

The Colombo National Museum

Posted on

Fascinating and majestic best describes the Colombo National Museum. It stands in a dignified demeanor. Sublime and noble. It is a timeless beauty surrounded by fauna, flora, and a conspicuous banyan tree that is as old as the building. The Colombo Museum is a historical edifice of more than a century that has lorded over a changing landscape just like its creators envisioned, to be a living and breathing space where beauty and nature comeingle. The Colombo Museum is the quintessential embodiment of timelessness.

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The Colombo National Museum showcases cultural artifacts and natural history specimens.

Would anyone dare to pierce a glass enclosure to sit upon a king's throne to feel the majesty the moment gives? Someone did many years ago at the Colombo Museum, probably the only non-nobility to occupy the magnificent throne after the British graciously returned the royal seat and regalia of the last Sri Lankan king after unceremoniously dethroning him and taking those items with them to England. Despite the drama the royal regalia has been through in the past, crossing continents and back, the royal seat sits right royally protected in a glass enclosure accompanied by the scepter, the crown, and the sword with the belt. They are silent sentinels of the man who lorded over the island from the mountains in Kandy. It is a glimpse of what was and a grand reminder of an interesting chapter in the island's history. It's easy to be transfixed by the ornate throne as its splendor shines through the enclosure; the decorative details are awe-inspiring, evoking a sense of grandeur and visions of the past, of decked royalty prevailing upon an audience in long colonnaded halls, flanked by the queen and consorts, courtiers, and gracious subjects.

A journey into a past era in Sri Lanka's history unfolds beautifully, taking one through a well-curated story of the ordinary and extraordinary, of hoi polloi, the rich, and the royalty; it allows one to traipse through those ages, through the fields and through the doors of monasteries and temples and homes. There is peace in the countenance of the Gautama, the subject of the artist's interpretation, serene at all times, looking undisturbed upon the hustling feet, looking upon the munificence in those eyes. In all its simplicity, life in those days was still flamboyant, at least for the wealthy folks, whose indulgences were on display, intricately carved combs and jewelry boxes made of ivory, gem-studded knives, and swords, jewelry chests made from tortoiseshell, even ear picks, toothpicks, and hair tweezers made from ivory were beautiful works depicting Sinhalese art motifs. When one thought that was it, people of yore had pill boxes made from ivory and horn. A 19th-century ivory antique displaying a bullock cart drawn by two bulls with a rider and passengers is an inconceivable mind-blowing work of art and craftsmanship. It makes one wonder about the skill of the artisans chiseling upon stone and molding metal and ivory to give form and features to countless images that depict gods and sages in poses conjured up by creative souls of the past. The Colombo Museum is a pivotal resting place for Sri Lanka's history, a meticulous presentation of objects that showcase lifestyles and worldviews, religion, power, politics, creativity, and innovation. A ubiquitous 'joint base' that narrates Sri Lanka's transformational journey through millenia, providing picturesque aesthetics of its chequered periods through peace and prosperity, and conflicts. In design, the Museum is an unmissable imposing landscape in Colombo.



The Royal Seat is among the many popular belongings of the Kandyan era.



An intricately carved ivory comb.

The white mansion, intricate and elaborate, harking back to the grandiosity of Italian architecture, with gigantic columns at the entrance, spiral-scroll-like volutes in the capital of columns, tall windows paired with arches, pilasters, and layered walls. The corridors that run through the building assume the role of circulation between different galleries. The upper floor corridors supported by arches and columns are open to the elements, but the view from the loggia across the lawn is breathtaking. Not even the incessant flow of traffic in front disturbs the scenery, and the serenity that the well-kempt garden provides from that vantage point is the oasis one stares upon. In fact, the eight-acre property seems very

withdrawn from the busy surrounding streets, becoming an architectural edifice that commands immense attention and adulation. The land was formerly a vast estate belonging to a family named Gunasekera, likely of superior social standing and close affiliates of the British rulers, where a large cinnamon plantation stood. The locality of the Museum is known as Cinnamon Gardens to this day because this prime real estate was once confined to cinnamon trees.

