

# Colombo National Museum



# Our heritage, our pride

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**A** national museum is truly a mirror of a country's historical, cultural and biological heritage as well as a place where a country's pride is enshrined. A national museum educates the people about their past heritage while awakening the feelings about their country. This is the story of the Colombo National Museum which brings the proud history of Sri Lanka closer to the next generation.

Sir William Henry Gregory of the United Kingdom (UK) took over as Governor of Ceylon on March 4, 1872. He was a keen observer of museums during his stay in the UK. Due to his extensive knowledge of works of art, even the British Museum had collaborated with him at the time.

Having arrived in Ceylon for a five-year term, he was shocked at the cultural heritage that was lurking in the ruins at that time. He suggested to the British Government that a museum be built to preserve the dying Ceylonese history, but initially the Government rejected the proposal, citing the enormous amount of money involved. Undeterred, the Governor continued to use his connections to seek approval for the construction of a museum.

## Italian architecture

It was not until 1874 that the British Government finally approved his proposal and approved the construction of Ceylon's first National Museum. Accordingly, the Government architect designed the basic building of the museum according to Italian architecture and the contract for its construction was award-

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ed to Wapchi Marikkar, who built the Colombo Post Office, the Old Town Hall in Pettah and the Galle Face Hotel. All of its carpentry was entrusted to S.M. Perera.

At the end of two years, the Colombo Museum was completed as a two-storey building with ornate towers, arches and open porches. It was opened to the public on January 1, 1877, with 808 artifacts and 384 other specimens. The items included inscriptions, various stone carvings, artefacts such as jewellery, coins,

and replicas of natural sciences such as mammals, reptiles, fish, shells, corals, and minerals. Dr. Amaral de Hale was the first director of the museum. He held that position until his retirement in April 1891.

Under the guidance of Dr. Arthur Wiley and Dr. Joseph Pearson, who succeeded Dr. Hale as director of the museum, several new compartments have been added to the museum from the East and West. Dr. Pearson also started a magazine called '*Spolia Zeylanica*' to publish

articles on research at the museum. At the same time, a bronze statue of Sir William Henry Gregory has been erected in front of the museum in gratitude for his immense service in donating a museum to Ceylon.

## Golden era

After Dr. Pearson, A.H.S. Malpas became the Director of the Colombo Museum. He was the last British National Director at the Colombo Museum. After his tenure, Dr. P.E.P. Deraniyagala was appointed to this post, ushering in a golden era for the Colombo Museum.

At his request, the Colombo Museum has been designated as a national museum by the Museums Act No. 31 of 1942 and branches were opened in Jaffna, Kandy and Ratnapura. It was during this time that the British Government agreed to return to the Government of Ceylon the

jewels and throne of King Sri Wickrema Rajasinghe housed in the British Museum.

Since then, the Colombo National Museum, which was developed under various directors, now has nine branches. It also has 16 exhibition booths where the antiquities belonging to ancient eras are being kept. Another valuable feature of the national museum is its library.

Opened along with the museum, it contains a number of ancient books written on Ceylon and houses a copy of every book printed in the country since 1885. There are also pamphlet books from the pre-Christian era, a Pali version of the Mahavamsa and pamphlet books donated by the king of Burma. Lately, various personalities' book collections were donated to it and among them are the collections of H.C.P. Bell, Henry Blake and Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike.