

The Museum of the Future

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The concept of the historical museum is embedded in the idea that explaining the past, through its artifacts and the ideas that they evoke, can also be a way of comprehending the present, and possibly even having thoughts about the future. An initial curiosity about the past can lead on to attempts to understand it and such an understanding may throw light on the present. The museum is a place that evokes the past through the objects that it displays. Until recent times they were treated as objects that spur curiosity and this can create a sense of wonder in the beholder, the assumption being that they are different from the objects that surround us in the present. Hence the names of what started off as a kind of museum - such as the *wunderkammer*, the cabinet of curiosities, and the *ajabghar*/literally, the house of strange things.

Slowly the purpose of the museum evolved into something more. It remained a place that housed objects of interest from the past but these objects began to follow patterns of thought. Two strands were influential. One pertained to the nineteenth century discussions on the evolution of the universe and the other to the evolution of the human being and human cultures. In conformity with these notions, the contents of museums tended to bifurcate. Some focused on geology and the natural sciences, and others on pre-history and history. Today there are museums that relate to many disciplines and the objects associated with them. This is why I have specified that my concern is with historical museums.

This kind of museum is perhaps more accessible to most people since those relating to natural sciences are thought to require more specialized knowledge. The latter reach out to a past that is extremely distant in time and require a far greater stretch of the imagination than most people can comprehend. The historical museum relates to the more immediate past, the past that is imminent to our present, the past that almost conditions our present as some would like to believe. The link has been projected as being closer. I shall address my remarks to the museums of this kind.

If there are two ideas that I think we of recent times, have contributed to the understanding of the world they can be said to be relevant to the idea of the museum. One is that knowledge is not static. It advances through constant analysis and it also advances through juxtaposing it in various ways that may suggest new ideas. The other is that various parts of knowledge can be brought into communication with each other, although we may not be aware of doing so. It is this communication that also allows of fresh juxtapositions and

advances. We cannot predict what form knowledge will take in a generation from now, but at least these two aspects will continue.

So my idea of the museum of the future is that museums should be so structured as to provide the possibility of changing the juxtapositions of information so as to encourage the emergence of new knowledge. And they must provide the possibility of facilitating communications between knowledge.

Keeping this in mind I would argue that a museum need not be a spreading mass of galleries, each devoted to one piece of historical or cultural information. Perhaps they could be set out in modules, each module focusing on a theme. One module could be demonstrating a rise in sea-level in the second millennium BC and showing what the affect would be in various regions, and indeed exhibiting how such changes may have happened in the past and what was the result. Another by contrast, could be dealing with the drying up of areas, where climate change wrecked havoc on a number of areas. Was the termination of human activity on Easter Island, really the affect of deforestation? The discovery of iron and how it changed societies could be another. Coming closer to our times a module on industrialization in Europe cannot stop with changes in Europe as it would have to include an exhibition that takes in colonialism and nationalism in relation to European exploitation of the rest of the world.

This would be a change from galleries in museums that currently project the civilization of the world as largely segregated, each in its own gallery. This is in keeping with the original concept of civilization as worked out in the nineteenth century. The world was divided into distinct civilizations according to demarcated territories, characterized by a single dominant language and a differentiated religion. Civilizations were viewed as unique and as having evolved in virtual isolation. Each had a golden age that came to be seen as its classic period. But a century later studies showed that civilizations are essentially porous. Their periods of highest achievement are generally times when they have much contact with other civilization. There is considerable borrowing and lending resulting in an admixture of knowledge that is conducive to its advance. Civilizations grow through contacts. The attempt in the museum therefore, should be to show the porosity and the contacts and what resulted from them.

My projection for a museum of the future assumes that only some people can afford to visit a major museum yet such a museum should be available for a virtual visit by anybody. Can this be done by using digital technology? It would be a museum on the net. Perhaps an experiment can be made with exhibits in one gallery of an existing major museum. If it

succeeds this may be a way of exhibiting – at least on the net - objects that are in storage and cannot be exhibited for lack of space.

Each object would be projected from a variety of angles so that the viewer gets a sense of the object as if she was seeing the object itself. The facility for enlargement would allow the visibility of details sometimes even better than in an actual view. The objects should be so projected that as objects they can be shuffled and juxtaposed with other objects without requiring the viewer to go from one gallery to another as in a museum. So too can various aspects of an object. For example if one is looking at the Kailash temple at Ellora cut into the rock, one might want to view the Deccan volcanic rock structure to observe how the caves and later the temple itself was cut.

