

## Arts inventory

**Southeast Asian countries are urged to prepare inventories on traditional arts.**

A United Nations' expert on intellectual property encouraged nations in the Southeast Asian region to make inventories on arts so as to reduce conflicts relating to ownership rights. Wend Wendland, Chief of the Traditional Creativity and Cultural Expression Section under the World Intellectual Property Organisation (Wipo), recommended to delegates at a sub-regional meeting on intangible cultural heritage in Bangkok that a regional panel be established among the countries to carry out the plan.

To protect traditional arts and knowledge, such as traditional music and medicine, he also advised the countries to seek copyrights for traditional products as deterrence against piracy. Wendland was responding to the issue of criteria for claims among countries disputing over cultural heritage claims, as in conflicts between neighbouring countries that share common cultural products and practices.

Musical instruments and performing arts, including shadow puppetry, which are performed in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, are some of the examples that may become bones of contention, particularly when cultural arts become commodities. Toss in the growing needs for identity and distinctiveness in the homogenising effects of globalization, and you have political and commercial issues of a country claiming ownership of a certain common cultural heritage. He pointed out that the criteria for the collective standard in defining original sources, and to be decided by whom should be determined.

After the Unesco Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression was formed in 2003, conflicting claims were made by various countries over the source of origin in traditional arts, including performing arts, woodcraft, traditional dance and musical instruments. Criticisms have centred on the Unesco list, focussing on some eighty items, for example the keris dagger, which Unesco determined as Indonesian, but it is also a cultural heritage of Malaysia and southern Thailand.

Noriko Aikawa, an adviser to Unesco, has been reported in the *Bangkok Post* to have defended the



*shadow puppetry*

aim of the Convention to promote conservation, and not competitiveness or a hierarchy, even though she admitted that clear guidelines on cultural heritage claims were required.

In Thailand, the Office of the National Cultural Committee has requested for a budget of US\$2 million for the inventory of intangible cultural heritage according to the *Bangkok Post*. Its secretary-general, Prisna Pongtadsirikul, said the office had compiled a list of more than three hundred and sixty items, with plans to commercialise some of them. The list included traditional performing arts, folklore, handicrafts and traditional knowledge, from communities and local artists.

## Drought in Africa linked to human history

**Dramatic climate changes in Africa some 70,000 years ago might have altered human history.**

Researchers have examined sediments from the beds of Lake Malawi and Tanganyika (East Africa) and Lake Bosumtwi (Ghana), and found evidence that Africa underwent an extended period of drought, which could have compelled the first humans to depart to other parts of the world. The prolonged climate change across the continent, which had a profound impact on the landscape, made it extremely difficult for humans and all species in equatorial Africa to survive.

Lake Malawi is now an inland sea (550 km long and 700 m deep), but is believed to have been mere pools of less than 10 km across and 200 m deep about 75,000 years ago; and at that time Lake Bosumtwi, a 10 km-wide lake that had been a crater, was completely devoid of water.

During this time, about 10,000 hominids lived in that part of Africa. Populations increased tremendously, with an exodus to the Middle East, Asia and Europe, soon after the end of the drought. Scientists maintain that the traumatic experience has a significant bearing on human evolution, since environmental conditions affect speciation of humans.

It is fascinating to consider that humans may not exist had a group of them, in early human history, failed to persevere through extraordinary climatic conditions, or survive by migrating to seek water. We're here, possibly because they survived.

## Giant Crocodile

*Fossils of a monster crocodile which existed 140 million years ago in the oceans have been found in Patagonia, Argentina.*

The creature, with its dinosaur-ish nose and serrated teeth, has been dubbed 'Godzilla', and belonged to the species known as *Dakosaurus andiniensis*. There are major differences between it and crocodiles today, such as that it had fins and not legs; and its natural habitat was the water. It was about 4 m (13 ft) long, from nose to tail, and had jaws measuring a third of a metre (foot-and-a-half) in length.

It was during the late Permian period when crocodiles evolved, and became prevalent during the Cretaceous (146 to 65 million years ago). What we have is an interesting morphology: 'Godzilla' was different from other crocodiles (which had thin snouts and small, sharp teeth for catching fishes and molluscs) because it had enormous and jagged teeth, and a snout which looked similar to that of dinosaurs. The US-Argentine group of scientists is of the view that the monster was a wild predator, and ate other marine creatures and reptiles.



