

Some Tentative Suggestions for a Children's Museum*

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The need for a Children's Museum or, at least, for some sort of Museum-School Service has been felt for some time in education circles in Malta. At a time when stress is put on environmental studies and extra-curricula activities the setting up of such a service has become increasingly important. This report contains suggestions for a Children's Museum devoted primarily to Maltese Archaeology, History and Folklore. Museums are usually planned for an adult public and, therefore, often lack appeal to children. The conventional arrangement of show-case after show-case with methodically arranged, carefully labelled exhibits is meaningless to children. These need a special type of museum where show-cases are reduced to a minimum and the display is organized in a way that will stimulate interest and excite imagination. It is a basic principle in education that memory depends on the kind of material to be remembered; the more meaningful the material the more easily it is assimilated.

Different Types of Children's Museums

There are three possible alternatives for a Children's Museum. It can be planned as:

- a. an annexe to an established museum e.g. the National Museum of Archaeology
- b. a school annexe, a few rooms in area schools being reserved for the purpose
- c. an independent, centrally situated building staffed by a team of dedicated and specially trained teachers.

This report favours the third alternative. Our established museums suffer from a chronic lack of exhibition space and can ill afford rooms for a children's display. Nor is it feasible to have a museum annexe in schools. Not only is the

problem of space equally crucial but its implementation would entail duplication of effort and expense. It would be much better if funds, energy and expertise were concentrated on the setting up of one central, well organized and suitably equipped museum.

A major difficulty would be to make the museum appealing to children of different age groups from primary to upper secondary school level. To restrict its appeal would be to limit its scope and it would, further-more, be impractical to have separate museums for different scholastic levels. It is, therefore, important to plan the museum in a way that children, irrespective of their age, will find it stimulating. A good understanding of child psychology is an important requisite.

The Premises

The museum should ideally be housed in specifically built premises but since this might involve considerable expense it could, perhaps, be more realistically set up in an existing building. Such a building must, however, be carefully selected with a view to location and amenities for a special type of display. It must necessarily be easily accessible for in this way children would be encouraged to visit the museum on their own without having to wait to be taken by parents or on guided tours by schools and clubs. Valletta, Floriana and Beltissebh would be the most likely sites. There are several suitable government buildings in this area. A scheduled building with historical associations should be given preference not only because it would help create the right atmosphere but also because it would thereby be serving a useful purpose compatible with its character (1). The Valletta district is so full of scheduled historical buildings that it has long been a major government headache to find suitable use for even the more important; the state of preservation of some does in fact give rise to concern. If the choice does fall on such a building, its restoration and rehabilitation must be left to expert hands who

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while giving due consideration to the requirements of this specific type of museum will also ensure that all works carried out are sympathetic to its historical character.

The Exhibits

The National Museum Department has a considerable reserve collection from which it can afford to loan a few exhibits. The display in a Children's Museum need not, however, include precious originals. Copies, preferably facsimiles, would do just as well and are, in a way, more desirable. Children should, ideally, be allowed to handle them or examine them at close quarters. In a history museum, such as the one discussed in this report, there must be emphasis on scale models: prehistoric monuments, fortifications, galleys of the Knights, old means of transport etc. Where models are not possible, charts should be used instead. Naturalistic dummies in period costumes also fascinate children as proved by the small detachment of dummy soldiers in morion and half armour until recently displayed in the Palace Armoury at Valletta.

Activities and Amenities

This report does not contemplate a static museum. It thinks of it as a living organism capable of growth and expansion and of adapting itself to

new educational requirements; there is nothing so dead as a museum devoted only to display. A programme of cultural and educational activities is therefore envisaged. A well stocked library with proper reading and research facilities, and a lecture hall adequately equipped for slide and film projection are essential prerequisites. Courses leading to the award of a diploma are also a desirable addenda but priority should, perhaps, be given to quizzes and debate forums on all aspects of Maltese history and culture. Among other amenities the museum should, finally, have a good supply of folding chairs, drawing boards and modelling clay to put at the disposal of children, especially younger ones, who are to be encouraged to make drawings and models of the exhibits.

The Staff

The Museum is to be organized and run by the Education Department with the close co-operation of the Museums Department. The personnel chosen to staff it must be carefully selected preferably from among history teachers. Their selection (possibly, though not necessarily, after a call for applications) must be based on experience, dedication to duty and academic qualifications rather than seniority. It is recommended that the chosen candidates undergo a period of training abroad and it is therefore desirable that contacts be previously established with foreign educational

institutions with experience in this specialised field.

For its proper functioning the Museum must have a director and curators to run the various departments. It would be a mistake to place the various departments under the charge of a single curator not only because pressure of work would not permit him to attend to all of them satisfactorily but also because it would be difficult to find one single person sufficiently qualified in the various fields.

Three Departments

The number of departments will depend ultimately on the size of the museum and the nature and availability of exhibition material. Irrespective of such considerations three departments are a *desideratum*:

(a) *Archaeology and Ancient to Early Modern History*

This is a vast department (too vast perhaps) covering a long span of time from about the beginning of the 6th millennium B.C., the presumed date of the first material evidence of human habitation (2) down to 1530 A.D. when the islands were ceded to the Knights of St. John. Its curator will, therefore, be responsible for the pre and proto-historic periods and the Middle Ages (3). Some may question the inclusion of the Middle Ages in this department and suggest that it be set up as a separate unit. This may eventually prove to be advisable especially at a time when much work is being done in the field of medieval Maltese studies, but one must beware of being over ambitious especially in the initial stages of such a new venture. Moreover the dearth of documentary material relating to the period, up to the first half of the 15th century, makes it very much an archaeological subject. The curator in charge of this department must preferably be a trained archaeologist who, ideally, should gather round him a team of reliable young archaeological enthusiasts to help the National Museum Department in its excavations. It may also be possible, in time, to entrust this team with the digging of some minor site. Any such work must, necessarily, be carried out with the close co-operation of the Museum Department which, in such cases, normally retains the right of supervision and intervention. In this way children will be given the opportunity of participating directly in archaeological work. Such a venture has been tried with success in most European countries, particularly England and France, where excavations are rarely planned without student participation. In addition to

excavations a number of other field activities, such as the plotting of archaeological monuments on large scale maps, can also be organized.

(b) *Early Modern to Modern History*

This department is to be concerned with the time of Knights between 1530 and 1798 and that of the French and British dominations.

Though none of the multifold aspects of this important period should be overlooked, emphasis may justifiably be put on the Knights of St John not only because of the richness and ready availability of exhibition material but also because it remains the most culturally splendid period in Maltese history. The variegated story of the Knights, particularly their battles and corsairing adventures, excites the imagination of children and can, therefore, be their best introduction to history.

Field activities, such as surveys of fortification works and wayside churches, are also envisaged for this department. The initiative taken by the Youth Section of *Din L-Art Helwa* in looking after a number of monuments can well be emulated. There are several historical buildings in a sad state of preservation for the upkeep and maintenance of which the department may assume responsibility.

Another important aim of the department should be the training of students in the upper forms of secondary schools in research work. Groups of children can be assigned periodic projects on various aspects of Maltese history, or on specific monuments, which they would submit to the Museum's library.

Art and photographic exhibitions with Malta as their theme are also to be encouraged for they help foster an awareness of the historical heritage of these islands.

There are indeed several fields of rewarding activities into which this department can expand.

(c) *Folklore*

Folklore is the reflection of history and a Folklore Department is, therefore, desirable in a History Museum. The chief objection to it will probably be lack of space. Ideally there should be a separate Folklore Museum but as this is unlikely to happen it may be advisable, in view of the importance of the subject and its general appeal, to sacrifice exhibition space from the two other departments. The display need not be extensive but it should be representative of at least the more important branches of this vast subject. The cycle of life (birth, marriage and funeral customs etc.), the national costume and the more important traditional crafts should, in particular, be well illustrated.

Field activities organized by the department can, if properly planned, produce rewarding results. Students can be sent in small groups to talk to peasants, old folk and traditional craftsmen and record on tape their traditions, proverbs, legends, superstitions, songs and personal reminiscences. This information should then be analysed and edited and put at the disposal of folklore students.

