

BALANCING POLITICAL HISTORY, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND ART: THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM IMPLEMENTATION AT MUSEUM NASIONAL INDONESIA

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THE HISTORY OF MUSEUM NASIONAL

The mid-18th century in Europe was a period known as the “Age of Enlightenment” when people began questioning traditional beliefs and setting up societies to discuss scientific reasoning and development.

In accordance with their times, European settlers in Indonesia were also motivated to follow suit. On 24th of April 1778, the Governor-General of the VOC or *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (the United East Indies Company), Dr Reinier de Klerk (1710 – 1780), gave his permission to establish *Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* (The Batavian Society for the Arts and Sciences). This was the first society of its kind in Asia. It aimed to analyse many cultural aspects of the people of the East Indies (now Indonesia) through scientific research. The motto of the Society was *Ten Nutte van het Algemeeni*, indicating that it would work “for the good of the general public”. De Klerk was appointed as Managing Director while several other council members became directors. One of them, Jacobus Cornelis Mattheus (JCM) Radermacher (1741 – 1783), who was married to the Governor General’s stepdaughter, became the society’s executive director.

JCM Radermacher made the greatest contribution. In 1779, he donated his house in Kali Besar, Jakarta Kota, the trading district in the old part of the city, to the Society. He also donated a number of scientific instruments, for example, musical instruments, coins, manuscripts, books and other curios. The building and

other contributions became the initial collection of the museum and the library of the Society.

In 1813, two years after the British had ousted the Dutch from the East Indies, Thomas Stamford Raffles became the Lieutenant Governor of Java and President of the Society on April 24, 1813. He was very keen to acquire knowledge about the history, culture and arts of the East Indies and he stimulated a great deal of new interest in the institution. Due to the building in Kali Besar becoming too small for the growing number of collections, Raffles ordered the construction of a new building to be used as a museum and meeting hall for the “Literary Society”, as the institution was renamed during that period. This building was located at Jalan Majapahit 3. Today, this location hosts the building of the State Secretariat, near the President’s Palace.

The Society’s collection steadily increased, until the museum on Jalan Majapahit 3 became too small. In 1862, the Dutch government decided to build a new museum building. This edifice, today’s Museum Nasional on Jalan Merdeka Barat 12, was opened in 1868. An east-facing rectangle, the museum was built in Doric style, with its white Neo-classical façade and Doric columns. Since then, the building has undergone several alterations and extensions.

The museum is well-known among the Indonesian people, especially among the inhabitants of Jakarta. They call it *Gedung Gajah* (Elephant Building), because of the large bronze statue of an elephant standing in the front yard.

This statue was donated by King Chulalongkorn of Siam (now Thailand), when he paid a state visit to Jakarta from March 27 to April 21, 1871.

In 1931, the museum’s collections were shown at a world cultural exhibition in Paris. Unfortunately, a fire in the exhibition hall demolished Indonesia’s exhibition pavilion and destroyed most of the objects. The museum received some insurance money as compensation and in the following year, these funds were used to build the old Ceramic Room, the Bronze Room and both Treasure Rooms on the second floor.

Because of the service rendered by the Society in the field of science and in government projects, in 1933, the Dutch government added the title *Koninklijk* (Royal) to its name. The museum flourished and was very fortunate to be spared from any damage during the dangerous years of World War II (1942-1945) and Indonesian National Revolution.

On January 26, 1950, the society’s name was altered from *Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* to *Lembaga Kebudayaan Indonesia* (Institute of Indonesian Culture). This change was in line with the times, as seen in the motto of The National Museum of Indonesia, “The existence of the National Museum as a source of information and tourism, which can develop people’s minds and lives, develop civilization and pride in national culture, as well as strengthen unity and friendship among nations.”¹

Mindful of the importance of the museum for the people of Indonesia, the LKI or Institute of Indonesian Culture presented the museum to the government of Indonesia on September 17, 1962, and the museum became *Museum Pusat* (Central Museum). The museum was managed by the Indonesian government under the Department of Education and

Culture. By decree of the Minister of Education and Culture on May 28, 1979, it was renamed the *Museum Nasional*.

In 1994, upon the initiative of the Minister of Education and Culture, Wardiman Djonegoro, the expansion of the Museum began. Adjacent to the existing building (Building A) and in the same architectural style, the new building (Building B) was inaugurated in June 20, 2007.

From the year 2000 till 2011, Museum Nasional was under the purview of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the building of the new museum still continues. At the end of 2011, Museum Nasional was returned to the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and Education.

THE ROLE OF MUSEUM NASIONAL INDONESIA IN THE PRESERVATION AND PRESENTATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Due to its long history, Museum Nasional Indonesia has now become the oldest and largest museum in Indonesia. Various programmes related to developing museum technical aspects such as preservation and presentation of the collection have been undertaken. Although there has been no significant increase in terms of collection development since the era of Indonesia’s independence (1945), there was however a historic event in 1978.

