

The Dr Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum

The Oldest Museum in the City

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues

For Mumbai, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (King Shivaji Museum), formerly known as The Prince of Wales Museum, has always held pride of place although it is not the first museum built in the city. That credit goes to a much smaller, lesser known museum – the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum.

The idea of a museum in Bombay (as the city was known then), was advanced in 1850 when arrangements were underway for the first *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, to be held in London in 1851. Via this exhibition, Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort, wanted to promote the rich industrial arts and crafts of the British colonies. The new museum planned for Bombay would display copies of India's finest decorative arts, sent to this exhibition and subsequent exhibitions as well.

Initially established in 1855, the museum reopened in its present building in 1872 as the Victoria and Albert Museum. In addition to industrial arts, it also showcased the history and cultural heritage of Bombay.

The museum building itself is a landmark as it was the first colonial building in the city to be constructed specifically for housing a museum. It has a grand Palladian exterior while the inside is designed in the



The celadon-green building of the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum. Photo courtesy of Janice D'Souza Barrett

High Victorian style, a rarity in India. In 1975, the museum was renamed the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Museum, in honour of the first Indian Sheriff of Bombay. Dr Lad also played an instrumental role in the museum's establishment.

Beginning in 2003, the museum underwent an extensive five-year restoration, which earned it UNESCO's 2005 Award of Excellence in the field of Cultural Conservation. The building now boasts celadon-green walls with intricate stucco work, floors paved with heritage Minton tiles, and Doric pillars with 24-carat gold detailing. There are other interesting touches in the museum's decor, including the V&A symbol set in the wrought iron railings of the museum and the Star of David patterned into the curved ceiling, a tribute to the museum's Jewish sponsor, David Sassoon.

The museum's permanent collection is displayed in five galleries. The Origins of Mumbai Gallery has colonial-era maps and plans that trace the evolution of the city from a group of seven marshy islands known to the Romans as Heptanesia, to the elegant Bombay of the mid-19th century (the *Urbs Prima in Indis* – first city in India), to the bustling metropolis it is today.

Delightful dioramas and miniature clay models are



The opulent Victorian interior of the museum, with the Star of David patterned into the ceiling. Photo courtesy of the author

displayed in another permanent gallery. These document the varied cultures, occupations and lifestyles of the city's people, from the late 18th to the early 20th century. The prohibitive costs of photography in the early 20th century led the museum to make these terracotta models to depict the diversity of the communities that lived in the city.

The Industrial Arts Gallery displays Indian *objets d'art*, the very reason behind the creation of this museum. Local designs were modified to suit western tastes, creating a huge demand around the world for Indian craftsmanship. These Indian fine and decorative arts became very popular in Europe in the 19th century.



The V&A symbol set in the wrought iron railings of the museum. Photo courtesy of Marina Thayil

The Founders' Gallery and the 19th Century Paintings Gallery are two other galleries in the museum's permanent collection. There is also a dynamic space where special exhibitions are held, with themes that link the city's present to its glorious past.

The story of the Dr Bhau Daji Lad Mumbai City Museum is inextricably linked to the history of Mumbai. In the midst of the city's frenetic bustle, the museum provides a serene space to learn about the history and evolution of the metropolis.

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