Opening Hours

These are to be the same as those of other government museums. It should naturally, be open on week ends and school holidays when a programme of activities on the lines suggested above is to be organized. During the scholastic year frequent visits to the Museum should be organized by schools. History lessons may, sometimes, be more profitably held on the museum premises. In order to avoid congestion a schedule of visits can be worked out between the Museum and the various schools.

The Display

The exhibition material is to be displayed in logical chronological sequence. This can be arranged by dividing each department into sections and providing a separate room or gallery for each section. If the space available is restricted it may be practical to split up large rooms or halls into cubicles. The size of rooms or cubicles is to depend on the importance of the section and the availability of display material.

The following sections are suggested for the three respective departments:

- a) *Archaeology and Ancient to Early Modern History* (i) Geology and Palaeontology (ii) Neolithic (iii) Copper Age (iv) Bronze Age (v) Phoenician and Punic (vi) Roman and Early Christian (vii) Middle Ages.
- b) *Early Modern to Modern History* (i) The Order of St John - its origins and early history (A.D. 1113-1530) (ii) The settlement of the Order in Malta and the Great Siege (1530-1565) (iii) The Order in Malta (1565 - 1798) (iv) The Hospital of the Knights (v) The Navy of the Knights (vi) The Armoury of the Knights (vii) The French interlude (1798 - 1800) (viii) The arrival of the British and the development of Malta into the most important naval base in the Mediterranean (1800 - 1900) (ix) The struggle for political autonomy (x) World War II
- c) *Folklore* (i) The National Costume (ii) The Cycle of Life: Courtship and Marriage; Infancy and Childhood; Festivities throughout the year; Merry making; Death, Funerals etc. (iii)

Traditional crafts and occupations: Farming; the Cotton Industry; Milling; Roof-beating; Miscellaneous.

Sample Display

For the purpose of this brief report suggestions for the display are limited to the Copper Age section of the Archaeology and Ancient to Early Modern History Department. Suggestions are enumerated and asterisks (*) are used to denote where exhibition material is to be so arranged that children can either handle it or examine it at close range.

The Copper Age

The Copper Age (c.3750 - c.2200 B.C.) is one of the most splendid periods in Maltese history. Its cultural sophistication is reflected in the startling and unique series of megalithic temples of elaborate plan and construction and in the fine pottery wares considered among the finest produced anywhere before the use of the wheel. The lengthy period is conveniently divided into five pottery phases: Zebbug (Zb) c.3150 - c.2900; Mgarr (Mg) c.2900 - c.2800; Ggantija (Gg) c. 2800 - c. 2450; Saffieni (Saf) c.2450 - c.2400; Tarxien (Tx) c. 2400 - c. 2200 B.C. The climax of this remarkable civilisation was reached in the Tx phase. It then died suddenly and mysteriously leaving hardly any trace on the material culture of Malta during the succeeding centuries. On account of the importance of the period it is recommended that a large hall be reserved for the display. If this is not possible it should be spread out in several adjacent rooms:

- 1 Large scale map of Malta showing the distribution of Copper Age sites.
- 2 Facsimile copies of the more important pottery wares illustrating the development in style from Zb to Tx phase.
- 3 Restored stone model, actual size, of Zb phase stele with rough human face from Ta' Trapna tombs. The whole surface of the stone is to be stained with red ochre (4).
- 4 Chart illustrating the similarity in plan between tomb 5 Xemxija and the lobed temple at Ta' Hagra, Mgarr (Mgarr E)
- 5 Scale models illustrating the development of the temple plan from the lobed to the six-apsed building. The following examples are suggested:
 - a) Mgarr E
 - b) Skorba W
 - c) Ggantija S
 - d) Mnajdra S
 - e) Tarxien C

