



Welcome Remarks

National Heritage Board Academy – IPS Symposium Making a ‘Great’ Art Museum: Contending with Southeast Asian Modernities and Art, 13 July 2011

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Geniza is a Hebrew word that originally meant 'container' or 'hiding-place', and later came to signify a 'book tomb', a 'grave of written things' - a place in the synagogue, usually a room attached to it, where written material of all variety were placed when they were worn out or used.

One rabbinical scholar explains the *geniza* thus: 'When the spirit is gone, we put the corpse out of sight to protect it from abuse. In like manner, when the writing is worn out, we hide the book to preserve it from profanation. The contents of the book go up to heaven like the soul'.

This veneration of the written word is common to all 'the peoples of the Book', not just Jews – indeed, to all traditional cultures. Pakistani Muslims, for instance, to this day, wrap discarded Qurans in white cloth and deposit them in caves in the Chiltan Mountain, near Quetta. Called the Mountain of the Holy Qurans, it contains the remains of some 50,000 Qurans, and has become a place of pilgrimage, I read in *The New York Times* some years ago.

Writings deposited in *genizas* centuries ago are now a great boon to scholars. Quranic texts discovered in Yemen's Great Mosque at Sana'a, for example, give a glimpse of the first 200 years of Islam.

Another remarkable find occurred in 1890, in a synagogue in Cairo, where a huge trove of biblical texts, books, letters, bills, lists of names, calendars, catalogues, dictionaries, scientific texts, medical texts, poetry, grammars, histories, Arabic Judaica, even children's exercise books, going back to the 9th century, were found. They were discovered stuffed in a forgotten room, accessible only by ladder, where they had lain, mouldering, for a thousand years. The find provided an extraordinary picture of Jewish life in the Middle Ages, 'showing connections among the economic, political, ethnic, intellectual, and personal spheres of the Judeo-Islamic world'.

How wonderful it would be if there were a *geniza* for all the music that has ever been composed in the world, for all the paintings that have ever been painted, for all the sculpture that has ever been fashioned! Some magical hole in the wall where every object that people have loved, admired, worshipped, treasured, caressed, touched, used would be stored. An eternal grave of significant or beautiful objects, not just of the written word. Alas, no such place exists.

The English word ‘museum’ comes via Latin from the Greek *mouseion*, which originally meant seat or shrine or temple dedicated to the Muses, *Mousa*. There were nine Muses, if you recall, the daughters of Zeus, and their mother was Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory. Both in mythology and in fact, the arts have thus always been associated with memory. That makes sense: A people without memory cannot possibly produce art.

The earliest museums, at least in the Western world, date back to the 5th century BC, to the Treasury of the Athenians at Delphi. In English, the word ‘museum’ dates back to the late 17th century, when it was used to refer to buildings that displayed objects, though its first use with reference to particular institutions in England was actually libraries – as in the British Museum, which has about 14 million books, 920,000 journal and newspaper titles, 58 million patents and so on, as its website tells us. No museum dedicated to valuable objects can contain as many items. Such a museum’s memory has to be necessarily selective, canonical.

Or does it -- in this day and age? The Smithsonian has databases of tens of thousands of holdings in museums in America and around the world. We can in effect have electronic genizas of every artefact in existence in the world. It is possible to reproduce each and every object. You don’t really need to go to the Louvre to see the Mona Lisa or Borobodur to see Buddhist sculpture or Fatehpur Sikri to see Akbar’s palace. What place museums to collect and house a limited number of significant objects when we can, theoretically, have limitless digital genizas? I don’t know the answer to this question.

The inauguration of The National Art Gallery, another four years away, has given us occasion to deliberate on fundamental questions like this. This conference is but one step in charting the path for a new national arts institution. The next generation of museums will probably have to go beyond the concepts and practices that have governed them thus far. New ways of ‘seeing’ and sharing have to be explored. Technology has added new dimensions to the presentation and the reception of artifacts in museums.

The Institute of Policy Studies is happy to join NHB Academy and others at the The National Art Gallery, Singapore in hosting this conference and publishing a book of its proceedings. It is in line with our mission to look beyond immediate needs and also to act as a bridge between various stakeholders. I don’t suppose you will arrive at definitive answers to all the questions one might have about museums, but I trust you will arrive at a clearer view of the questions.

I wish you a fruitful symposium.

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Welcome Remarks at the NHB Academy -- IPS Symposium on Making a ‘Great’ Art Museum: Contending with Southeast Asian Modernities and Art, Janadas Devan, *IPS Update*, August 2011