

A Fine Balance:

The Many (and Changing) Roles of a National Museum

Prof. Tan Tai Yong
Executive Vice-President (Academic Affairs),
Yale-NUS College, Singapore

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The National Gallery Singapore, which is dedicated to showcasing Singapore and Southeast Asian art, officially opened on 23 November 2015. The unveiling of this visual arts museum that was ten years in the making brings the number of national museums on the island to six in total.¹ Why does a country as tiny as Singapore have this many national museums, you may ask. What purpose do they serve? Would it not suffice for a relatively young country like Singapore to have just one or two national museums telling the story of its birth and development as a nation-state?

Singapore's experience is perhaps indicative, and a recognition of not only the continued relevance of museums in nation-building, but also of their continuing relevance in educating citizens, not just for the country, but for an increasingly globalised world. As nations continue to build and invest in museums as a means of distinguishing their history, heritage and culture, it is timely to examine how national museums are responding to a growing awareness for more nuanced and critical approaches to their varied and evolving roles.

The origins of national museums

The prototype of what we recognise today as national museums emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century. The British Museum in London and the Louvre in Paris, both iconic cultural institutions and bastions of history, opened in the mid-to-late 1700s. "Motivated by the Enlightenment, the encyclopaedic spirit, world exploration, trade, and developing industrialisation,"² these institutions were projections of English and French wealth, power and identity. These museums became symbols of national achievements and imperial power.

The museum evolved and spread throughout the world in the nineteenth century at the height of western imperial expansion. As European colonial powers conquered new territories and, in the process, encountered people, cultural practices, belief systems and natural environments that were vastly different from what they were familiar with, they developed the practice of collecting objects and specimens, and displaying these as artefacts in museums. The British Empire, for instance, yielded ample material for British and colonial museums in terms of ethnographic, natural history and botanical collections.³ Although current research has shown that these collections were sometimes assembled under haphazard, chaotic and unsystematic conditions,⁴ they were then thought to represent a mastery over things unknown through scientific endeavour, rational thought and industrialisation. It was also the empire's way of "knowing" their subjects, through collection, study and codification.⁵

A second global boom in museums took place in the post-colonial period, after the Second World War. The rising tide of nationalism saw liberation movements and armed insurgencies waged against incumbent colonial governments all across Africa and Asia. This led ultimately to the dismantling of European empires and the creation of new nation-states. National museums started emerging as nations embarked on the process of nation-building. Many of these museums were inherited from the colonial state, and were of a similar typology. But they took on the national agenda, with their exhibitions and collections geared towards a nationalist narrative. Many would highlight the achievements of the new state, often linking their genealogies to a golden, pre-colonial past.

The development of each nation's national museums is shaped by local conditions such as nation-building needs, economic wealth, the degree of state involvement and state sponsorship, international and diplomatic connections, individual and corporate interests and so on.⁶ It is also crucial to acknowledge the imprint of curatorial direction, something that is often overlooked.

Classification of national museums

Given such diversity, how can we go about classifying national museums in a way that is useful?

We could start by quoting from a report by the Smithsonian Institution, which was published in 2005:

- a. “Monolithic museums [are the] great public collections that were created as or became national museums, with the intent of presenting a universal view of humanity’s achievements and knowledge.”⁷ They do this through their rich and varied collections, and vast reservoir of scholarship and expertise. The British Museum and the Louvre are classic examples of these sorts of museums.
- b. State museums of national culture that present the histories and aspirations of their countries and serve as important vehicles for building or reconstructing national identity, particularly for emerging nations.”⁸
- c. Specialist national museums which provide high level academic and technical support for scholarship that serves national and international audiences – a prime example would be the National Gallery in London, which has one of the world’s premier collections of European paintings.⁹

Most national museums might fall into category b. As a means of buttressing their international status, national museums often claim the cultural inheritance of major civilisations such as China, India and ancient Greece. The Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore serves as a good example. Its mandate perfectly illustrates its nation-building role: *“the [museum] is devoted to preserving the cultural heritage of Asia, especially the ancestral cultures of Singaporeans. These include China, Southeast Asia, India, and the Islamic world. More recently, the museum has focused on the long*

*historical connections between cultures. As one of the National Museums of Singapore... we seek to promote a better appreciation of the rich history that has created Singapore’s multi-ethnic society.”*¹⁰ The National Gallery Singapore probably falls into categories b and c.

The role of national museums

Whatever category they might fall into, national museums – as institutions that are created and funded by a central government – typically have educational and overt political aims, particularly in fostering national consciousness. Their collections are often used to represent the history and heritage of the nation (or empire), and to “reflect the aspirations of the nation, and even shape and define a common interest.”¹¹

As national museums came to be regarded as public institutions which foster knowledge through their collections and exhibitions, they developed a preoccupation with amassing distinctive and “complete” collections to distinguish the nation’s history and cultural heritage. In this regard, I would like to mention how the National Gallery Singapore, which is said to have the largest collection of Southeast Asian art in the world, aims to fulfil these purposes.