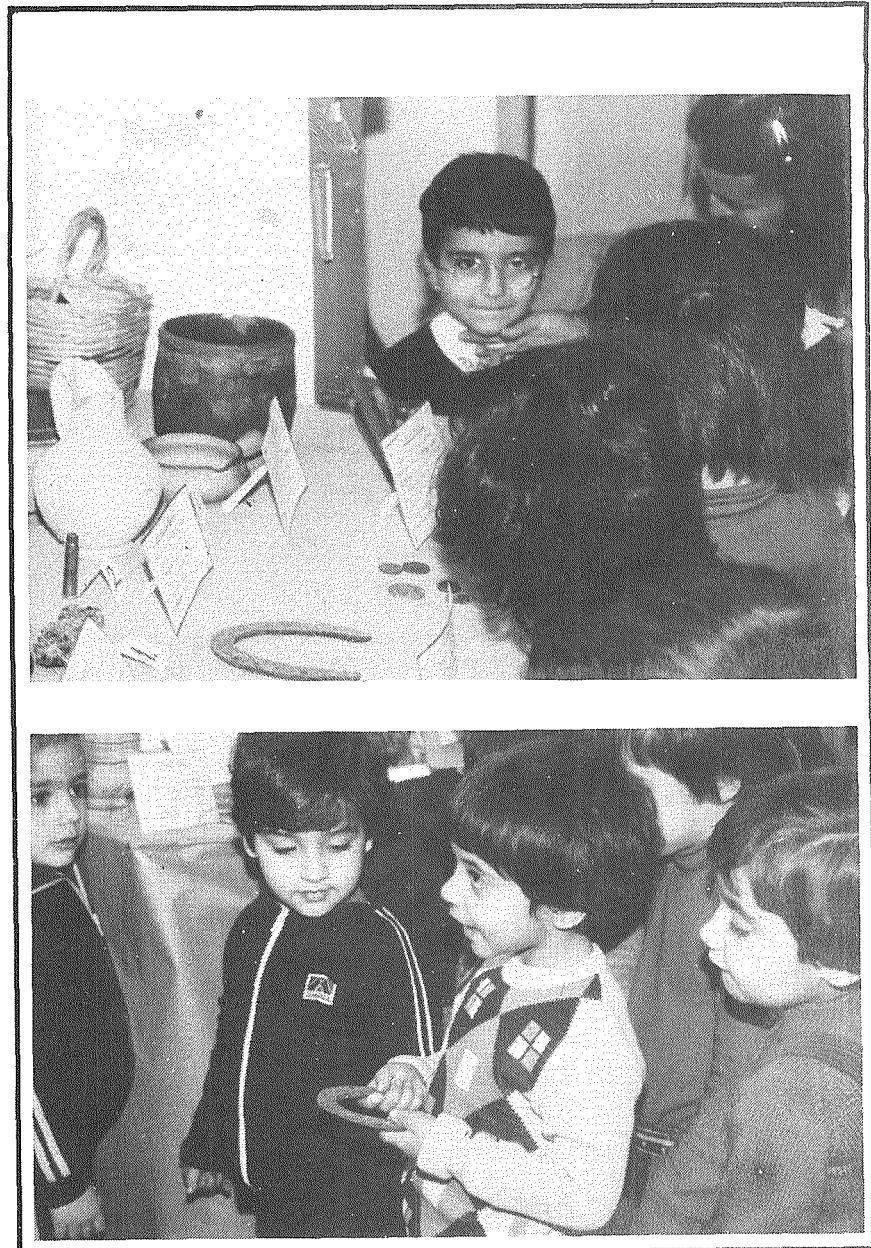
The five models are to be placed in chronological order next to each other on a

table or affixed to a wall.

