

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

Mrs. Phetmalayvanh Keobounma
General Director of Lao National Museum

INTRODUCTION

This essay describes our museum as it is today and the development of our new Museum facility which opens next year. Using our experience with building and developing the new Museum, I will discuss how we have presented a balanced view concerning political history, ethnography and art.

PAST AND PRESENT VIEW OF THE LAO NATIONAL MUSEUM: FAILURES AND REALISATIONS

On the whole, we at the Lao National Museum struggle to meet a sound standard of display and presentation of our country and its history. One of our greatest problems is, of course, resources.



Lao National Museum
Images courtesy of Lao National Museum

During the early French Colonial Period (1893–1954), within Indochina (Lao, Vietnam and Cambodia), Lao was the only country not to be provided with a purpose-built museum. Myanmar's museum was established by the British. Perhaps it is fair to say that Laos was the only country in Southeast Asia, apart from Timor and a few other small states, to have not benefitted from a museum culture as such.

Wat Ho Phra Keo, a temple in Vientiane is the only exception. It was restored in the late 1960s and established as a museum to house a large collection of Buddhist images. Before the end of the American-Vietnam war in 1975, a myriad of temples throughout the country that exemplified and maintained traditional Lao arts and architecture existed. During the 1980s a number of Museums of the Revolution were set up in the provinces. The main Museum of the Revolution was set up and located in Vientiane, capital of the Lao PDR.

With tourism in the 1990s, the Royal Palace in Luang Phrabang was instated as the museum to display the royal collection. Other Museums have also been opened such as the Kaysone Memorial Museum, the Souphanouvong Museum and the Museum of Public Security, among a few others. Since the late 1970s, a number of Provincial Museums have been instated. However, it is the Lao National Museum that sees continued visitation from tourists and scholars.

As previously mentioned, in 1985 the Museum was dedicated to the people by the government. Before the current regime took power, the building was the last royal Prime Minister's office, housing till recently some of his private collections, political manifestos and other miscellaneous documents.

The Museum of the Revolution as it was originally known, first opened its doors to the public in 1985. Its chronological theme and

format was exactly the same as other soviet museums across the globe. The soviet formula of museum display is quite stringent and very specific. As such, all soviet museums from our provincial museums to museums in other soviet countries are similar in character.

The soviet formula for exhibitions is a progression, chronologically through time; from ancient history, struggles to power, to recent technological achievements to advancement towards the future. Colour schemes and methods of representation were strictly adhered to. Only red and/or colours of the country's national flag would be used to enhance displays and backboards. In the early days of our Museum's representation this formula was easily implemented.

In the year 2000, the Lao Museum of the Revolution became the Lao National Museum and was allowed greater freedom to take a more liberal approach in developing its content and display.

THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS

Today, The Lao National Museum is a scientific research centre and public institution which is dedicated to the study, preservation and promotion of the country's culture and history. The museum, which houses over 28,000 artefacts, wishes to attract more visitors and enhance its role in society. We want this to result in the development of educational programmes and provide visitors with the most accurate and up to date information possible about the objects in our collection in an engaging and attractive way.

However, due to the lack of infrastructure and technology in the Lao PDR, the museum's various efforts in attracting local and international visitors to learn more about its own cultural heritage faces difficulties. One of the biggest obstacles we confront is the lack of an



New Lao National Museum
Images courtesy of Lao National Museum

official website. Not having an official website to introduce the museum and its collection directly to audiences limits the range of activities the museum can programme. This causes inefficiencies in promoting Lao history and culture to her people, and international audiences.

We aim to attract about 2.8 million tourists annually and increase the number of hotels to 350 and restaurants to 850. We also aim to discover and expand historical sites, and attempt to inscribe at least 2 more UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the country.

Yet the development of our National Museum is very under-resourced and we struggle to escape the old restrictions of the past. For instance, we still cling to the formal chronological and thematic style of exhibition design and presentation. In some cases, this causes imbal-

ance in terms of the correct representation of historical facts and in general, creates confusion.

