

# BALANCING POLITICAL HISTORY, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND ART: THE ROLE OF A NATIONAL MUSEUM IN MALAYSIA

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## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has been blessed with cultural diversity because of its multi-ethnic composition and its diverse range of religions practised. Its diversity is reflected in the existence of various materials culture on its land. Archeological finds show the way of life of a number of ethnic groups. To create awareness and build a harmonious society with a high standard, the Department of Museums Malaysia has taken serious measures to preserve, conserve and disseminate knowledge about the country's historical, cultural and natural heritage through its museums.

Museums have existed in Malaysia since 1883 with the establishment of Muzium Perak. Before World War II, the museum's work focused on research, documentation and the collecting of material culture with respect to material relevant to history, material culture and natural history.

After the separation from the Antiquities Division (which was established as a new department), the Department of Museums Malaysia focused on keeping and protecting material culture within museums. Exhibitions and museum education programmes are among the tools used in disseminating knowledge to the public while maintaining ongoing research on the collections. The Education Unit was established in the Department of Museums Malaysia in 2013 with the aim of educating the public, specifically the younger generation. The department is tasked with enhancing the younger generation's understanding of the museum as a place

for safeguarding cultural heritage as well as fostering a sense of ownership for one's heritage.

Realising the importance of public education especially for youth in safeguarding cultural heritage for the future, the department has taken measures such as continuous and consistent research on the collections, developing public programmes to accommodate each level of society, publishing research in a variety of forms such as in books, journals, audiovisual and digital media etc. The department collaborates with appropriate government/non-governmental bodies to do this.

The latest collaboration is a programme with the Ministry of Education Malaysia. It addresses students from the age of 9 to 17 years and aspiring teachers by using material culture (objects, artefacts and so on) to help them get a clearer and better picture of the legacy of their ancestors. This also enhances their understanding of the history syllabus outlined by the Ministry of Education. This programme will be carried out across the nation involving museums and schools from all around Malaysia in 2016.

## THE HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MALAYSIA

In 1953, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj (1903-1990), the first Prime Minister of Malaysia suggested establishing a functioning National Museum as a repository for national heritage. Subsequently, the construction of the National Museum, which was built on the site of the former Selangor Museum (1906-1945) was

initiated in 1959 and completed in August 1963. It was officially declared open by His Majesty, the Third Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Tuanku Syed Putra Al-Haj ibni Almarhum Syed Hassan Jamalullail (1920-2000).

At the time of its first establishment, the National Museum focused on Malaysia's history, natural diversity and the uniqueness of Malaysian society. However, after a refurbishment that was completed in 2008, its exhibitions have employed interesting and interactive ways to encourage its visitors to explore the history of Malaysia, from the prehistoric era to the present achievements of Malaysia. The National Museum, which was declared a National Heritage Site in 2015 under the National Heritage Act 2008 (Act 645) strengthened its role as a one-stop-education centre for the history, ethnography and art of Malaysia. The new presentation style, comprehensive facilities, authentic sources of knowledge in line with the changing political developments make the museum a centre for the dissemination of accurate information and a relevant repository for the historical and cultural heritage of the country.

## THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

The history of education in Malaysia began before to the Colonial period (1400-1874) during which the education system was based on an informal and formal basis which emphasised religious subjects. Such education was based on a process of learning that produced individuals who were skilled and competent in technical and practical aspects of work. During the British colonial era, significant changes began to occur in the education system. This lent to an opportunity for vernacular curriculum finding its niche in Malaysian society. This was prior to the arrival of Chinese and Indians immigrants, which were later brought over by the British.

The British did not provide a unified school system. Instead they allowed a multi-stream education system structured by languages namely English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil. These language-based schools were known as vernacular schools. The aim was to meet the needs of specific sectors of the economy of the time. There were deficiencies in the education system organised by the British. A number of reports aimed at improving British education system, such as the *Fenn-Wu Report* (1951), the *Education Ordinance* (1952), the *Razak Report* (1956) and *Rahman Talib Report* (1960).

