

Southeast Asian Museums: On a Slow Path to Maturity¹

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This paper looks at the situation of the museum, in particular of art and culture, in the Southeast Asian region from birth through transformation to the present and also offers a glimpse of the future. While this is an ambitious subject to cover in a short essay, I will take this as a point of departure to explore such pertinent issues as the context of the museum in each country and how it relates to the nation and regional development.

1 Introduction

The museum in the Western sense was formulated in this region during the 18th century, but because of social, political, and economic situations has not developed consistently. In the West, the definition of museums has gradually changed, moving from the post-museum (Hooper-Greenhill), to contact zone (James Clifford), and civic laboratories (Tony Bennett), each signaling a particular shift in how museums are imagined (Barrett 2011). These define the museum variously as a gathering place, a venue for collaborative action and interaction, and as a part of the community. Recently, there has been more focus and debate on the relationship between museums and the communities they serve. This kind of definition has not been coherently applied to museums in the Southeast Asian context.

It is impossible to address the Southeast Asian museum as a whole, because each country in the region has a specific context and these are quasi-incomparable. In the pre-nation state, museums in this region were introduced and constructed according to the Western concept, whether by the colonial powers or through auto-colonization. From the colonial period to the present, museums in Southeast Asian have only slightly changed in each country according to their economic and socio-political contexts. This means that

1 This paper is part of the author's DFA research on Beyond 2015: Small Narrative Curatorial Practices and Soft Power, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand.

they have mostly depended on governmental policies, GDP, and the market. Using economics as the base, it is possible to break down the region into three groups. The first group covers the high-income nations like Singapore, the second group the upper middle-income nations such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, as well as lower middle-income nations like the Philippines, Vietnam and Laos, and the third the low-income Myanmar and Cambodia. Obviously, a high-income country like Singapore has better plans for its public museums, while in the middle-income countries, the private sector has traditionally been more powerful and contributed more to the community than government. Low-income countries like those in the Mekong subregion are still lacking in terms of infrastructure and funding. Due to the limitations of my research, this paper does not include Brunei or Malaysia.

2 Bright Future for Singapore?

The consolidation of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015 will mark the launch of many public museums in Singapore, and private ones in Thailand and Indonesia. Public funding for the arts in Singapore has enabled this country to become the regional leader in contemporary art. With vision and strategic planning, the Singaporean museums will realize their full potential from 2015 with The National Art Gallery of Singapore (NAGA) and The NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (CCA) leading the way on the regional and international stage. The government has invested in many art projects, including the Gilman Barracks, the Art Stage, performance art festivals, and several community art projects. The opening of NAGA in 2015 aims to celebrate Singapore's 50th year of independence. The 60,000-square-foot gallery, which will be housed in the former Supreme Court and City Hall buildings, will be Singapore's largest visual arts space. It will manage and showcase the country's substantial Southeast Asian modern art collection. The two historic buildings are still in the midst of getting a \$530-million facelift (Chia 2013). The Singapore Art Museum (SAM), meanwhile, has assumed a new role in taking care of the Singapore Biennale, the last edition of which focused on regional art. By working with 27 curators from the region, their recent biennale, entitled "If the World Changed," showcased many emerging artists from different countries and brought local artists into the regional limelight.

Singaporean museums have not only invested in infrastructure but also in human resources, headhunting world-class curators Ute Meta Bauer, the former curatorial team of Documenta X, Berlin Biennale, to run the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA Singapore). CCA is a research center of Nanyang Technological University, developed with support from the Singapore Economic Development Board, and has created such holistic platforms as exhibitions, residencies, and research. CCA Singapore positions itself as a center for critical discourse and experimental practices for Singapore, the region, and beyond. It aims to play an active role within the local art scene, as well as help develop re-

