

The Kingdom of Allusions: Iconographies of *Nation* in the Thai Museum

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In the western world, the prototype museum aspired to gather things that would represent life's myriad facets and curiosities. Among such curiosities that passed off as museum pieces were the various intriguing mechanical contraptions of the day, creatures from the water world, the myriad beasts of Noah's ark, the stars in their eternal and mysterious trek, the charred and intact remnants of human history, sundry articles of science, faith, and philosophy, and a breathless household of art objects that evoked the true, the good, and the beautiful.

The museum aspired to stir up a sense of wonder in its itinerant beholders. Perhaps, because in the great disorder of everyday life, certain things have faded into oblivion, there arose a need to find some quiet space highlighting the depth, curious dimensions, and lonely integrity of disparate objects. The museum aspired to awaken a certain curiosity for everyday things that would recreate depth, dimension, and restoration in the beholder's psyche.

But the museum did not evolve naturally. One of the most bitter contentions everywhere was the space that could be allocated, allowing for the infrastructure to rise—the big house that would serve as the museum and repository of all gathered objects. In many ways, it was the modernist fascination with space that secured for the museum the very grounds of its existence today. Modernism was fond of experimenting with space. Life was ambient or always in a flux. Modern life created spaces where people stopped momentarily & relished equally brief pleasures. These included parks, theaters, restaurants, hotels, & museums.

What Museums Do

The museum has beckoned under various guises in Thailand. The Thai public has entered it as a palace, a temple, a warehouse, an aquarium gallery, or as a recognized public institution (as in a hospital or a bank), ancestral houses, and public squares such as metro stations and mall foyers that cater to changing exhibits.

Of the hoard of functions that museums played across the ages, let's look at five that continue to interest us today. These five functions would be: to collect, to organize (or classify), to display, to instruct its audience, and to project a sense of the nation. Obviously, some of these functions are so attuned to the museum objects themselves, while other functions take a closer look at the very people who visit museums, and still others assign an intriguing, socially symbolic role for museums to take on.

A clear starting point is that museums demonstrate what it means to classify things rigorously. Michel Foucault thinks that museum objects are not only metonymies of different spaces assembled under one roof but of different time zones, too. He likens the museum to a cemetery, where the grateful dead have fallen down at different times and for different reasons, too.

For a start, things are public commodities first, before they become museum objects. These things have been made to charm the public—some gizmo that one fancies, is fun to use, good to own, and truly something to gloat about. Here, we come face to face with the industrial context of modernism, where private property is big deal and where the breathless manufacture of gadgets is too hot to handle because, the moment we go out, we see a whole trundle of things being hawked, smashed, or twisted into new shape for our sure convenience. Our psychic stress comes from seeing human history quickly turn into a manufacturing wasteland. Here are otherwise useful things quickly turning into has-beens as what's hip and what employs the latest technology overtakes them. Where T.S. Eliot has sighted his wasteland, we have come up right away with provisional spaces where to keep history's surpluses (or excesses).

Now, looking at museum spectators is something else. Those in cultural studies think that the trip to your favorite museum smacks of Foucault's discipline and punish. They're looking at it as a covert form of liminal regimentation, where living in the city becomes a checkerboard of so many regiments that city folks must undergo. For them, museums have succeeded in forcing its visitors to dress up (and to acquire the prescribed articles of its dress code), to behave properly, and to train their eyes in looking closely, with the purpose of making worthwhile discoveries. It's no strange feat, then, that the early modern demographers observed how museums appealed to men (so dressed up like million-dollar troupers) while the women went for the big department stores. And yet, curiously enough, it was the men who suffered from a collecting mania (what with their strong purchasing power!).

Perhaps, **Wat Phra Kaeo** can best illustrate this regulatory function. The wat is a Buddhist temple. To get in, one must rent a sash and leave his dust-sprayed sandals among the shoe racks. Once inside, the visitor must observe the correct posture: one's dirty toes must never point to the image of the Emerald Buddha. So one sits on folded limbs and gazes mutely on the Buddha. It is a tacit rule that people must kneel or sit down once they're inside the wat.

It would be an awkward thing to go roaming inside the temple. Instead, one runs through the entire motion of temple visits—that is to kneel and savor the quiet, to light incense sticks, even, and to listen to the breathless *Om*, if the orange-robed monks happen to be around. This way, the wat proceeds to discipline its captive crowd. Bodies obey Buddhist calisthenics for so long as they linger inside. And the apparatus of religion prevails this way, whichever way we look at it. The liminal regiment becomes a way of walking spectators through the strictures of Buddhist prayer life.

Where the discipline of piety commands, the wat directs the voyeuristic pleasure differently. It briefs the spectator that there are rules to follow all the time. Moreover, the wat also lives up to a form of acquired irony: amazing how in modern times, a haven of prayer has become the touristic site for cultural spectatorship and the brief rehearsal of religious protocol.

The Gallery of Crossed Destinies

The open museum means a huge and thorough process of classification. The great forces in ideology—the artists, architects, economists, concept developers, even crowds and lawmakers—all take part in this sorting-out game. Reordering becomes the next big step, where one amasses a formidable collection of big and small things.

For one, museum objects require conjuring the ideal space to hold the wide array of displays, given their size, volume, and their practical and symbolic values. Then, there's the need to frame and write up accompanying narratives. All told, this writing project becomes the vivid illustration of abstract principles and suppositions about the collection. Here, various layers of visualization (through things, words, stories, rooms, interactive tasks) become a thorough exercise in the art of organization.

It's a tough organizing job because Foucault reckons that with museums, one is trading in various volumes of space and different strands of time. For him, the museum speaks for a type of space that holds the sum of all possible worlds. He offers the word *heterotopia*, for which he explains:

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they can reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.¹

Where museums have become fashionable, we see the rise of a formal discourse that shall gain ground among art circuits as *visual culture*. But what are the forms of visualization that the discourse manages to carry out?

For one, any museum proceeds as an exercise in entrenching hegemonic visual narratives. This collaborative representation brings together the state, historians, folklorists, poets, artists, curators, architects, engineers, and the well-heeled in launching an official narrative to consolidate what seems all too dispersed. Things shored up from the past form the visible helix of superstructures and constructs about the collective. And all manners of expression are employed to launch this visualization.

To illustrate, the visualization project undertaken by the **Hua Lamphong Permanent Thai Transportation Exhibit** goes beyond the level of the aesthetic functions. Social planning figures as one prominent layer of its visualization process, since it started out as a personal interest and then, as an infrastructural project of the King.

One comes across the exhibit at Hua Lam Phong metro station, where the target crowd is perpetually in transit, exercising their role as everyday commuters. Part of the transit, then, would be this on-the-side education where pictures, mechanical memorabilia, and historical narratives outline the development of modern transportation in Thailand.

The exhibit presents the state railway system as a royal concern and eventual project of monarchy that has effectively linked distant and previously unreachable places in the kingdom.

This way, the daily subway transit of city folk operationalizes both physically and visually the technological consolidation of the Thai nation. In this visualization, the state railway's production history identifies a veritable capital in the king's attraction to modernity and in his political will to carry out such tough project. In turn, the exhibit lionizes the King as the technology-drawn agent who adopts modernity to compose a practicable outline of the modern Thai republic.

Museum Politics

To say more about the socially symbolic function of the Thai museum, we must take note of certain telling details in the material history of Thailand. These details sharpen not only Siam's geographical traits but also vital aspects of its social and economic life that allows us to tell it apart from other Southeast Asian countries.

Among such particulars: Thailand is a kingdom. The capital, Bangkok, is a city by the river. The country grows much rice and teak, making the farmer an important figure in Thai life. Like other Southeast Asian countries, Thailand owns up to a background of peasant societies that have championed agriculture over the ages. Culturally, it draws much from the spiritual tradition of Buddhism. And in a unique way, it stands intact in Southeast Asia, for never having been won over by European colonial expansionists.

How do the museums of Bangkok reflect these historical particulars?

