Past and Present under two roofs

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Colombo’s National Museum mirrors the island’s history. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.

Rita Sebastian

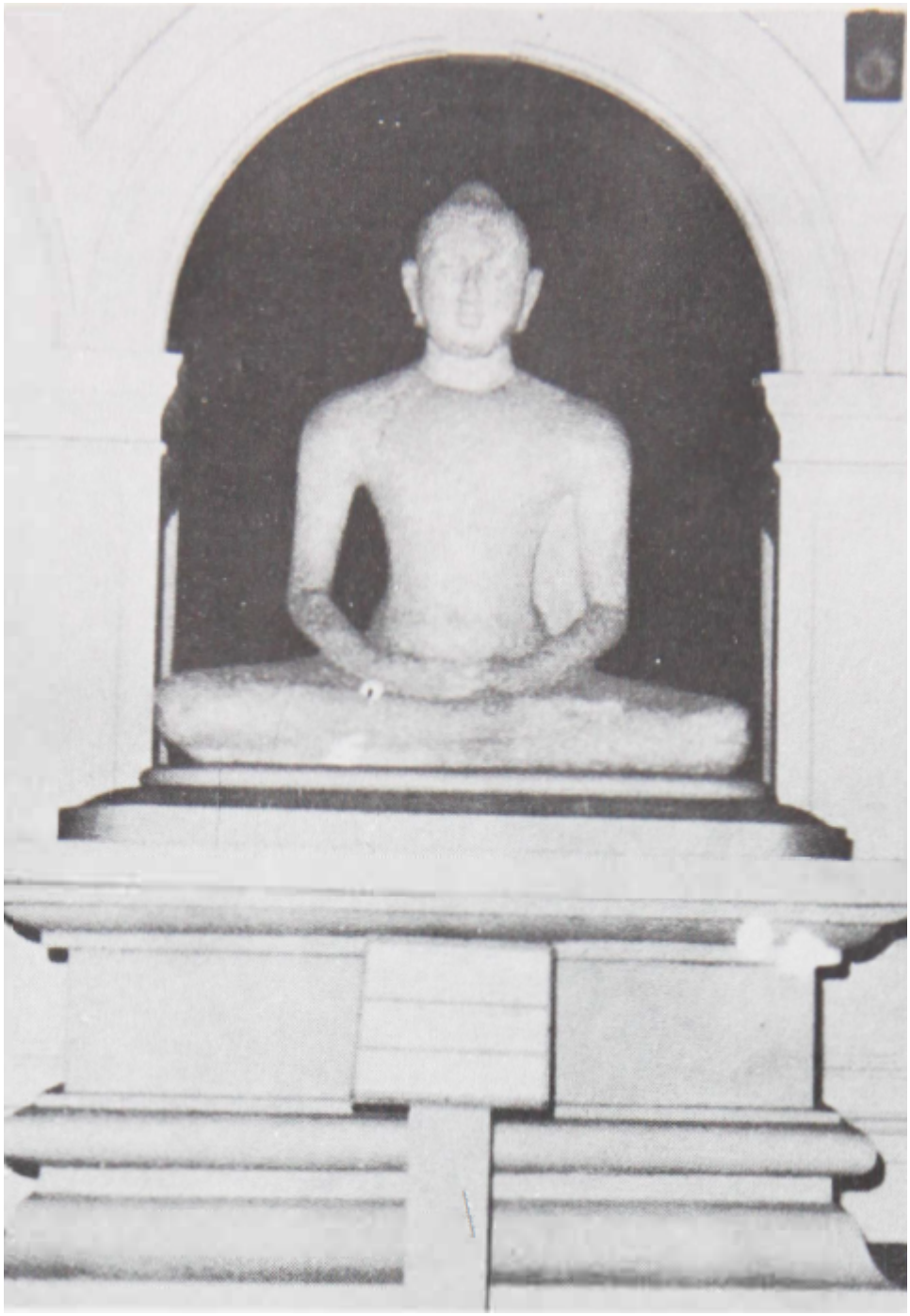
A larger than life Buddha, carved in limestone, dating back to the fifth century A.D. dominates the entrance to the Colombo Museum. It belongs to the Anuradhapura period, a time when Sri Lankan kings ruled from this north-central city, a place were the remains of a rich and colorful architectural heritage can still be seen. Located in Colombo’s Vihara Maha Devi Park, the national Museum was built in 1887during the tenure of British Governor William Henry Gregory who turned “from the West to the glowing horizon of the East and to Ceylon, the object of my ambition and my day-dream for many a long year.” To Governor Gregory, setting up of the museum

became more than a mere day-dream. Whatever architectural remains could be recovered, invaluable manuscripts that spoke of the island's history, old literary works and epigraphic records found their way into the Museum, through his almost singleminded interest. Today the Museum mirrors not only the momentous changes in the island's history, from the remains of an ancient civilization to four hundred and fifty years of foreign domination during which the country passed through Portuguese, Dutch and British hands to gain independence in 1948; but it also exhibits the country's wealth of natural resources and the peoples' indigenous skills that have withstood generations of change. In the Museum complex the exhibits have been categorized into six sections – Anthropology, Ethnology, Entomology, Geology, Botany and Zoology, each providing a look in to the past as well as a step into the future. Buddhism, which was brought to Sri Lanka from India in the third century B. C., and which has been the dominating influence in the island's development, is seen as a binding thread knitting the various strands together. You see the Buddha carved in stone, in bronze, and wood, seated, standing, reclining; each exhibit tells a story of the sculpture of ancient Sri Lanka. You see the grandeur of the throne and footstool of Kandy's last kings, a gift of the Dutch Governor Thomas Van Rhee in 1683 to King Vimala Dharma Suriya II.

You move on to wearing apparel, from ancient to modern, in cotton and silk, from the ceremonial dress of the Mudaliyar to the British army soldiers' uniforms and ornaments like the carved and perforated ivory comb worn in the hair, jewelled betel bags and dancers' costumes worn for traditional theatre. The Museum visitor can also view utensils used in the Sri Lankan kitches, from pots and pans to a grinding stone on which local condiments are ground into paste for cooking and herbal decoctions. And there is an exhibit on Sri Lanka's aboriginal man, the Veddah, who walks the forests with his hunting kit, stalking his prey in search for food. Paintings dominate two rooms of the Museum, Paintings on temple and palace walls, and painted cloth for use in ceremonial processions have been an integral part of the island's cultural heritage. Over three thousand five hundred palm leaf man u -scripts (ala leaves) com prise an almost unrivalled and unique collection of Sinhalese, Pali, Sanskrit and a few Tamil, Burmese, Cambodian and Telegu characters. Another section of the museum has stuffed birds and animals and there's a natural science museum as well. Over five hundred thousand publications on Sri Lanka provide a rich source of research material for both foreign and local scholars.

A few kilometers away, in the heart of the Pettah, the city's busy commercial center, is the Dutch Museum. The Dutch townhouse, which served as a Dutch

orphanage, later a private residence, a hospital, the headquarters of the Ceylon Volunteers, a Police Training School and lastly as a post office, has moved back in time to take in the original character of its early occupancy by a Dutchman, August Carl Van Ranzou. The building, which opens on to the road, has a high roof supported by pillars of striking height. Over the main doorway is a large tablet within an ornamental border which gives the date of the building as 1 782. A central courtyard inside, typical for Dutch houses, has rooms all around it. The original architecture has been preserved and in the large rooms with their lofty wooden windows you can view Dutch artifacts, furniture, books and maps, each telling its own story. On occasion, visiting Dutch musicians have played in the central courtyard taking you back to the years when the island was administered by the Dutch. And in the museum you will also see Dutch tombstones that have been moved from wherever they could be found, to take their place with other objects from across the seas. The National and Dutch Museums are open every day (the National Museum is closed Friday) from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Entrance fee is Rs 25 for adults and Rs 10 for children (foreigners). Photography is allowed with purchase of a permit at the reception for Rs 50. Flashes, video cameras and special camera equipment are not permitted.



A Buddha statue carved in limestone dominates the museum’s entrance.
Photo courtesy: Pushpakumara Mathugama