

THE ROLE OF THE MUSEUM IN THE PRESERVATION OF THE NATIONAL CULTURAL HERITAGE— SOME THEORETICAL NOTES

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The 20th Century is most assuredly an era of rapid transition and transformation. We can have no doubt that future historians will see this century as a critical historical watershed on a global scale. For us in Asia this epoch represents the development, if not, yet the maturing of two interlinked processes. One, the re-emergence of the Asian countries as independent factors in the sphere of international politics, economy and culture after more than 100 years of foreign invasion, domination and conquest ^{the latter} a phenomenon which Sri Lanka experienced in some measure from as early as the 16th century. Two, the modernisation and radical transformation of our traditional societies and civilizations.

A major aspect of this process is the emergence of a large number of modern nation States out of a host of traditional Asian societies and nations. Many of these, Sri Lanka amongst them, have been clearly defined geo-political and geo-cultural entities over a long period of time and are well-known in the annals of Asian and world history. Richly steeped in centuries of tradition, they are today profoundly aware of themselves as historical formations of great antiquity. The historic past of these societies, their energetic present and their future structuration have, therefore, to be viewed as a continuous and sequential process. The recording and the understanding of this process are essential tools for all those who work in the field of the historical sciences.

It is precisely in such a context that we have to view the role of a National Museum as one of the primary institutions which has

arisen in the sphere of modern culture. It is significant that the concept of a national museum did not have its origins in that epoch when modern nation states first took shape in Europe but rather in that era when European expansionism and colonialism had reached its apogee and when the national struggles of a host of countries throughout the world were beginning to take a modern form. Modern nations were beginning to appear as distinct formulations in a global struggle for independence and national freedom. Similarly, the concept of a national museum—even when such an institution was originally formed under colonialist patronage—had to be re-interpreted periodically so that it could play an increasingly important role in the formation of national consciousness, become part of a process of national self-definition. In many countries, including our own, this development has now reached a certain stage of maturity, especially in the last few decades, but it is still far from complete. **The role of a national museum is to present to the people of a nation a concentrated image of themselves; to record and to systematically recreate the formation of the national history and culture by the display of cultural and other museological material.**

Functions of a National Museum

A national museum, or properly speaking a national museum network, has at least four distinct but interrelated spheres of activity:

- (a) the collection of museum material, which includes a theoretical concept of what constitutes such material as well

as a rigorous practical process of selection;

- (b) the systematic storage, preservation and recording of material and information in such a way that the widest range of data is available for future generations to study and to research;
- (c) the study and interpretation of this material;
- (d) the selection and organisation of material for presentation as museum display, as well as the organisation of other extension services such as special exhibitions, lectures and cultural programmes.

In the historical context that we have been discussing each of these functions takes on very special responsibilities. While these spheres of activity apply equally to a museum—i.e. the master plan and scope of its collection, its perspectives for future development, etc. has a definite national character. It focuses on the totality of a nation's cultural heritage. It does not merely preserve a nation's cultural heritage in a static or passive form but by an act of preservation and interpretation, it contributes to the on-going cultural formation of that nation. *In short, a national museum does not exist in the past, it recreates and re-enacts the past in a way that is useful and meaningful to the present and the future.*

Historical change and the concept of museological material: Selection and definition.

In a society such as our own, the rate of historical and cultural change increases daily. Many old customs and institutions and many items of traditional usage pass into disuse, usually in step with socio-economic transformations that are taking place. Meanwhile, the formation of new cultural structures becomes a major national responsibility. This is deeply influenced by both internal and external factors. In this situation, the accumulation of national cultural materials

and the recording of cultural data, together with its careful storage, preservation and study, become important historical tasks. We are required not only to record and to understand the society that is changing and passing away, but also to apply what is useful and valuable in the national cultural experience to the on-going process of cultural formation. Among the existing national institutions in the realm of scientific, academic and cultural work, the national museum occupies a central position as an institution specifically designed to play this role.

Such a responsibility often calls for a re-interpretation of the concept of a national museum and of what constitutes museological material. Usually museums in the past have been the repositories of either antiquities from ancient times and masterpieces of sculpture and painting or the curiosities of "folk art." Today we have a much wider view not only of what comprises museum material but also for the very concept of culture itself. The historical and sociological view of culture—as against the aesthetic—encompasses all the cultural and technological artefacts of a people; in fact, all the manifestations of their material life including the most casual by-products of productive or recreational activity. Thus, when a national museum formulates the collecting programme, its definition of museum material must be conceived of in the widest possible manner.

The national museum network often becomes the filter through which much of the cultural material that falls into abeyance is preserved and documented. The importance of this selective function does not apply only to the present time. **By its role as a storehouse of cultural material, and especially by means of its reserve collections, the national museum more or less chooses and controls much of what future generations will be able to study and to know about the social and cultural life of their past.** For historians and scholars