

by Nilofur Farrukh



Jamil Naqsh Museum

Citizen - Art - Museum:

AN UNEXPLORED CONNECTION

The museum as the repository of artifacts can probably trace its origin to the patrons of the arts, who wanted to extend their passion to a permanent collection. During this early stage, the imperial habitat, with its vast inherited and accumulated or commissioned collections, acted as a natural incubator for the museum concept.

The treasures of the Mughal court, seen in situ in the court scenes of the illustrated manuscript *Padshahnameh*, are today locked behind display cases in London's Victoria and Albert Museum. The fact that the finest South Asian miniature paintings are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York and in European museums foregrounds the nexus between economics, politics of power and the museum.

This article will try to give an overview of the present museums with special emphasis on permanent art collections in Pakistan and their possible role in creating a collective historical and cultural consciousness among the citizens.

Museums in Pakistan are fairly diverse institutions. The oldest and largest are the archaeological museums of Karachi, Lahore and Peshawar. Site museums tend to be smaller and more specific to the excavations where they are located, like the ones at Mohen jo Daro, Taxila, Harappa, Bhambore, to name a few.

The Museums at conservation sites, like the Baltit Fort in the Northern areas, is more



ethnological in nature. The Sindh Museum in Hyderabad also offers extensive display of provincial culture. On a national scale the Lok Virsa Museum in Islamabad covers all four provinces. A more recent phenomenon is museums dedicated to the Armed Forces, that blatantly expose children and adults to violence and machines of war without any sensitivity to its social impact.

The country's most significant art collection is with the National Gallery, Islamabad, which is scheduled to shift to its new premises soon - by the middle of 2006. The Lahore Museum and the A. R. Faridi Gallery at the Pakistan Arts Council in Karachi have historically important art collections. While the first has some landmark works that trace Modernism in Pakistan, the second is significant for the works of early masters from East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh).

In Lahore, the house of a famous artist, Shakir Ali, has been turned into a museum, where his living space and studio have been preserved for the visitor. Managed by the Pakistan National Council of the Arts, it offers library facilities in the basement, and the garden is sometimes put to use as an outdoor display space.

During the 1990s, private institutions like the Gulgee Museum and Jamil Naqsh Museum, dedicated to these artists, were set up in Karachi. The pioneer among this kind of ventures was the Chughtai Museum founded by the artist's family in Lahore.

Gallerie Sadequain, located in the historical precincts of Frere Hall in Karachi, has a special significance as the last studio of the great master who died while working on the ceiling there. Till recently, one could see there a number of Sadequain's works on marble.

The recently founded Mohatta Palace Museum in Karachi

has pushed the bar higher on museum management and has held some well-curated exhibitions.

In her extensive study of museum displays, Julia Noordegraaf writes in her book, *Strategies of Display** "Museums are interesting objects to study as they are emblematic of the way visual regimes influence and shape our views of the world. Like other visual media such as illustrated in newspapers, cinema and television, museum displays offer us representations of our natural and cultural environment of its historical development."

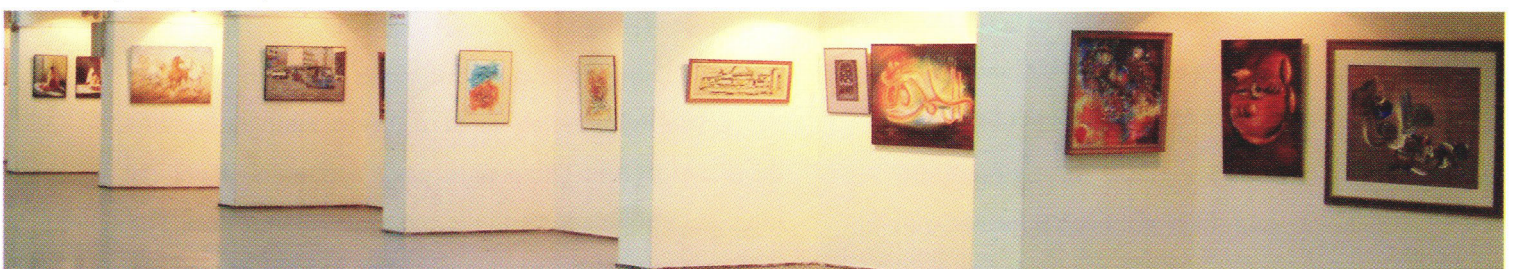
"An analysis of museum presentation can therefore provide insight into the way we interpret the world and the manner in which we communicate about it."

In the context of this statement it would be worthwhile to see how the existing museums, their collections and displays, have been sensitive to national aspirations and addressed the problematic relationship that the post-colonial society has with its past.

The archaeological Museums that came into existence some hundred years ago continues in many ways to project the mindset of the colonizers that prioritized research and display of artifacts from archaeological and historical sites, with a detached curatorial objectivity in which the voice of the 'subaltern' has been silenced. The very absence of contextual material and an interactive environment points to an authoritarian strategy with little regard to a socially and culturally diverse audience.