gional and international art infrastructures.²

3 Medium-Rare Condition of Middle-Income Countries

In the second group of both low middle-income and upper middle-income countries, the progress of museum development is uneven. For Thailand, although public museums started at the end of 18th century as private collections of the King in the palace and became accessible to the public in the 1930s after the shift from absolute to constitutional monarchy, another four decades passed before the art gallery with its mediocre collection of pre-modern and modern art was officially opened. Launched in the 1970s, the private Bhirasri Modern Art Institute was founded by students of Corrado Ferofi, or Silpa Bhirasri, an Italian sculptor who founded Thailand's first art school. It served as the powerhouse of the art scene for two decades. When it closed due to lack of funding, the private art institution known as the National Art Gallery was founded in a building transformed from royal mint into art space, but its collection was neither attractive nor well presented. After the Bangkok Transit System was established, the city museum, Bangkok Art and Culture Center, became an important venue for contemporary art and cultural activities thanks to its prime location in the heart of the business area. In the private sector, the Jim Thompson House Museum was established in the 1975, and in 2003 extended its new space, the Jim Thompson Art Center, as a venue for hosting temporary exhibitions of local and international art, textiles, and research-based exhibitions. Other private museums have also opened in recent years, among them the Museum of Contemporary Art, owned by a former telecommunications tycoon and collector of local modernist art. More museums owned by major contemporary collectors are set to open both in Bangkok and Chiangmai in the near future. At the national level, a plan by the Office of Contemporary Art, Ministry of Culture to build the first national museum of modern art remains on hold, the victim of political instability and the economic downturn.

Enjoying a close connection with European traditions since its colonial period, the Philippines demonstrated its understanding of the museum's value as an important part of the metropolis. This is illustrated by the voluminous museums in Manila. Despite the decline in public funding since the Marcos period, public museums like the National Museum (founded in 1901 as the Museum of Ethnology, National History, and Commerce), the Metropolitan Museum of Manila (founded in 1976) and the Cultural Center of the Philippines, both created by then first lady Imelda R. Marcos, house national collections and serve as the main platform for modern and contemporary artists to show their works (Paulino 2010). Private collections and museums like the Lopez Memorial Museum founded in 1960, the Ayala Museum, the Arteneo Art Gallery, as well as the Yuchengco

2 <http://www.gillmanbarracks.com/cca>.

Museum, founded in 2005, reinforce the long tradition of philanthropists and patrons of the arts. There are also university-supported museums, including the Jorge B. Vargas Museum run by renowned art historian and curator, Dr. Patrick Flores in the University of Philippines, which houses one of the best collections of Filipino modernists, and the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, which operates as part of the De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde and showcases works by artists both from the region and further afield under the direction of young curator Joselina Cruz.

Anthropological and archeological museums in Indonesia were introduced during the Dutch colonial period and the first public art gallery opened in 1914 as the Kunstring. After Indonesian Independence, the Soekarno government opened the first art school in Yogyakarta in the 1950s, and 20 years later, Jakarta governor Ali Sadikin built art and ceramic museums housing very good collections. The National Art Gallery opened to the public in 1992 with collections of national and international artists like George Braques, Rivera Orozco, and Kandinsky, and the collection is still updated every year.³ It also boasts a committee of young curators and art critics and hosts many local and international shows.

After the fall of Suharto regime in the 1998 revolution, the *reformasi* process resulted in a stronger democratic system and greater freedom of speech. This transitional period paved the way for neoliberalism and later evolved into a boom in contemporary arts. Greater freedom of artistic expression led to a thriving art scene of alternative spaces and artist movements in main cities like Yogyakarta with the Cemeti Art Foundation (founded in 1980s), in Bandung with artists' collectives, and in Jakarta with Ruangrupa.⁴ A strong economy helped the Indonesian art scene to flourish and gave rise to many private collectors who later built their own museums.

Indonesian curator Rifky Effendy wrote about the early movement of his country's private museums, noting that they were constructed by senior artists at various locations. He cited the museums of Nyoman Gunarsa and Neka in Bali, the museums of Widayat and Affandi in Yogyakarta, and the Barli and Jeiham museums in Bandung (Effendy, n.d.). Later, collectors started to build their own museums, among them the ODHOHD Museum founded in 1997. This modern and contemporary art museum is owned by Dr. Oei Hong Djien (OHD), a well-known collector who started amassing art in the early 1970s. The collection of more than 2,000 artworks, ranging from paintings, sculptures, installations, and ceramics from different time periods, is located in the city of Magelang in Central Java ("Dr. Oei Hong Djien," n.d.). In 2007, Indonesian-Chinese collector Budi Tek opened the Yuz Art Museum to display his burgeoning collection of international contemporary art and does not plan on stopping there. Tek is also concerned with creating finan-

