

Sarawak Museum, Kuching

Exploring the world's largest repository of Borneo collections

By Louise Macul



“His Highness the Rajah intends on a future day to establish a museum, for which a suitable building will be constructed at Kuching by the Government.”

- Sarawak Gazette, 28 March, 1878

This being Sarawak, the museum did not come about until 1888 with its official opening on 4 August 1891. Rajah Charles Brooke's French valet was the designer and he built the museum modelled on a Normandy town hall. Further extensions in 1911 brought it to its present form. The building itself belongs in a museum and its entire collection is complete with Victorian cabinets and specimens which were preserved using methods of that era. Therein lies its charm.

The Rajah was encouraged to establish a museum by the evolutionary theorist, Alfred Russell Wallace, who did research here from 1854 to 1856. The first collection of ethnographic specimens was purchased from H Brooke Low, a Sarawak government servant and author of *The Natives of Sarawak* and *British North Borneo*.

Sometimes a museum appeals to us because it offers an exploration of something we have never seen before. Sometimes we walk into a museum because it reminds us of something. For me, the appeal was both: a new world, the island of Borneo and a pleasant memory. Walking into the Sarawak Museum reminded me of the very first museum I ever visited as a child – the Abbe Museum of Bar Harbor, Maine, US. An early 20th century museum with old wooden cases filled with archaeological collections from Mount Desert Island, it also featured an actual teepee! I remember peering into the corners of the dusty exhibits with wonder at the how, when and who of times gone by, wondering to myself, “How did this stuff get here?”

And so it is with the Sarawak Museum: I wonder how things got there as I look at the specimens of things extinct (or nearly so). I now walk beneath the heads in an authentic longhouse built by the headhunting Ibans of the past just as I, as a little girl, crawled into a teepee built by the Penobscot. One of my favourite collections is of Borneo seashells from Mary Saul, the wife of a British officer posted to Sabah some 50 years ago. Other favourites range from boat coffins to beads to baskets in the galleries that contain the 47,000-year-old cultural heritage of a vibrant people.

I am attracted to the totality of this museum and not just the objects displayed. The Sarawak Museum is the only

repository for Borneo collections – zoological, botanical, ethnological and archaeological – in the entire world. ‘All Things Borneo’ should be its tag line. Today the Sarawak museum has 12 different sites in and outside Kuching. Their collections include artefacts of the Malay Islamic tradition, textiles, local contemporary art and historical material.

There is a place in our world for all the bells and whistles of modern museums, replete with interactive exhibits that can take us back hundreds or thousands of years with the push of a red button and the donning of a headset. There is also a place for historical museums that display people's interests, research and a desire for preservation and education from many generations ago. All museums start with people and their collections – the museums within each of us to share with others.

Louise Macul lives in Kuching and is working with the Sarawak Museum staff to create an all new Friends of the Museums, Sarawak. She also enjoys conducting FOM Study Tours to Sarawak.

Photos courtesy of the Sarawak Museum

- ① The Sarawak Museum, Old Building
- ② Kenyah Tree of Life in the Sarawak Museum



Sarawak Museum, Jalan Tun Abang Haji Openg
Open daily 9:00 am – 4:30 pm (Admission free)
www.museum.sarawak.gov.my