

**Proceedings of the International Seminar  
on  
Heritage, Visuality and Museology**

**Editorial Board**

**Advisor**

**Dr. Sachindra Shekhar Biswas**  
**Former Director General, National Museum, New Delhi**

**Prof. (Dr.) Sachindranath Bhattacharya**

**Professor**  
**Department of Museology, C. U.**

**Dr. Durga Basu**

**Associate Professor**  
**Department of Archaeology, C. U.**

**Chief Editor**

**Dr. Mahua Chakrabarti**  
**Head & Associate Professor**  
**Department of Museology, C.U.**

**Co-Editors**

**Dr. Dhriti Ray**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**Department of Museology, C.U.**

**Shri Sanjit Jotdar**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**Department of Museology, C.U.**

**Smt. Piyasi Bharasa**  
**Assistant Professor**  
**Department of Museology, C.U.**

## **Museum objects of foreign origin: A study into issues related to accession, repatriation and legal rights**

Prof. Anura Manatunga\*

Most of the famous museums of the world are having foreign objects as a part of their collections. Some of these museums have been established for housing foreign objects other than local items and the importance of those museums is still depends on their rich collection of foreign objects. Hence, one may argue that museums would not be flourished, if objects were not being collected from foreign countries. In fact, the so-called 'Encyclopaedic Museums' are being encouraged to collect foreign objects to represent the diverse culture of mankind.

It is, however, presence of foreign objects in museums is a highly controversial issue. The controversy goes beyond the museums themselves into the arena of politics, trade, law, ethics and several other fields. This is relatively a recent issue came up with the rise of national states in the post colonial era. It intensified during the last two or three decades due to various other reasons. The collapse of the Soviet Union, embracing of liberal trade policies, armed conflicts in various regions, easy communication systems and the change of social values are some of the key factors behind the changing paradigm on foreign objects in museums.

Three aspects regarding foreign objects will be discussed in this paper; i.e. accession of objects to the museum collection, legal rights of objects and repatriation of objects into countries of origin in view of understanding the issue properly and for proposing some amicable solutions to the issue.

Possibilities of restriction of further accession of foreign objects into museums will be considered seriously in this study. This will propose a strict control over trade of antiquities both in foreign and local market and mitigation of illicit trade of cultural properties will be emphasised. Dialogue for legal rights of objects and possible repatriation of them to the countries of origin will be discussed.

Keywords: foreign objects, accession, repatriation, legal rights, illicit trade, antiquities.

\* Professor, Department of Archaeology, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. am@kln.ac.lk