For one, museums have much to say about monarchy. It stands to reason that museums have mushroomed in Thailand because of its kings. Historically, the Thai kings had been avid advocates of international expositions and royal fairs that displayed the treasures of the kingdom. In 1911, for instance, King Chulalongkorn ordered the elaborate organization of a Siamese Section for the International Exhibition of Industry and Labor in Turin. The details included a 359-page descriptive catalogue, still within our reading access today, translated as *Siam and its Productions, Arts, and Manufactures*.

Some of these exhibitions provoked the fascination of the outside world for orientalia. Very early on, these exhibitionary practices were geared at tourism—attracting people to pay attention to Thailand. These practices also showed the kingdom's fascination with modernity, the gadgets that they could acquire in order for Thailand to modernize. Many other museums came about because of the devotion of individual collectors, the investments to which many years of their life went.

Social history tells us how modernity's horn blowers have always ended up hoarding all the modern gadgets on sale and, eventually, trying them out and tiring of them. Today's museums, displaying such hoards, work as the virtual accumulation of the loot of the ages.

The desire to modernize has always gripped Thailand's modern monarchs, from Chulalongkorn to the incumbent, King Bhumibol. In their leisure, these kings have been engaged in collecting, assembling, and institutionalizing modern gadgets not only for their own curiosity but also for the gradual access of the nation. This would include the locomotive, the printing press, and

the use of postage stamps in writing letters, aptly represented in contemporary Thai memory by their well-established, counterpart museums.

Today's museums of lifestyle, culture, and folk arts afford us a throwback to the consumption history of the moneyed class. We only have to take note of the fact that many of today's art treasures had previously triggered among rich individuals the mania for shopping, as they decadently wangled things that could beautify their dwellings. And among the middle-class, the hobby of collecting amassed for them various trifles that acquired an impressive monetary value as the years wore on. The ideology of free trade has promoted shopping as a tireless and expensive activity. And after a while, the things that one has accumulated prove too good to throw away.

Yet over time, trendy things could suddenly become junk, headed for the garbage. For some, this crisis situation triggers the determined move to finance the building of museums. This signals two things. One, it valorizes collectors, in their devotion to scout for and amass trifles. Yet another, it fetches for their collection a monetary value, dignifying the leisure of their hobby as a form of invaluable labor, sustained through long stretches of time.

In scoring the pivotal role that kings have played in the development of Thai museums, we only have to cite that some of Thailand's most prominent museums are accessible to us today as open portals in the architectural form of the royal palace. There's the **Grand Palace, Vimanmek Mansion**, and even the late Princess Galyani Vadhana's **Suan Pakkad Residence** functioning today as museums.

Vimanmek Mansion plays out the commoner's visit to the all-teak palatial residence of King Chulalongkorn. It also offers a glimpse into how the present royal family lives. The museum guide points to certain cordoned-off areas supplied with current amenities. To stress the currency of this brief observation of royalty, the guide mentions that the present royal family holds court there sometimes and the demarcated areas are at their disposal.

The tour takes the visitor to various rooms and objects of curiosity that lend an insight into the everyday dynamics of palace life. Here are the rooms where the various royal consorts slept, the elaborate stairway that leads to the King's attic chamber, and his spacious bathroom that features modern amenities such as a shower, a bathtub, and good plumbing system. These private metonymies become the commoner's most pronounced access into the chapters of royal life. In a manner of speaking, they frame the palace tour as one's tacit right to inspect the lifestyle of monarchy and to catalogue its motions.

Of course, we also find here various grand pianos and a gallery of typewriters in all previous models, establishing the king as a person of learning. The stock of gifts received from foreign dignitaries builds up his diplomatic prowess and interest in international relations. The whole mansion demonstrates various aspects of the king's personality and reiterates his character as a virtuous person, his country's rightful leader.

The palace as museum affords us a view of a collection of things that did not have to be uprooted from their original milieu. It fulfills certain functions. One such is that the public scrutiny of the private quarters and properties of the nation's highest leaders contends for a culture of

transparency. Royalty's inventory of previous purchases and acquisitions become constantly exposed to the public eye. These palace museums offer viewers the illusion that they are on an inspection trip, to inspect the various collections of royalty and to render a visual inventory of where public wages have gone.

