



Publication: The Business Times

Date: Jul 6 2007

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PROFILE

Culture finds freshness in museums today

In the great age of museum building, history is no longer trapped in dusty, ancient surrounds, writes **PARVATHI NAYAR**

IT'S very simple: culture follows money and the money is now in Asia. So suggests Mark Jones, director of the UK's Victoria & Albert (V&A) Museum, and guest speaker at the two-day Asean Museum Directors' Symposium held this week at the National Museum.

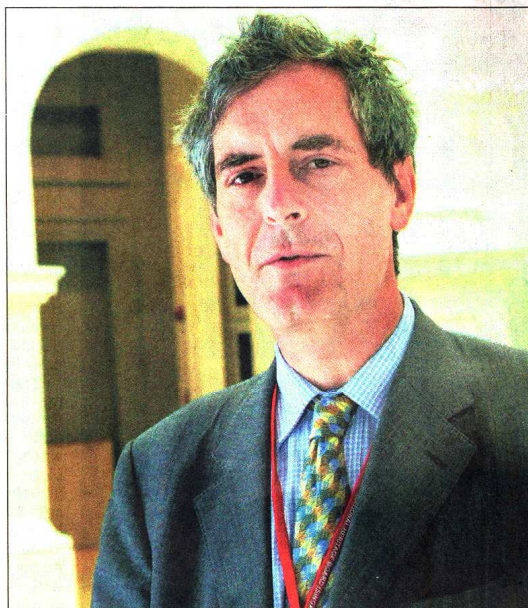
The symposium's theme was "Making Museums Matter", and this issue of relevance filtered into Mr Jones' lecture, as well as his subsequent interview with BT. Over lunch at Novus restaurant, he proves to be a thoughtful advocate of the 21st century museum, but isn't averse to sharing the occasional, droll observation about the pragmatics of culture.

Explaining how Mr Jones was an ideal choice for guest speaker, National Heritage Board CEO Michael Koh says: "Mark Jones worked for six months at the National Museum back in 1970. His participation is a homecoming of sorts as this is his first visit since then. As the director of the V&A and a respected museum professional, Mark has many useful insights that he can share with us."

The context, of course, is the symposium, attended by 47 museum leaders and delegates from 12 countries. It was a first, organised by the National Heritage Board, and a key initiative announced at the event was NHB's new integrated approach to museum programming that will include Asian-themed exhibitions and festivals. This fits in well with Mr Jones' contention that museums play what he terms a "recognising" role. That different members of a country's populace need to "see themselves and the things that are of interest to them mirrored in the state's cultural institutions, ie museums".

Mr Jones shrugs away the compliment that he has repositioned V&A in this way since his directorship (from 2001). He says instead: "V&A is going through a process of understanding better the 21st century equivalent of its 20th century role, and has become more responsive to people's changing interests."

To many of us who have visited the museum over the years, it does feel as though V&A has shed its exclusively twin-set-and-pearls image. It has grown steadily more appealing, contemporary and inclu-



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sive with the programming of its temporary exhibitions and events like weekend fairs, among others. Indeed, visitorship of the V&A has increased from 950,000 in 2000/2001 to 2.5 million in 2006/7.

A useful initiative announced at the symposium was the formation of an Asean museum network, which again ties in with Mr Jones' observation that museums work as global brands today. For some of the smaller regional museums in Asean a good alternative to compete with this brand power would be "to set up top quality institutional alliances that share the best in terms of product and expertise". In fact, what Mr Jones found interesting about the symposium was how it demonstrated that Asia "is increasingly looking to other parts of Asia for alliances and multilateral relationships".

While there is nothing specific on the cards, Mr Jones does admit to the possibility of sharing longer term relationships or exhibitions

with Singapore museums in the future. Mr Jones says: "Singapore is a major beneficiary of globalisation where enterprises find it easier to move and relocate to advantageous locations. However, as competition between cities and states gets more intense, the factors that make that city/state more attractive go beyond the matter of good governance; culture plays a greater role than people give it credit for. People like to live where they can enjoy themselves and engage with culture."

He continues: "Even more importantly, the competition now is around ideas not products - and what distinguishes successful economies is the ability to attract creative people, by creating the climate where those ideas pop up."

Forget, then, the musty moth-gathering museum that does not just enshrine the past, but also lives in it. Museums that matter in today's world are dynamic players that contribute to making a city more creative and inspiring.

"This is the great age of museum building," he says, and especially of what he calls "the gestural museum". In other words, museums like Daniel Liebeskind's dramatic extension to the Denver Art Museum, which do far more than provide a functional place for artefacts.

He likens such museums to ceremonial objects - such as thrones - that appear to have a function, but whose value outstrips mere functionality. An impressive museum building - such as our own National Museum building - "announces that a city, state or interest group has arrived, and promotes the influence of that group".

He also points to the Louvre, arguably the most famous museum brand in the world; for over US\$1 billion, the French government has agreed to rent the name, art treasures and expertise of the Louvre to a fabulous new museum to be built in Abu Dhabi. Museums, in a way, are a "logical consequence" of a country's prosperity.

As for the threat of the digital age, Mr Jones isn't worried. Using the analogy of travel documentaries that provide more information on a destination as well as get people to actually go there, he says the digital platform can only help the cause of museums. "Museums trade in authenticity - above all, the artefacts have to be authentic - and in a world where experience is increasingly second-hand, there is something very valuable about direct experience."

Which leads to the role that museums play in cultural tourism: "The hunger for experience is increasing, not reducing. Tourism may begin as a simple desire to visit, but then it becomes a desire to experience. A high proportion of tourism in Britain is driven by culture and heritage."

To take an even bigger picture view, in many subtle and obvious way, museums can play a role of social cohesion and offer stability to wealthy economies. As Mr Jones says: "Countries need to have strategies to give the people a stake in society. Museums take the culture of the elite - the higher status goods or art - and makes it available to the general population. Also, policy-makers are aware that the increase of prosperity is not bringing contentment - which brings to the forefront what institutions like museums can do, to create spaces for individual self-fulfilment."