Connected to the projection of the object would be the write-up on it. Some minimum information would come as a requirement for all objects, such as, chronology, location, the material from which it is made, the subject itself, and the patron. Other requirements can be added to this. This would then be followed by a free-flowing statement about the object from both a historical and art-historical perspective, or any other for that matter: what are the special features that should be observed; what do these features suggest about other links and connections, what specialists have said about the object and what have been the controversies about it; and perhaps some space for comments from those who have 'visited' the site. In each of these sections there would be cross-indexing to other objects and views that have a bearing on the object under view. This write-up then becomes something like a short sub-section in a chapter of a book on the subject, with an inter-meshing of knowledge and the availability of more knowledge at a click.

The visitor can go round the actual museum or if that is not possible, the museum can come to her in the form of the virtual museum on the net. She has access to an illustrated write-up that makes it more intelligible. If she chooses to she can also use the digitized information in an actual museum.

Juxtaposing objects becomes easier if one can do it digitally. If for example one is looking at the bronze figure of a young woman that came from the excavation at Mohenjo-daro – commonly referred to as the dancing girl – one can read in detail about her in the digital script, observe the photographs of her from different perspectives, see enlargements that provide details of how she has been sculpted and so on. Then one reads that someone has suggested that she is a proto-type icon of the goddess Parvati of 2500 years later. One can

read what is said about Parvati coming into prominence in the first millennium AD as the consort of the god Shiva. The two images can be juxtaposed and one can see whether there are possible similarities. One may also get a lead to other writings on both images and follow up the discussion.

The aesthetic in each case is obviously very different since there is a gap of 2000 years between them. The earlier one is made of bronze and the other can also be of bronze or sometimes of stone, but the technique of making the two is not the same. The dancing girl appears to have been made from a mould whereas the bronze Parvati is made through the *cireperdue* process and the one in stone is sculpted. They were probably both made by craftsmen but perhaps for different purposes. The first is a unique find and was not embedded in a context, perhaps because it has come from an excavation, whereas the Parvati is one of many other Parvati icons in metal and stone. The earlier one does not seem to carry any symbols of deity whereas the second displays what are sometimes read as symbols of divinity. Questions such as these and more detailed investigations would help the viewer to decide whether the two icons were of the goddess Parvati or were depictions of entirely different figures with distinct functions.

As has been argued in the past, items that go into the making of a culture or of a civilization can also be juxtaposed, but viewed in a different way. For example, the representation of the Buddha has been depicted in a variety of styles that differ according to the geographical location of where they were made. The earliest Buddha image is thought to have been sculpted in north-western India as part of the Gandhara style of art. The Hellenistic influence is marked and this is why early colonial scholarship referred to this style as the highpoint of the Indian aesthetic. A close contemporary was the image from Mathura that was different and had little of the Hellenistic touch. Soon after came the images from Amaravati that were recognizably different from the Mathura but not extremely so. The latter two then came to be regarded as the true Indian aesthetic. The Gandhara images were treated as hybrid art and of poor quality as compared to the more Indian images.

The image was sculpted extensively wherever Buddhism went so it appears in Indonesia and Cambodia having travelled along the sea route and in central Asia and China having travelled over land. To represent this in one gallery would require geographical and aesthetic leaps, yet the characteristics of the various aesthetics were significant. If seen in some proximity the points of similarity and dissimilarity become much clearer. The Buddha image then takes on another dimension. Should these images be displayed in one gallery, with or without a

script, or is it more effective to see them juxtaposed digitally accompanied by detailed information and other images local to the region?

The digital medium in facilitating juxtaposition opens up the universe in terms of observing barriers or creating links. Prehistoric rock art for instance is a superb example of how people completely unconnected seem to have similar aspirations and fears and express them in remarkably recognizable ways in different parts of the world. Visiting a museum to see reproductions of the paintings of Bhimbetka (near Bhopal), virtually speak to the visitor asking to be compared with the paintings at Lascaux. A sensitive curator may display photographs of rock paintings from other parts of the world, but would it not be simpler to see them on one's digital guide. These could be projected to life size on an empty wall to make the juxtaposition more pertinent.

Museums have a tendency to focus on single objects yet not say enough about it. I have a problem with coin cabinets in the museums. Coins are placed in slots behind a glass barrier. Yet the appreciation of coins comes to some extent from handling them. I can see the problems in allowing that to visitors. Is it any easier if each of the coins is photographed from various angles and with the possibility of enlarging a sharply contoured photograph. Surely yes. For one thing one can see much more of what is being communicated through the coin. One can make a rough assessment of the wear and tear so important to the history of the circulation of the coin. One can perhaps read the legend more clearly as well as the symbols. And of course there is much more data available on a digital script.