But the rites of entry discipline them, too, for entrance in the palace compounds requires the wearing of sashes and the removal of dust-soaked and dirty footwear. Viewers enter these palaces unshod, reinforcing the public's natural subjection to the decorum of royal life.

A second function is in quelling public resentment. In the psychic realm, at least, access to the royal residences extends a form of leveling experience where the previously concealed habits of royalty, their private and palatial routines become accessible to the subjected classes.

Still, a third function is that these museums have become the justification for the collections of monarchy. The museum establishes how such collections are discriminate efforts that result in the preservation of reliable markers of fine taste, vision, and the open attitude to changing preferences and values that have caught up with the rest of the world.

Narrating the Nation

Across Asia, a pressing impetus for opening museums is to lend some space to the artistic visualization of the rise, formation, and consolidation of national communities. Often, national museums have become the most pronounced expression of this endeavor.

For instance, most of Southeast Asia's national museums have been either established or revived through political advocacy, eventual legislation, and the executive privilege mandating the creation of such spaces. These national museums of the modern period evolved more as policy initiatives, legislative debates, and executive action in support of culture and the arts than the quiet and matter-of-factly rise of certain sites, collections, and individual hobbies projecting collective signification. This has been the case, whether in Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, or Thailand.

National museums are not exclusively artistic enterprises, either. A stricter inspection of circumstances prompting the establishment of national museums yields us inroads into the influence of social science, as well. Here, we recognize the long-standing involvement of archeologists, by way of fieldwork, meticulous diggings, and classification exercises, often financed from their own pockets.

This quest for materials obscured by time and artifacts is one way of rediscovering the kind of life, ethnic practices, and environments that supported people across strata of time. And, each time, the recovery of such materials yields relevant clues to heritage, identity, and the history of folk life. Thus, the establishment of national museums complements the science of archeology—the otherwise distant space of fields that have been dug up in quest of relics that could establish racial progeny.

The **National Museum in Bangkok** was established in 1926. The Thais regard it as their country's first public museum, after a bequest from King Rama VII to convert the Viceroy's Palace

into a permanent exhibit place for the public. The National Museum features three types of exhibits: Thai history, history of art and archeology, and fine art and anthropology.

Here, we find the sum of various archeological diggings. One way in which the exhibit makes sense is for historical narratives and annotations to frame the whole range of artifacts. The Thai nation is imagined not only in terms of modern history but of its prehistory—through strata of time where the relics speak of a natural world that is lush, filled with untamed beasts, and where skeletal remains show the structure of the human anatomy refining towards the familiar shape of today's homo sapiens.

Of so many curiosities at the National Museum, the historiographic narrative is worth a close look. This historiography is framed in terms of Buddhist eras—the flowering of Buddhism in Thailand through the influx of foreign influences and through the advent of forces that would seal and direct the spiritual outlook of Thai society. Readily, this chosen historiographic frame establishes a confluence between political events in the Siamese kingdom and its spiritual tradition. Obviously, this confluence of history and theology asserts that the spiritual tradition of Buddhism is integral to the consolidation of national consciousness.

But what observations can we draw about the Thai nation by looking merely at an entire gallery of Buddhas at the National Museum?

Following museological standards, a Buddha statue matters in relation to its facial expression and its hand gestures. The guided tours and museum annotations stress these as informative ways of ascertaining a statue's quality. For example, a sure standard is the keenness of human expression that a stone sculpture projects—the smile, the pacific disposition, and the amicable look on the Buddha's face. But also, the Buddha's *mudra* or hand gesture becomes the standard in establishing how well the sculpture has observed human kinetics, how precisely he is able to capture the agility of human movement.

On the iconographic plane, though, the *mudra* serves not only as a lesson in Buddhist theology but a gateway to historical preoccupations. Here, the Buddha's *mudra* serves as a metonymy—a piece that evokes the sense of the whole—and the metonymy evokes the sum of obscured historical concerns emanating from the time these statues had been carved and venerated.

The apt metonymy that recurs is the Buddha in his various poses and *mudras*, reflecting relevant social functions as peace advocate, settler of disputes, and solitary person rejecting worldly possessions. Where the gallery is filled with statues, the Buddha's social roles are resonated quite astoundingly wide across the National Museum, for that matter. Why so many statues of the Buddha as teacher? Why do we have a gallery of the peace-advocate Buddha?

Such proliferation can only root back to the social conditions that have spurred on the manufacture of these icons. Were they made and valued, perhaps, during times of social distress, when the voice of the wise was much sought after, to direct a confused society toward the right path? Were they acquired and venerated during times of siege and bloodbath, when the general clamor was one for peace and resolution so that general calm could prevail?

In other words, the previous ages were acquiring Buddhas and venerating them to wrestle with the actual struggles then. This captures for us a picture of a previous environment rife with disputes, wars, and the fierce commerce that could have resulted in ruthless materialism.

In the absence of detailed proof, such as secular materials representing the eras in question, what has served as apt figural windows into the social life are really the sacrosanct Buddhas surviving the desecration. As to the Buddha's mudra, it evokes how social tension has been addressed, often through the model of Shakyamuni's disposition and his paradoxical manner of public contention.

The national museum aims to construct narratives and a visual culture that can awaken people to their distinct folkways and practices. In the advent of nationalism, countries have been compelled to look for things that embody their collective aspirations. This is a reconstructive project, because through the proof of remnants and retrieved metonymies, the national agenda is retrieved, likewise. This is the work of looking back and of the mind trying to comprehend a long stretch of time that reveals both history and prehistory and the realization of a long period of existence—of endurance in time—gives the country at stake its useful points of reference and the courage to assay, assemble, and make sense of its epochs. This provokes the development of both historical memory and consciousness.

Allegories of Works and Days

Museums and their showcases project social relations—the way people interact, the relations they forge, their useful exchanges, as well as the way they threaten one another.

For instance, museums assert the social history of peasantry and its reconfiguration into another mode of productive existence. We refer here to the humble folk engaged in farming and fishing, triumphing the agricultural way of life. Thus, one ubiquitous exhibit piece of Thai life is the teak house (**Suan Pakkad Palace**)—the traditional abode of poor folks and the figural construct for their mode of existence.

Closely following in the visualization of folk life would be museums on rice and other staple grains (**Agrarian Cultural Museum**), clay pots (**Mon Ceramics Museum**), folk wisdom and homeopathy (**Thai Pharmacy Museum**) and mural paintings on myth and folk life (**Wat Pho & Temple of the Emerald Buddha**) that reveal various facets of the heritage. Also, in a more pronounced way, there's a museum dedicated to the history of Siam's working people (**Thai Labor Museum**), its depictions ranging from slavery and oppressive practices to the democratic and post-revolutionary interventions of the labor force, underscoring the discursive visualization of modal shifts and changes in productive relations.

Perhaps, one reaction to the obsession with technology and the modernizing mania is to grow certain nostalgia for displaced ways of life and discarded modes of social production. The museum's highly visual profile becomes of utmost service to such yearning. But, all told, nostalgia is romantic and unreliable in that museums are often reticent, skirting the contradictions, tensions, and unresolved struggles that characterize specific modes of production. For all the fascination with

lost things, it is often the case that museum exhibits don't really say much about how particular modes of production have bred problematic, conflictual, and contentious relationships in society.

Museum displays can only intimate traces of specific relationships triggered in such modes of production. For example, the radical historicization of a rice museum must welcome the mediation of cultural anthropologists and alternative ethnographies so that the exhibit does not gloss over lean days that peasants endure during the long interim before harvest, or the systems of usury and indenture nurtured by the structure of feudal patronage. Sadly, museums can sometimes romanticize the textures of lost experience.

The **Royal Barge National Museum** more than illustrates the nostalgic disposition. Where paved roads have obliterated Bangkok's old klongs and thanons, now there's only the ruckus of traffic. With a touch of humor, certain anthropologists argue that Thai motorists really consider the concrete pavements as imaginary waterways when they go on a road rage. Sure, tuktuks and Revos are roaring, but the residual habit of traveling by boat creates nostalgia for all the lost waterways, resulting in the traffic spool, the road rage, and the city stress. The barge museum underscores the Chao Phraya's residual influence, as the whole metropolis accommodates more fly-over and skyways—structures that have become the recent trademark of Bangkok, than the river life of the long tail boats and the peculiar charm of the floating market.

The operationalization of the museum itself inspires other materialist types of social relationship. One such is the relationship between museum builders and the crowds that they hope to draw in. This prospective relationship supports museum economics. Spectators pay their way to enter a museum. The trip promises an experience of wonder, through the clever and engaging transport to ontologies of time and space arranged in the limited spaces of the museum.

For some reason, in initiating a possible relationship between spectators and owners, many museums in Thailand make a distinction between locals and foreign visitors. The foreign spectators are charged more, perhaps on the tacit assumption that as outsiders, they're not really entitled to view the heritage materials on display. By extension, this segregation directs the museum to be the efficient conduit in launching a touristic discourse.

It's really quite impossible for tourists to cover the entirety of foreign space right away. What stands in for convenience are packaged, guided tours of organized spaces that were designed to give maximum exposure to heritage materials. Such shorthand trips trigger the production of printed literature, in the form of prepaid narratives and sundry information about the museum. Moreover, exhibitions are contracted, stocked, and periodically changed to draw audiences back to the same cramped space. Permanent spaces with changing charms—this is the irony of modernity. But there's a price to pay for the creation of such paradoxical spaces. They expose the complex base of social, political, and racial issues separating tourists from the locals.

Of Causes and Crusades

A museum serves as artful shorthand for the nation. Yet as representations include and exclude, we also come across many groups contending to be recognized as part of the nation.

Time—in its various seasons, epochs, eras, and generations—exists as a museological amalgam, with its many strands waiting to be recognized as constitutive of the nation.

The museum works, then, as an artistic structure similar to the bricolage of folk artists. Its inherent hybridity, the “many-ness” held together under one roof, is due to the challenge encountered in assembling various units of time and space. The bricolage, or fused shape, becomes not just an odd assemblage but continues to resonate with the concerns of various strands of time and space. The things in a museum, seized as a whole, establish the big picture about social history.

In a manner of speaking, when we lump together the great number of topical museums, we also see how the odd topicality of the museological discourse anthologizes the hybridity of various sectors and forces in nation building. Broadly, museums have been regarded as reflective of the sum of society’s obsession with modernity. But the modernism that we wish to historicize here is not restricted to progressive modernism alone. Equally, an angle of modernism worth exploring would be the movement’s attendant crises and conflicts that have washed up on foreign shores after all the constant sailings.

For one must recognize that colonial territories and protectorates did not always gain from the ruses of modernism. The contradictions, too, the unstaved crises, and failures of the movement comprise its history of ideas. And sporadically, museums, through their topical leanings, also reflect the obscured hermeneutics of modernism.

To wit, at the **Bangkok Nursing Home Museum**, the exhibit on the history of urban health care also invites negative hermeneutics. Although the lobby museum lauds the British community for reforming the city’s sanitation practice through a modern hospital, it also betrays the onslaught of foreign-acquired diseases and the occasional menace that threatened to decimate the population, in the locals’ sheer lack of immunity from such transplanted maladies. When the outsiders set foot, they also dragged in a whole pantheon of public diseases (influenza, diphtheria, measles, mumps, and the various poxes), as well as the social consequences of their lifestyle, and the sum of their mortal woes. Through the periscope of health care, their lifestyle clearly summoned a distinct system of crime and punishment that has also contaminated the local population. Somehow, image museums manage to reflect how the dregs of foreign concerns wash up onto an insulated culture.

An Oriental Craving

Seemingly, Thailand has been spared of colonial rule. But occasionally, its museums project foreign curiosity and orientalist leanings. Much of Southeast Asia did not really escape the invasive salvos of foreign expansionists. They have eyed the heritages they discovered with mixed feelings of surprise, shock, contempt, admiration, and covetousness. Today’s intact collections acquired by rich foreigners attest to such orientalist mediations. Where foreign acquisitions have inspired small museums today, it becomes possible for us to historicize how foreigners mediated social history by introducing their own appropriations of everyday articles and practices and how their orientalizing mind has directed the daily discourse.

