

MUSEUMS—THEIR NATURE AND THEIR PRACTICAL SERVICES TO ARCHAEOLOGY AND TO EDUCATION

By Grace Morley

1. MUSEUMS ARE AT ONCE A RESPONSIBILITY AND AN OPPORTUNITY

Museums, once everywhere an almost accidental result of the private instinct of collecting, which later have passed into public ownership, represent both a responsibility and an opportunity to those who now control them. The responsibility in its simplest aspect is to preserve safely what they contain in collected material and in the fullest possible information about it. Then comes the responsibility of using this collected material well for the benefit of the community, its instruction and its enjoyment. The opportunity that this provides is very broad and may include a wide range of benefits.

2. TRAINING IN MUSEUM TECHNIQUES

In contemporary thinking museums are dynamic institutions. They are not passive repositories of accumulated objects of any category, (archaeology, art, ethnology, natural history, history, applied sciences, etc.) but active users in appropriate ways of what is in their possession. This modern role is explained by the needs of contemporary societies and it has resulted in many developments affecting museums. Among others is the appearance of a new professional and technical field of study devoted to the organization, operation and administration of museums, called in many parts of the world "museology", "training in museum techniques", or some similar descriptive term in others. In all cases, however, it is concerned with giving specific training in all the techniques and skills that modern active museums require to students who already have thorough knowledge of the particular subject

which their museum work covers. For example, a graduate, or holder of a masters' or even a doctor's degree, according to the prevailing standards of specialist academic education, in any subject pertinent to a museum, say archaeology, ethnology (cultural anthropology) zoology, etc. may gain, if he aspires to a museum career, by taking a university course in museum techniques. He masters general principles of museum operation, but he also learns how to apply these skills to the museum development of his own subject or subjects. This for him represents a short cut to acquiring the ability needed for effective and economical operation of the museum, and has great advantages over the older method of learning how to work in museums by actually doing it. It provides for him quickly and easily the world-wide accumulated experience in museum work, which he can review and from which he can adapt what is useful to his own country, his own subjects, the requirements of his own museum in its particular community. Similarly, as a shortened retraining or "refresher" course for those already in museum work, it provides the opportunity of systematizing what they have learned by experience, of improving its application by the adoption or adaptation of techniques of museum operation that have been tried out and found useful over a long period of time.

3. MUSEUM TECHNIQUES

What are these museum techniques? They are very numerous, and in large museums able to have many specialists on their staffs, they include highly developed professional/technical skills, like that of the conservation expert,

a highly trained chemist experienced in applying his scientifically based preservation methods to objects of archaeology and arts in that type of museum or a taxidermist for natural history museums, engineers for applied science museums, etc. In Asia, archaeology, arts, and ethnology form the majority of collections, but only a few of the national and largest museums have any range of personnel in such specialized categories. Most museums are of moderate size and need well trained curatorial personnel, that is graduates or holders of masters degrees, who care for collections, study them, draw exhibits from them, label them and by means of their own scholarly knowledge of the subject, or of some part of it, help others to appreciate and understand them. Some of these must be advanced scholars, very learned in their subjects. They must, however, be assisted by younger scholars, well trained also in their subjects, but gaining in experience and knowledge of them as well as in museum work as they serve their collections. Finally, there have to be a variety of technical workers, junior curatorial officers, but also typists, clerks, accountants, guards and cleaners of various categories, for example.

All curatorial personnel, even very experienced and senior specialists, could obviously profit by training in museum techniques. It should be provided either before they begin museum work, or possibly it is even more valuable after they have already had a period of work in a museum and so understand, from intimate contact, at least the principal phases of museum operation. Knowing the requirements of their own museum, both in its own intimate operation for the public and behind the scenes, as well as the needs of the community in this case provide a firm purpose to their training.

What can students expect of museum training? They can expect to review with profit to themselves the scientific and technical procedures that have resulted from museum operation over a long period of time, under the direction of the most experienced museum

leaders of the world. More pertinently still, they can look forward to being assisted to adapt these general principles to their own particular needs. They will have expert guidance in learning about all aspects of museum service in contemporary society and they will have the opportunity to consult with experienced leaders on their own possibilities in relation to their own museum.

Perhaps the way in which museum training may be developed will become clearer if one reviews step by step museum work of the present and what ideally is expected of those who carry it out.

4. THE WORK OF THE CURATORS

A. General

Collection is the first step – careful handling of the material collected, complete recording of information available of every kind for immediate identification and for future study are fundamental. But this precise documentation is also indispensable as a record of the possessions of a museum, its inventory one might say.

B. First Aid

On acquisition the materials must be carefully examined for defects, for conditions which might be harmful to it or might infect other objects. It must be cleaned according to approved procedure for its particular type (fumigation for ethnological and natural history specimens of organic kinds; careful removal of dust or corrosive salts, etc., for archaeology and art, for example, but only by the simple and basic methods any trained curator should be able to apply. (Anything of a more elaborate kind must be entrusted only to specialists in conservation. It is acknowledged by museum experts everywhere that more material in museums has been damaged by the ignorant attempts at conservation of untrained people than time and casual carelessness of handling have been able to cause).

C. Registration of Objects

Then begins the process of "documentation" following the first brief "identification" entry in the accession register about the acquisition. For important items it may proceed through many stages to the most elaborate paraphernalia required for advanced research. The original entry in the accession register, however brief, is important because it contributes to "inventory" of the museum, the legal basis of record of its collections. Therefore, as soon as acquired, the object should be entered in the accession register, with a summary but exact description and dimensions, etc., sufficient for identification. It receives a number at this time which it will bear thenceforward. There is a variety of museum numbering systems in use, and any system conscientiously and logically followed will serve its purpose. However, the most common system, in use in most parts of the world today, consists of a number indicating the year, followed by a serial number indicating order of acquisition during that year (for example: 68.44, being the forty-fourth item acquired in the year 1968).

D. Photographic Documentation

As soon as possible a photograph should be taken and the first of whatever index cards the particular museum uses in its documentation control system should be made, to be multiplied later as proves necessary and convenient. At this stage, more careful examination should produce a more exact description based possibly on published information, but the process of studying, adding to information on the museum object, is likely to continue indefinitely for anything unusual or of major importance. The museum trainee receives drill in these documentation procedures; he learns photography so that he himself may provide the essential identification photograph of the object, if the museum lacks a photographer, or is temporarily without one. He will have acquired from his professional/technical course justification for his request, or recommendation, to authorities for a photographer, or failing

that assistance, at least basic photographic equipment and film. As non-specialists they may not understand the need for this form of recording.

E. Classification for use

The fourth step in processing a museum acquisition is to decide whether it is to be prepared for exhibition or simply to be deposited in safe storage. Material not on exhibition must be at hand for reference, preferably in easily accessible reserves, or study collections.

F. Presentation

Skill in presentation is now general and well presented exhibitions everywhere in the world have today become almost a common place. For good presentation in exhibitions sufficient space is the first requirement. Scholarly knowledge, taste, acquaintance with appropriate methods of arrangement, up-to-date information on materials for mounting and backgrounds, etc., all are needed. Very large museums sometimes have a specialist to do presentation, in close co-operation, of course, with the curatorial personnel, but in most museums those in charge of collections organize the exhibitions. Often, because of their profound knowledge of the material, their understanding of its significance, which must be made clear to other, even the layman, and their sensitive feeling for it, their exhibitions are more successful than those of the professional "display" expert, whether decorator or architect. Even if their exhibitions lack the superficial smartness of the decorator's style they are likely to be more attractive, simply because presented by some one who knows and admires the material and wishes to share as well as possible his own understanding and love of it with others.

G. Handling of Museum objects

After some practice and supervised training, most competent curators are able to do good presentation. The most important thing that

they learn from their training is safe handling and safe presentation; the understanding of materials and techniques that allow them both to exhibit to advantage but also to preserve the object at every stage without damage. This respect and concern for the safe handling and safe keeping of the object are especially necessary when storage is to be provided. Protection from dust; from undue humidity or dryness; from contact with harsh objects, that even by the vibration of traffic might wear surfaces; from insects of every kind, are some of the aspects of careful safe keeping of museum material in storage that curatorial personnel must understand thoroughly. Use of appropriate precautions against these dangers and of safe suitable insecticides are learned. Methods differ in different environments. The curator must learn to develop his sensitivity of damage, based on a thorough understanding of the materials and of techniques of the objects of which he is in charge. He must be instructed that the thorough-going museum professional can never delegate the handling of small objects even under his close supervision, to others, but that he himself alone is qualified to handle them. The need for keeping hands from direct contact with metals, bronzes for example, which are so prone to "bronze disease", for keeping harsh things away even from stone, which despite its appearance of hardness, may so easily be scratched and marred on its surfaces; of putting textiles on rolls, or with padding at folds so that creases may not wear them out even in storage, are all things that the laymen does not think of, that the learned scholar writing books or lecturing on the subjects may not consider, but which for the museum curator are a basic obligation. He, after all, is not thinking of his own enjoyment or of the value to the public or to research scholars of today; his concern is that anything considered worthy of museum exhibition or reference storage should be in as good condition as when he took charge of it, for the benefit of the public and the scholars of two or three hundred years in the future.

H. Labelling

He learns to label exhibitions according to their type, individually, and by group and introductory labels. He considers the use of supplementary documentation for exhibitions maps, photographs, charts, diagrammes, drawings. He is helped to understand what the school student needs, but even more what the intelligent but quite uninformed visitor requires to understand, in order to respond significantly and to enjoy what is shown in the museum galleries.

I. Publications

He learns how to explain his exhibitions and his reserve collections by guided tours and lectures, but also in catalogues, guide books and general publications, of a scholarly character and of a popular kind, in publications produced by his own museum but also in those of a general nature, such as illustrated magazines, and newspapers which will offer him their pages.

He will learn how to talk to different audiences, how to explain his collections and their importance to history, to culture, to society in the past and to draw attention to their importance for the present. He will be able to lecture on his museum collection for scholars, for school classes, for the general public. He will know how to speak for the radio, and how to illustrate his theme and explain it for television.

J. Museums and Education

He will be able to examine the educational services, distinguish between the traditional ones, long accepted that are useful, and those that may be no longer of any value. He will learn how to improve the promising ones and to introduce effective substitutes for those outdated. He will be able to suggest new ways to help children to understand and find enlightenment, and delight in their heritage. This heritage, this cultural representation from the past depends on the type of museum; it

lies in archaeology as represented in museums by smaller objects from sites and monument; in all kinds of art and decorative arts; in ethnology in the form of folk and tribal arts. In another form, in other museums it is in the natural environment as represented by exhibition of birds and animals, trees and plants, specimens of geology, etc. Finally the new methods of applied science, knowledge of industrial processes and techniques to bring this heritage in its diverse forms abreast of the demands of contemporary society are to be found in still another kind of museum the industrial and technological museum.

So much for general discussion of "museology" and its value, which may seem somewhat abstract and theoretical presented thus without application to a precise situation. Perhaps museum skills may be made more concrete, more clearly understandable and the assistance to be derived from them may have more reality, if one examines some applications to the situation at hand. Even a superficial review, as must necessarily be the case in so brief a form as this article will make clearer what is meant.

5. MUSEUMS IN NEPAL

A. General

Nepal has seen in recent years a rapid growth of museums, in continuation of the founding of the Nepal Museum, intended to perform the function of a national museum in the capital. It is custodian of the cultural heritage of the nation as recorded in antiquities—stone sculptures, bronzes, manuscripts, coins, and painting as well as, more summarily, in historic items—the arms, portraits and artifacts of the Royal House and of the Ranas. It contains as well, to a limited extent folk art, the small and rather unsystematic natural history collections that have accumulated so far. The limitations and opportunities these varied collections present are already recognized by the authorities. Planning to derive the utmost in benefits from them is under way.

Some parts of Kathmandu, where fine

examples of monuments are grouped and the two nearby former capital cities, respectively Lalitpur and Bhaktapur may seriously be considered to constitute the equivalent of out-door museums, so rich are they in architectural, art and historical interest, in the fine buildings which form their ancient royal residences. In historic palaces and buildings, museums have been established or are in the course of development. In Kathmandu there is the Numismatics Museum in the palace wing is already entered from the Hanuman Dhoka; while in parts of the palace in Bhaktapur are the Picture Gallery and a Wood-carving Museum. Lalitpur has the beginning of the Sculpture Garden and plans for other exhibition areas have been considered. All of these new museums like the Nepal Museum itself clamour for museology trained staff.