The Colombo Museum, founded in 1877, was a well-thought-out project spearheaded by the Ceylon branch of the Royal Society – the Royal Asiatic Society. Under the auspices of the Royal Asiatic Society, its members had undertaken research in multiple areas, including archaeology and anthropology, literature, fossilology, marine biology, and indigenous communities, since 1845. Englishmen traveled the island and recorded their findings, including from ancient temples and archaeological ruins, some of whom studied the Sinhala language and even Sanskrit. Most of them gathered artifacts from their visits to monks and locals and fossils and other natural matter, which began accumulating, leading to the idea to build a museum to house the artifacts and other specimens piling up in various places. Although several attempts to establish a museum fell on deaf ears of several governors, Governor William Henry Gregory, having been on a restoration committee in a British museum, was probably more favorable to the idea and thus was born the first Museum in colonial Ceylon. The impetus to establish a museum in Ceylon heightened when the Royal Asiatic Society of Calcutta set up a museum to house their collections. Many assume that the Colombo Museum was formerly a governor's bungalow or was constructed for some other purpose and later transformed into a museum. But Ranjith Hewage, the Museum Superintendent, who has studied its history extensively, says the building was constructed solely for a museum. The imposing architecture was drawn by James Smither, the architect of the Public Works Department. The construction contract was given to Wapchi Marikar, who had constructed several government buildings during British colonial rule. The Colombo Museum is a repository of an extensive collection of cultural artifacts and natural history specimens. In fact, in time, the collections became too large. With natural history specimens hitting the one million mark, with over one hundred thousand artifacts, four thousand palm leaf manuscripts, and one million publications, the Classical-period building could no longer shelter so much of history at the turn of its hundredth year. Thus, its administrators have dedicated the historical building to showcase cultural artifacts, while the National Museum of Natural History is housed in a separate building.



The elaborate carving of ivory antique exemplifies fine craftsmanship.



Visitors are greeted by a serene limestone Buddha image.



Masks featuring artistic patterns.



A masterpiece of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.

Back into the Museum, huge two-paneled Burma teak doors nearly ten meters in height mark the entrance. The entrance welcomes the visitor to the serenity of a limestone Buddha image from the eighth century in Samadhi, moving the visitor into joyful calm and bliss. The wooded bifurcated staircase majestically winds to a midway landing and separates into two narrower stairs to the right and left, leading to more exhibits. The Colombo Museum has fifteen galleries, beginning with the pre and proto-historic periods, that give a glimpse of

ancient humans on the island before the fertile periods when royalty reigned. There are dedicated galleries for the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kandy periods, while the transitional period showcases artifacts from short-lived kingdoms in Sri Lanka. Galleries one to five have been arranged in historical sequence, while six to fifteen display various collections that include art and crafts, stone antiquities, textiles, ceramics, murals and paintings, flags and standards, coins and currency, weapons, masks and traditional rituals, and conventional agriculture in Sri Lanka. There are six galleries on the ground floor and nine on the upper floor. At the turn of the millennium, an additional space was added to the old structure, designed according to the original architecture, creating a U-shaped rectangular layout by architects of the State Engineering Corporation, which includes four floors.

Sri Lanka's history under royalty, the golden years of creativity and craftsmanship unfolds in the Anuradhapura Period gallery, a lavish display of their projects, their patronages to augment religion and art, as witnessed in the beautifully crafted images of the Buddha, seated and standing, in preaching and meditative postures. The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara strikes a leisurely pose and is regarded as a masterpiece among world sculptures. The display would be complete had his consort Tara been confined to a replica. The original image was looted by colonialists and is on exhibition at the London Museum. The Anuradhapura collection is vast, given that the period spanned more than a thousand years. Notably, the artifacts are a glimpse into the dominance of Buddhism and its embodiment in stone and bronze, all molded and interpreted at the hands of artisans, striking poses and embellished with ornamentation and accessories. The Bodhisattva sandals from the ninth century were found with the great Avalokitesvara masterpiece and other standing and seated Buddha images. What draws one to the pair is its enormity and ornamentation, which is believed to have adorned a standing Bodhisattva image. It is deduced that had the presumably three-meter-tall statue been found along with the sandals, it would have been yet another masterpiece in Sri Lankan bronze art. The Anuradhapura Period boasts of making great strides in and contributing to language, literature, health, and sanitation, some of which are displayed in the gallery.

The gallery dedicated to the Polonnaruwa Period is another priceless collection of artifacts. The penetration of Hinduism during this period in the country's history is profusely evident in the images of the gods and goddesses, and fine craftsmanship is evident in the abstracted human forms that express deep spiritual concepts through heavy symbolism and stylization. The deities' divine nature is emphasized through extravagant attire and jewelry, and Shiva and Parvathi in bronze embody those features, their emotions molded expertly through well-contoured features. The detailing in the garments and accessories to the headgear is

impressive. This gallery is definitely for the art connoisseur to revel in the detailing and be awed by the skill of artisans who would have at most used their bare hands and rudimentary tools to bring the best in divine attractiveness. Apart from the divinity, one of the most mind-blowing creations believed to belong to the 11-12 centuries, the focus of much research is the Elephant Lamp, a masterclass in the use of hydraulics, a combination of engineering and other sciences to regulate the flow of oil. The lamp itself is intricate, like a real-life episode frozen in bronze, with two men on an elephant's back, a heavily ornamented movable arch, and a long chain relieved at regular spaces by a female dancer, male cymbal player, and a hooded cobra forming the hook. There is power and beauty in all those images, a meaning and a sense of purpose relevant to the times. They are certainly lessons of a time long ago.

