

Museums showcase tangible pieces of history. They hold the past. Their importance lies in the fact that without the past, there is no present and future.

# Museums

The theme for International Museum Day 2012 is 'A Changing World. New challenges, New Aspirations'. The present generation needs to realize the importance of these priceless repositories of our heritage.

A clear understanding of one's roots, which good museums facilitate, is imperative to act confidently in the present so as to be able to look forward to the future.

Last year as news of untold riches in the cellars of Thiruvananthapuram's Shree Padmanabhaswamy Temple unfolded, one of the ideas promulgated by the city's cultural leaders for safeguarding this treasure was to build a Museum along the lines of Paris's Louvre. This would promote cultural tourism to this landmark and also net in revenue for the exchequer, it was argued. This is a relevant thought in the context of the International Museum Day which is being celebrated on 18th May every year.

A museum, the origin of which word can be traced to the Greek Musaeum or Mouseion meaning a place devoted to the Muses or patrons of arts, has unequivocal importance in the cultural evolution of a region. For this reason the International Council of Museums (ICOM) formed in 1946, has been promoting this Day since 1977 as an occasion to raise awareness about museums. The Council is a global network of 30,000 museum



professionals and members. Museums come in various hues – fine arts, folk art, modern art, craft, history, military, natural history, science & technology, children's, zoological, archaeological and ethnological to name some prominent ones. There are even open-air, pop-up and highly specialized museums.

Musee du Louvre or the Louvre Museum in Paris is one the largest art museums in the world and also the most visited. It houses 4, 00,000 objects and 35,000 works of art dating from ancient times to the present. Mona Lisa, the masterpiece painting of Leonardo da Vinci and Venus de Milo, a sculpture believed to be by Alexandros of Antioch, find pride of place here. The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C. has the world's largest collection of aircraft and spacecraft including

The Napier art and natural history museum situated in Thiruvananthapuram was established in 1855. It was later named after Lord Napier, the then Governor of Madras. The museum has a unique ornamentation and architectural style with gothic roof and minarets. Apart from historical artifacts, a temple chariot and ivory carvings, the museum campus contains the Sri Chitra Art Gallery. The gallery has paintings by Raja Ravi Varma and Nicholas Roerich as well as Mughal and Tanjavur art. The adjacent zoological garden is the oldest in the country.

the first plane of the Wright brothers. Still in D.C. is the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History with its humungous collection of dinosaur fossils, marine artifacts and hundreds of millions of exhibits including the Hope Diamond. Films buffs would recognize the museum from the movie Night at the Museum II. Incidentally its prequel was set in New York's American Museum of Natural History which has an extensive anthropological collection. A massive replica of a blue whale hangs suspended from its ceiling. Some of the other great museums are British Museum in London (the oldest in the world, its Reading Room was the breeding ground of greats like Karl Marx, Bram Stoker and Arthur Conan Doyle), Victoria & Albert Museum in London (houses "Tipu's Tiger") Metropolitan



Museum of Art in New York City (figures in the movie *The Thomas Crown Affair*) and National Museum of Korea in Seoul (exhibits include Silla Gold Crown, Pensive Bodhisattva and a ten-story Pagoda). The Vatican Museums represent a collection of art, sculptures, tapestries and maps starting from the time of Pope Julius II in the 16th century. Works by master artists like Raphael, Caravaggio and Michelangelo are on display here. The German Museum in Munich is the largest museum of science and technology.