After independence, the country's education system began to gradually reform. In the First Malaysia Plan (1966-1970) to the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000), education was a priority. The government looked for new ways to ensure that educational institutions produced individuals who were able to contribute productively to national development. Preschool Education, Curriculum for Primary Schools (series), Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (ICSS), higher education, teacher education, technical and vocational education and private education were reviewed. The development of the education system continued to grow providing world-class and high-quality education that developed an individual's potential and fulfilled their aspirations.

## NATIONAL BLUE OCEAN STRATEGY (NBOS): BETWEEN DEPARTMENT OF MUSEUMS MALAYSIA AND MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The Department of Museums Malaysia and the Ministry of Education were never part of the same Ministry. This separation between the two departments made efforts of nation-building and cultivating a sense of belonging to the country more difficult and drawn out. The two departments complimented each other's work. The Department of Education provides a younger generation with a theoretical

foundation, while the Department of Museums Malaysia, through the National Museum, showcases evidences that supports the theory taught by teachers in schools.

Thus, in realising the value that both departments can provide, a series of discussions were carried out, after it was announced that it was compulsory for students to pass history as a subject during their main examination in their formal education years.

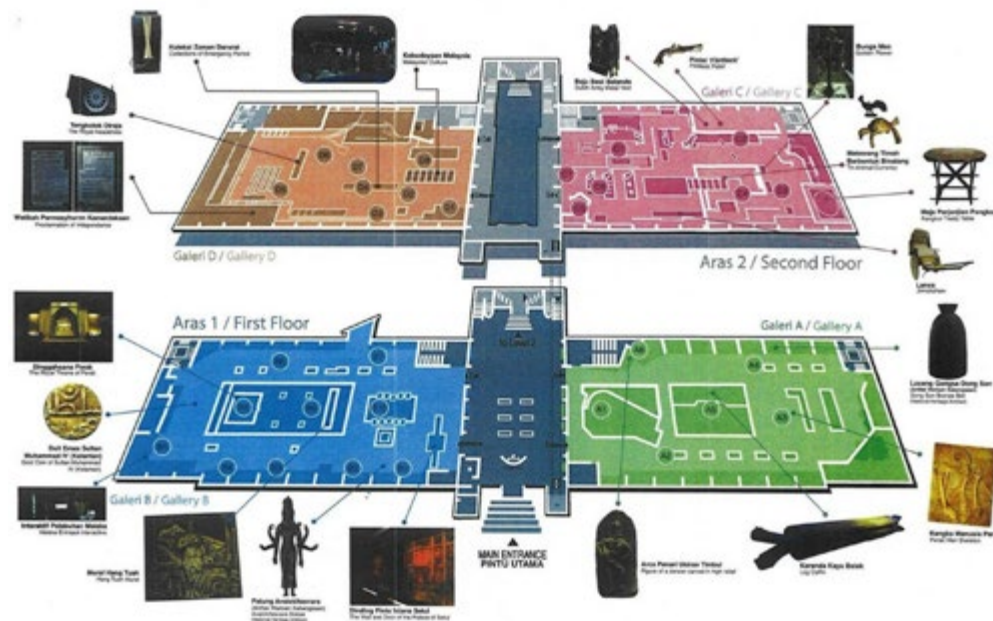
The main objectives of the collaboration between the two departments are:

1. To instill love for the country;
2. To nurture a spirit of togetherness among a multi-racial society;
3. To instill love and interest in heritage among students and teachers through museum education;

4. To establish museums as a support system for formal education through “Teaching and Learning”;
5. To balance academic requirements and hands-on experience in engaging students and teachers; and
6. To instill and nurture good moral values and discipline, and build awareness of the uniqueness of Malaysia’s cultural diversity.

The planned programme is to be carried out all over Malaysia with active participants from Malaysia’s museums. The first step towards realizing the programme before its launch at a national level was to convene a committee consisting of experts from the Department of Museums and the Ministry of Education to run a pilot test.