B. Trained Personnel

Meanwhile, much serious thought has been given to the problem of staffing the new museums. Already two promising academically well trained young men have undergone successfully the two year Diploma Course in Museology at the M.S. University of Baroda in neighbouring India and have returned to their country to apply what they have learned in museum theory and practise to the museums in Kathmandu and Bhaktapur respectively. They constitute the professional technical nucleus on which the administrative authorities, with their far sighted plans for museum and monument development in the country can call. Undoubtedly additional personnel will be trained as time goes on and as resources permit.

C. The National Museum, Kathmandu

The Nepal Museum, Kathmandu, is already in process of renovation and improvement. The first steps have been elimination in the Art Gallery, the Juddha Kala Bhavan, of some of the less important pieces on exhibitions in order to allow more space for the finer exam-

ples, on the very fundamental realization that the most valued of all conditions for good presentation is adequate space around all objects worth exhibiting. Improvement in labelling of individual terms, in the direction of more precise information, exact dating, etc., has been begun. It is in the language of the country naturally but also, in recognition of Nepal's growing importance as an international tourist centre, in English. The addition of explanatory or introductory labels has yet to be started, though it will be of great value both to the visiting foreign tourist, of whom there are so many in Nepal, and to the school tours and individual visits of the Nepalese themselves.

In the old Palace arsenal of Bhimsen Thapa, the first building used for the Museum, some beginning on safer, more attractive exhibitions for the part of the ethnological section devoted to vessels of various types has been undertaken. Here again the museological techniques have contributed to the work. In general, gradually the requirements of safe exhibition are being assured. Fragile items, in the Art Gallery such as tankas and textiles are being examined. Modifications of the former presentation are being made, in order to preserve the interest and attraction of a decorative as well as aesthetic kind that they provide, without undue wear and deterioration from the effects of air movement and light glare. Some thought has already been given to simple conservation measures when they are required. Ways of augmenting the valuable ethnological collections, while there is yet time to do so, before the impact of contemporary technological society penterates too deeply and too thoroughly into even the remoter areas of the country are being considered. Perhaps not quite so urgent, but equally important in the long run, in order to fill in the pattern of a general museum that the Nepal Museum was intended to become, is the natural history section. Already the historical aspect of the museum has been greatly strengthened by the

construction of a separate building in the Palace compound to exhibit the official and personal collection of His Majesty, King Mahendra.

Meanwhile, the educational and public relations potentials of a National Museum, have not been overlooked. School groups are encouraged, special announcements are widely distributed, appointments for visits are made. Articles in the public press are welcomed. Signs of a traditional aspect, but modern intention, have been installed for the various service aspects of the Museum.

D. Other Museums

The other museums in the neighbouring cities are all still in the process of being developed and improved. With trained personnel at hand, it can be foreseen that they will make a steady progress. In the Picture Gallery of Bhaktapur especially study of care for fragile tankas and paintings is required. Obviously, in addition to good presentation and adequate labelling, of which there is already sound illustration and the promise of steady improvement, the far more important, though less obvious, contribution that museologically trained leadership can and must provide is improved care in handling art objects, especially those of great fragility, like tankas, often extremely valuable not only as art objects but for their iconography. However, other archaeology and art objects, like those in terracotta, wood, metals and stone, murals and the often extremely delicate materials of the decorative arts, consisting of textiles, wooden and inlaid and encrusted objects, and the like, need to be considered most seriously from the point of view of long term preservation, as well as immediate conservation, when damage and deterioration, are already present. The very abundance of Nepal's wealth in archaeology and arts, the fact that every one is accustomed to being surrounded with fine examples of work of the past and so regards antiquities casually as an ordinary and normal setting, tends, as it

