

**MUSEUMS AS AN ELEMENT OF CULTURAL TRANSMISSION:
WITH REFERENCE TO THE COLOMBO NATIONAL
MUSEUM, SRI LANKA**

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Abstract

Museum refers as an institution that cares for a collection of artifacts and other objects of scientific, artistic, cultural, or historical importance and makes them available for public viewing through exhibition that may be permanent or temporary. With regard to the exhibition, museums symbolize certain culture that implies through the collection. This study attempts to analyze the potential of cultural transmission through a museum. The study has carried out at the Colombo National Museum which is the centre of Sri Lankan museums. The objectives of the study were to find out the cultural backgrounds of the collection, to find out the ways of cultural transmission through museum and analyze the importance of museum cultural transmission. This specific study has based on the data collected through a field research. The significance of the study is to develop museums as cultural transmission centres.

Keywords: museums, Colombo National Museum, culture, cultural transmission, significance

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INTRODUCTION

Museums as institutions that cares and display artifacts in their collection became a vital element in Cultural Tourism. It has become an attraction in the concept of Cultural Tourism. A cultural tourist attraction is a place, monument or live event of people's culture. A Cultural Tourist expects knowledge on culture or experience of the culture at the destination. In accordance, every cultural tourist attraction communicates or symbolizes certain culture behind them. This study has been attempted to introduce one such attraction and critically analyze the use of it as cultural education centre.

AIM

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METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study has based on a field research carried out at the Colombo National Museum, Sri Lanka. The motivation for selecting the Colombo National Museum as the sample case was its importance as the major museum establishment of Sri Lanka.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The research significance was to develop museums as cultural transmission centres that help to minimize the negatives course through less knowledge on host culture of a country or a tourist destination.

MUSEUM

The word museum has originated in a Greek form "*mouseion*". It meant "seat of the Muses" who is the goddess that designated for all arts. Museum has designated as a philosophical institution or a place of contemplation. Use of the Latin origin, museum appears to have been restricted in Roman times mainly to places of philosophical discussion. Thus the great Museum at Alexandria, founded by Ptolemy I Soter early in the 3rd century BC, with its college of scholars and its library, was more a prototype university than an institution to preserve and interpret material aspects of the heritage (Benediktsson, 2004, 12).

It means a museum became an ideal location for learning of heritage and culture since the very beginning of the concept.

CULTURE

Culture has been defined in different ways by different authors. It is identified that culture is a significant element of a social group of people. Considering few definitions of culture, Tyler defines 'Culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'. According to him man generates culture and culture based on human identities.

Hofstede describes culture as a collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another. According to this definition culture is the element which has ability to differently identify a group of people from other human groups.

Kim Ann Zimmermann explains culture as the characteristics of particular group of people. Moreover it defines by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts.

MUSEUMS AS TOURIST ATTRACTION

Every tourist who comes to a country visits at least one museum. The purpose of such tourist's is having knowledge about culture of the destination. Those tourists expects introduction of the destination, knowledge on basics of host culture, general history and ways of life of host community. Moreover, museum plays a vital role as an ice breaking element of tour package.

CULTURAL TRANSMISSION THROUGH MUSEUMS

Cultural Elements transmit through a Museum could be identified in several forms. History, trade and occupations, lifestyles, arts and knowledge, religions and beliefs and international relationship are such cultural elements that transmit through a museum.

COLOMBO NATIONAL MUSEUM

The National Museum of Colombo is the major museum in Sri Lanka. It is located in Colombo which is the merchant city of the country. This museum was founded by English Governor Sir William Henry Gregory during 1877. Currently, museum became the most significant place that displays comment identities of Sri Lanka. Basically the museum attempts to signify historical background of the country by arranging gallery no 01 to 06 for historical ages such as Pre and Proto Historic Periods, Anuradhapura Period, Polonnaruwa Period, Medieval Period and Kandyan Period. Moreover, museum attempts to display different objects according to subject areas such as paintings, coinage, ancient technology, fabric, jewelry, weapons, and folk arts by gallery 07 – 13. Gallery 14 and 15 are newly developed galleries for traditional beliefs and customs, and Agriculture. In this way, the museum has arranged the exhibition by considering important of historical periods of the country and several subjects has highlight when describing culture of Sri Lankan society.

Apart from the gallery arrangement, the objects or collection of the museum is playing a vital role in transmitting the culture of the country. Since the objects in museum exhibition are equally important as each of them have background story about Sri Lankan culture, there could be identified unique objects that contribute to this study more than other objects. Several examples are as follows.