The first specimen of *Dakosaurus andiniensis* was discovered in the Neuquen Basin, which used to be a deep tropical bay of the Pacific Ocean, by Zulma Gasparini (palaeontologist, La Plata National University, Argentina) in 1996. The find was a fragment, and offered little in terms of knowledge about how the giant crocodile lived, until recently when two more specimens, including an entire fossilised skull, were found.

Researchers believe the creature's different way of obtaining food source might have led to its evolution, with its jaws and teeth providing clues to the theory that rather than fishes, it sought giant marine vertebrates, such as the reptile, *Ichthyosaurus*.

## Two more sites in Thailand for World Heritage list

*Unesco is considering the inclusion of two sites in World Heritage list.*

The site surrounding the area around Prasat Hin Phimai, Prasat Hin Phanom Rung and Prasat Muang Tam in Nakhon Ratchasima province, in Northeast Thailand, and that of Phu Phra Bat Historical Park in Udon Thani province, will be examined by a Unesco fact-finding committee to determine if they will be classified as world heritage sites.

Prasat Hin Phimai is an example of classical Khmer architecture belonging to the Khmer empire, which built Angkor Wat. Constructed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it is considered the largest Khmer sanctuary in Thailand, from which Angkor was directly accessible to, in the past. The temples contain fine Khmer carvings, with shrines built of sandstone. The site is linked to Prasat Hin Phanom Rung and Prasat Muang Tam through ancient routes.

Prasat Hin Phanom Rung is situated on top of an inactive volcano, with an avenue stretching two-hundred metres to the major structure, which is embellished with stone carvings and friezes (the Reclining Vishnu lintel there had been returned to its rightful place recently by an American museum), while Prasat Muang Tam boasts of the famous Kleang and Baphuon styles of carving on lintels with well-preserved gables.



*Khmer sanctuary in Thailand, Prasat Hin Phimai*



*Nang Usa's Tower, rock formation of  
Phu Phra Bat Historical Park*

Phu Phra Bat Historical Park features Southeast Asian prehistoric cultural relics, caves, natural rock formations and rock terraces. Human societies dating back to about three thousand years held ceremonies among the rock formations and left a legacy of paintings that depict their daily lives.

Five sites in Thailand are on Unesco World Heritage Sites list. Ayutthaya, Sukhothai and the Ban Chiang archaeological area are three cultural sites. The two natural sites are the Thungyai-Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuaries and Dong Phrayayen-Khao Yai Forest Complex.

There are several more natural and heritage sites in Thailand that could also make it to the list, but conservators lament that many have been damaged by both the environment and humans.

### **Tsunami uncovered underwater city in India**

***Indian divers discovered evidence of an ancient city, which the tsunami in 2004 reportedly exposed.***

Archaeologists claimed that "man-made" stone structures were spotted on the seabed off the south

Tamil Nadu coast. They could belong to Mahabalipuram, the mythical city of a legend that tells of how the gods flooded its temples. The myths were recorded by J. Goldingham, a British traveller who went to India in 1798.

The Archaeological Survey of India organised the expedition for divers to explore the area after public reports of a temple and other structures being seen as the sea rolled back before the tsunami arrived. There were also claims that other relics, including an ancient granite lion which experts believe had been buried for centuries, were revealed when the powerful waves washed away sand at the site.

The new discoveries of the diving expedition, described by the divers as what appeared to be rectangular blocks that are arranged in a clear pattern, were located near the 7<sup>th</sup> Century Mahabalipuram temple along the shore, which is believed to be the surviving structure that escaped the fury of the gods.

During the last three years, archaeologists have already been excavating those parts, because another earlier diving expedition had discovered what seemed to be a port city, and a temple, submerged in the sea.

### **Madrid's Serra sculpture disappears**

***One of Spain's top museums misplaces a massive steel exhibit weighing thirty-eight tonnes.***

The Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid reported that the enormous sculpture by American artist Richard Serra, was kept in a warehouse in 1990 which was owned by a company that specialised in storing huge artwork. A few months ago when the museum director, Ana Martinez de Aguilar, wanted the piece exhibited, it could not be located.

The specialist company was found to have been dissolved since 1998, and Madrid police are now involved in locating the work. The museum commissioned the sculpture – consisting of four steel slabs – by Serra in 1986, and acquired it at the cost of over US\$200,000 a year later.



## **Matisse biography wins award for writer Spurling**

***'Matisse the Master' by Hilary Spurling won the Whitbread Book of the Year award.***

The biography of the French artist has been described as "an extraordinary achievement" which "opened our eyes to great art." Spurling, who worked on it for fifteen years, used to be a journalist for *The Spectator*; she also reviews books for the *Observer*, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *New York Times*.