3 Interview with Hafiz Rancajale by Facebook chat, November 3, 2014.

4 Based on the author's observation of Indonesian art scene and two trips to Jakarta and Yogyakarta since 2004.

cially sustainable museums. “I think I am the first Chinese or Indonesian to be seriously making a collection into an institution; the first to build up a sustainable collection system,” he says (Spanjaard 2004). His new museum in Jakarta, opened in 2013, runs on revenue from hotels and even a wedding chapel on the museum site (Spanjaard 2004). According to Hafiz, an artist, curator, and a committee member of Jakarta Art Council, the government has plans to build a contemporary art museum within the next two years.⁵

The Mekong sub-region, on the other hand, is still under autocratic government and suffers from heavy media control and little freedom of speech. Lack of infrastructure and funding has halted the development of museums since the Cold War period. However, today the government of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, for example, is paying more attention to the support of art and culture. Catherine Wilson reports that while “the majority of cultural funding is devoted to the preservation of its ancient Buddhist heritage, Laos is also increasing support for living artists. In 2012, the Ministry of Information and Culture merged with the Lao National Tourism Administration to form the Ministry of Information, Culture, and Tourism” (Wilson 2012). This new organization started the inaugural national artist awards at the National Cultural Hall in Vientiane. In terms of physical infrastructure, although there are a few traditional museums such as ethnology and textiles museums in Luang Prabang, and the National Institute of Fine Arts in Vientiane, there are no modern museums. The fledging art scene is fluttering its wings, however, and commercial galleries owned by expats have opened in two cities in Northern and Central Laos. M Gallery, Project Space, and international institutions like Institut Français have become important platforms for local and international artist and are opening the doors to the world for Laotian and ethnic artists.

The art scene in the Mekong sub-region has a similar history, not least because these countries too were colonized by the French until the early 20th century, then dominated by communist regimes during the cold war. It has also become very active thanks to the young people in these countries introducing the alternative-space model. The public art museum in Vietnam has existed since early in the 20th century and the National Museum of Fine Art in Hanoi was founded in 1966 in a former girls’ school built in 1930s. The Ho Chi Minh City Fine Art Museum, which was founded in 1987, has amassed a collection of modern art created in the country between the French colonial days and the present. However, neither museum is as active and engaging as the alternative art spaces or the activities of artist collectives. In Hanoi, an artist collective led by Tran Loung and young artists has played a significant role in shaping the capital’s art scene since the 1990s and become an important platform for artists to gather and show their works. In the South, Sans Art, started in 2006 by Dinh Q. Le, Tiffany Chung, and Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Vietnamese-American artists who returned to Ho Chi Minh City, and run by young Australian

5 Hafiz, *ibid.*

curator Zoe Butt, has become a mover and shaker on the local scene, and serves as an intersection for Vietnamese artists to meet with international curators and artists.

4 The Subdued Old Empire on the Rise

It is interesting to observe how the two lowest-income countries in ASEAN, both former colonies of the French and British, and which suffered political instability after gaining independence, have started to catch up with the rest of the world. Khmer social history is probably more painful than that of the Burmese because of the genocide by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Yet even after struggling to survive in an atmosphere of political instability for many decades, the emerging Cambodian art scene is one of the most active in Southeast Asia.

After the fall of the Khmer empire in the 15th century, Angkor was “discovered” by the French naturalist and explorer Henri Mouhot during his nation’s colonial period in Indochina in the 19th century. Angkor became the pride of France’s expansion in the region. It was presented in the International Colonial Exhibition at the Exposition Universelle de Paris in 1867, and again in 1931 (Flour 2014). Back home, the National Museum’s first stone was laid by George Groslier (1887-1945), a historian, curator, author, and motivating force behind much of the revival of interest in traditional Cambodian arts and crafts, and it was he who designed this quintessential building that is today synonymous with “traditional Khmer” architecture. The National Museum buildings were constructed between 1917 and 1924, with the inauguration of the museum taking place in 1920. The central section of the east façade was renovated in 1968 under the supervision of the Cambodian architect, Vann Molyvann, and housed one of the world’s greatest collections of Khmer cultural material, including sculpture, ceramics, and ethnographic objects from the prehistoric, pre-Angkorian, Angkorian, and post-Angkorian periods. The museum closed between 1975 and 1979, the years of Khmer Rouge control, and re-opened on April 13th 1979.⁶