does in India, and in many other countries of this region of long history and rich heritage of antiquities, to lead to a certain carelessness in handling. Moreover, an understanding of materials, of techniques, of their weakness and fragility has not had an opportunity to be cultivated. The imagination that long in advance evokes the stain left by a nail or pin rusting rapidly, used to hang a tanka or a textile or a painted manuscript page to a wall, has to be acquired. Those trained in museology have gone a long way in understanding, anticipating and forestalling such dangers to museum objects. They can be expected to eliminate those destructive practices that cause loss. After all, Nepal is incredibly fortunate in being rich in beautiful objects of all kinds; the aim of its young museologically trained leaders, who are assured of the confidence and the understanding support of their enlightened and foresighted authorities, must be to make sure that what they have now in their charge is safe guarded and passes safely to future generations.

E: Museums of Archaeology and Art

For a land like Nepal museums of archaeology and arts naturally are the first to take form. An abundance of the material which falls to their responsibility is at hand. The smaller objects from monuments, which for one reason or another are no longer safely preserved on their monuments or in them find their proper place in a museum. There they are not only preserved but also they are exhibited with intelligence and the skill of museum training or they are kept in accessible reference reserve or storage. Fully documented they can then serve education, in general in regard to period and schools of art, but specially as introduction and explanation of the monument or place from which they come. Likewise, for archaeological sites – and Nepal is now engaged in scientific excavation of great importance and is developing the remains of past periods that they reveal – the

museum becomes the indispensable shelter for the movable objects discovered. As in the case of monuments, but possibly even more importantly, because an excavated site is more difficult for a laymen or a school student to understand as a document of history and culture than a monument, the site museum has a large responsibility. It must supplement the object exhibited with full labelling and with liberal documentation. It must employ all the informatory devices of museology – precise individual labels, introductory explanatory general labels, photographs, digrammes of the site, charts, maps. The site museum becomes a visual educational device in three dimensions as far as the objects exhibited go, complemented by all possible information derived from the scientific methods of the excavation, recorded in text, photographs, drawings of the stages of excavation, plans of the site, etc. It can be said therefore that it is the indispensable supplement to archaeological development and monument conservation. On the practical plane it might be added, that, when monuments and archaeological sites are considered as attractions for tourists, from nearby and afar, museums again assume a major role as a means of providing an introduction and information.

F. Collection of Ethnological Materials

Hardly less important, and under contemporary conditions a truly urgent museum requirements, are collections of ethnology (cultural anthropology) which means folk and village arts and artifacts, costumes, objects that represent customs, ways of living, that have changed little for centuries but under the impact of rapidly developing technological society, the encroachment of manufactured products, becoming substitutes to replace the traditional items of use, are rapidly disappearing. To collect them, to record their use in different places, is an urgent requirement for they represent the traditional past, the

historical cultural personality of a people as a background for their development as a modern nation. History is often illustrated in museums of archaeology, arts, and ethnology for these have documents in concrete form of the evolution of a people through time. In Nepal this is already recognized.

G. Natural History

Natural history, the flora and fauna of a country, the natural setting in which a nation has developed and in which it lives, likewise deserves its museums collections. They are especially important to teaching and have their practical aspect as reference collections in developing natural resources and in educating the general public, as well as school children, university students and research workers. Wise collecting has a certain urgency, for environments change as contemporary societies develop, animals especially become rarer and even disappear with the growth of cities and modern transportation.

H. General Remarks

In Nepal the framework of the museum with these principal facets, is already to be found. In the Nepal Museum itself it is already

exemplified indeed. Here a monument shelters collections of archaeology, art, history, decorative arts, ethnology, even natural history, though the last three are far more limited and less systematic than the three first groups. Already specialized museums of archaeology and of arts have been founded. Site museums are planned. It remains only to continue development, giving attention to collecting and preserving with care the required exhibits, while the planning for attractive and instructive exhibitions, safe reference storage and future use for cultural education in the broadest sense are carried on.

Nepal has started well; it is well on the way to satisfactory service in its museum growth. Experts in this subject can only rejoice that one more country, and in this case one so richly endowed with the most precious of museum materials, has joined the world-wide community of museums. Symbolically this is reflected by its recent entry into the International Council of Museums, the world-wide professional organization of museum leaders, launched twenty years ago by Unesco, and so influential in the international museum movement today.