In his book *Forging The Raj****, Thomas R. Metcalf observes that in the 1860s, a determined Alexander Cunningham placed the study of India's archaeological remains on a 'scientific basis'. The first survey produced a list of monuments, classified, labeled and deemed worthy of restoration and protection. *'This enterprise gave India a visible past, but one defined*

Gallery at the Arts Council, Karachi



by the imperial regime, and sustained by the assumption that the Indian people had themselves neglected and defiled these monuments. Preserved in a state of picturesque decay, isolated from the living present, India's archaeological sites testified at once to the country's past greatness, her subsequent decline and Britain's essential role as custodian of that greatness'.

So thoroughly did the British tear India's monuments from their historic connections, that they never even considered preserving intact entire districts or neighborhoods'.

The inherent contradictions in this commitment to conservation were manifested in the destruction of Shahjahanabad near Delhi and other traditional settlements which were sacrificed to accommodate railways tracks.

'By its very nature too, the act of defining another's cultural heritage, arrogant and patronizing, made manifest the authority of the colonial regime'.

This position of the colonizers has been blindly retained by archaeological museums and poses a challenge to a free nation; To subvert this strategy into a vital tool to dismantle the false construct of colonial history and reconnect citizens with their legitimate heritage.

Today post-colonial countries are

making serious efforts to reclaim their historical treasures. Both the Peacock Throne and the

Kohinoor Diamond taken away as colonial booty are now on display in British Museums. Dr. Huwas was recently able to repatriate the mummy of Ramses I to Luxor after lengthy negotiations. Presently he is campaigning to bring The Rosetta Stone back to Egypt. The spat between UK and Greece over Greek treasures continues to hit newspaper headlines.

Since 1947, except for a few minor interventions, the archaeological museums have not been reformed into an engaging institution committed to presenting an inclusive

history rather than the didactic ideological version it offers. This apathy extends to all departments and no attempt has been made to make the displays or the environment visitor-friendly. Among the drab walls and dilapidated galleries at the National Museum in Karachi, one comes across the Freedom Movement Gallery which is not only conceptually inadequate, but its unimaginatively displayed memorabilia fails to communicate the spirit of this critical movement to the discerning museum audience of today.

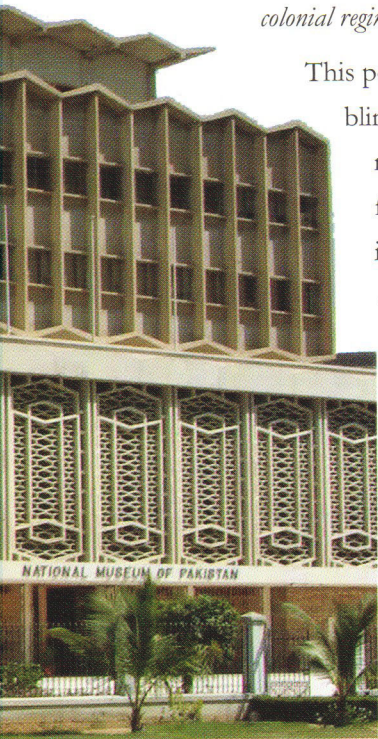
The dull remoteness of displays is not un-similar to the Lahore Museum. Its cherished painted ceiling by Sadequain, which is one of the finest works of art in the country, fails to engage the visitor. In the absence of contextual information that can come in the form of photographs of the work in progress at the gallery, preparatory sketches/plans, and audio visual interviews of the artist, there is not much to generate interest and pride.

A lack of awareness, disinterest or disconnect with the needs of the community keeps Pakistan's archaeological museums (with their priceless core of artifacts) from adopting a strategy that projects an indigenous point of view with the help of an appealing display and a proactive outreach program. In the West, where the Museum's state grant is often linked to the popularity of the institutions, it has no choice but to design programs that prioritizes the interest of the community.

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Such a focus in Pakistan can draw the citizens to the museum and introduce them to the rich material culture of Pakistan and celebrate the long craft continuum in a meaningful way.

Targeting the troubled youth of Nottingham UK, are the 'Galleries of Justice' housed in a 19th century jail and courthouse. This unconventional museum has a strong social intervention program that encourages youth in hands-on activities. Using the language of video games, they have devised software to help them to survive rampant crime, drugs and racism. This is particularly successful among the immigrant population and the economically deprived. The replication of such a project would be very relevant in the



National Museum in Karachi



A. R. Faridi Gallery, Arts Council, Karachi

urban centers of our own country.

The marginalization of the Hindu and Buddhist heritage in our museums has led to the neglect of exhibits and galleries specific to minority religions. They have begun to disappear into dark corners and museum stores. Either done by political design or 'religiosity' of the museum officials, this sets a dangerous precedent that robs people of a true history of their ancient land. Only a pluralistic policy in the hands of a professional and enlightened museum team can the paradigm of exclusion end and a respect for the country's syncretic culture and the spirit of its civilization prevail.