In his speech at the official opening of the museum, Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (b. 1952) said:

“The National Gallery is ‘nowhere near the scale and riches’ of the Louvre in Paris or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. [...] You don’t find baroque capitals or gold leaf all over the place. It’s quiet, it’s plain and simple but it’s historic and if you come in, you know this is a special place.”

He also noted that

“The measure of success is not how many tourists come, or how our museum ranks internationally, but whether Singaporeans feel the Gallery belongs to them, visit it to enjoy what

it offers, and in time come to love the Gallery.”¹²

Let me now turn to the nature of national museums and the limitations they face. Here is an excerpt from an edited volume on national museums:

“For a museum to be effective we must buy into its offerings: art history, national narratives, the unassailable logic and authority of science, and so on. In doing so, we believe that museums contribute to our sense of a knowable and reproducible reality through which we can grow our personal knowledge. But this museum reality does not come without performance. The two can never be disassociated. All who enter the museum are, however, deceived by the illusion that the museum’s authority rests on its objective representation of the world. It does not.”¹³

There are many strands of thought packed into the above quote, but the points that need to be highlighted here are the similar tensions and impulses behind the interpretation and representation of “knowledge” in museums and the writing of history, namely narratives bound to the nation-state.

The future role of the national museum

There are two other issues that need to be discussed in relation to the future role of a national museum. The first issue whether it is useful for national museums to attempt to move beyond national narratives to focus on new broader conceptual frameworks? And secondly, whether there is such a thing as a trans-Asian identity based on networks and cross-cultural exchanges? And how can national museums play a part in shaping this identity?

The use of the nation-state as the framework for curatorial interpretation of national collections is limiting and problematic. As is the case with historical narratives, there will always be omissions and challenges to the narratives presented in national museums.

Moving beyond national narratives

How can national museums avoid being straitjacketed by the narrow confines of national and political narratives? One way is to examine transnational networks and cross-cultural exchanges that date back to the colonial and pre-colonial period before the emergence of nation-states and modern political boundaries.

The study of such connections has opened up new scopes in academia, especially in the area of colonial studies. The following quote is from an article examining the networks that shaped the British empire in the nineteenth century:

“[...] there have been growing calls for trans-national histories and many historians have insisted that the construction of new analytical models that recover the movement of people, ideas, ideologies, commodities and information across the borders of the nation-states are urgently needed in this age of global moment.”¹⁴

National museums can adopt the same approach. Many museums in Asia are custodians of colonial collections, their histories inextricably linked to these trans-national networks. The material culture that emerged from cross-cultural exchanges can offer fertile ground for research by museums. Fuelled largely by trade and forged by the extensive circulation of people, ideas, information and commodities, these exchanges offered immense possibilities for creative adaptation and innovation.

A good recent example is an exhibition curated by the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in Singapore in 2013. Titled *Devotion and Desire: Cross-cultural Art in Asia*, this exhibition showcased the museum’s new acquisitions which consisted of cross-cultural art pieces. In his introduction for the exhibition catalogue, Dr Alan Chong, Director of ACM and the Peranakan Museum, addressed the idea of challenging national narratives through new curatorial frameworks:

“The history of Asian art has traditionally been seen as a series of individual cultures – China, Japan, Korea, India, Cambodia, Thailand, for example – connected by streams of influence, but essentially retaining individual national identities. This may be useful and indeed convincing, but we are hopeful that new approaches might shed light on other systems that connect these cultures, beyond the expected narrative of the influence of Buddhism throughout Asia.”

He went on to argue that

“In this regard, the role of colonial powers in artistic exchange should not be segregated as an entirely separate category of ‘export’ or ‘trade art’, but perhaps seen as more organically connected to the cultures that produced

the objects for the West. The trading patterns within Asia might also be usefully incorporated into the narratives of museums and scholarship.”¹⁵

So, as museums traverse their roles between “nation-building” and “education” – and collections should aim to fulfil these distinct yet connected roles – the question of balancing political history, ethnography and art might not have to be problematic.

In conclusion, while we can all recognise that there will be limitations to what the national museum can represent and how they will tell their stories, we can all appreciate that museums will constantly need to fulfil and juggle multiple roles. The key perhaps is to continue looking for more nuanced and critical approaches to the national museum’s ever-evolving roles.

Notes

1. Singapore’s national museums are: the National Museum of Singapore, Asian Civilisations Museum, Peranakan Museum, Singapore Philatelic Museum, Singapore Art Museum (which focuses on the contemporary art of Singapore and the region) and National Gallery Singapore.
2. Smithsonian Institution 2005, pp. 24–25
3. Longair and McAleer 2012, pp. 2–3
4. Keurs 2007, pp. 1–15. See also Singapore 2009
5. MacKenzie 2009, pp. 1–8
6. Knell et al. 2011, p. 6
7. Smithsonian Institution 2005, p. 28
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 29
10. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore website: <http://acm.org.sg/about-us/story-of-our-museums>
11. Smithsonian Institution 2005, p. 37
12. *The Straits Times*, 24 November 2015
13. Knell et al. 2011, pp. 4–5
14. Ballantyne 2001
15. Chong 2013, p. 11

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