

SHIFTING PRIORITIES OF A NATIONAL MUSEUM – THE JOURNEY OF NATIONAL MUSEUM NEW DELHI

Joyoti Roy, Outreach Consultant
Dr. R.K Tewari, Deputy Curator, Numismatics,
National Museum New Delhi

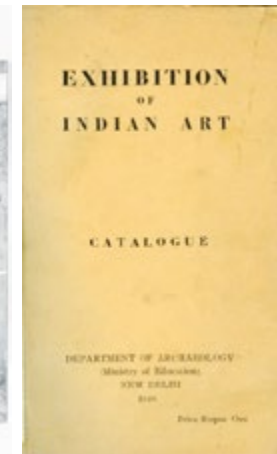
Museums in India have undergone important changes in the last decade. These changes are reflected in the priority placed upon collections, display, representations and public engagement. By virtue of being a National Museum, the Museum in New Delhi has historically taken on a complex role, which needs revision from time to time. In today's environment, the balancing of political history, ethnography and art is precarious and sensitive. It calls for deep introspection. Through a discussion of the journey of the National Museum in Delhi, this paper recounts the story of a national museum in-making, addressing the expectations it is faced with today and how it deals with them. While many matters remain unresolved, the role of the museum is determined by the people. The people's needs guide the way in which the museum defines its function.

1. NATIONAL MUSEUM – BEGINNINGS

The blueprint for establishing the National Museum in Delhi was prepared by the Maurice Gwyer Committee in May 1946. An exhibition of Indian Art, consisting of selected artefacts from various museums of India was organised by the Royal Academy, London in cooperation with the governments of India and Britain. The exhibition went on display in the galleries of Burlington House, London during the winter months of 1947-48. Upon its return, it was decided that the same collection should be on display in Delhi. As a result, an exhibition along the same lines was organized in *Rashtrapati Bhawan* (President's residence) in 1949. This seeded the idea for the creation of a National Museum of India.

The foundation of the present building located in the heart of Delhi city on Janpath was laid by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, on May 12, 1955. The first phase of building was formally inaugurated by Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the Vice President of India, on December 18, 1960. The second phase of building was completed in 1989. Today, it remains as it was upon completion.

Established in 1814 by the British in their colonial capital of Kolkata, the Indian Museum was a much larger museum that predated the National Museum in Delhi – so, why did they build a new museum rather than make the Indian Museum a national museum? The Indian Museum is the oldest museum not just in India but in the entire Asia-Pacific region. However, India needed a National Museum at the heart of its independent capital city in New Delhi. The genesis of the National Museum at Delhi emerged from an exhibition that took place very close to its independence, when the need to assert the national nature of our collections was crucial. Before this, collections were located regionally and were owned by local people, museums and royal treasuries. India was ready to build herself into a nation and it was important to show the World and its own people that this country that had struggled for over 3 centuries for independence, now stood united. With all of India's cultural accoutrements pooled together, there must be a space and place that could hold this valuable representation of 'being one nation' under one roof - only a National Museum could embody this sentiment.



*The Exhibition at Rashtrapati Bhavan after return from London and the first catalogue
Image courtesy of the National Museum New Delhi*

The 1948 Burlington House Exhibition showcased collections from Indian Princely States, Archaeological Site Museums and private donors. When the idea of a National Museum was mooted, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru had to personally write letters to each of the donors asking them to donate their collections permanently to the new National Museum. This was not an easy task. While some donors agreed generously, others found it difficult to part with their prized possessions permanently. This call for donations was in the name of building a national asset that would remind the people of India for generations to come how rich their histories were. The National Museum finally had a large enough core collection to open in 1949.

While the Museum continued to grow its collection through gifts that were sought painstakingly, artefacts were also collected through its Arts Purchase Committee in the 1980s and 90s. The Museum presently holds approximately 200,000 objects of diverse natures, including objects of Indian as well as foreign origin. It's holdings cover more than five thousand years of Indian cultural heritage.

While the National Museum was established to serve a national agenda, in the decades following its establishment, the motivations and the relevance of its national function underwent

great change. Like the Indian Museum, the National Museum was first meant to address the foreign visitor. They were both capsules of Indian history and culture, which would help orient the outsider to what laid within India.