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Sculptures of deities Shiva and Parvathi evoke divinity.



A tranquil recumbent Buddha sculpture from the 18 – 19th century.



A skillful detailing of a Samadhi Buddha statue under a Makara Arch.



An impressive Elephant Lamp built with hydraulic features.



On display are a royal belt and upper garments worn by the last king and queen of Sri Lanka, with the blood stain on the queen's jacket.

The Transitional and Kandy periods focused on brass-based images of the Buddha. Being more recent, they are vibrant, from elaborately carved household items, bronze statues, knives and swords, decorated bronze panels to jewelry boxes, betel bags and betel pounders, areca nut slicers and lime boxes, kitchen utensils and a miscellany of day-to-day accessories. The specialty is that they are ornate and intricate. One cannot but move excitedly at the sight of the royal seat. Interestingly, the royal seat is made from jackfruit tree wood and covered with a gold-plated embossed metal casing, which remained unchanged despite being taken to England; however, according to Mr. Hewage, who recalled Professor Nimal de Silva speculating whether the original color of the padded section of the royal seat may have been blue changed to red when the color of all furnishings in the English palaces was changed to red on the occasion of Queen Victoria's jubilee. The throne invasion occurred in the 1950s, which alarmed museum officials who could not force the man out lest it damaged the seat. The incident is on record. The man became so obsessed with his newfound position that officials were forced to seek Police intervention, as the intruder claimed to be the king and refused to budge from the seat. Also on display are two upper garments worn by the last king and queen of Sri Lanka at the time of their capture, along with the royal belt, with the blood stain on the queen's jacket discovered during research, which bears witness to a story that her earrings were ripped off by several local aristocrats who colluded with the British in executing their capture. Notable in the Kandy Period gallery are two rare Buddha images rescued from unscrupulous elements holding them illegally. One is an image of a metal recumbent Buddha, the longest to be found and the rarest from the 18th to the 19th century. The other is the Samadhi Buddha statue under a Makara Arch belonging to the 17-18 century, which boasts a high

degree of craftsmanship.

As the Museum's Director General, Sanuja Kasturiarachchi, rightly says, the artifacts are so numerous that they require no props to fill gaps or technology to sidestep the vacuums. Many museums of international repute don't own native artifacts as much as the Colombo Museum and other regional museums in the country. That is our specialty. The Colombo Museum is a repository of the country's long history, a fair representation of Sri Lankan history through the ages and periods. The Director General says every visitor endures a rich experience at the Colombo Museum, which also means we don't have empty spaces that must be filled with technology. In fact, the collection is so numerous that the Museum has had to expand the old structure to accommodate the increasing collections. The Museum is also home to the oldest palm-leaf manuscripts. Today, the Colombo Museum has opened a unique gallery at the entrance where six richly decorated, restituted objects from the Netherlands – a canon, gold and silver ceremonial swords and knives, and guns displayed tell their historical stories. They have been so beautifully preserved that they exude visions of grandness even after several centuries. Their return and display are indeed enormously gratifying for anyone who views them. And so the Colombo Museum lives and breathes nativeness and historical authenticity.

The Colombo Museum is constantly endeavoring to conserve its vast collections so that they remain for future generations to witness. The Museum has the oldest library in modern history, with over a million books and the oldest printed book in Sri Lanka. The National Museum of Natural History is also a storehouse of the natural world with collections of birds, mammals, reptiles, insects, fish, amphibians, rock, mineral, and fossil specimens. The Colombo National Museum is the ubiquitous history book on Sri Lanka, and its inanimate objects speak for the skill of artisans, convey the character of a society and how it evolved through the good times and the bad, where daily life was immersed in the expression of religious fervor and ostentatious lifestyles embodied in thousands of frozen objects. At the Colombo National Museum, every collection tells an epic story of survival, honor, and bravery. It is a story worth experiencing.



The return of a historical canon from the Netherlands is on display at a new gallery.



An awe-inspiring gigantic display of the blue whale skeleton.