

The Role of the Museum in Society

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Introduction

Museums have a long history going back to the 3rd century B.C., when the first known museum was opened in the University of Alexandria in Egypt. Over the years, however, the museum culture has spread to nearly every part of the world and today it has become uncommon to find any country that does not have a museum, no matter how small it may be. This implies that the concept of the museum has become a global concept that has survived the 20th century.

The traditional role of museums is to collect objects and materials of cultural, religious and historical importance, preserve them, research into them and present them to the public for the purpose of education and enjoyment.

The early museums were elitist, uninspiring and aloof as they encouraged only the educated people to visit them. The general public were excluded. This focus has today become too narrow and unacceptable in a changing world where there is sustained clamour for more openness, pragmatism and collective involvement in dealing with issues that impact on people, communities and nations.

The Museum Today

The museum as an institution tells the story of man the world over and how humanity has survived in its environment over the years. It houses things created by nature and by man and in our modern society it houses the cultural soul of the nation. (It holds the cultural wealth of the nation in trust for all generations and by its function and unique position, it has become the cultural conscience of the nation.)

As a result of their historical beginnings in many "developing" nations, museums are seen as places where unwanted objects or materials are deposited; in addition, they are regarded as places where objects associated with idolatry and fetish religions are kept. This negative interpretation of what museums mean has continued to inhibit their development in most countries, (especially in third world countries).

In our modern society, it has become necessary and indeed urgent for museums to redefine their missions, their goals, their functions and their strategies to reflect the expectations of a

changing world. Today, museums must become agents of change and development: they must mirror events in society and become instruments of progress by calling attention to actions and events that will encourage development in the society. They must become institutions that can foster peace, they must be seen as promoting the ideals of democracy and transparency in governance in their communities, and they must become part of the bigger communities that they serve and reach out to every group in the society.

For museums to retain their relevance and become positive partners in the development of our societies, they should use their unique resources and potentials to become more responsive to the dynamics of modern society and urban change.

As institutions possessing critical resources in society, they can encourage, promote and foster the best of the cultural and democratic ideals of the nations. Without being political, they can give voice to the citizenry in matters pertaining to how they are governed by creating avenues for free discussions and dialogue; they can create a confluence where the events of today can be exhibited and discussed for the collective good of all. Through their programmes and activities, the museums can sensitize target groups like teachers, adults, the youth, and women's organisations through popular forum discussions on the goals of the nation for the promotion and better understanding of its heritage and its agenda for national growth, development and general emancipation.

Museums and Education

Education is critical for development. Education that is devoid of the cultures of the people in the society is empty and incomplete. One of the fundamental objectives of the museum is to educate, and it is only the museum that has the capacity and the ability to impart cultural education effectively as it houses the tools and materials for doing so in its collections. In modern society, the museums enrich the educational process by exposing children and indeed the public to their history in a positive way; they assist our future generations to understand and appreciate their history and culture and take pride in the achievements of their forebearers.

Museums possess materials and information that can and should be used in enriching and improving the school curriculum in various disciplines. What is important is for the educational planners to work closely with museum experts on how the educational resources that are available in the museum can be integrated into the curriculum and the learning process at all levels. On its part, the museum should develop educational programmes for the various tiers of the school system, namely, primary schools, secondary schools, teacher training colleges, technical colleges and universities, among others. A properly articulated museum education programme will become an essential component in the overall educational system of society. Educational visits to the museums should be developed and encouraged to cater for all interest groups, and as we approach the turn of the century, it has become very necessary and important for our museums to ensure that they become children-friendly.

As we enter the new millennium, we can no longer continue to ignore the role our children can and should play in our society as they too are part of our collective humanity. Our children

should be given a voice in the museums; special educational and cultural programmes should be developed for them and they should be allowed to be involved in discussing programmes that are made for them, as they do have ideas that will enhance such programmes if given a chance to contribute and speak out. For too long we have ignored our children, for too long we have taken them for granted, and for too long we have made them tag along behind adults in most activities. I speak for our children; I plead that our children be given a chance to speak to us and I plead that we hear the voices of our children in our museums.

Perhaps one effective way of ensuring that the interests of children are given consideration in the museum will be to establish a special programme for Children in Guyana Museums (CGM), which will be operated by all the museums in Guyana. Through our educational programmes, we should aim at bringing some "noise" into our museums, for "noise" is real in our society today. That "noise" will bring some warmth and excitement in our otherwise pale and dull museums. The age and time of the silent museum is gone and we should reflect the mode of our modern society in our activities in the museum.

As education becomes a global issue at the turn of the century, it should be clearly understood that the museum is a veritable institution in the learning process that should be fully integrated into the educational system.

Museums and the Promotion of Unity

For a people to live in peace and happiness, there must be unity. Museums do promote unity in the society by using their resources to ensure understanding and appreciation for the various groups and cultures that exist in that society. Peace is essential for happiness and joy in the family, in the community, in the society, in the nation and in the world. Our world is troubled in many ways today and peace is threatened so often because people do not understand their neighbours. Conflict resolution and reconciliation are essential elements for the attainment of sustainable peace and unity.

Museums should use their collections in promoting a better understanding of the collective heritage of the people of Guyana, which will have the effect of fostering the commonality of those things that unite the nation and its people. They can, through their programmes and activities, reconcile the various interests in the society for the collective good of the nation; they can use their unique positions to reach the conscience of the nation and to foster dialogue, and they can become rallying points for the country in ensuring that peace is enthroned.

On a broader perspective, museums can promote cultural diplomacy that will engender greater understanding between peoples and nations. A properly packaged cultural diplomacy programme will promote the best of Guyana to the wider world and foster a free flow of knowledge and a wholesome exchange of cultural materials and ideas with other nations of the world. This programme will also create a sense of pride and purpose among the people of Guyana, who will better appreciate the fact that they too have a contribution to make to encourage peace, unity and understanding in the communities of the larger world.

The Way Forward

As we approach the millennium, museums must show leadership in the promotion of the heritage of the nation. As custodians of the cultural soul of the nation, they must have the capacity to broker peace, unity and understanding in times of conflict and disorder and they must speak out when there is fear and danger in the land. They must tackle current problems in society, be they the problems of drugs, street children, prostitution, or lack of appreciation by the citizens in their involvement in the preservation of the heritage and the cultural property of Guyana. As institutions, they must not be afraid to speak through their exhibitions and programmes for the good of the nation. The museums of Guyana can showcase the best of the cultures of the nation through properly packaged cultural festivals that can attract an international audience.

In our society today, our museums must promote exhibitions that are topical and challenging; they must broaden their scope and not restrict themselves solely to objects and materials in their collections. Museums must be proactive in their approach to the execution of their mandate and it is important that they clearly explain their vision and mission, which will guide them in all that they do.

In a changing world, museums have become very important institutions that are respected and valued.

As we approach the turn of the century, museums of Guyana, like in other countries, must be innovative, people-oriented, community-minded, programme-oriented, professionally solid with well-trained personnel and above all, children-friendly, for them to play a major role in the development of Guyana and the world in the 21st century.