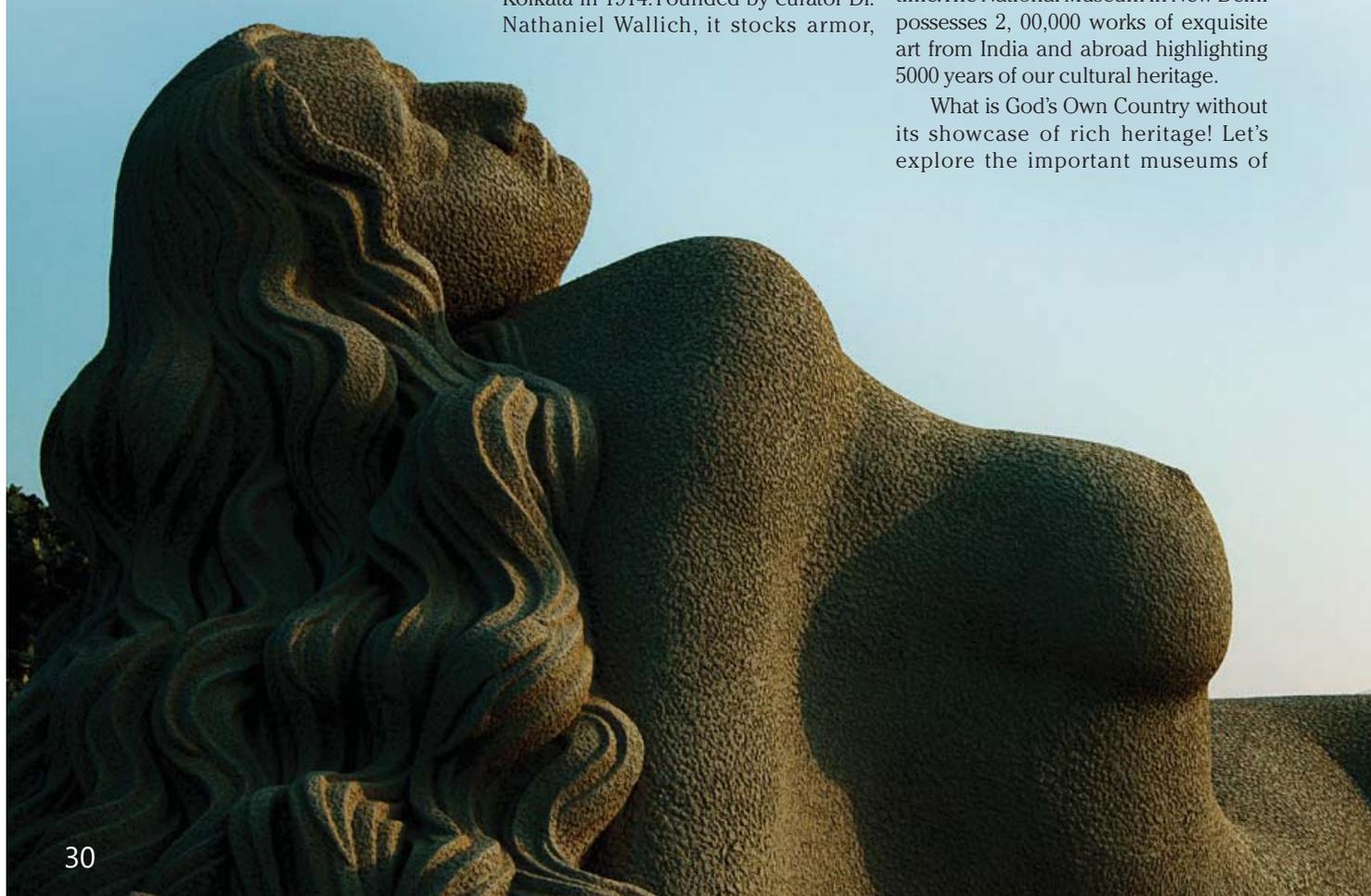
Museums have had peculiar inmates too. Examples are Shinyokohama Raumen the museum devoted to noodles in Yokohama, Japan, Bunny Museum in Pasadena, California, Sulabh International Toilet Museum in New Delhi, Museum of Bad Art in Dedham, Massachusetts, Sewer Museum in Paris and Museum of Torture in Amsterdam. Wax museums, named after a French sculptor lady called Madame Tussauds, consist of life-like wax sculptures of famous people and celebrities. The concept of the museum has caught on the imagination of literary minds even. Turkish Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk's last novel was titled *The*

*Museum of Innocence*. It tells the story of a man's obsessive love for a woman such that he ends up objectifying her and collects artifacts of his life with her. In the title story of American writer John Updike's short story collection *Museums and Women*, the protagonist associates each of the women in his life (mother, childhood sweetheart, wife, mistress) with museums he had gone to in their company.