In March 2006, after six decades of independence, the Pakistani nation will get its first purpose-built National Art Gallery in Islamabad. For a developing nation like Pakistan, a National Gallery or Museum is always looked upon as a luxury. Culture too is neglected unless linked to tourist trade or the entertainment industry. This may be the result of the absence of a strong cultural voice that can forcefully articulate the intrinsic link between visual arts and a cohesive national identity.

Like writers, how do visual artists reflect the collective concerns of the citizens and become their voice?

In the global arena in a Post Modern world, with its shift

from the 'center' to the periphery, every country has a chance to trade with its 'social capital', and art has begun to play a significant role in shaping a nation's image. In this region, the Sharjah Biennale and Dhaka's Asian Biennale have had success in exploring art to put their countries on the cultural map of the world.

Grasping the importance of cultural projection, a Saudi Prince recently gifted US dollars 20 million to put up an Islamic wing at the Louvre Museum in Paris. These efforts not only showcase national artists but also initiate a global dialogue that boosts local tourism while establishing a more authentic image of their people.

For a nation to inculcate pride in its contemporary culture,

Art Hub

The Foundation for Museum of Modern Art (FOMMA) announces that pending the availability of the four buildings earmarked for the proposed "Museum Complex" - as part of the 112 acre Race Course Gardens - the Defence Housing Authority has allocated an old army barrack in Zamzama Park, to be developed immediately as the FOMMA-DHA Art Library and Center.

It is proposed that the barrack in Zamzama Park, provisionally made available to FOMMA, be converted as an art resource center for researchers of contemporary art, as well as a meeting place for the arts community generally.

FOMMA is actively pursuing sponsorship funding as well as establishing contacts with major museums of modern art in various countries in order to establish twinning arrangements with them for the exchange of art publications and other audio-video material. FOMMA's own publications are being offered in the first instance, and there has been a positive response from a number of museums as well as academic and professional institutions.

national exhibitions and retrospective shows play a vital role. A good precedent was the exhibition '*Sadequain: A Holy Sinner*' (2003), at the Mohatta Palace Museum, that introduced his creative genius. Murals and paintings from various periods of the artist's career had been meticulously researched and displayed.

When similar retrospective exhibitions showcase the corpus of Chughtai, Allah Baksh, Zubeida Agha, Anna Molka Ahmed, Shakir Ali, Bashir Mirza, Zahoorul Akhlaq, and dozens of other artists, it will make visible the artistic

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vitality and impact the way Pakistan is perceived in the global community. Acting as a catalyst for awareness, the shows will enable Pakistanis and the world to discover the multi-cultural and multi-faceted oeuvre of the artists who referenced the link with our pre-Islamic history with the same enthusiasm as with the Islamic Arts. An accessible national collection of Modern art in Pakistan will assist the country's art historians to counter the Western claims of derivation and establish the legitimacy of an indigenous modernism. An equally important issue is to encourage a discourse on the continuum within the Miniature Painting tradition by creating a context with a collection of Mughal and post Mughal paintings along with the internationally acclaimed work of the Neo-miniaturists. This will create a space for dialogue and documentation around contemporary art.

For a National Gallery to be a vibrant and effective institution, it is recommended that it be run by an autonomous body of art professionals with a public and private partnership. An ambitious program will put much pressure on the already overstretched resources of the Pakistan National Council of the Arts that jointly looks after visual and performance arts on a shoestring budget.

To give a nation a sense of its own history and dispel colonial notions of an 'interrupted' people with a retrogressive culture, the museums and publications can be the strongest agencies to establish the truth through a dialogue with all tiers of society. Only a collective cultural identity with a strong sense of self can enhance a nation's ability to negotiate the present and the future with confidence.

* *Strategies of Display Museum Presentation in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Visual Culture*. NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, 2004

** *Forging The Raj*, Essays on British India in the Heyday of Empire. Oxford University Press, 2005

Photography: Zahoor Ahmed

ARTS AT THE ROHTAS SUPPORT FUNDING (CORPORATE)
The Shell Gallery
 at
Mohatta Palace Museum

As its corporate responsibility towards the promotion of art and culture, Shell Pakistan Limited had contributed Rs. 9 million to the Mohatta Palace Museum for the conservation and restoration of the Palace building. Consequently, the Shell Gallery was inaugurated in April 2002 at the Museum. Currently, the Gallery is being used for the Raj exhibition and displays heirlooms of the Talpur family. Although this was a one-off funding, but Shell continues to support the Museum by being a member of its board of trustees and helps raise funds for further expansion. Shell also supports the Himalayan Wildlife Foundation through an annual son e lumiere show for the restoration and preservation of the Rohtas Fort in the Punjab.

The Shell Gallery, Mohatta Palace Museum, Karachi - image courtesy Shell

