

George Lyndon Hicks Fellowship for Southeast Asia Collections

Curious about the George Lyndon Hicks Fellowship? Find out what our fellow, Dr David Clinnick, has to say about the fellowship.

NL: In the paper you wrote in 2016 titled 'Profiled hands in Palaeolithic art: The first universally recognised symbol of the human form', you argued that the profiled form of the human hand is a universally recognisable image. We see handprints being used predominantly in cave art. While handprints of ancient civilisations are mainly anthropological, what is the palaeontological aspect of this?

David: In that paper, my colleagues and I were not arguing whether 'handprints' have any specific palaeontological importance. I am, unfortunately, not a palaeontologist, but rather an archaeologist, specifically a prehistorian who focuses on the evolution of human social organisation during the Palaeolithic period. Now, in some ways, my research does touch on certain aspects of human palaeontology, or the discipline of studying and analysing the anatomical evolution of humans within a generally palaeontological paradigm.

In this regard, certain conclusions can be drawn about the overall health and environmental stress factors of ancient human communities through the analysis of handprints and stencils. This is because the development of the human hand is very sensitive to *in utero* conditions during fetal development. For example, if a pregnant woman is subjected to periods of malnutrition, this could and often does have an effect on the anatomy of the hand of the child she is carrying. These anatomical changes will stay with the child into adulthood. However, I have not participated directly in this kind of research into prehistoric handprints and stencils.

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NL: Tell us about your current research.

David: Currently, I am working on a synthesis and reappraisal of what are assumed to be the earliest stone tool traditions in Southeast Asia, which are typically described as chopper-chopping tool cultures. At present, I can say that there seems to be a much greater degree of technological diversity and 'complexity' than is generally assumed to exist within the chopper-chopping tool complex.

NL: How has the National Library's collection helped you in your research?

David: The renowned Harvard prehistorian Hallam Movius was the first researcher to compare the chopper-chopping tool traditions of East and Southeast Asia to the other Lower Palaeolithic cultural/technological traditions of the world. At the time, Movius could only draw on data from five archaeological sites across East and Southeast Asia to construct his synthetic description of the chopper-chopping tool tradition. Out of the five sites, two — Pacitan in Java and Kota Tampan in Malaysia — were discovered and excavated by members of the Raffles Museum and Library. It was therefore incredibly helpful to have the opportunity to be a fellow at the National Library, an institution whose roots are in the Raffles Museum and Library. The National Library is one of the best institutions to research the earliest publications concerning the analysis of Pacitan and Kota Tampan. In fact, the National Library, National Archives, and Heritage Conservation Centre collectively hold the most scientifically important resources relating to Pactianian and Tampanian archaeological traditions.

NL: What kind of impact do you hope your Fellowship will have?

David: I truly hope that through my fellowship I will be able to highlight the importance of human history in the deep past as well as the contributions that members of the scientific community within the Raffles Museum and Library made to our present understanding of our shared past as a human species. I also hope that my public presentations, staff sharing seminars and development report will foster a more general interest and recognition of the importance of the scientific disciplines of archaeology, anthropology, and palaeoanthropology. I hope that the National Library will continue to develop their collections relating to these disciplines.

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NL: Would you recommend this fellowship to your peers and why?

David: I would most certainly recommend the fellowship to my peers. There are so many highly valuable — but under exploited — scientific resources, including original research notes/journals, held in the library's collections and within Singapore more generally. The library and related centers that branched off from the old Raffles Museum and Library are a collective treasure trove of original information and data that beg to be studied. It is hard to imagine, but the simple truth is that there are still mounds of primary data collected by the Raffles Museum and Library during the interwar and postwar periods that have yet to see the light of proper academic publication. I have little doubt that subsequent analyses of many of these resources would warrant publication in leading scientific journals internationally.