To research the detailed and revealing biography, the author, based in London, had unparalleled access to documents belonging to the Matisse family. The first volume of her two-part biography is titled 'The Unknown Matisse'. Concentrating on the early part of Matisse's life, it took seven years to write, and was published in 1998. The second volume has been hailed as "a masterpiece" by Whitbread judges.

Spurling had been told that Matisse would be "too dull to write about", but she could not believe that the French painter, represented by his art work, could have had a dull life. The biographer explained that Matisse was a "drama-a-day man", and made "Picasso's life looks like a picnic."

## **Mass burial linked to Mayan mystery**

***A ghastly find may provide a new clue to the mysterious collapse of the ancient Mayan civilisation.***

Last year, archaeologists dug up a grave deep in a jungle in Guatemala, and uncovered about fifty corpses – of men, women and children – who carried signs of having suffered a violent demise. Experts investigated the gruesome deaths, and believed they were mass executions (the victim's head had been pulled back, with a large spear pierced through the chest into the spine).

Having been buried for centuries in a muddy pool irrigated by the waters of a natural spring, the bodies were reported to be well preserved. The royal finery, precious jewellery, etc. unearthed along with them indicate their nobility, but the identity and reason for their deaths remain a mystery.

Researchers support the idea that the excavated site was in the ancient city of Cancuen, which prospered from its location along the Pasion river, considered as the lifeblood of the Mayas. They have been baffled, however, by research that suggested the killers left the area after the attack. In Mayan warfare, the conquerors would occupy the land they won, but the conquerors of Cancuen abandoned the city. Consequently, the dominance of Cancuen as a trading city waned, preceding the decline of other cities along the river. The Maya civilisation declined and disappeared thereafter.

There has been geological evidence to bolster the theory that the sudden collapse of Mayan civilisation was due to a famine precipitated by a severe drought.

## **Computer confirms that Mona Lisa was 'happy'**

***The enigmatic 'Mona Lisa' smile has been analysed by a computer that confirms that it expresses genuine happiness.***

A computer at University of Amsterdam applied a "emotion recognition" programme to study Leonardo da Vinci's painting, and verified that 'Mona Lisa' was 83% happy, 9% disgusted, 6% fearful and 2% angry.

The University of Illinois programmers developed the software, based on a database of young female faces, which calibrated an average "neutral" expression as the standard for comparisons. By scanning photographs, the programme could identify and categorise emotions, rating features and expressions, including the curvature of the lips and crinkles around the eyes.

The smile on 'Mona Lisa', regarded by many as the most famous portrait of all time, has been a fascinating mystery to art enthusiasts. It was painted by Leonardo da Vinci, the Italian master, between 1503 and 1506, and is now exhibited in the Louvre, Paris. The painting was named after Francesco del Giocondo's Florentine wife, believed to be the model.

A Harvard University scientist said that the smile was only apparent when the observer gazed at other parts of the painting, due to the way the human eye processes visual information.

## Monster water scorpion left its tracks

**A rock in Scotland has been found with the marks of a huge water scorpion as the creature hauled itself across a beach three hundred and thirty million years ago.**

The ancient scorpion, *Hibbertopterus*, is believed to have been close to 1.6m (5.2 ft) long and a metre wide, and had six legs. Making it into fossil history as one of the biggest invertebrate track markings in sandstone, the stunning tracks feature a central line created by a bulky, plated tail.

As large as a human being in size, *Hibbertopterus* was different from the scorpions of today, in that it neither had a sting, big pincers nor held its tail up in the air. The notion that it might have been a brutal predator has been dismissed. The animal could move out of its usual water habitat to remain for short periods on land.



Fossils of *Hibbertopterus* fragments in Scottish Lower Carboniferous rocks have been known for a long time, and were first described from West Lothian in 1831.

## Six tried for theft of Scream

**Six accused are on trial for stealing Edvard Munch's 1893 painting, 'The Scream'.**

Five persons are being tried by an Oslo court for aggravated robbery, while a sixth is charged with dealing in stolen goods. All of them have pleaded innocent. The accused hauled off 'The Scream' and 'Madonna' from Oslo's Munch Museum in a spectacular day-time heist in August 2004. If they are found guilty, prison sentence of up to seventeen years may be imposed. The art works are evaluated at over eighteen million dollars (US).

The defendants include one of the suspected thieves, the alleged driver, the suspected "mastermind" and two presumed accomplices. Police has yet to apprehend a second robber in the group.

The sixth suspect could face up to six years in jail for possessing stolen property. For one month, after the robbery, the two paintings were reportedly hidden in a bus owned by him.

