

Understanding the Past Through Museums - Case Study of The Harappan Collection

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ABSTRACT

The role of the museum may differ for anyone, but what it takes to preserve the cultural heritage of the nation, state or district is something that makes it a devoted space of historic importance. With the efforts of Archaeological Survey of India, in the pre- and post-colonial era, excavations have been successful and a huge amount of tangible collection has been procured from the Indus Valley Civilization such as utensils, toys, seals, jewellery, weapons, tools, and more. Harappan civilization was just about this but did showcase the architectural marvels, city planning and sewage systems. This article emphasizes on the importance of museums in providing the generations to come with the ample amount of information to inculcate and communicate with the past human mankind had. Not only this, but how communication strategies can be improved to create a visual for the visitors to connect better with the intangible part of the collection.

Key Words: Museum, Harappan, Bronze, Collection, Tangible, Intangible

Introduction

What makes museum an important space? The answer to this question may be different for you, for a museologist, an art historian, for a conservator, and many more. But this question does induce the urge to look into the fact that what was a museum for the people in past, what it has become now, and what future scope it has stimulated for the society.



Fig 1. (Source: Somya Malik)

The idea of collection springs along with the beginning of the civilization in the world from what may be an instinctive human desire to collect and interpret and having noticeable origins in huge collections made up by individuals and groups before the modern era. ICOM (International Council for Museum) code of ethics describes that a museum's role and responsibility is to preserve, interpret, and promote the natural and cultural inheritance of humanity. The cultural property also provides the primary evidence and therefore represents an

important contribution to knowledge. What is very interesting to look at is that the artefacts displayed in the museum not just depict that they are of high economic value but also conveys the story of how they were made, what cultural background they belonged to, who made them, what technique was used to make them and much more. The visitors may be provided with a physical perspective that explains the collection with even more depth hence exploring the potential of the museum and its educational role deserves to be analysed at length.

In the Indian context, the origin of the idea of collection could be traced back with the references from Indian literature mentioning about the *Chitrasalas* (art galleries) – *Chitravithi* (gallery), *Saraswati Bhandars* (Libraries). These *Chitrasalas* were exhibiting the rows of paintings and other specimens of decorative art in the palaces of kings and nobles where they could relax during the leisure hours.

The early phase of the movement of museums in India began with the Asiatic Society of Bengal which was founded by William Jones in 1784. Founded in 1814 at the cradle of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, the Indian Museum was the earliest and the largest multipurpose museum not only in the Indian subcontinent but also in the Asia-Pacific geographical region of the world. In the year 1861, the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) took place.

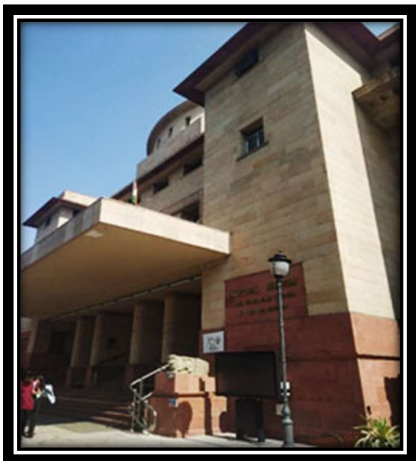


Fig 2. National Museum, New Delhi
(Source: Somya Malik)

Sarnath was the first site museum of the Archaeological Survey of India. The National Museum, New Delhi, was inaugurated in the Rashtrapati Bhawan, in 1960. The Museum presently holds approximately 2,00,000 objects of diverse nature, both Indian as well as foreign, and its holdings cover a period of more than five thousand years of Indian cultural heritage.

The movement of development of museums did embrace an extensively creative future for us. An incredible experience is what a visitor craves for in a museum. The need to consider what meaning visitors make of their museum experience comes from two different sources: one is the increasing importance of the educational role of museums; the other is the increasing pressure on museums to justify their existence (Hein, 1998) For Example, an exhibition namely 'India and the World' was setup in the National Museum, New Delhi in collaboration with the British Museum and CSMVS, Mumbai in



Fig 3. Bronze Chariot - Source: [Click Here](#)

2018; the education department did a great job in engaging all the age groups with their special activities and programs.¹

For the public, interaction with the collections other than at the level of looking at fully completed and immaculately presented displays is generally severely curtailed, and because of this, definitions of the meanings of

the collections are restricted to the private sphere of the museum worker (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). New knowledge must be created through enhancing the research work on implementing creative ideas based on the collection through communication techniques like monographs, VR, AR, 3D scanning, dioramas, virtual tours, hands-on activities, audio-visuals in kiosks, and much more. For example, Pompeii² which was lost for centuries due to a volcanic eruption is now being displayed through interactive mechanical devices.³

The idea here is to create a visual for the visitor which doesn't just make the cultural property the highlight of the exhibition space but also the story behind it a highlight too. However, the story may convey the manufacturing technique, the cultural relations, utility, intangible heritage related to the artefact, etc. Safeguarding intangible heritage necessitates its "translation" from oral kind into some kind of materiality, for example, archives, inventories, museums, and audio or film records. Though this might be thought to be "freezing" intangible heritage within the form of documents, it ought to be clear that this can be just one facet of safeguarding and care should be taken to pick the foremost applicable strategies and materials for the task.