The famous **Jim Thompson House and Museum** in Soi Kasemsan can help us here. Thompson plays out both the inventive and invasive odds of the discourse of reconfiguration. He was an American ex-CIA agent who re-tooled disparate & dislocated acquisitions (such as several teak houses bought separately) into a single entity, triggering in many ways the concept of the *simulacra*.

Though his house is one well-linked theme park constructed on the idea of things Thai, there is no single reality out there that it aspires to reflect. More so, the Thompson theme park teases its audience to play out the fantasy of burglary. The whole trip to Soi Kasemsan is woven around the romantic premise that its owner has gone quite mysteriously and has vanished for good. Meanwhile, the state has intervened, allowing people some momentary access to his property. The audience walks in like interlopers sneaking into private property; their eyes gawk shamelessly at the intriguing treasures amassed by the absent owner. In a way, the time one spends inside the Thompson compound smacks of voyeurism.

The bit about state take-over has its own keen semiosis. Under exceptional circumstances, it reinforces state authority to repossess private property. The take-over suspends the individual's liberalist privilege to acquire, assemble, reconfigure, and promote the internal rubrics of Thai culture after its owner vanishes mysteriously. In effect the state re-appropriates Jim Thompson's cognitive tactics, adds his simulacra to its national heritage, wangling back what the foreigner worked so hard to reconfigure.

Without forgetting various sectors haggling to snatch back their places in collective representation, we must take a quick glance at some museums signaling current concerns and directions. We can tout these rightly as maverick museums. These museums don't only look back; they look ahead to an imagined future. They project sidestepped concerns or posit speculative narratives about how the future might look. In doing so, they challenge the conventions of the classical museum. Through their exhibits and layers of narrative, they become controversial venues for issues that are either controversial themselves, irreverent, renegade, or repressed by the state. These museums exist, spurred on by radical dynamics.

Here's rattling off a few illustrative examples: For the **Museum of Imaging Technology**, the idea of leafing through old photo albums has been repackaged as digital technology—the startling and virtually sleek experience of the time machine, transporting people anywhere they fancy. Through clay dioramas, the **Thai Labor Museum** visualizes the everyday forms, wages, and struggles of the labor class, committing to memory the unresolved tensions between the producers of commodities and the capitalist class. **Ocean World**, Siam Paragon's long-galleried basement aquarium, is controversial in its demonstration of the commodification of marine ecology into an expensive touristic experience. In this marine theme park, viewers do a heedless take-over on the previously unexplored world of underwater creatures. The sea comes to us minus all the elemental risks, a virtual privilege achieved through the trick of thick fiber optics and the voyeuristic walk under the sea. And the **Siriraj Forensic Museum (the Congdon Anatomical Museum)**, while it depicts the anatomy of public crimes and misdemeanors, the grotesque, the deformed, and the morally suspect allows us to sample the transgressive, visualizing the carnivalesque, as well as Foucault's pitch about tactical discipline & punish.

Summing Up

Broad as it may seem, the *nation* stands for the multiform of figural constructs favoring collective representation inside the museum. Where museums display a wide and engaging range of curiosities and objects, they feature not only things but also ideal ways of seeing. The objects that they show also say much about the people who have spun, used, or extended them to the great relief and joy of society. The display alludes to forces in society, groups with a keen interest and fierce stake in directing the nation.

Through this project on Thai museological practices, I have traced national allegories through museum objects, the living spaces forged inside museums, the helpful narratives, timelines, and annotations accompanying the exhibits, the manner of enlarging the collection, its instructional goals, target crowd, the practical functions that it fulfills against the matrix of other museums, and the force of public perception that affirms and contests, both, the national allegories that museums project.

Over time, such resonant practices endure in collective memory, referring to hard-won insights and eliciting habits and rituals that affirm collective priorities. Specifically, museum objects become performative constructs of social allegory as society lists, preserves, and promotes its most significant concerns.

ⁱ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed, *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 231.

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