

A.C.M

**OPENING OF EXHIBITION: “TREASURY OF THE WORLD-
JEWELLER ARTS OF INDIA IN THE AGE OF THE MUGHALS”**

THURSDAY, 11 FEBRUARY 2010

SPEECH OF CHAIRMAN, NHB, TOMMY KOH

Salutations

1. Our distinguished Guest-of-Honour, President S R Nathan.

Our Foreign Minister, Mr George Yeo.

Our Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts,
Admiral Lui Tuck Yew.

Your Excellency, Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah al-Ahmad al-Sabah,
the Minister of Oil and Information of Kuwait.

Your Excellency, Sheikha Hussah al-Sabah, Director-General of
the Museum of Islamic Art of Kuwait and members of your
distinguished delegation.

Your Excellency, Ambassador Abdul-Aziz Ahmed al-Adwani,
Ambassador of Kuwait to Singapore.

Singapore’s Ambassador-designate to Kuwait, Ambassador Tan
Hung Seng

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Warm Welcome

2. It is my great pleasure to welcome all of you, especially our Kuwaiti friends, to the opening, for the first time in Asia, of this fabulous collection of the jewelled arts of India, from the Mughal period.

Kuwaiti Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Sabah

3. The leader of the Kuwaiti delegation and the representative of the Emir of Kuwait is Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Sabah. The Minister studied economics and finance in the United States. Upon his return to Kuwait, he worked first with the Kuwait Central Bank and subsequently, as the head of two banks. In 1999, he joined the government as Minister of Finance and Minister of Communication. He is currently the Minister of Oil and Minister of Information. He is also the President of the National Council of Culture, Arts and Letters. Please join me in extending a warm welcome to the Minister and his wife.

The Al-Sabah Collection

4. The beautiful objects on display at this exhibition belong to the Al-Sabah collection of Islamic Art, one of the best in the world. The collection was started about 35 years ago by two individuals, Her

Excellency, Sheikha Hussah and her husband, His Excellency Sheikh Nasser, the eldest son of the Emir of Kuwait.

5. I would like to say a few words about Sheikha Hussah. She and her husband share a common passion for Islamic art, architecture and heritage. Sheikh Nasser and Sheikha Hussah are widely respected as connoisseurs of Islamic art and culture. Sheikha Hussah is the director-general of the Museum of Islamic Art in Kuwait. She has not only helped her husband to build one of the best collections of Islamic art in the world, but she has also made her museum a vibrant centre for the promotion of arts, culture and education. Outside Kuwait, she has been actively involved in restoring historic buildings in Bahrain; in Damascus and Aleppo in Syria; and in Isfahan, in Iran. During the period when Kuwait was occupied by Iraq (1990-91), Sheikha Hussah worked tirelessly abroad, through exhibitions of the Al-Sabah collection, to keep the flag of Kuwait flying high.

6. Sheikha Hussah visited the ACM in 2005. In 2008, she very kindly hosted a dinner at her home for Dr Balaji Sadasivan and ACM's Tan Husim. Please join me in welcoming Sheikha Hussah back to Singapore and for sharing her collection with us.

The Mughals of India

7. The jewelled arts on exhibition are from India, when India was ruled by the Mughals, The Mughal dynasty, began in 1526, and endured for 332 years, before the British deposed the last Mughal

emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar, in 1858. Who were the Mughal rulers of India? Where did they come from? What were their achievements?

