

the graduate

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A Mint Choice for an Interesting Day

Conveniently located at 26 Seah Street, opposite Raffles Hotel, is an avant-garde building. Few will miss the unique facade of the world's first purpose-built museum for toys. The wave-like glass panels rise from the first storey to the top of the building, mimicking a contemporary glass toy box. This facade also performs the practical purpose of blocking out the sun's ultraviolet rays to protect the precious displays inside.

Named the Mint (Moment of Imagination and Nostalgia with Toys) Museum of Toys, this five-storey building, which opened in May 2006, showcases an extensive collection of vintage toys, childhood memorabilia, with some rare and one-of-its-kind-in-the-world pieces. It is disabled-friendly, with a long ramp leading from its front porch to the museum foyer where the ticketing and merchandise counters stand. Elevators also provide easy access, taking visitors from one level to the next.

The displays, totalling more than 50,000, are changed every three to six months to keep viewing fresh throughout the year. Valued at over \$5 million, the collection originates from more than 25 countries, including Germany, Japan, the

UK, the US and even far-flung countries such as Bulgaria. The toys are housed in a modern gallery, converted from a former shop house. More than half the pieces are found in Singapore and can be considered as part of the nation's heritage of toys.

Part of the \$2 million needed to build this novel museum came from the Singapore Tourism Board and the rest from the museum's founder, Chang Yang Fa. Mr Chang, a 56-year-old electrical engineer, brought to fruition his dreams of opening such a museum, based on his passion for toys. The historical collection is the result of his 30-year love affair with vintage toys and childhood memorabilia, ranging from the mid-19th century to mid-20th century pieces, with some from the period predating the 1970s. Visitors are thus promised an "experience within an experience" and a "journey of re-discovery" as they make their way through each floor of the building.

Mr Chang elaborates: "We are not just a depository for toys. Instead, we would like to showcase a very important period of time in man's modern history. Through the toys, you are able to

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see the historical developments over time in many countries. For example, you have the Cultural Revolution toys as well as the Ping-Pong Diplomacy toys, all reflecting the period in history when they originated. What we are looking to achieve is a bridge for the past and present through the toys we showcase."

The toy museum has the distinction of several 'firsts' and 'largest' claims in Asia, outside Japan. Its highlights include the largest collection of Dan Dare (a classic British science-fiction comic hero from the 1950s) toys and collectibles. Several rare original paintings by Dan Dare's creator are also on display and are presumably the only ones of the genre in Asia, if not the world. The only transparent plastic Dan Dare water-pistol known to exist in the world is also showcased here.

Other interesting displays include the only known remote-controlled Peacock mechanised toy from the 1992 movie *Toys*, which starred Robin Williams, direct from Hollywood. An 1840 German-made 'Chinese Stair Walker' toy, claimed to be the oldest toy known to exist in Singapore, is also on exhibit. Other categories on display include comic covers, exclusive autographed records, pressed-steel toys, teddy bears, Michael Lee dolls, Mickey Mouse originals, Batman and other Disney collectibles.

Says Mr Chang, who is proud of the Mint Museum: "We want people to be aware that there is such a place in Singapore. I would like visitors to enjoy a unique nostalgic journey viewing the collection and, at the same time, see the potential of the museum as a nice hang-out spot. We have had many visitors coming back to hold their private functions and, after our closing hours, make



use of the many facilities on every storey of the building which we specially catered to their requests and needs."

In addition, the museum houses in its basement the chic Mint Café, carrying on the theme of vintage toys and childhood memorabilia, as well as a restaurant and wine bar with its ready-stocked wine rack and changing LED lighting fixtures. Mr Chang summarises: "Ultimately, we want to enhance the visitor experience and raise the level of awareness of the museum. I know that this kind of [showcase] takes a while for Singaporeans to accept and appreciate but I believe that, over time, we will get there."

"I see Singaporeans becoming more sophisticated, especially with the choices available to them in society today. I also envision that, when we do get there, it means we will have to do more for the less privileged population. More people should hence follow their dreams [to pursue] greater causes and passions in life."

With its long list of attractions, it looks like the Mint Museum of Toys is set to become another unique tourist landmark in its own right as it strives to "reach out to the child in every one of us", offering an emotional link to childhoods which have may have been long forgotten. ■

Flash your NUSS Membership Card for **25% discount** on admission and **15% discount** on a la carte menu items at Mint Café. Valid for May and June 2007 only.

The World's First Purpose-Built Toy Museum

The Mint Museum of Toys is fully supported by the Singapore Tourism Board and other governmental agencies such as The National Heritage Board and SPRING Singapore. The museum's opening hours are 9.30am to 6.30pm. The admission charges for adults are \$10 and \$5 for children between ages two and 12. Families and corporations may contact the museum directly for special packages tailored to specific groups at 6339 0660 or check out the museum's website at www.emint.com.