

## MUSEUMS AS MEMORY THEATRE A VISIT TO THE SALAR JUNG MUSEUM IN HYDERABAD

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### **ABSTRACT**

*"The Kunstkammer was regarded as a microcosm or theatre of the world, and a memory theatre. The Kunstkammer conveyed symbolically the patron's control of the world through its indoor, microscopic reproduction."*

*Francesco Fiorani in his above quote makes it very clear that the founders of the Kunstkammer museum (the first museum of Russia) had one thing clear in their mind: the space of the museum is one of performance, where the visitor comes to have a history being performed in front of his eyes. But he does not stop there. The story that the visitor is told is a testimony not of its times alone, but of the 'patron's control of the world through its indoor, microscopic reproduction'. The reproduction of the patron's desire, then brings together, to the visitor, a commemorative history. Museums then, can be said, to borrow a phrase from Barthes (1984), "mechanically represent what (otherwise) could never be repeated existentially". It is a memory theatre. And memories associated with it always facilitate other memories. In this respect, I intend to read how the theme of memory-play can be read along the corridors of the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad. Quite literally, the corridors of Salar Jung contain an odd twenty-something number of mirrors. As one journeys from one room to the other, from one 'performative space' to the next, it is these king size mirrors placed along the liminal corridors that bring up an existential question. I use 'liminal' as the space of the corridor seems to be the space of the present that separates each room and therefore each performative space. Contra-punctually weaves in all these performative space to produce the net 'museum experience'. Within the geographical boundary of the museum, what happens to the subject of the museum? These mirrors reflect (in between two performative spaces i.e. the rooms) the visitor's immediate 'bare' position when seen out of the museum context. He has come out of one room and thus no longer a part of that memory, and has yet not entered the next room and thus not a part of it too. Within his immediate space (the corridor), the practical reality of the world, outside the museum, seems too inconsequential, between the two worlds of grandeur. The subject is made to feel a crisis for which he has to search for his space in the next performative space: the next room.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Museums and Museumizing, Commodity and Culture, Commemorative History*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Salarjung is an art museum. As on date, there are 38 galleries in the Museum in three blocks i.e. (1) Indian Block (27 galleries), (2) Western Block (7 galleries) and (3) Eastern Block (4 galleries) in which nearly 13,654 objects are on

display. The Indian collections are from the States of Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Orissa, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Jammu & Kashmir, and places like Kangra, Basholi, Jaipur, Udaipur, Mewar, Hyderabad, Golconda, Bijapur, Kurnool and Nirmal. The Western collections are from England, Ireland, France, Belgium, Italy, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Venice and Austria. The Eastern collections are from countries like China, Japan, Burma, Korea, Nepal, Thailand, Indonesia and from Middle East countries like Egypt, Syria, Persia and Arabia. The Indian art objects comprise of stone sculptures, bronzes, wood carvings, miniature paintings, modern paintings, ivory, jade, textiles, metal ware, manuscripts, bidri, arms and armour, utility ware etc. The catalogue of the Salar Jung Museum notes ‘all human life and cultural endeavor could be represented by exhibiting manufactured articles.’ This becomes a central factor for the play of the commodity-spectacle. After all, it must be remembered that the collection was acquired by a single man, Mir Yousuf Ali Khan, popularly known as Salar Jung III. In the absence of any direct descendants of Salar Jung III, the Government of India appointed a Committee to administer the Salar Jung Estate.

These exhibited manufactured commodities then become central to the performative spaces in the museums that enact stories and recall the commemorative past as a memory theatre. The objects on display at the museum are symbols of a majestic, larger than life existence. The stories, they seem to relate to the visitor, in a language of visual systems, give each visitor his own version of the story, as he responds to it. As the visitor participates in this figment of the imagination, he finds, rather locates himself somewhere within the play of the spectacle sign. His context is made viable by his own position: as an art historian/amateur, as a man/woman/kid. He images his own story.