In India, the oldest and also the largest museum is the Indian Museum in Kolkata in 1914. Founded by curator Dr. Nathaniel Wallich, it stocks armor,

ornaments, fossils, textiles, carpets, pottery, lacquer work and Mughal paintings. Marquee exhibits here are an Egyptian mummy, Buddha's ashes and the Ashoka pillar. The Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad is significant in that it houses the biggest one-man collection of antiques in the world. Jung was a Prime Minister of the seventh Nizam. His collection includes Aurangzeb's sword, Raja Ravi Varma paintings, Qurans written with gold and silver, wardrobe of Tipu Sultan and furniture from Napoleon's time. The National Museum in New Delhi possesses 2, 00,000 works of exquisite art from India and abroad highlighting 5000 years of our cultural heritage.

What is God's Own Country without its showcase of rich heritage! Let's explore the important museums of





Kerala. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), under the Ministry of Culture, the premier organization for protection of the cultural heritage of the nation, maintains most of our museums. The Arakkal Museum (not under ASI) is part of the palace by that name and is owned by a Trust of the only Muslim royal family of Kerala, Arakkal. The Archaeological and Art Museums in Trissur contain Stone Age tools, excavated materials from Indus Valley megalithic sites like urn burials, beads and iron implements. The Hill Palace complex built by the Maharajah of Kochi in 1865 in Tripunithura (the movie Manichitrathazh was shot in the palace) has archaeological and heritage museums, a deer park, a pre-historic park and a children's park and is home to many rare species of medicinal plants. The Indo-Portuguese Museum built by Dr. Joseph Kureethra, Bishop of Kochi in Fort Kochi has sections like Altar, Treasure, Procession, Civil Life and Cathedral. A 16<sup>th</sup> century teak altar from the Church of Our Lady of Hope, Vypeen is a major attraction here. The Krishnapuram Palace is a museum in Kayamkulam built in the 18th century by Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma. It houses a 154 square feet mural painting called Gajendra Moksham as well as a double-edged sword, Kayamkulam Vaall. Napier Museum is an art and natural history museum situated in the state capital Thiruvananthapuram. Established in 1855 it was renovated twenty years later

and named after Lord Napier, the Governor of Madras from 1866-72. The museum has a unique ornamentation and architectural style with gothic roof and minarets. Apart from historical artifacts, a temple chariot and ivory carvings, it contains the Sri Chitra Art Gallery. The gallery has paintings by Raja Ravi Varma and Nicholas Roerich as well as Mughal and Tanjavur art. The adjacent zoological garden (zoo) is the oldest in the country. The Teak Museum in Nilambur, Malappuram is a two-story building managed by the Kerala Forest Research Institute since 1995. Nilambur is where the world's first teak plantation was started by the British in 1840s. Wayanad Heritage Museum at Amabavayal in Wayanad which is managed by the District Tourism Promotion Council is divided into blocks named Veerasmruthi (hero stones), Gothrasmruthi (tribal life), Devasmruthi (period between Neolithic age and 17th century) and Jeevanasmruthi (hunting traps, ornaments, musical instruments). The Pazhassi Raja Archaeological Museum in Kozhikode was set up in the old Malabar Collector's Bungalow at East Hill in 1975. Visitors to Padmanabhapuram palace, the former seat of the Travancore rulers now in Tamil Nadu, will not miss the Museum of Antiquities adjacent to it. The Museum which is under the administrative control of the Government of Kerala houses a fabulous collection of old coins, stone and copper plate inscriptions as well as armaments like swords, rifles, spears and

shields.

As the English thinker G.K. Chesterton remarked, 'We can be almost certain of being wrong about the future, if we are wrong about the past.' In a fast paced world where one hardly 'stands and stares' museums will have to keep up



with the  
pace.  
Accessibility  
means availability on  
mobiles. Opportunities  
are myriad to use technology  
to endear museums to the masses. The  
rapid strides in information digitalization  
and increasing speed and storage  
capacities have expanded the  
possibilities. Virtual museums are in.  
Rhizome is an example of an online  
curatorial platform. Internet has enabled  
virtual tours of museums which can be  
conducted from the comfort of one's  
living room. The new trends will  
hopefully make the concept of museum  
much more popular in the days to  
come. ■

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