GOLD PLATED BUDDHA IMAGE

The Dedigama Gold Plated Buddha Statue is one of the unique identities in Polonnaruwa period. The statue belongs to the 12th century AD. This *Dhyana Mudra* image has locate in an arch that decorated by dragons. This statue has filled with clay and sandalwood powder while it covers by gold plates. This artifact indicates the ancient technological and artistic skills of Sri Lankans (Widyarathne, 2015).

VEHERAGALA AVALOKITHESWARA BODHISATHWA IMAGE

The Buddhist sculptures and statues have developed in Sri Lanka in the middle of Anuradhapura Period. Though early Buddhism based on Thervada teachings later on the Mahayana teachings were introduced to Sri Lankan Buddhism. As a result, many Bodhisathwas has worshiped during these periods. Avalokitheswara Bodhisathwa is one of famous Bodhisathwas in Mahayana teaching. He is believed as the person who has ability to rescue the people from sorrow of life. This statue is a symbol of art, metal technology and changes in Buddhism in ancient Sri Lanka. This statue is made of bronze which is combination of copper and tin. It has painted by mercury which gain golden colour. When

considering artistic skills indicate by this art creation, there could be find a gentle smile, clemency and glory clearly indicate by the artist.

IMAGE OF GODDESS THARA

The Goddess Thara is known as the Shakti (Consort) of Avalokitheswara Bodhisathwa. The Bronze statue locate in Anuradhapura Gallery is a replica of actual figure that has displayed in British National Museum. Goddess Thara is popular for kindness, goodness and prosperity. This image believed as a design of 09th century AD. The image indicates the formation of Mahayana Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Artistic skills of forefathers and iron technology of ancient Sri Lanka.

GODDESS DURGA STATUE

The stone statue of Goddess Durga which belongs to the late Anuradhapura period is one of the unique icons in Hinduism in Sri Lanka. Since most of the Sri Lankans believe Hinduism influenced Sri Lankan society during Polonnaruwa period, this statue is a great significance that indicate Sri Lankan Hinduism is much older than Polonnaruwa period. Moreover, as an element in art history, it symbolizes the uniqueness of the artist. This lady figure is a creation prior to structured art fraternity. The historians express this statue belongs to 9th century AD. The statue has located on a buffalo that is believed as *Mahesha Asur*. Historians interpret the statue implies "*Maheshasur Mardhani Durga*" which is one of the forms of Goddess Parvati (Hewage, 2012, 162).

SHIVA NATARAG IMAGE

According to the *Trimurti* concept (Three forms) in Hinduism; Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are the great trinity that functions of creation, maintenance and destruction of lives of the world. Out of them God Shiva is believed as the god who is for destruction. Shiva Nataraj Image in Polonnaruwa Period Gallery indicates such symbolical and artistic fragments of history. This image is covered by a fire round which implies the myth of world. It shows that human always suffering by myth. The God Shiva is implies by a dancing male figure which adopts a *Thanda* configuration (Rough form). This sculpture is one of the ideal images of Hindu God image collection. The bronze image illustrates development of Hinduism in Sri Lanka, bronze technology and skills of Sri Lankan artists that influenced by Indian art.

ARDHANARI NATESHVARA IMAGE

A combined image of God Shiva and his consort Goddess Parvati is named as Ardhanari Nateshvara. This image in one of the unique objects in Bronze collection of

Colombo National Museum. The image signifies a dancing posture. Historians reveal this statue as a representation of beginning of life in the world. Nevertheless, the image specifies the significance of Hinduism, Artistic skills and technology of Sri Lankan history.

TRILINGUAL INSCRIPTION

This inscription is a matchless factor in studying language history of Sri Lanka. Moreover, it points out much socio cultural aspects, trade and international relationships of ancient Sri Lanka. This inscription is related to China. The inscription has been written in three languages as Chinese, Persian and Tamil. The content of the inscription is a list of goods that were sent by Chinese Major Cheng Ho as an offer to God Vishnu. The Sri Lankan language used in this inscription is Tamil which indicates that Tamil traders have commonly visited other countries during this period. Besides, The Persians were actively participated in commercial activities, as a result, this inscription has been written in Persian language as well.

ANCIENT COINAGE

The Colombo National Museum consists of a remarkable collection of currency in ancient and contemporary Sri Lanka. The oldest coins in Sri Lanka were identified as the Punch Marked Coins. Then after, fylfot coins, Lion imaged coins, Lakshmi coins, Roman coins and *Kahavanu* (Gold coins) have developed. During the 10th and 11th centuries of AD, the coins seem to become much round shaped. During the Polonnaruwa Period, the coins were introduced with king's portrait. King Raja Raja, King Parakramabahu, King Nissankamalla and Queen Leelawathi were issued such portrait coins during their reigns.