The National Museum had the honour of being the first institution to execute this



Collections Mapping on Curriculum-Based Activities: Blueprint of the National Museum  
Image courtesy of the Department of Museums Malaysia



“Teaching and Learning”  
Image courtesy of the Department of Museums Malaysia

project. The National Museum was seen as the most suitable place since it is considered a one-stop centre for visitors to get a glimpse of the political history and socio-cultural development of Malaysia. Thus, the blueprint of this museum is closely related to the curriculum of history textbooks for students from 9-17 years old.

### PILOT TEST

The pilot test took place through the month of May 2015. It involved 10 schools; 5 of which were primary schools and 5 were secondary schools from the Klang Valley area. A teacher training institute also took part in the pilot test.

The purpose of the pilot test was to study the effectiveness of the functions and role played by museums in helping students comprehend the country’s history. The pilot test and its effects on teaching history theoretically and

through using material culture evidence in the museum was monitored closely by the Department of Museums Malaysia and the Ministry of Education Malaysia. For this pilot test, history as a subject has been chosen to be the subject matter.

There were four (4) main segments during the execution namely, Teaching and Learning, In-Gallery Activity, Strengthening Activity and Reflection. All these segments served a specific purpose throughout the process.

### TEACHING AND LEARNING

Students were organised in a classroom setting. Their teacher would start a lesson based on the lesson plan prepared by the teacher prior to the museum trip. Students would be taught by their teacher following the textbook syllabus set up by the Ministry of Education.



Activity in Gallery 1  
Image courtesy of the Department of Museums Malaysia

### IN-GALLERY ACTIVITY

Students were divided into a few groups and handled by two (2) facilitators from the Department of Museums Malaysia. In this segment, the students were given a formal tour of the specific gallery related to the topic in the syllabus they learnt from earlier. This is to provide continuity with the lesson taught in the classroom setting. The facilitators showed students the evidence of the material cultures related to their topic of study. Thus, students are provided with a vivid picture of the sequence of historical events that occurred.

### STRENGTHENING ACTIVITY

This segment was created to encourage students to develop an understanding of and develop opinions on what they learnt and gained from the other two segments. Students were given tasks and worked in groups for problem-solving and hands-on activities related to the topic they had learnt. For future groups of teachers, this segment will focus on the brainstorming activities. This will address the challenge museum professionals and school teachers

face in teaching history. In this way, teachers will be exposed to the benefits of museums and its collections as teaching tools.

### REFLECTION

The reflection segment emphasised the experiences gained by students from the programme. Students were asked to share their thoughts and experiences. Students were tested with spontaneous questions on both topics from the content presented in the classroom and museum. During this segment, facilitators took notes on issues discussed or shared by students in order to get a clearer understanding of whether the programme was a success.

### FINDINGS

After a month of pilot testing the programme, the test delivered very interesting findings. Feedback from teachers who teach history found that the understanding of the students towards the subject increased. Moreover, the time it took teaching certain topics and sub-topics, which used to take about 8 to 10 weeks, could be accomplished in several hours



Strengthening Activities  
Image courtesy of the Department of Museums Malaysia



Reflection  
Image courtesy of the Department of Museums Malaysia

in the museum. This development was very encouraging as students were more engaged with the lessons taught in the classroom after their trip to the museum.

in instilling a spirit of togetherness, an understanding of cultural diversity and a love for the country as one nation.

### CONCLUSION

Other findings also showed that teachers were more aware of the effectiveness of material culture as a teaching tool. Teachers were also made aware of how museums can accommodate their teaching purposes.

The pilot project has been presented a few times to significant stakeholders throughout the country. In conclusion, it was clear that the role of the National Museum for this project achieved its goals in balancing political history, ethnography and art by collaborating with the Ministry of Education, schools and teachers.

Findings from the survey and the reflection segment showed that students were more aware of the role of the National Museum

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