

03 The Role of Museums in the Preservation of
Living Heritage:
Experiences of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

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ABSTRACT

The author stresses the high respect that the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (VME) has for cultural diversity, as seen in its approaches to the following three areas: people, space, and time. The VME has given priority first and foremost to the representation of everyday life – problems, stories, and concerns of peoples and of ethnic communities. The Museum's role as a research and educational institution, as well as a body that appreciates and supports the intangible value of crafts are shown in two research case studies: learning to make pottery in the classroom for children, and giving voices to craft artisans in a photovoice project. The author also addresses current challenges of the VME, especially as it expands its research and display policies to include the cultures and daily life of ethnic peoples in other Southeast Asian Countries.

The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology and its role in Vietnam and the Mekong region

The concept of the ethnographic museum, which introduces the lives of ethnic groups and cultures of different countries and regions, has only recently begun to be formulated and developed in Vietnam.

In the late 1990s, the formation of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology has allowed the idea of the ethnographic museum to gradually conceptualise and have a greater opportunity to develop. The successful ethnographic exhibitions and cultural events at the Museum of Culture of Vietnamese Ethnic Groups (since 1992) and at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (since 1997) demonstrate the value of renewing the status of

ethnographic collections and presentations in museums, especially in provincial and local museums throughout the country.

The mission of the Ethnology Museum is to research, collect, and preserve ethnographic artefacts that reflect the culture and life of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups, and then to present these artefacts to the public. This paper discusses the role these activities play in Vietnam and the region.

The museum's priorities

Respect for cultural diversity underlies all of the museum's exhibitions and activities. This respect for the

diversity of the peoples of Vietnam is the most important message that the museum seeks to pass on to its visitors. The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology works to cultivate respect for cultural diversity through its approaches to the following three areas: people, space, and time.

With regards to people, the museum's first priority is to emphasize the equality of all cultures and peoples. This means that the museum is equally concerned with presenting the cultures of groups with large populations and of groups with small populations, and is equally interested in groups residing in urban areas as well as those found in remote areas. In particular, groups with long histories in Vietnam and those who have emigrated from neighbouring countries for various historical reasons, are introduced on an equal level at the museum. This information helps museum-goers become aware of the historical and cultural relationships of ethnic groups in Vietnam with their neighbours in the larger Mekong region rather than presenting a picture of isolated and fixed cultural boundaries or of greater or lesser stages of development.

With regards to space, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology has established a new strategic priority to extend the museum's scope of exhibitions, research and programming from Vietnam alone to Southeast Asia and the region as a whole, in order to help museum visitors more fully understand the cultural relationships between Vietnam and other countries. The Museum of Ethnology is in the process of carrying out a very important and difficult task: to prepare for a permanent exhibition hall at the Museum that will introduce the cultures of ethnic groups in the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) nations and the region, starting with the cultures of other countries

in the Mekong region. It is anticipated that this project will take 15 to 20 years to realize as it is starting almost from scratch. In spite of the challenges that this will inevitably pose, the Museum also foresees the bright possibilities. These exhibitions will play an important role because cultural understanding is necessary to fully achieve international political and economic integration and exchange in the face of globalization. Cultural background information about the political, cultural and environmental conditions of today, and in the past, provide a basis for stability and development in the region. It is hoped that museum colleagues and international organizations in South East Asia will collaborate enthusiastically, developing a South East Asian Museum, because, as a group, we all share the same goal of enhancing unity and understanding in the region. This is particularly important because cultural exchange remains limited between countries in South East Asia, particularly in the Mekong region. Discussion and research dealing with cultural issues among South East Asian nations has largely been limited to the national sphere; audiences and museum staff have not yet had extensive opportunities to explore these issues across national boundaries within the museum setting.

The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology places a priority on the present, with particular attention to the contemporary, daily life of ethnic groups. One aim is to present audiences with lively portraits and stories about the destiny of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups. Through varied anthropological approaches, the Museum of Ethnology reflects on, and explains the concerns of cultural subjects for the survival of their cultural heritage. In this way, the museum gains a new vitality. Having been aware that the museum should focus on contemporary life, the Museum of Ethnology

has efficiently organized activities to preserve living and intangible heritage.

The role of the museum as an educational and research institution

The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology is deeply aware that if it wishes to attract more visitors and enhance its role in society, it must develop its educational programs. The museum must provide visitors with accurate and timely information about the objects in sensitive, lively, and attractive ways. Moreover, the museum should regularly organize temporary exhibitions and innovate design activities in order to provide new information to the public and acquaint visitors with the issues with which the museum is most concerned. In addition, research is an extremely important component to ensure the continual renovation of the museum. The museum embraces all of these aspects to ensure that each time a visitor comes to the museum they discover new things, thus encouraging them to return again and again.