Let's take one of the gold coins of the Gupta king, Samudragupta – the one showing the horse that was released at the *ashvamedha* ritual. We need to know the basics of the coin such as the metal, and its quality and content of gold; we need to know what its value might have been in the mid-first millennium AD; we need to ask whether such a valuable coin was in circulation as money or was it minted more for purposes of gift-giving to special people close to the king? Why was it that such high value coins were made by goldsmiths who are given a very low caste status in the *dharma-shastras* / the social codes.

There is a legend on the coin that gives us the basic information about the coin: that it was minted to represent the Gupta king, Samudragupta, who performed an *ashvamedha* sacrifice. It also provides another kind of information on where the script used in writing the coin legend on the coin, should be slotted into the history of the Brahmi script. The interested visitor would like to know something about the script and how it differed from the earlier

forms of Brahmi. What does the *ashvamedha* tell us? He thought of himself as a powerful ruler else he would not have performed the ritual, but at the same time was he as powerful a ruler as the ritual would suggest, or was his performing of it, symbolic? We have inscriptions that indicate his being a powerful ruler. And what was the meaning of the *ashvamedha* – a sacrificial ritual that goes back to Vedic times and was performed by rajas who were claiming to be powerful. It was also a ritual of fertility. It was a ritual associated with Vedic Brahmanism.

This coin and others suggest that there was a revival of interest in Vedic Brahmanism in the Gupta period. A comparison with the range of Gupta gold coins in terms of the theme would tell us much about Gupta times and the fact that it is treated as the 'golden age'. This information then leads to many other questions that no museum label can hope to encapsulate. A digitally available essay on the coin would be the answer.

Objects in a museum need a lot of space to spread themselves. This is because objects have an obvious and known history as well as a hidden history that has to be drawn out. Let me try and explain this with an example.

Some time in the medieval period a pillar originally erected by Ashoka Maurya was moved to the fort at Allahabad and re-erected. At the lowest level the pillar carried the lengthy edicts of Ashoka Maurya written towards the end of his reign, in which he reminisces on what his activities have been especially with regard to the propagation of *dhamma*, his understanding of an ethical ideal for society. In his time such pillars were either free-standing pillars carrying his edicts, or else were the same but located near a Buddhist monument. The symbolism of the pillar has been described in terms of an *axis mundi*, or a *dhvaja-stambha* / a flag staff near a sacred site, or near a *stupa*. His edicts composed in Prakrit are beautifully inscribed in the early Brahmi script.

After a long hiatus of about six hundred years, another inscription was engraved on the same pillar. It was a *prashasti* / eulogy in praise of Samudragupta the Gupta conqueror and his conquests – the territories he conquered and the people he uprooted. The composition is in Sanskrit and the script is late Brahmi, different from the earlier one. The tenor of what is said contradicts the ethics of the earlier inscriptions so one wonders whether it was a deliberate contradiction, especially as this inscription cuts into a few lines of the earlier one, or whether the script had changed so much that the earlier inscription could not be read. There is a

scatter of graffiti by minor medieval rulers. Then comes the third important inscription that of the Mughal ruler Jahangir whose genealogy is recorded in Persian, in the *nastaliq* script.

The pillar was a focus of attention over three millennia, had inscriptions written in three different scripts, and the message in each case varied. Ashoka was concerned with the welfare of his people and propagating *dhamma*, the Samudragupta inscription praised his conquests, and Jahangir was establishing his legitimacy via a genealogy. The stone for the pillar was probably quarried in the Chunar area near Banaras, and after the fashioning of the pillar and its being engraved, it was transported to a site. Those who engraved the inscriptions were members of a low caste and largely only carried out the cutting of the letters on the stone.

The pillar is not in a museum but could well be in one. In a sense its location is such that the fort plays the role of a museum. What did the pillar mean to those that engraved their statements on it? They were treating it as a historical object without knowing precisely what it represented. It seems clear that they were deriving historical legitimacy by inscribing their statements on the pillar. Can we treat this as a statement of historical consciousness?

Many early rulers used inscriptions as a means of communicating with their subjects. It would be worth finding out which were the more direct records of past events and which were meant to evoke thoughts among those who read them.

In our effort to understand the link between us and our past, it would be worthwhile to try and figure out what our past thought of its own earlier past. In doing this, a virtual museum stocked with digital information and commentary, could play a crucial role.