

National Art Gallery or Sate Funeral Parlor?

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When one refers to an entity that calls itself the National Art Gallery, it is reasonable to assume that such an agency is of countrywide importance. In the context of comparative experience from other parts of the world, such an agency would be vested with the role of promoting contemporary visual arts in a given society and maintaining a collection of important visual art works over time in a permanent collection. As such, a 'national' art gallery should have essential expertise and services: it should have warehouses to store important works, curators, art critics in its staff or on contract and contacts with other galleries in the region and elsewhere.

Nevertheless, perhaps due to the peculiar development of both politics and culture in our own society, Sri Lanka's National Art Gallery situated in prime real estate at Ananda Coomaraswamy Mawatha in Colombo seem to be fulfilling an entirely different set of duties. Today, rather than being a depository and promoter of the country's visual arts, the National Art Gallery is better known as a funeral parlor for perceived cultural icons such as teledrama actors, film directors, singers, politicians and the like. The latest corporeal remains to be exhibited at the national art gallery were that of Mr. Edwin Kottegoda. His remains were displayed at the National Art Gallery on July 25th from 1.00 PM to 5.00 PM. To be fair by Mr. Kottegoda, in his own way he has done much to collect, record and preserve Sinhala folks songs (*jana gee*). The point however is this: Irrespective of a person's perceived or real contribution to the country's cultural scene, what is the compulsion to exhibit his remains in the National Art Gallery? It is unfortunate that the state's cultural commissars do not have the intellectual capacity to comprehend a very simple fact. That is, there is a very significant difference between an art object and a dead body, even though that dead body may be that of a well-known person.

The deterioration of the National Art Gallery to the level of a state sponsored funeral parlor has to be understood both in the context of the historical evolution of the gallery itself along with the deterioration of the country's politics. The National Art Gallery came into existence because of the enthusiasm of two art organizations. These are the Ceylon Society of Arts established in 1891 under the patronage of the colonial government and the Arts Council of Ceylon established under the provisions of the Soulbury Commission. The initial idea stressing the need for an art gallery was publicly stated in 1911, and the first stage of the gallery project was completed in 1932. The eastern wing was added over a long period of time while the third wing was added in 1958 by the newly created Ministry of Cultural Affairs using funds channeled through the Arts Council. Up to the 1950s, most visual arts activities were either organized or sponsored by these two organizations. In 1952, by an Act of Parliament, the Arts Council was placed under the Department of Cultural Affairs along with the National Art Gallery. The institutional foundation for the establishment of the mortuary tradition of the Art Gallery emerged in this context. It also marked the diminishing of the Gallery's original visual arts promoting objectives.

We need to evaluate the Art Gallery's mortuary tradition and its artistic tradition in the context of contemporary realities. A group of young artists trying to organize a collective exhibition at the

National Gallery found it very difficult to get the space reserved. The rental fee per day for one of the two regular exhibition halls of the gallery is a very reasonable Rs.1000.00. But the decisions on whether to rent the space or not is made by officers of the state's cumbersome cultural bureaucracy who lack any knowledge on contemporary art practices in the country or beyond. This is typified by the fact that the National Art Gallery does not have a curator or an official position for a curator. That serious responsibility is vested with an individual whose official duty is to hang paintings. Besides, according to artists, gallery reservations can be cancelled at any time if a minister or any such political heavyweight demands the place for an alternate event such as a funeral.

On the other hand, the space dedicated as the permanent collection is a sorry excuse for a country's permanent collection in visual arts. They are displayed in semi darkness with an obvious absence of curatorial expertise. The displayed paintings are in various degrees of decay and do not constitute a clearly formulated representative selection of the country's output in visual arts. The gallery also does not have safe storage space or the knowledge to store artworks. It also does not have a director with curatorial and art-space management expertise to operate the gallery on a daily basis. It has no annual agenda of activities and what is to be displayed depends on availability of space and the moral and political content of the works to be displayed. So under present conditions, a truly radical exhibition might never be held at the National Gallery. There have been instances where art exhibits have been removed merely because they disturbed the moral sensibility of high officials of the cultural department. A classic example is the removal of an entry in last year's Art Council Exhibition even after it had been selected and placed in the gallery by a panel appointed by the Arts Council. It is in these circumstances that a friend from Stockholm visiting Colombo in the recent past was moved to exclaim: "It is about time people who understand art reclaim this gallery."

But the visionless politics that have created the socio-political instability that we are experiencing today will not easily allow the removal of the National Art Gallery from the clutches of undereducated politicians and unenlightened bureaucrats who have retarded its evolution over the last fifty years. In that context, it might be more practical to convert it more fully into a proper funeral parlor for perceived cultural worthies as the mortuary tradition is already well established and accepted by both the permanent bureaucracy as well as the political establishment. Moreover, the country's cultural bureaucrats already have plenty of experience in organizing state funerals as opposed to their complete lack of knowledge in both contemporary art practice and theory as well as art management.

We can appoint a commission within the Art Gallery or better still, in the Ministry of Cultural Affairs to find out ingenious ways of displaying corpses of important people in the National Gallery. We can learn a lot from the Funeral Commission that was established to find ways to preserve the body of soviet leader Vladimir Lenin. That commission which was later officially renamed 'The Commission for the Immortalization of the Memory of V.I Lenin' defined its task as the preservation of the late leader's corpse "in such a state that it can be viewed, and that the external appearance of the body and the face should preserve the physical features of Vladimir Il'ich in just the same way that he looked in the first days after his death."

Similarly, the commission that we might establish could be called ‘the National Commission for the Preservation of the Corporeal Remains of Culturally Important Personalities.’ It can decide whose corpses will be exhibited in the National Gallery, and which one of these worthies would be added to the ‘Permanent National Corpse Collection’. In any case, since the existing permanent art collection of the National Gallery is in a terrible state, we might as well completely remove it, and convert the space into a permanent mausoleum where cultural worthies could be exhibited in perpetuity after their death. They might be embalmed or like the work of the British artist Damien Hirst, these remains might be placed in containers filled with formaldehyde solution. If we decide upon the Damien Hirst option, we would even be able to call these exhibits artwork, as there is already precedence for that in some of the less imaginative schools of artistic thought in Western Europe.

The other more redeemable option would be to place the running of the art gallery in the hands of the local community of visual artists. It would be their responsibility to set up a viable mechanism to operate and expand the gallery, introduce essential services and facilities that have not evolved in fifty years and raise the necessary funds both locally and internationally. It should be up to them to negotiate with both local and foreign artists to hold serious exhibition and other related events. The state’s only acceptable role in this kind of venture would be to help set up an endowment for the operation of the gallery.

However, the more serious challenge is to overcome the problem of not understanding what an art gallery is all about at the level of popular consciousness. The people who initially mooted the idea and ensured the gallery’s establishment had a very clear idea what this was all about. But at present, there is no serious art consciousness at the popular level or at the level of the urban elite and within the different layers of the middle class. That is why it has been so easy for the National Art Gallery to become a funeral parlor without encountering any serious opposition.

In the context of our visionless politics and monumental lack of imagination, a fully-fledged funeral parlor run by the state at Ananda Coomaraswamy Mawatha is more plausible than the emergence of a dynamic art gallery. Personally, I have decided to write into my will that when I die, my corporeal remains should not be taken anywhere near what used to be the National Art Gallery.