8. The Mughal dynasty was founded by a man called Babur. He was born in 1494, the son of the ruler of the Fargana Valley, north of Afghanistan and near the caravan or silk route. Babur ascended to the throne at 12 when his father died in an accident. He was a teenage warrior and fought all his life to defend his kingdom and to expand his power base. In 1504, he lost his kingdom and fled south to Afghanistan. He captured Kabul and ruled it with justice. Twenty two years later, in 1526, Babur defeated the Sultan of Delhi and founded the Mughal dynasty. When he died 4 years later, his son, Humayun (1530-1540 + 1555-1556) succeeded to the throne. Humayun was succeeded by the great emperor, Akbar (1556-1605) who was succeeded by Jahangir (1605-1627) and Jahangir by Shah Jahan (1627-1658), the builder of the Taj Mahal. The golden age of the Mughal dynasty was the 17th century when India was strong, prosperous and tolerant. To control and administer their empire, the Mughal emperors recruited administrators, soldiers, artists, artisans from India, Persia, the Middle East, Central Asia and Afghanistan. Persian or farsi was the language of the court. During the golden age, Mughal India was the envy of the world. The first English Ambassador to the Court of the Great Mughal, Sir Thomas Roe (1615-1619), was so bedazzled that he described emperor Jahangir as “the treasury of the world” in a letter to King Charles I.

Babur and Genghis Khan

9. The word “mughal”, is said to have come from the word “mongol”. I have tried to investigate the question: Was Babur a descendant of Genghis Khan? This is what I have discovered. Genghis Khan divided his empire into 4 domains: China, Central Asia, Persia and Russia. Genghis Khan’s grandson, Kubilai, would conquer China and establish the Yuan dynasty. Another grandson, Hulegu, would conquer Persia and establish the Ilkhans. Another son, Jochi, and grandson, Batu, would rule Russia and be known as the Khans of the Golden Horde. Finally, Chaghatai would rule over Central Asia. According to Stewart Gordon, the author of “When Asia was The World”, Babur’s maternal grandfather was a direct descendant of Chaghatai (p146). Jack Weatherford the author of “Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World” confirmed Gordon’s view and calculated that Babur was a 13th generation descendant of Chaghatai, the second son of Genghis Khan. It is therefore true that Babur was a descendant of Genghis Khan. Babur was also a descendant of Timur or Tamberlane as he is known in the West.

The Genius of Indian Jewellers

10. This exhibition consists of over 400 items of exquisite jewellery and jewelled arts. They are a testimony to the genius of India’s artists and jewellers. I had a sneak preview of the exhibition. I am confident in saying that, like Ambassador Thomas Roe, you will be dazzled. I have never seen so much diamond, rubies,

emeralds and other precious stones and such exquisite jewelled arts in one room. I would like to congratulate ACM's design team, led by Henry Yeo for transporting us to the Great Court of the Mughal emperor in the 17th Century. I would also like to congratulate our curatorial team, led by Husim and Nicola, for their brilliant curatorship. For those of you who would like to know more, I would recommend an excellent catalogue, co-written by Manuel Keene and Salam (Sue) Kaoukji. I would also recommend an excellent article co-written by two of our curators, Nicola Kuok and Clement Onn, in the current issue of Arts of Asia.

Thank You

11. We have many people to thank for bringing this exhibition to fruition. I would like to thank the following friends from the Kuwait Museum of Islamic Art:

- (i) Abdul Kareem al Ghadban, director of exhibitions and educational programmes;
- (ii) Sue Kaoukji, curator
- (iii) Osama Albalhan, National Council for Culture , Arts and Letters Representative
- (iv) Fahad Al-Najadah, project coordinator;
- (v) Budour al-Qassar, project co-ordinator;
- (vi) Abdulaziz Alduwash, installation team
- (vii) Ahmad Alenzi, installation team
- (vii) Benjamin Hilario, installation team (who is not present today)

12. I would also like to thank our sponsors:

- (i) NHB Heritage Gala;
- (ii) LCH (S) Pte Ltd
- (iii) Helu-Trans (our logistics partner); and
- (iv) Royal Plaza on Scotts, for sponsoring our reception.

13. Finally, I wish to reiterate our warm appreciation to President Nathan for honouring us with his presence as our Guest-of-Honour.

14. As the lunar new year is only 3 days ahead of us, I would like to conclude by wishing all of you a very successful year of the Tiger.

15. Shukran and thank you.

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