2. EARLY DAYS: ENCYCLOPAEDIC COLLECTIONS, DYNASTIC HISTORIES AND AN ABSENCE OF THE LOCAL

The Archaeological Survey of India, which was established in 1861, nearly a hundred years before the National Museum, New Delhi, has carried out numerous excavations since its inception. By the time the National Museum, New Delhi, was established, it had already established many site museums; the first was at Sarnath (near present day Varanasi). Each of these site museums housed collections from nearby finds or excavations. Site museums were established by the British in pre-independence India and were visual store-houses of a large number of objects that could be studied and correlated with the site they came from.

When collections from these site museums were brought to Delhi for the core collection of the National Museum, their context and function changed. They now carried on their shoulders the responsibility of representing a national history. If one visits the Sarnath



Early Sculpture Gallery at the National Museum
Image courtesy of the National Museum New Delhi

museum today, one will realise that its remarkable masterpieces are still displayed like a 'list', with minimum explanation and a narrative that only engages the scholar, who already has knowledge of the site and its history. For the common visitor, there is little to engage with. A similar manner of display was seen in the early galleries of the National Museum which has 3 floors and over 27 galleries.

The first few galleries of the National Museum are chronologically arranged (starting with the Indus Civilisation collections of 2500 BC to the Late Medieval Sculpture of the 14th to the 15th Century). This has remained intact for many years and reflects the understanding of Indian histories through dynasties. This is a historiography that needs urgent updating. Occasionally and within these galleries, sculptures are organised by religious subjects, whether Buddhist, Jain or Hindu. Later, in the mid-1960s,

a Buddhist Art Gallery was added to this mix to celebrate the large collection of Buddhist artefacts in the possession of National Museum.

The sculpture galleries are followed by a section on Indian Miniature paintings – a rich and diverse tradition of India. The gallery is essentially divided into various schools of miniature paintings – Pahari, Rajasthani, Deccani, Central Indian and Mughal. Further on is the Decorative Arts Gallery. The Decorative Arts is a genre which emerged in the British vocabulary to refer to crafts and utilitarian objects of daily use that had very high craftsmanship and aesthetic value. The period and provenance of such objects is usually from the late 18th to the 19th century and represent a period of collecting craft items by Indian royalty and later by colonial connoisseurs. An extension of the Decorative Arts Gallery is the jewellery collection which was recently re-curated. The galleries on the

first floor include a gallery on Indian Coinage and Numismatics and the Central Asian Antiquities. The third and final level in the Museum has a Textile Gallery, a Wood Carving Gallery, Arms and Armour Gallery, The Pre-Columbian and Western Arts Gallery, Musical Instruments Gallery and a gallery titled *North-East Lifestyle*.

This arrangement of galleries closely reflects the Indian Museum in Kolkata. The curatorial plan of the Indian Museum reflects how the British wished to understand Indian history. Archaeology, anthropology and the study of natural sciences were all important academic fields which the British established in India. To begin with, in the early 19th century, these were tools for surveillance but gradually they were strengthened with technologies such as photography and print-making. Many British Officers pursued these independent fields of study. Therefore, objects utilised by Archaeology, art, anthropology, zoology and botany had to be under one roof. The museum 'conflated' every aspect of India (then a British Colony) into one capsule so that India's history and geography could be understood as a simple linear story without any complexities. Chronology and classification of objects based on the material and technique (stone, wood, paintings, textiles) was at the centre of this curatorial logic.

A growing friendship between the British and princely states also helped in funding conservation and excavation at various sites; for example, the conservation of the Sanchi Stupa was sponsored by the Begum of Bhopal in early 20th Century and Sir John Marshall, the first Director General of ASI worked on it. The Sanchi Museum, is one of the earliest site museums of India and showcases finds from the site of Sanchi. Such trends ensured that historiography was carefully structured. The piecing together of the story of India through these sites was ultimately mirrored in our museums; first at the Indian Museum and later in the National

Museum in New Delhi. This was in spite of the National Museum in Delhi being established with the great impetus of representing the 'national'.

For over 5 decades, the National Museum in New Delhi has perpetuated this narrative without questioning it. There are advantages and disadvantages in this kind of story-telling which interfere with the real meaning of the 'national' and must be probed today.

In brief, the collecting practices in the first few decades of the National Museum's establishment were encyclopaedic. They were neatly assembled and packed into a linear chronological history, where possible, and at other instances they were either put into the Decorative Arts or into material and technique specific galleries. This trend has to be broken for the museum to remain relevant to its public.