BRASS SCULPTURE OF FEMALE COMBATANTS

This engraved sculpture represents two female combatants. Though there are a lot of historical evidences about male combatants in Sri Lanka there could not be found much evidence on female combatants. This sculpture is believed to be representing *Sudaliya* or *Maruwalli* scholastic combatants that were famous combat scholastics during the Kandyan period. This brass sculpture points out the gender equity of ancient Sri Lankan society.

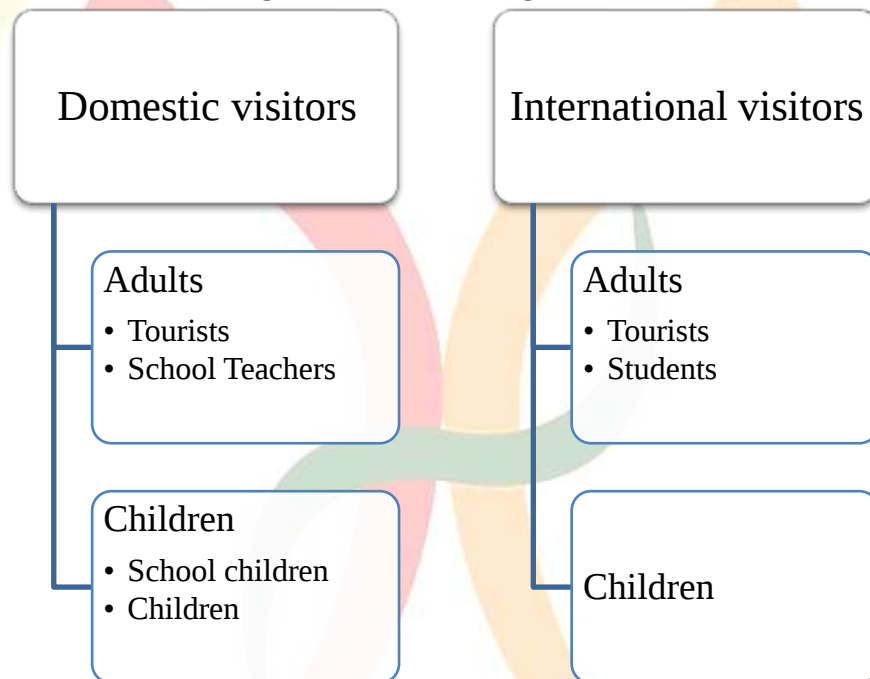
ROYAL THRONE

The royal throne used by the King Wimaladharmasooriya II is the major object in Colombo National Museum. This throne was a gift to Sri Lankan king from Dutch governor who ruled the coastal area of country during 1692 – 1697 AD. The structure of this throne has been made by wood and covered with gold plates. This throne has been decorated by Sinhalese decorations. Those decorations symbolize the pride and gentleness of the king. Moreover, they specify the prosperity of the kingdom under his govern.

MUSEUM ACTIVITIES AND CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

Museum education is one of the major components in function of a museum. Museum helps formal education of the country as an informal education institute. In this regard, museums organize several activities and arrange resources that gain ability to visitor education. Considering the forms of visitors received by museums, there could be find different categories. Visitors in Colombo National Museum have been categorized as follows.

Figure 1: Visitor Categorization



(Source: Visitor analysis by author)

As per the figure 1, it clearly specifies the different categories of visitors that could identify in diverse age groups and purposes. A museum should address the requirements of such vary of their visitors. Those different types of visitors certainly have different types of educational expectations. Colombo National Museum has identified those numerous expectations and is organizing diverse educational activities for their different range of visitors. The Museum Education Division is conducting such various educational experiences to selected crowds other than the museum exhibition galleries. Conducting lectures for university students, conducting mobile exhibitions, public lectures, publications, museum library, and guided visits are some of the educational attempts by the museum. In this regard, museum circulated the knowledge on Sri Lankan culture and

society. Although, the Colombo National Museum records less educational attempts for differently able visitors that are sensitive group among visitors.

Trilingual labeling system and guide service, audio visual room, publication and souvenir shop, library and Ola Leaf collection, school exhibitions are some effective knowledge circulation attempts that frequently find at the site.

CONCLUSION

Study of Colombo National Museum leads to such conclusion that museum is not just a tourist attraction or cultural store. It has ability to transmit the culture of its collection and area it exists. The Colombo National Museum, as the leading museum of Sri Lanka has attempt in cultural transmission through several efforts such as exhibition arrangement, educational activities and as a tourist attraction. The importance of such cultural transmission is helping the country to illustrate their cultural pride as well the visitors get familiar to destination they visit and encourage to respect host culture and protect the authenticity of the host culture and destination.

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