An act of personalization goes parallel with an act of alienation. It contains at the same time two dimensions: a past and a present. Barthes (1984) comments on the past life contained in a visual as being related to a “history (that) is very hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it- and in order to look it, we must be excluded from it. As a living soul, I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history”. of the present aspect he adds, the association with the visual is ‘a painful labor, straining towards an essence of ... identity.’ What is significant, then in the enactment of the performative spaces, is this process of imaging a self in a different personalized context. As the world of the spectacle-sign now reflects an image of the visitor, he is made to inherit an image of a ‘condition of absence’. According to Saussure (1916), the symbol is arbitrary but never empty. It is this ‘arbitrariness’ that the performative space brings into play. Felluga (2011) notes on Judith Butler, “the distinction between the personal and the political or between private and public is itself a fiction designed to support an oppressive status quo: our most personal acts are, in fact, continually being scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies.” Accordingly then, the image of the performing visitor is trapped in the gaze of the performative space which pre-assumes a certain paradigm of meaning for the subject differentiating him from other paradigms of meaning as well. This aspect will be discussed further in the Andersons notion of the museum imagination.

Reverting back to the phenomenon of the commodity-spectacle, Thomas Richard’s (1990) *Semiotics Of Commodity Spectacle In The Commodity Culture Of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle* is worth noting. Richards formulates certain major foundations through which a commodity, by ‘a disparate array of popular technologies of spectacular representation, can fashion a style suited to be a spectacle and thus worthy to be consumed.’ This establishes the autonomous iconography for a manufactured object.

First, commodities are made to acquire a dimension that is blown out of proportion to their use or value in society at large. In a museum, objects assume certain timelessness. A museum rips an object of its use value and projects it simply as art. The use value becomes a fossilized existence: a testimony to its past. This becomes clear when, say for instance, we consider the metal-ware, or art objects from Persia, Syria and Egypt are covering the diverse media like carpets, paper (manuscripts), ceramics, glass, metal ware, furniture, lacquer, aesthetically attractive glass objects to majestic furniture, splendid examples of ivory, enamel ware and clocks. All of these have at some point or the other in history, had a certain use value for itself. It has now attained the value of art as well as a testimony of its past. Either ways, the commodity has come to acquire for itself a dimension that alienates itself from its onlooker. Not only is it removed in time and space, but also in dimension. It no longer remains a commodity that has to be acquired, rather an object that is to be gazed at.

The second foundation of the semiotics of spectacle lay in the concept of commemoration i.e. to place objects in history and, with time, to replace history. Though, this has been discussed above, to exemplify, we can take a virtual tour of the founder's gallery. Each of the paintings, objects of display, even photographs usher us into a past of Salar Jung's life. It provides us with an understanding of the history of the museum itself, in connection to the Nawab city of Hyderabad.

The third was the invention of a democratic ideology of consumption where, commodities provide a common ground for everyone. The assumption is that all desire the same articles; it did not matter whether they had it or not. Salar Jung has seen a large influx of people both elite and other wise, native/ foreign, rich/poor. The ticket fee is nominal for everyone to be able witness the splendour of the place. People may be educated or otherwise apart from the distinctions stated above, however, they stand on common grounds in their alienation of the object on display. According to Roland Barthes (1984), the touch is the most demystifying of the senses and the sight the most magical. What the museum, then does is to "extend the sway of sight over all commodities and signal the rise of a new imagistic mode of representing them".

Fourth, the transformation of a commodity into a language that would be necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on. In the words of Benedict Anderson (1980), "museums and museumizing imagination are both profoundly political". Suggesting a "general process of political inheriting at work", Anderson claims, came into existence due to the "novel nineteenth-century colonial archaeology... that was associated with the eclipse of commercial colonial regimes and the rise of the true modern colony."

What follows thus is the imaging of the Richard's (1990) 'consuming subject'. There is a contraction of perception as the subject has now become the exclusive consumer of the material commodity. The commodity is then no longer the object of the past or a memory, but rather the objectification/ subjectification process of which both the participating visitor and his projected image are only effects. By consuming a certain image, I mean a paradigm where the relation between the social and the individual is aestheticized and commodified into a cultural capital, the consumption of which space generates within the subject, a notion of the consuming subject.

In wrapping up, we may have a look at the myth of the achieved abundant society where commodities themselves became the medium of the announcement.<sup>1</sup> Museums posit as places that have a certain understanding of the cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid P 64

history and politics of regions. This is to focus on spaces of consumption which, as a microcosm, bears the reflection of a cultural totality of a region but also, and perhaps more importantly, the formation of these cultural identities cannot be and should not be thought outside the efficacious domain of commodity form.

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