3. DEALING WITH ANTHROPOLOGY- A COMPLEX PLOT

Initially developed as a science and thought to be guided by logic alone, the field of Anthropology has undergone many interpretations. Today, Cultural Studies probably describes its ambit best. A shift of priorities from tangible heritage to intangible heritage in the last 2 decades has propelled the understanding of Indian history and culture that manifests in its languages and dialects, culinary traditions, lifestyle, creation myths, literature and the everyday arts. These forms of culture reflect people and practices that are difficult to represent in a museum. The discussion, debate and sharing of which is essential to the process of museum-making.

And all these dwell strongly on the people and their practices which are difficult to capture in a museum. Yet, nevertheless, must be part of mainstream museum-making. The Anthropology-

gy Collection of the National Museum has met a similar fate.

This collection at the National Museum consists of about 8,000 objects. It was built over the years through purchases, gifts by various private donors and collected through the surveys conducted by officials of the department in tribal belts and rural areas. The collection was further enriched by the acquisition of significant objects by Dr. Verrier Elwin (1902–1964), an eminent British anthropologist. These artefacts reflect the rituals and customs related to life cycles, economic pursuits and traditions of various Indian communities. The collection comprises of artefacts in a variety of materials and mediums such as terracotta, textile, basketry, bone wood, metal, paper, leather etc. The seven states in the North East of India, colloquially known as ‘The Seven Sisters’ have an extensive variety of customs, lifestyles and traditions. The display highlights the regional similarity in cultural traits. The traditional apparel, jewellery, basketry, wood carvings and personal adornments of some of the groups, mirror the life and culture of the different people in the region. The glimpse of everyday life of the Monpa, Sherdukpen, Khowa, Apatani, Mishmi, Adi, Nocte, Wancho, Singhpho and Khampti of Arunachal Pradesh, the Karbi and Bodo of Assam, the Thangkul and Kuki of Manipur,

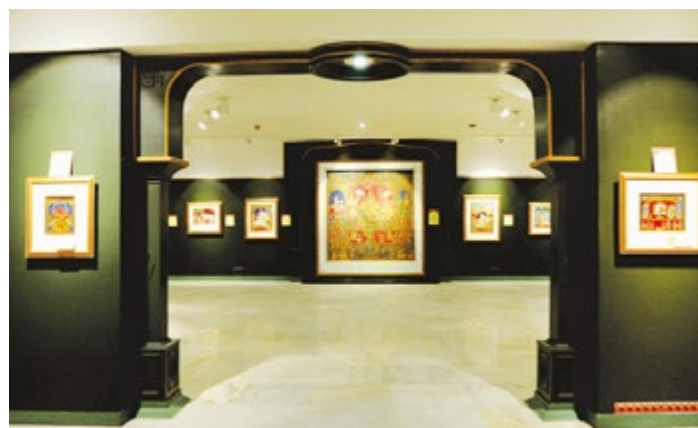
the Mizos of Mizoram, the Ao, Angami, Sema, Lotha and Konyak of Nagaland, and the Riang from Tripura are on view in this gallery.

While the North-East Lifestyle Gallery depicts the composite culture of this region, the Tradition, Art and Continuity Gallery was established and opened only in February 2014 with a completely different approach, which is discussed in the next section.

4. NEW GALLERIES AT NATIONAL MUSEUM –TANJORE AND MYSORE PAINTINGS, TRADITION, ART AND CONTINUITY AND THE JEWELLERY GALLERY.

Between 2013 and 2015, the National Museum established three important galleries – the Tanjore and Mysore Paintings Gallery, Tradition, Art and Continuity Gallery and the Jewellery Gallery.

The Tanjore and Mysore Paintings Gallery was opened in 2013. It was a pleasant departure from the chronology, material and medium based gallery classification. It is based on a local South Indian style of painting, a tradition derived from domestic practices. Tanjore and Mysore paintings, rich and beautiful as they



Tanjore and Mysore Paintings Gallery
Image courtesy of the National Museum New Delhi



Tradition, Art and Continuity Gallery
Image courtesy of the National Museum New Delhi

are, are actually from the home shrines of the Vaishnav and Shaivite devotees from the temple town of Tanjore (in present day Tamil Nadu) and Mysore in Karnataka. While on the one hand, this gallery showcased arts practices of a particular community, it is clearly a reflection of local styles of South India that are very difficult to fit into any linear narrative of a history of India. Tanjore and Mysore paintings are somewhere between high religious art and folk expressions. They are continuously influenced by local contemporary trends. While the National Museum constructed and put on display this public gallery because it had a sizeable collection of Tanjore and Mysore paintings, the gallery actually enriched the overall narrative of the Museum representing the national. This is because local, folk and contemporary traditions of art making are as national as the classical sculptures.

The second new gallery that opened in February 2014 was the Tradition, Art and Continuity Gallery. This gallery must be seen in comparison to the approach of the North-East-

ern Lifestyle Gallery which tries to address the large and complex region of the North-east by placing textile and tribal objects quite randomly. The Tradition, Art and Continuity Gallery, on the other hand tackled the people’s art in a different manner. It clusters various kinds of people’s crafts – basketry, metal sculptures, masks, ritual objects, jewellery, narrative paintings etc. This was a clever curation of similarly used objects from across India, including the North-East, Central India, North India, East India and South India. More importantly, it was titled *Tradition, Art and Continuity*. It captures the spirit with which Indian communities create, use and destroy art. This too was a renewed approach to representational issues that was not bound by region, period or dynasty. It acknowledged the craftsmen and their skills.

The Jewellery Gallery which opened recently is also a new exciting beginning. The jewellery pieces on display have been arranged in two sections: On one side, they are displayed according to which part of the body they are

worn on: head and hair ornaments, neck pieces, bangles, waist belts and anklets. On the other side, and more importantly, they are organised by type: Temple jewellery, marriage jewellery, dance jewellery and ritual jewellery. There is an emphasised focus on the technique and influences from one part of India on others and so on. This classification allows the visitor to engage with the pieces in a universal manner. In other words, earrings from Kashmir (in the north) to Bengal (in the East) to Kerala (in the South) are all put in one cabinet and allow visitors to see in a short span the wonder that was India in the modern day.

These galleries take a pleasant detour from chronological and dynastic storytelling and represent the local flavour and fabric of India that matter to a larger cross-section of Indian people. The galleries employ a language that is understood by all and looks familiar and more inviting.

This shift of curatorial practice, enriched

by design and display, are the new emerging face of the National Museum – more accessible to its own people, jargon free and soul enriching.

5. BALANCING IT WITH EXHIBITIONS

The trends in the new galleries, however, do not mean that all the old methodologies are denounced and that no chronology should be told. Within the last 2 years, the museum has organized over 15 exhibitions, some large and some small but essentially, it has become a hub for public expression.

Curators who do not work in the National Museum are now closely working with its collections to make exhibitions. In this regard, there are three examples that must be mentioned:

In early 2014, the Museum hosted one of largest exhibitions in its history called the *Body in Indian Art*. The exhibition showcased over 300 objects from over 44 lenders across India. The exhibition was curated by an external curator, Dr. Naman Ahuja. The exhibition was



Jewellery Gallery
Image courtesy of the National Museum New Delhi



The Body in Indian Art Exhibition
Image courtesy of the National Museum New Delhi



Objects in the Deccan Art Exhibition
Image courtesy of the National Museum New Delhi

originally mounted for the Belgian Festival of India and was shown at the National Museum upon its return. While the exhibition included the best classical masterpieces of Indian art, it began with a wooden tribal sculpture of a Naga warrior. This was a conscious decision on the part of the curator who chose to begin with an object that came from one of the most unknown North-eastern states of India. This was an important national statement for the exhibition and for the museum. The exhibition had put classical sculptures and tribal ethnographic

sculptures on the same platform.

In January 2015 the museum collaborated with the Aesthetics Project to host an exhibition titled *Nauras: The Many Arts of Deccan*. The exhibition showcased objects from the Deccani period of Indian history which was an extremely cosmopolitan era. The Pre-Mughal Deccani period has often been overshadowed by Mughal history. Representing the many histories of India so as to allow pluralistic narratives to be told is also the responsibility of a national museum.



*Blind children being shown the Cadence and Counterpart Exhibition
Image courtesy of the National Museum New Delhi*

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*National Museum, New Delhi
Image courtesy of the National Museum New Delhi*