As the stolen paintings have not been recovered, and an international search and offer of reward are in place, the prosecution case mainly rests on phone-tap evidence.

## Gamelan course in Singapore

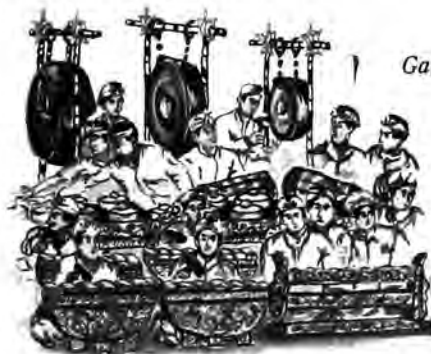
**The Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA, Singapore) has introduced a new course on Gamelan (Indonesia orchestra).**

Students enrolled in the Diploma in Music (Teaching) programme can now learn how to play the musical instruments of the Gamelan. They do not specialize in a single instrument, but will be taught to perform with every basic instrument installed. Since NAFA procured a Javanese Gamelan set, interest in Indonesian music has increased, particularly among secondary school students.

The course, however, does not allow students to practise at home, because they would not possess any of the instruments, thus making it necessary for them to be attentive during the intensive ninety-minute class each week.

So far, several students show passion in pursuing Gamelan studies further, and more requests for open-rehearsals have been made by the public.

The NAFA Gamelan ensemble is developing into a full-fledged performing ensemble, and plans are afoot for motivating master musicians to visit, including ethnomusicology lectures on Southeast Asian music, and practice workshops involving Southeast Asian musical instruments.



Gamelan Orchestra

## The loss of Iraq's cultural heritage

### *Iraqi national treasures continue to disappear because of war*

Since the looting of the National Museum in Baghdad, which created an international outrage, after American military invaded Iraq two years ago, items of national importance, and pieces of art continue to be stolen, smuggled and sold in underground markets.

While US soldiers have been criticised for failing to prevent the museum's priceless collection of Mesopotamian art from being looted, there have also been accusations that Iraqis themselves, particularly those working in the museum, professional smugglers, individuals close to Saddam Hussein and international dealers, were involved in mass looting. Private collectors, especially, and their link with looters, are considered the real culprits for the damage being done to Iraq's archaeological sites.

*BBC News* reported over 15,000 stolen objects, with many smuggled out of Iraq and offered for sale. In Baghdad, 3,000 items have been recovered, and over 1,600 of which have been found in neighbouring countries, 300 in Italy, and 600 in the United States.

Websites that offer sale of thousand-years-old Mesopotamian works of art are generating further looting of archaeological sites in southern Iraq. *BBC's* archaeologist and journalist Joanne Farchakh Bajjaly said that more than 150 Sumerian cities such as Umma, Umm al-Akkareb, Larsa and Tello (fourth millennium BC) have been destroyed, and strewn with shredded pottery and broken bricks. Proper excavation of these sites – some 20 sq km – could have yielded important knowledge on the development of the human race.

The occupation troops are also accused of damaging archaeological sites by turning them into military

bases. At Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the withdrawal of armed forces from the area has ruined the site.

Landing area for helicopters and parking lots for heavy vehicles were constructed in areas within the middle of the Babylon archaeological site, causing damage to the Ishtar Gate, one of the most famous ancient monuments. Dr John Curties, keeper of the British Museum's Near East department, reported that the American army vehicles trodden on 2,600-year-old brick pavements, and archaeological fragments were scattered across the site. He also said that over 12 trenches were built in ancient deposits, and that military projects caused contamination in the site.

What happened at the museum when American forces entered and occupied Baghdad remains unclear, but Iraq's antiquities, archaeological treasures and cultural heritage are, according to leading experts, being systematically plundered. This leads to the loss of archaeological evidence that are crucial for understanding Iraq – believed to be Ancient Mesopotamia – as the "birthplace of civilisation", which developed writing, medicine, mathematics and astronomy.

A special Iraqi force now protect designated areas, but it is being stretched thin, having to post about 1,000 officers to guard almost 10,000 sites. Bajjaly, who has been studying Iraqi heritage for the last seven years, warned that the destruction of Iraq's heritage would not cease until Iraqi leaders act on a political will to consider archaeology a priority, and safeguard its cultural heritage and sites by taking action against dealers in Baghdad, stopping the plundering in the south, and preventing coalition forces from setting bases on archaeological sites. She added that the longer Iraq was in a state of war, the more the cradle of civilization would be threatened.