Let me give you a case in point: A problem was caused by the placement of several exhibitions donated by foreign entities. These exhibitions could not be placed in the Museum properly. Instead, they were relegated to stairway landings and small annexes of existing exhibition galleries. All in all, the dated but reasonably simplistic chronological order of display has become fragmented and confusing. For instance, the tour of the Lao National Museum begins with “the dawn of time”, dinosaurs and fossilised remains. One then proceeds through Neolithic displays and onward to the introduction of the Buddhist religion and the birth of the nation in the 13th Century. After the advancements of the nation, there are displays devoted to the Lane Xang Period or 13th

Century history in Lao. After which, a continuity of Lao’s history is lost. Neolithic habitation sites are re-introduced in the stairwell on the ground floor. This exhibition was produced by the University of Pennsylvania. The only space for this exhibit was in that stairwell. Proceeding up the stairs, one finds an exhibition of ethnic clothing following which, one is suddenly back in 13th century Lao (when Lao first became a nation-state). Owing to a number of additional sponsored exhibitions, the chronological formula has become convoluted and has made the storyline confusing.

In terms of politics, our Museum attempts to portray our turbulent and complex history - its political strengths and weaknesses - in the most balanced way possible.

We believe we portray a balanced view, particularly in comparison with some other countries that tend to present a biased view based on the country’s current power base or government.

Although, perhaps, we give too much space to our more recent, modern political past, it is a section of the Museum that visitors comment on more so than all our other displays. We have attempted to condense the space to just cover modern history. However, the recorded comments in our Visitors’ book attests to there being little knowledge about Lao in the pre-modern Lao history period and that tourists desire to know more.

FUTURE PLANS AND DEVELOPMENT

(A)
Providing a more balanced narrative of Lao History and Heritage

The building next to our new building is Kaysone Museum which focuses on the last hundred years of our political history. As such, we see no need to replicate their excellent representation of this complex and politically turbulent time. Therefore, we at the Lao National Museum plan to downsize the space we have given to represent this history in favour of other historically important periods in Lao history.

(B)
Focusing on Lao’s Golden Age to raise awareness of Lao’s rich history and heritage

The main focus or centre piece of the new Lao National Museum will be dedicated to the Lane Xang Period (1353–1707) which is considered to be Laos’ Golden Age. There has been very little representation of this fascinating period of Laos’ historical past. It is a period in Laos’ history that birthed a nation. It was a time of intense commercial activity and development. Trade and building developments flourished. The architectural style of the period was highly refined. A true Lao vernacular was born in this time. Cultural activity was also abundant during this time.

New Lao National Museum
Images courtesy of Lao National Museum



(C)

*Providing an equal and common space
for all ethnic groups in Laos*

It is vital, particularly in terms of national security, that all ethnic groups are represented equally and in a fair way. Lao has more than 100 different ethnic groups and it is difficult to fairly represent all in a balanced way. This is mainly due to the lack of historic and contemporary textiles and artefacts that pertain to each ethnic minority. Many textiles and artefacts have become quite expensive and we have no funds to acquire them.

Traditional arts and crafts, such as weaving, would be well-represented within an ethnic textiles exhibition. Such an exhibition would lend to a better understanding of how these historic and traditional forms have influenced contemporary Lao arts and crafts.

(D)

Protecting and Preserving Our Natural History

Natural history also requires representation as a matter of urgency. Due to rapid development, we are now facing the loss of much of our flora and fauna. In terms of education, representation of our native flora and fauna (particularly those on the brink of extinction) will be a crucial component of our new museum.

CONCLUSION

We believe it is still possible to work within the chronological formula to deliver a balanced and cohesive theme for museum exhibitions. We are building a new museum which we anticipate will be ready next year. We imagine that this is a fresh start for us in representing Laos' history in a wider and more balanced manner. We are planning our new exhibitions now and working with our new spaces. Research and development of each display component is now being undertaken in earnest.

We are confident that the new museum will be one that will engage and enrich the knowledge and appreciation of locals and tourists, presenting the rich history of Lao to the world.

(Blank Page)