- 6 Scale models of the temple complexes at Ggantija, Hagar Qim, Mnajdra and Tarxien.
- 7 Three tentative reconstruction models of temple facades based respectively on:
 - a) limestone model from Ta' Hagraat, Mgarr
 - b) graffito at Mnajdra
 - c) limestone model from Tarxien.
- 8 Large coloured charts of tentative reconstructions of temple interiors attractively produced to stimulate children's interest. Carlo Ceschi's reconstruction drawings (5) can serve as a model but they must be modified in the light of recent archaeological knowledge.
- 9 Five large coloured charts illustrating:
 - a) quarrying of megalithic slabs
 - b) transport of megaliths to temple site
 - c) raising the orthostats
 - d) raising the lintles and cyclopean masonry above the orthostats
 - e) roofing the temples.
- 10 Tableau of ritual sacrifice in the temples life-size figures of priests and worshippers. The first pair of apses of Tarxien S would (because of the gigantic statue of the Fertility Deity, ornate altar, animal friezes and decorated stone slabs) provide an ideal setting. The sacrificial animal (ram, pig or goat) is to be shown in the act of being slaughtered while a worshipper pours an offering in the libation-holes outside the temple's entrance. The priests' costumes and hair styles are to be based on the three clay figurines from Tarxien C which, presumably, represent priests.
- 11 Copies, preferably facsimile, of sculptural reliefs on stone blocks from temples. They are to include:
 - a) ornate altar with "potted plant" pattern (Hagar Qim)
 - b) mushroom-shaped altar (Hagar Qim)
 - c) ornate altar with spiral volutes and niche (Tarxien S)
 - d) animal friezes (Tarxien S)
 - e) bull and sow relief (Tarxien C)
 - f) fish relief (Bugibba)
 - g) serpent relief (Ggantija).
- 12* Model of a Fertility Deity statue with a detachable head that can be moved by a system of strings (6).
- 13* Copies of stone statues and clay figurines divided into three classes:
 - a) stylised cult images
 - b) naturalistic human figures
 - c) small, crude and deliberately distorted figures.(a) and (b) should, preferably, be facsimile reproductions of the originals; (c) can be of slightly larger scale. All the more important

examples of Copper Age statuary such as the Hypogeum 'Sleeping Lady' and the Hagar Qim 'Venus of Malta' and cult statues are to be included.

- 14* Copies, preferably facsimile, of Copper Age tools and weapons. They are to include:
 - a) flint, obsidian and chert knives and scappers
 - b) hammers and mallets of hard stone
 - c) digging stick weights.
- 15 Scale model of the Hypogeum
- 16 Mural of a tentative reconstruction of ritual practices in the Hypogeum based on recent archaeological interpretations of the monument. J.D. Evans, *The Prehistoric*



Antiquities of the Maltese Islands, London 1971, should be consulted.

- 17 Plan of the ceiling of the "oracle" chamber at the Hypogeum showing the painted decoration in red ochre based on spiral volute motifs.
- 18 Facsimile reproduction of personal ornaments from the Hypogeum. They are to include:
 - a) axe pendants
 - b) hard stone pendants
 - c) shell pendants.

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- 1 All buildings of historical and artistic interest are scheduled monuments and fall under the Antiquities Protection Ordinance.
 - 2 The dates of the Maltese prehistoric sequence used in this study are those set by radio-carbon using the conventional calculation. These dates are, however, being drastically reassessed as a result of careful comparison with dendrochronology.
 - 3 The Prehistoric chronology is divided into Neolithic (c. 5,000 - c. 3,700 B.C.), Copper Age (c. 3,700 - c. 2,200

B.C.) Bronze Age (c. 2,000 - c. 800 B.C.). Under Proto - Historic are included the Pheonician and Punic periods (c. 800 - 218 B.C.) and those of the Roman and Byzantine dominations (218 B.C. - 870 A.D.) The Middle Ages which may be said to start with the coming of the Arabs in 870 A.D. came to an end in 1530 when the islands were ceded to the Knights of St. John.

- 4 This is the earliest datable piece of Copper Age sculpture in Malta. It consists of a flat slab of globigerina limestone roughly carved to represent a schematised human face. The slab is broken off at the bottom but the beginnings of a shoulder are discernable and it seems probable that it formed part of a statue-menhir or stele. The whole surface of the stone, especially the face, was stained with red ochre.
- 5 Carlo Ceschi, *Architettura dei Templi Megalitici di Malta*, Roma, 1939 and *ibid.*, "Architettura Megalitica di Malta" in *Atti del XV congresso di storia dell'architettura: L'architettura a Malta dalla preistoria all'ottocento*, Roma 1970
- 6 Copper Age cult statues have invariably been found headless but a socket between the shoulders indicates that it was meant to receive a separate head. Small holes bored through the walls of the socket suggest that the head was attached by means of a dowel or by strings that could, presumably, be used to make the head move.

A detailed list of exhibits under the other Departments is incorporated in the author's original dissertation, a copy of which is with the Faculty of Education.