What have dinosaurs got to do with S’pore?

Museum’s $12m pursuit of dino skeletons from US makes no sense

BY ONG SOR FERN
DEPUTY LIFE EDITOR

I have been musing about price versus value recently, more specifically about the price of art versus its value to a community. As a lifelong arts lover, my instinct is always to defend the value of the arts and to declare that it is impossible to put a price on it.

But, as with everything in this modern world, price tags have become a handy soundbite with which to grab a viewer’s attention. And catching people’s attention is, as even hallowed institutions such as museums have found out, an essential KPI (key performance indicator) in these busy times.

Spending money to buy attention is easy. Just look at the recent brouhaha over the Tang treasures collection which came with a US$32 million ($39 million) price tag. My own attention was snatched last Sunday when The Sunday Times reported that Singapore’s new natural history museum is hoping to raise $12 million to buy a trio of dinosaur skeletons.

My first instinctive reaction was dismay. What do dinosaurs have to do with Singapore’s natural history, I thought. And that $12 million could fund so much else. But I have enjoyed the curator’s tour at the Raffles Museum and it opened my eyes to the staggering wealth of natural resources in South-east Asia.

The museum owns about 500,000 specimens of animals, the largest collection of South-east Asian wildlife in the region. All I could think of when I saw the enthusiasm and dedication of the staff, who guided packed tours through their cramped libraries of specimens, was: “How can a country as materially wealthy as Singapore fail to dedicate proper financial support to such a crucial part of our national heritage?”

Of course that question was answered handsomely last year when it was announced that the Raffles Museum has managed to raise $46 million to build a spanking new home, designed by acclaimed homegrown architect Mok Wei Wei no less, to house the collection.

About time, I rejoiced. But having struggled so hard to win funds, why is the museum now chasing a $12 million set of dinosaur bones?

The jaded journalist in me recognises that dinosaurs are a guaranteed surefire hit. I had been told that dinosaurs and mummies are no-brainer winners when it comes to ratings, which explains why the National Geographic, History and Discovery cable channels are perennially trotting out specials and documentaries on these topics.

But the museum aficionado in me rebelled: $12 million is a little over a quarter of what it cost to build the museum, and just for one display?

Think what that amount could do for the rest of the collection.

I have no doubt the custodians at Raffles Museum have taken good care of the collection but it was, at one point, shunt-ed pillar to post like an unwanted orphan, losing some precious exemplars in the process. Surely the money could go towards careful restoration and loving care as well as creating even better showcases and proper curation once the new building opens?

I am sure money will be needed to run the place and dollars could also be invested in grooming the curators and scholars who are the intellectual backbone of any museum aspiring to international repute.

The funds could also be used to create educationally and materially based exhibits on the collection. I would love to see a large format book, a la John James Audubon’s gorge- ous works, documenting the collection with annotated essays, colour illustrations and plates. I would buy a book like this in a heartbeat, but this sort of project takes time, money and other resources too.

No doubt the trio of dinosaur skeletons are important relics. There is speculation that it is the first, and the set is more than 80 per cent complete. Whatever.

They do not make sense to me as they are not even found in the region – they are from Wyoming in the United States.

To me, the pursuit of the bones is just the latest in a series of programming decisions in Singapore museums which signal what seems like a disheartening intellectual and spiritual vacuum. I wonder if the pursuit of such blockbuster exhibitions has come at too high a cost in terms of a lack of curatorial discipline and intellectual heft about Singapore’s own culture, heritage and history.

For example, the National Museum of Singapore’s most memorable exhibitions have been retrospectives of Far Eastern photographer Abbas and Taiwanese film-maker Edward Yang. I admire their work, but documenting the collection is a coup to land the Abbas retrospective.

But where are the thought-provoking exhibits about Singapore’s history? I have been through the history gallery all of once and all I remember is hating the museum-like layout and struggling with the clumsy audio companion. The story the gallery told did not register with me at all. I felt dissatisfied.

And the Living Galleries at the museum were also a disappointment, except for the one dedicated to Fashion. Now that gallery was a successful fusion of pop culture, sociology and history. I loved that the artefacts in that gallery – dresses, shoes, make-up, music – gave me an insight into how women played a crucial part in Singapore’s development in the years after independence, how their roles in society changed and how something so frivolous as clothes reflected their changing status.

For me, a museum is not simply about the blockbuster shows although those are nice to have. But anyone can buy a show. Fewer people can tell me a good story about my home and show me something surprising about Singapore. That, to me, is what a museum should do. They are the custodians of Singapore’s best stories and they should strive to tell it as well as they can. And that is something to be valued beyond any price.

Source: The Straits Times