

Hidden Treasures at The National Museum

Posted on

Christine Jayasinge. Photographs: Suresh de Silva.



Who was the British soldier (circa 1815) whose braided and frogged felt coat, tails, and epaulettes is mounted in all its crimson, if somewhat faded splendour in a showcase at the National Museum? Which young or old Maldivian fisherman who, crossing the then uncharted Indian Ocean lost his jaunty blue cap in the port of Colombo? Was it for her pretty young daughter that a mother had several yards of heavy gilt lace imported from Europe sometime in the 17th Century? Impossible to tell and only imagination can breathe life into these antiquities that are on display at the museum. As you enter the gracious, colonial-style building that houses the museum, you make a sharp right turn and you are in the room where somewhat tatty cashmere shawls and frayed but still beautifully embroidered silks from another era are exhibited. The exhibit titled “Hidden Treasures” is the fledgling textiles, costumes and accessories gallery that the museum intends expanding in time to come. As yet, it is just a fraction of the vast store of hoary cloth and clothing that lies in the museum’s backrooms, but there’s enough to catch your eye.

Impossible to tell and only imagination can breathe life into these antiquities that are on display at the museum. You may be somewhat tickled by a handwoven Kandyan G-string that men used as a bathing cloth long years ago, a modest garment unlike anything used today.

You may be somewhat tickled by a handwoven Kandyan G-string that men used as a bathing cloth long years ago, a modest garment unlike anything used today. Then your eye will fall on a collection of big and small betel bags, intricately hand-embroidered. The smaller ones of velvet were used to tote along one’s personal chew of betel while the big bags would be stuffed with large quantities of the

aromatic leaf for occasions like weddings when sheaves of betel were exchanged in welcome or as a gesture of respect. Perched atop an Indian silk with an elaborate paisley design in gold is a curious five-domed headdress, simply titled "A copper wire mesh cap". Could it have been a votive offering at the feet of some beneficent god? Peep into another showcase and wonder in whose bungalow the massive pink and blue ceiling cloth was put up. Before the British arrived bringing their style of architecture, the Dutch were content with merely a roof over their heads. But then, the bare wooden beams were something of an eyesore and so, on festive occasions, up would go the ceiling cloth printed in gay colours that hid all that from view. In fact, in the museum's storeroom lies a massive Indian printed ceiling cloth of a wine-tipping woman and a warrior, too vast to be accommodated at present. Just as the collection of Maldivian costumes, apparently gifted by some bygone sultan, is too large to fit into the small room. With these, is a pile of 65 old woven reed mats that have the distinctive design of the region from which they come. Unearthed from the obscurity of the stores is a hat used by a ratemahatmaya (a high Ceylonese official during the British occupation) with brim of beaten and finely worked silver, a red lascoreen's cap with holes where the moths have been and gone and the imposing black coat with a band crossing the breast to be buckled by a jewelled silver rosette that some local dignitary of old wore. Says the museum's director, Dr. Mrs. Thelma Gunawardane: "What we hope to have in the future is a permanent exhibition covering the development of textile technology here, the evolution of costumes of all the communities in Sri Lanka and a contemporary section with modern designs and fashion". It was she who, delving in the massive storerooms a couple of years ago, unearthed this treasure trove of forgotten pieces and held an exhibition called "Warp and Weft" with them. With the help and advice of academics and others involved in the field, the idea of a permanent costume and textile gallery was born. To this end, Dr. Gunawardane on acquiring another colonial building, the recently restored Dutch hospital in the Fort, to house the entire collection.

She points out that apart from the fact that the export of readymade garments today is a top foreign exchange earner for the country, Sri Lanka has had an ancient tradition . of weaving and dyeing both cottons and silks, "When Prince Vijaya (the legendary forefather of the Sinhala race who came from India) landed here, it is said that he found Kuveni (the native princess he married) weaving," said Dr. Gunawardane. There is evidence in ancient texts, paintings and sculpture that textile technology was well advanced.

In fact, it is to find out how much the ancients knew of this art and science that the museum's textiles and costumes' committee is encouraging young scholars to undertake research in several aspects of the subject. Already, four post-graduate students are hard at work both here and abroad. They will later help to expand and diversify the gallery. "We want young designers and people interested in textiles to research not only the technology aspect but also the history of dress in Sri Lanka," says Dr. Gunawardane. At the moment, the museum is stymied by the inadequate cataloguing of the pieces they have. Many have been simply recorded in a register with little detail of their antiquity, which is why a lot of scholarly work to date the items and trace their origin is needed. Besides, more work has to be done in restoring and conserving the cloth, although with German expertise this is now being tackled quite successfully here.

Says Dr. Gunawardane: "With our kind of climate, textiles deteriorate fast and it takes specialized knowledge to keep the insects that abound at bay." And of course, the museum does not have enough money to do all that it would like to do. But with the help of NGOs like the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), they hope to have enough in hand to build a laboratory which is fully equipped to handle all kinds of conservation and recruit more qualified staff. Among the items on display in the present collection, two or three have comparatively detailed descriptions mounted alongside them. These are gifts that were made by people who viewed the original exhibition, went home remembering some tattered raiment that had grown dusty on their closet shelves, dug it out and brought it round to Dr. Gunawardane. There is the waistcoated silk shirt with gilt threadwork that was part of the ceremonial dress worn by Mr. Don Walter Wijewardene (a close relative of former president J. R. Jayewardene) in 1927 at the first perehera (procession) held to commemorate the Duruthu Poya (full moon) day. A British handloom weaver, Ms. Marianne Straub, a friend of the renowned antiquarian Ananda Coomaraswamy, has given an undated bedspread with the typical Dumbara weave. In a showcase all to itself is the handwoven silk wedding saree worn by former Textiles Minister Wijepala Mendis' daughter and turned out by weavers at the Department of Small Industries. This is the first contribution made to the contemporary collection. Even now, the museum welcomes such donations and has even purchased several items from members of the public so that the gallery will have a good representation of costumes of all sorts.

If you intend visiting "Hidden Treasures", a word of advice: avail yourself of the services of a museum guide who can do much to dispel the shrouds of antiquity and

just plain unfamiliarity that might hide the true worth of these objects. Unfortunately, no guide book has yet been compiled as this is very much an incomplete collection, a precursor to a much more comprehensive exhibit. One can see visitors, unaccompanied by guides, practically litting through the room, apparently disappointed by what they see, not realizing that there is so much about them they do not know.



Uniform worn by an officer -Ratteinahattaya



Betel bags from the Kandyan area.