



# Pettah's splendid Dutch Museum

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Pix by Kamal Bogoda

It is believed that most of Sri Lanka's museums are relics of a bygone age where its exhibits are housed at ancient buildings with historical evidences. There are exceptions, however, in particular where the Colombo's Dutch Period Museum is concerned. To give it an authentic touch, it is located in the main streets in Pettah in a magnificent 17th century Dutch Governor's residence. In this splendid building, many of the facets of life of the Dutch period are to be seen.

The word Colonialism is often thought of as a dirty word with its implication of repression and exploitation. Why, then do people always commemorate a tie of foreign domination which had changed the way of life of Ceylonese? The very answer is found in the Dutch Period Museum in the form of its own history. The exhibits tell its story as it showcases combine to pay testament to the lasting influence of 140 years of Dutch occupation.

**The history**  
Initially, it was built as the main residence for former Dutch Governor, Thomas Van Ree in 1692. Later, it was sold to the Dutch East India Company (VOC) after the Governor's tenure and it was maintained as an orphanage and as a seminary till the end of the Dutch occupation in 1795.

From 1795 the building was used as a military hospital, an armoury, a police training institution and also as the Pettah post office and telecommunication centre by the British.

During the British period, the building had undertaken many changes. The balcony over the rear verandah and the two staircases leading to it at the either end were added. Part of the tiled floor was changed to concrete and the half round roof tiles were replaced by machine pressed tiles.

## The path to a Museum...

The path to the establishment of the museum was long. Authorities had to undergo many obstacles to establish a National Museum. The first advocate of the museum spoke out in the 1970s, but it wasn't until a few years later that a beautiful Dutch building was identified as a potential premises.

It was on a stormy January night in 1974 that nature intervened by ripping down the east wall, leaving dangerous electrical cables exposed. Rather than invest in renovations, the postal authorities quickly departed, allowing the former governor's residence to fulfill its destiny as the Dutch Period Museum.

The Dutch occupation in Sri Lanka was from 1656 to 1796, providing a buffer between the Portuguese and the British periods of occupation. The Dutch occupation was limited to the coastal areas. Even today, Sri Lanka's littoral is dotted with architecture reminiscent of the Dutch - the high terracotta tiled roofs and large airy



rooms perfect for seaside living. The museum itself is a beautiful example of this style, featuring huge wooden beams, shuttered windows and stable like doors. The highlight is the perfectly manicured grassy courtyard, the only example left in Colombo today, complete with wooden balcony where visitors can observe all the happenings on the lawn from beneath the cooling roof of the main house. The exhibits take the visitor on a journey through the Dutch occupation from early arrivals to the final demand by the British to leave. Immediately on entering, a three dimension painting draws the visitor into a king's court, awaiting an audience alongside the first Dutch envoys



## World's most accurate clock

Perfect timekeeping has taken a step closer to reality after scientists developed a clock that loses just a second every 300 million years.

The researchers claim the new atomic clock is more than twice as accurate as timepieces currently used to regulate international time zones and satellite systems.

Like its predecessors, the strontium atomic clock at the University of Colorado, harnesses the natural - and extremely consistent - vibration of atoms to keep track of time.

But it makes the



Ultra-cold strontium atoms in an atomic clock

"pendulum effect" of atoms even more consistent by holding them in a laser beam and freezing them to almost minus 273 degrees - the temperature at which all matter stops resonating.

"An atom consists of a nucleus and some electrons that spin in clearly defined orbits around the nucleus," said Professor Jan Thomsen, a nuclear physicist at the University of Copenhagen, who has worked with the new experiments together with researchers at the University of Colorado.

"By using the focused laser light one can make the electron swing back and forth in a clearly defined way between these orbits, and it is that which forms the pendulum in the atomic clock".

Even though the increase in accuracy represents only a small fraction of a second, it has great potential in areas to do with the determination of great distances - for example, measuring the distance to distant galaxies in space.

Now the team want to go a step further. "We dream of getting an atomic clock with perfect precision," said Prof Thomsen.

waiting to meet the King. Next, the focus shifts to the objectives of the Dutch, who as the dominance of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) shows, were driven by the quest for profit.

The main aim of the Dutch was to dominate the profitable spice trade. The Dutch introduced the concept of the market economy to a nation of self-sufficient farmers, but its concentration on the economy meant that social and religious aspects of daily life were generally left untouched.

## This is what the Dutch used

Inside the museum, there are sections on every aspect of life under the Dutch, showcasing coins, arms, intricately carved ivory boxes, temple paintings and even a temple pillar. The almira's are filled with household belongings used by during the period.

On the ground floor is the "The Hall of Death", which contained Dutch period tombstones of 1656 to 1796. These tombstones were brought to the Museum from an Old Dutch cemetery. Reading the inscriptions gives a personal insight into the people who lived and died during that era. Each stone features the skull and crossbones and even gives the length of life in days of the person commemorated as if every moment counted.

After ascending the wooden staircase, with its charming creaks and well-worn steps, we arrived at the second floor, which features an array of furniture made from Jak, Ebony, Nedun and Calamander wood among others.

The most unusual piece is a palanquin, a portable chair that enabled servants to transport their masters on their shoulders. More common items include beds, tables, chairs, and almira's all carved into striking pieces, whether ornamental or chaste; and of a similar style to many contemporary pieces.

There is also information about the way of life of the Ceylonese during the Dutch occupation. The elite had lived in large two storage houses. The houses were enclosed with common walls with large gardens known as "Meda midula". The education during that period was divided to Astrology, Medicine, Pali and Sanskrit.

The Dutch contribution to the Sri Lankan culture is visible in the Dutch National Museum. The occupants had only focused on areas such as the economy and architecture that didn't challenge traditional values.