The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology's efforts to preserve and develop traditional handicrafts are an example of an educational approach to the preservation of living heritage. Recently, a range of activities was organized in the museum to preserve and develop traditional handicrafts.

Understanding the traditional value of crafts

- The traditional value of a craft is what the craftspeople and the community have been accumulating from generation to generation.
- All those values are useful for contemporary people and society.

How do people use those values to reproduce culture?

- by passing on skills, knowledge and trading experiences
- by reproducing products
- by maintaining social networks and relationships in order to preserve and promote crafts.
- The traditional values of crafts are stable but not unchanging. Thus, they are dynamic and adaptable to circumstances and thus they create new values.
- Traditional values should go through the process of selection in specific circumstances. Their importance lies in the questions of who selects and who benefits?

First and foremost, the selection of cultural subjects is made by craftspeople and their community. The community decides what needs to be changed and how to change in order to adapt to new circumstance.

How do the traditional values manifest themselves?

They manifest themselves in two forms:

- Tangible material objects which involve:
 - production tools
 - different materials
 - craft products
 - styles and designs
- Intangible ways:
 - techniques in all processes
 - skills and expertise
 - traditional knowledge and experience
 - social networks, social relations and community relations

The role of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in preserving handicrafts

1. Display. The museum displays handicraft products that are used in daily life so that visitors can understand more about the value and uses of traditional handicrafts as well as about the lives of their producers.
2. Creating a new approach. The museum participates in various stages of craft development, playing a unique and important role in the economic development of ethnic minority groups.
3. In addition to exhibiting finished craft products, the museum has also initiated a new programme of arts and crafts demonstrations at the museum. Through these programmes the public can understand the value of traditional crafts.
4. The museum is committed to promoting traditional crafts to the next generation through programmes for schoolchildren so that they can learn and practice these crafts at the museum.
5. The museum is experimenting with the exciting new approach of giving cameras to craftspeople, be they men or women, young or old, and letting them determine how they would like their traditions to be represented at the museum. In this way, the Vietnam Museum of

Ethnology allows local people to introduce their own cultures and livelihoods and to present their thoughts, concern, and plans about the present and future development of their culture.

Case study 1. Traditional crafts in the classroom

Traditional Crafts in the Classroom is a project supported by UNESCO and implemented through the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology. The project aims at making traditional crafts known to and appreciated by young people (10-14 years old), especially disadvantaged youths, through research and practice. This project was implemented at the museum in the summers of 2003 and 2004.

In the summer of 2004, two Pottery Classes were organized for children: a basic and an advanced class. The advanced class was attended by the pupils who had attended the basic class in the year 2003. Four artisans from Phu Lang pottery village, professional potters and a master, were invited to teach the children. Phu Lang has centuries of history of pottery making, however, the trade is under threat of falling into oblivion. Many young skilled artisans have left the village to earn a living by another trade.

The pupils who take part in these classes are given basic skills in pottery making. They can make their own products and learn to design panels and brochures for the exhibition of their products. Through the workshop classes, the children not only mastered traditional techniques and skills in pottery making, they also learnt a

great deal more about their culture and heritage. The artisans, through these demonstrations and exchanges with the children and with professional potters, also learnt about the values of traditional pottery and gained knowledge about new decorative motifs and about making colours from natural materials. They also gained a further understanding of the demands of contemporary life. This is an important aspect, as the artisans endeavor to create designs to adapt to the demands of present day society, resulting in more production sales and thus an increase in their income.

Case study 2. The preservation of the traditional value of artisan crafts

Project background

There is a lack of efficient cooperation and exchange of information on traditional crafts among institutes, museums, universities and other relevant agencies.

Policy makers are not able to obtain sufficient information on craft potential and their situation at a grass-roots level. Craftsmen who have knowledge and technical skills need to be more informed about, and better equipped, to take part in the market economy.

All of the above activities that preserve and develop traditional crafts also succeed in connecting the museum to contemporary life, by responding to the concerns of artisans and increasing their standard of living by increasing employment. These activities connect diverse communities, and help people understand cultural values more clearly by reaching beyond their own cultural understandings to discover a wider horizon.

Objectives

- To identify the traditional value of crafts in Na Sang 2 village (Nua Ngam commune, Dien Bien district, Lai Chau province) and in Dai Bai village (Dai Bai commune, Gia Binh district, Bac Ninh).
- To document traditional crafts by photographing and interviewing craftspeople, reflecting the strong or weak points of each craft as well as the concerns of individuals and of the community.
- To encourage exchanges and the enhancement of knowledge on individual and community issues through group discussions on photographs.
- To provide recommendations to policy makers.
- To collect and preserve photographs, interview and field notes.
- To exhibit research results through interviews and photographs taken by craftspeople; to write a report on the 'Photo-voice' method, and compile village profiles.

Outputs and results

The collection and preservation of photographs and interviews

Within six months (from December 2002 to June 2003), craftspeople created approximately 3,000 photographs and participated in many interviews. These documents are preserved to serve today's researchers and people interested in crafts, and for all those of future generations.

Organization of exhibitions

From the photographs taken by the craftspeople, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, in collaboration with local people, organized three photographic exhibitions. The first two exhibitions were organized in the localities where its 'research subjects' live, making them all the more significant. Mr. Nguyen Xuan Sam from Dai Bai village said, 'We didn't expect that we could take such beautiful photographs that convey many things about our craft village. Through this exhibition, Dai Bai villagers, especially the young generation, have more understanding about the preservation of traditional value of our craft village.'

The improvement of people's own understanding of traditional crafts

Young people have had the opportunity to learn from the

content of the photographs and from the comments of senior craftspeople. At the same time, older people have had a chance to share their knowledge and experience with the young. The project revealed an effective way of transferring knowledge from one generation to the next. Through the photos and interviews, local awareness and understanding of the preservation and development of crafts was also enhanced. The project encouraged participating craftspeople to be active in informing others about the need to preserve their traditional crafts, thus contributing to the preservation of their own cultures.

The project also collected and preserved visual material and interviews on crafts in order to make a research database for Vietnam's present and future cultural managers and policy makers. The aim of this was to provide personnel with the resources needed to create policies that promote the preservation and development of traditional crafts, in ways that are suitable for local communities.

The success of the above projects relied on a proper understanding of the need to preserve and develop traditional craft skills, and an awareness of the importance of the museum in contemporary life. The Vietnam Ethnology Museum should be involved in resolving the difficulties facing craftspeople, by providing assistance in improving their quality of life and increasing their employment opportunities. The museum should link communities, raising people's awareness of cultural values, not only in their own locality but beyond their borders. This is a crucial educational role that the museum should play.

Challenges facing the museum

The Ethnology Museum faces many challenges and hurdles in order to continue to develop, improve and evolve.

The first challenge is updating the knowledge of important concepts, theories, and approaches in the design of exhibitions and public programmes. Most of the specialists and researchers working at the museum have university degrees in either ethnology or museum studies. In Vietnam, training in these two fields is still developing to compete with the more advanced theories and approaches from around the world. We are now actively considering many questions concerning the role of the museum in presenting the cultures of different groups living in Vietnam. How can we express the idea of

cultural diversity? What is the role of the museum as a link between the government, political institutions, cultural communities, and the general public? To what extent should the museum participate in socio-economic development and heritage preservation in Vietnam? Aside from its educational role for the general public, can the museum also be involved in training in museum studies and anthropology at undergraduate and postgraduate university level? What, beyond traditional anthropological subjects, might the museum focus on to effectively carry out activities to preserve intangible cultural values? What should the relationship be, in the museum, between contemporary culture and cultures of the past? How can the museum establish exhibitions to show the relationships between the social and cultural world and the natural environment?

In order to take steps to answer some of these questions, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology has a short-term and medium-term need for upgrading the level of the professional staff on site, and a long-term need for making sure there is systematic training available for potential future staff members. The museum actively seeks sponsors who will work in collaboration with museum staff to help meet their training and re-training needs. Training for staff and future staff of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology must encompass not only the fields of ethnology, anthropology, museology, conservation and restoration, but also video, audio and editing techniques for producing ethnographic films, exhibition design, product development market research, museum education and public outreach activities.

The second challenge is to diversify the types of exhibitions organized, and the cooperative network. If

exhibitions are only organized in Hanoi, the educational message will not reach remote communities. Therefore, a network must be established with local museums throughout the country to share access to objects, exhibition ideas and actual exhibitions. The Ethnology Museum embarked on this task in several ways. The project entitled *Building Capacity in Research, Collecting, and Exhibition* implemented by the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institute and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, developed training programmes and established a network of 12 museums in the lower Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. Participants in the project, which extended from 2001 to 2003, worked to conduct research on the preservation and presentation of the cultures and lives of the people who live in this region.

The Ethnology Museum has also sent highlights of the its collections and exhibitions to other regions of the country in travelling exhibitions. These travelling exhibitions extended to audiences far from Hanoi, thus enhancing understanding among all of the people living in Vietnam. In addition, the museum has ambitions to develop this further and participate in museum networks in the region and around the world. These links could take place at many levels, from the lending and borrowing of collections and the hosting of travelling exhibitions, to co-curating exhibitions and establishing joint virtual exhibitions on the internet.

The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology aims to be a destination not only for Vietnamese people and foreign tourists, but also for scholars from the region and all over the world, continuing its role as an important bridge linking cultures, people, and nations, particularly in the Mekong region. 

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