1978 was a blissful and exciting time for Indonesia. Masterpieces from the classical era and the Islamic developing era were handed over by the Dutch government to Museum Nasional Indonesia (MNI). The collection included the Prajñāparamita statue, Nagarakertagama text, and the gold pieces from Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara. Previously, these collections were managed by *Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde* Leiden – Netherlands.

¹ Dedah Rufadiah Sri Handari, *Museum Nasional 1778-2008*, (Jakarta: Museum Nasional, 2008.)

Museum Nasional Indonesia and the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden (RMV) were both built in the 18th century when the Dutch were in power in Indonesia. The collections of both museums were similar since they were derived from the same sites or collectors.

At that time, collection building throughout Indonesia was conducted by scientific expeditions, military expeditions, government officials and officers on missions. Based on prevailing policies at that time, all cultural heritage objects gathered by the collectors were transferred to Bataviaasch Genootschap in Batavia. The collection was then divided into two, one part was left in Batavia (Jakarta), the other was sent to the Netherlands, mainly to Leiden. The exporting of the collection to the Netherlands occurred from the mid-19th century till the time before Independence in 1945. As a result, most of the collections of Indonesian cultural heritage objects stored in RMV had never been seen by the Indonesian people themselves.

To address this issue, a joint exhibition organised by MNI and RMV entitled *Shared Cultural Heritage* (SCH) was held in 2003 through the auspices of a cooperation agreement. The exhibition was held twice: at the National Museum of Indonesia in August - November 2005, then at the De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam in December 2005 - April 2006.

The exhibition was a highly anticipated event for the Indonesian public, because the Rijks Museum voor Volkenkunde collection on display originated from the same period and site, namely Borobudur, Muteran, Singosari, Lombok, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, etc. Up to that point, only Indonesians who had been to the Netherlands had been able to enjoy these priceless artefacts. With the SCH exhibition, the Indonesian public was finally able to enjoy the beauty of the collec-

tions of the Museum Nasional Indonesia and the Rijks Museum voor Volkenkunde in one place. The *Shared Cultural Heritage* exhibition held from 2005-2006 was complimented with an international seminar, *Singhasari Masterpieces and Other Collections*.

The SCH cooperation was not limited to the implementation of an exhibition and seminar only, but also encouraged more comprehensive cooperation between the MNI and the RMV in areas such as collection research, collections management, library management, and others. MNI and RMV human resources were involved in an exchange programme to assist and enhance professionalism in such aspects.

The partnership between MNI and RMV continued from July 2007 to 2009. One of the programmes that was held as part of this partnership was the provision of consultancy services in the rearrangement and renovation of the permanent exhibitions of MNI's ethnographic collection. The RMV provided specialised human resources for this task. The renovation was carried out in two phases. The first phase was implemented in the fiscal year of 2007 and included the areas of Sumatra and Java. The second phase was conducted in 2008 and included the areas of Bali, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, East Nusa Tenggara and Papua.

In addition, the *The Glamour of Minangkabau Traditional Cloth*, held from April 7 to 30 2008, invited active participation from the RMV curators. The exhibition was organised as a first step to a major SCH exhibition in 2009 under the theme of *Sumatera*. In terms of human resource development, the CollAsia programme conducted in October 2008 discussed the use of old buildings (Heritage Buildings) for collection management in terms of either being used as exhibition spaces or for storage. Museum Nasional

Indonesia was chosen as the venue for its ancient and modern architecture. It was also an apt case study. The training also involved active participation of one RMV conservator.

The culmination of the SCH programme from 2007 - 2009 was the *Sumatra* exhibition from July - November 2009. The exhibition was also held at the Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore in 2010. The partnership between MNI and RMV, which has now been renamed as the National Museum of World Cultures, is still harmoniously tied. In 2014, when Museum Nasional Indonesia held the Singhasari seminar within the framework of the International Museum Day Festival and the 236 Years of Museum Nasional Indonesia, the curators of RMV were also invited to speak. Before this, we also built the Singosari mobile application. These projects represents the harmonious cooperation between both museums.

In 2016, the National Museum of Indonesia will enter the development of the third building (Building C) and will finish in 2018. With regards to the future presentation of our collections in our permanent exhibitions, we have a new storyline developed from focus group discussions in 2014, where we invited people from all walks of life to provide their input. These included members of the public, academic practitioners, professional organisations, the media, public figures, and museum practitioners. The most important thing we learnt from those sessions, which we also share and which we continue to apply, is a shared commitment to continue preserving our cultural heritage together.