The Harappan Civilization (chalcolithic period), which existed beyond the Indus and Saraswati Rivers somewhere after 2300 B.C. In 1878 Sir John Marshal an archaeologist discovered the sand dunes under which the settlements were buried. Archaeologists R.D Banerji and D.R Sahni, discovered Mohenjodaro in Sind and Harappa in Punjab (both in Pakistan) respectively in 1920-21 and 1921-22. The ruins of Mohenjo-daro were designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1980.

The Indus Valley Civilization is often separated into three phases: the **Early Harappan Phase** from 3300 to 2600 BCE, the **Mature Harappan Phase** from 2600 to 1900 BCE, and the **Late Harappan Phase** from 1900 to 1300 BCE.

¹ ("India and the World", 2018)

² ("Pompeii | The Immortal City – Exhibits Development Group", 2020)

³ ("Digital Projection brings Pompeii to life at Grand Palais in Paris | blooloop", 2020)

At its peak, the Indus Valley Civilization may have had a population of over five million people. The Indus cities are noted for their urban planning, a technical and political process concerned with the use of land and design of the urban environment. They are also noted for their baked brick houses, elaborate drainage systems, water supply systems, and clusters of large, nonresidential buildings. The archaeological evidences that were unearthed from over 1500 sites, conveys the splendours of art, craft, technology, script, science and cultural traditions are indispensable for human beings calling themselves as civilized in every sense.

The small scale of Indus art objects reflects the versatility and expertise of the craftsman at that point of time. Harappan art is not grandiose conception and execution of colossal objects but the deft tackling of the material at hand to produce art that holds one's attention. A large number of female figurines have been found at Mohenjodaro, Harappa, Kot -diji, and Chanhudaro. The forms of art found from various sites of civilization include sculptures, seals, pottery, gold ornaments, terracotta figures, etc. Their delineation of human and animal figures was highly realistic in nature. Bead making was another great craft of the Harappan culture.

The reason why the Indus valley civilization is being celebrated so much is because of the extraordinary advancements in the field of trade, technology, town planning, art and culture; thus, making us curious to analyse and research about it. The Indus Valley Civilization, deriving its name from the north-western parts of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent flourished more than 4000 years ago. Great heights were achieved in the art of metal sculpture; Indus civilization represented a proficient bronze age. Some of the prominent artworks of the time include the Dancing girls, animal figures from Mohenjodaro, chariot from Daimabad, arrowheads, vessels etc. Simple method of producing deep vessels was designated as 'raising'. Besides, 'lost-wax' method or *cire perdue* was used; this technique made the metallurgical advancement of the civilization more acknowledged and celebrated even today.

The technological sophistication and beauty of many of the Harappan artefacts have been recognized worldwide. There is an amusing variety of standardized, mass-produced craft items found at Harappan sites. The artefacts are far greater in quantity and range, and show greater technical finesse than those found in earlier cultural phases. Customarily, unalloyed copper was used for manufacturing artifacts and rarely tin was mixed with copper to make bronze. The highly acknowledged Lost-wax casting technique which made the bronzes of the time more precious is still

being used in the metallurgical process. The continuity of this technique in the communities today provides an approach of inclusiveness and lineage that has being passed on from past 4500 years.



Fig 3. Bronze figures from Indus Valley Civilizations

Left to right: Rhinoceros on wheels; Bronze Buffalo on wheels; Dancing Girl (New Delhi) Dancing Girl (Karachi)

Source: <https://www.harappa.com/blog/national-museum-delhi>

Bronze mirrors have been recovered from sites like Rakhigarhi, Lothal, Dholavira and Mohenjodaro. The Harappan bronze tool collection comprised of the typical leaf-shaped arrowheads, double edged axes, spears with bent end, shaft-hole axe, the sword with amid-rib or the bronze female figurines like that of the 'dancing girl', man riding the chariot, a buffalo and other animal figures. Bronze tools have a keener and more enduring cutting edges than copper tools.



Fig 4. Collection of Harappan Civilization from National Museum, New Delhi

(Source: Somya Malik)

The excavations in the Indus Valley (also called Harappan Civilization) yielded a variety of pottery which is plain and decorated and contain a variety of unglazed and glazed pottery. Pottery kilns were found at Mohenjodaro, Harappa and Chanhudaro. The daily use of the utensils are found in clay, which were made on the potter's wheel. Designs were made on the pots in Black and white and finally finished in red. Big jars were used to store grains. Bottles, plates etc. were made in terracotta. There was evidence of huge jars which were probably used for burials and keeping their belongings.

Now comes the role of the museum to not just to preserve this cultural property holding significance but also to communicate with the object through different mediums and to provide perspective to historicity of the object to the visitor. The idea here is to provide the story of objects not just through written texts rather through something visual, 3-dimensional creating an image in their minds to understand why this object is so important that it is kept here; the intangible aspect of the object can be displayed via various tools.

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