The Khmer Rouge destroyed much of the country’s cultural memories and materials. Even today there are no modern art museums in Cambodia, but archaeological museums such as Angkor are the premier tourist attraction. Attempts have been consistently made to retrieve the country’s lost intellectual history, with Cambodian artists, cultural workers, filmmakers, and artists tracking the social memory, both public and private, to revive tradition while building modern and contemporary art in all disciplines in Cambodia. In the field of visual arts, Ly Daravuth and the late Ingrid Moan, a couple of Khmer artists who studied with French and American art historians, initiated the first non-profit art organization, the Reyum Institute, in the late 1990s. Rithy Phan, a France-based Cambodian film-

6 http://www.cambodiamuseum.info/museum_history.html.

maker, started the Bhopana Audio and Visual Archives to collect and retrieve stills and moving images of Cambodia's cultural memory. This archive serves as a media training and resource center for young Cambodian artists and filmmakers. The idea of preservation and production of contemporary art and culture has proceeded simultaneously as shown in the SASA Art Project and Sasa Bassac Art Gallery, led by Erin Gleeson, an American curator based in Phnom Penh and Berlin.

The Bagan Kingdom was as powerful and influential in the Western part of the Mekong region from the 9th to 13th centuries as Angkor in the East. After long battles with other regional kingdoms that lasted for centuries, Myanmar was colonized by the British from 1824 to 1948. Myanmar's first national museum opened in 1952 when the country regained independence from the British. Until recently, the country was ruled by a military dictatorship and was under sanctions by the international community, but it has now opened up. The National Museum in Yangon, home to collections of archaeology, religious objects, regalia, cultural artifacts, and traditional arts, was poorly maintained by the junta. Thanks to the British connection, modernists travelled to the UK to study art while others went to India's Visva Parati in Santiniketan. The art scene started to emerge during the "prison state" years with the first private gallery, the still-functioning Lokkanat Gallery, opening in 1970, but because of the heavy media control and the censorship imposed after the student uprising in 1988, artists remained mainly active underground. Many young artists started to work and produce contemporary works and participated in major regional shows such as Po Po in the Gwangju Biennale and the Singapore Biennale. And even though there were no official art museums in the country, artist-run galleries remained active. In the 1990s, Aung Mint spearheaded a movement by young Burmese artists in experimental art and performance and started Inya Art Gallery. Aye Ko, a visual and performance artist who participated in the 1988 movement and was arrested and incarcerated in Insein Prison for a few years, started New Zero Art Space, and many artists' collectives worked with underground and some international artists. Younger generation artists such as Lin Thet, Moe Satt and young filmmakers like The Moe Naing were trained by the Media Art Center led by Keiko Seki, a Japanese independent curator who worked in Yangon for decades. Recently, at Pansodan, the collector-owned commercial gallery in Yangon, Aung Soe Min addressed the issues of art spaces and public perception in his country, saying, "At that time, there were several galleries in Rangoon, but the majority catered exclusively to foreign clients. Burmese people did not even visit many of these galleries, or if they did it was only when accompanying a foreigner. What I'm trying to do here is create a space that's open to everybody." His purpose is not only to sell paintings, but to awaken the Burmese people's interest in the arts. "When people say that I promote artists, I say no, I'm *promoting* a public" (Galache 2012).

5 Conclusion: Unresolved Problems

The problems lie not so much with the major shift from archaeological museums in the colonial period to art museums in the 20th century, but with the fact that the public is not the main audience. Because the idea of the museum itself was never introduced to and integrated with the social life of the public, local participation remains low. Art museums face a major challenge in rationalizing their role and in drawing people because the concepts of art and museums are both new and alien to Southeast Asian culture. For example, locals could see no sense in artifacts and objects being removed from their original context in temples or shrines and put in an adjacent archaeological museum. They did not understand that art was different from crafts, which mostly have a function in daily life and are related to ritual and religion. The idea of art as an object of beauty and pleasure had no place in the local perception. Modernist works might have found their way into the lifestyle of the elite, but the majority of the people still did not have the keys to appreciate works of art. One problem was the space for the art – the museum as a contact zone – which did not exist in parallel with the birth of Western modernists in the area. The inaccessibility of the art museum became more complicated when modernism was challenged by the post-modern and multiple styles of arts in the contemporary era. The gap between the art, museum, and public has continued to get wider and deeper.

In addition to the new Singapore museums, plans exist to build infrastructure in Bangkok, Chiangmai, and Jakarta, making all three cities home to new art museums. However, the most exciting one is Cambodia's plan for the Sleuk Rith Institute, a Documentation Center to house the archived materials of genocide-related documents in Southeast Asia. This plan was conceived by human-rights activist Youk Chhang, 53, who has invited Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid to design a new institute made up of five interwoven wooden towers to house the largest archive of genocide-related materials in Southeast Asia. With the five towers ranging between three and eight storeies, the Sleuk Rith Institute will accommodate a museum, a library and archive, a graduate school focusing on genocide, conflict, and human rights studies, a research center, a media center, and an auditorium that can be used by the local community ("Zaha Hadid" 2014).

Human resources are a major concern throughout the region. Effendy talks about museum management, noting that several institutes are not professionally run, have no long-term program, and are seldom visited. This is probably why the latest breed of artist-owned spaces use young curators and managers to plan and run their programs. Sometimes even the naming of such places reflects the progressive stance of the institutions, as with the Selasar Sunaryo Artspace, owned by the artist Sunaryo, in Bandung, which has added much color to the Indonesian art scene by holding curated exhibitions of young artists. Jim Supangkat, the first generation curator, held the CP Open Biennale in the National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta, in 2003. The problem is that biennales like these have not been sufficiently appreciated by the public, in part because of insufficient

infrastructure, the lack of art management, and insufficient public education. Such problems have often been encountered in organizing various Indonesian biennales (Effendy, n.d.).

To promote public understanding and create access to art from a regional perspective, many museums have tried to activate collections and explore the possibility of reintroducing them to the public. In countries that share a colonial history like Indonesia, Singapore, and Philippines, curators from these national museums, Patrick Flores (Manila), Risk Zaelani (Jakarta), and Ahmad Marshadi (Singapore) collaborated in creating a touring exhibition around all 3 countries in 2005.

The rupture of modernism in the Southeast Asian context seems to be a problem in countries where traditional culture is still considered as a living cultural heritage, while Western influences have been an integral part of life since the end of the 20th century. The missing link between the past and present has been explored in several recent exhibitions. “Thai Transience,” curated by Apinan Poshyananda and shown at the Singapore Art Museum in 2012 as part of the Thai Culture Fest, co-organized by the National Heritage Board of Singapore, and the Fine Arts Department and Office of Contemporary Art of Thailand’s Ministry of Culture, displayed traditional art objects, religious artifacts, and regalia from the national collection alongside contemporary art. The project was developed for another show at the Bangkok Art and Culture Center in 2014, entitled “Thai Charisma Heritage and Creative Power.” (Poshyananda 2014). At the Jim Thompson Art Center, David Teh curated “Transmission,” inviting regional artists to respond to the Jim Thompson House Museum collection.

The upcoming ASEAN Economic Community will offer an opportunity for us to work with minimal resources, but a strong regional network and add to the collaborations and exchange exhibitions that already exist. Singaporean museums might serve as the hub of art and culture in the region, but its neighbours are also happy to decentralize and interested in exchange and collaboration. An example is the Jim Thompson Art Center’s exhibition, “Safe Place in the Future?,” which travelled to the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) in the Philippines in 2013. Others include the regional exhibition “CCC” curated by Singaporean-based Lola Lenzi, Thai Vipash Purichanont, and Indonesian Agung Hujatnikajennong, which is set to tour around the region.

Exchange programs between artists have existed since the last century and have started, on a smaller scale, between institutes. For example, the Cemeti Foundation in Indonesia has worked with New Zero Arts in Yangon; Cambodia’s Sasa Bassac collaborated with H Gallery, Bangkok on an exchange program between Thai and Cambodian artists.; Ho Chi Minh City-based San Art has residency programs and a long-term project to bring curators, scholars, and artists from the region to stay at their space.

With these different strategies for various scales of museum and art spaces in the region, it should be possible to vitalize the scene and even raise the question of museums as contact zones while creating a public sphere for locals to discuss and dispute art in the re-

gion and beyond. Given the issues of undemocratic societies and freedom of speech in the broader sense, the need for the museum to serve as a space for public discourse has intensified and become increasingly urgent.

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