

The Role of Regional National Museums in Revitalizing the Cultural Ecosystems

Sang-hoon JANG*

Abstract

Regional national museums need to identify and express the identity of local cultures that embody unique local color on the basis on the universality of life, and examine how the identity is connected to the lives and needs of local people today. To do this, museums should broaden the scope of their content, both temporally and spatially, to encompass the diverse interests of their audiences. National museums can work toward this goal of revitalizing local cultural ecosystems by continuously improving museum accessibility, enhancing the effectiveness of museum learning experiences, and increasing community engagement. Ultimately, regional national museums should strive to be places of communication where ideas and thoughts can be shared.

Keywords: identity, accessibility, learning, forum, communication.

* Sang-hoon JANG is the director of the Jinju National Museum. He received his Ph.D. in Museum Studies from the University of Leicester, United Kingdom. After joining the National Museum of Korea, he served as head of the Exhibition Division and head of the Children's Museum Division. He currently serves as the vice president of the Korean Research Association of Old Maps. He has authored many books, including the *I Found the Detailed Map of Korea at the Museum*, and also translated several books into Korean, including the *Metropolis: Mapping the City*. His latest book is *A Representation of Nationhood in the Museum* (2020).

1. Introduction

National museums can be seen as the epitome of national and local cultural infrastructures. However, regarding their specific contribution to the revitalization of local cultural ecosystems, there are a number of issues relating to the existing practices of national museums in Korea that merit closer examination. In other words, although the National Museum of Korea in Seoul, with its affiliated museums in 13 cities across the country, has played a significant role in expanding local cultural infrastructures, it is necessary to examine precisely what contributions it actually makes to the revitalization of local cultural ecosystems.

To this end, it is necessary to re-examine how the very definition of a museum's mission—the preservation, research, exhibition, and education of cultural heritage—can be linked to the task of the cultural development of local communities. In this context, it is noteworthy that the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has recently updated its definition of “the museum” to emphasize its responsibility to the societies and communities in which it is located. The point of this revision is that museums, rather than being satisfied with their current role of preserving local traditional culture, should go one step further and become more inclusive. Museums should actively begin to think about how they can be a driving force in the revitalization of local cultural ecosystems.

The mission of national museums is defined as the preservation, transmission and development of local cultural heritage. It is therefore necessary to begin by examining the meaning of “culture” and, more specifically, “traditional culture”; how should we understand this term today and how should it relate to contemporary life and culture?

Based on this, this paper will examine the role that national museums have played in their localities, and will then analyze their limitations. Furthermore, it will explain what, how, and why museums should do to revitalize local cultural ecosystems in the future. The key drivers behind this analysis are the needs and challenges of our society. The significance and value of traditional culture can only be further expanded if it can be proved that it is meaningful to our lives and can contribute to society's development.

2. The Activities and Limitations of Regional National Museums

The Museum and Art Gallery Support Act stipulates that the Minister of Culture, Sports and Tourism may establish regional museums and regional art galleries of the National Museum of Korea, the National Folk Museum of Korea, and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art to promote the balanced development of regional culture (Article 10, Paragraph 4). However, since its establishment in 1945, the National Museum of Korea has opened and operated 13 affiliated regional museums in local cities,¹ while the National Folk Museum of Korea and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art have made little progress.²



Figure 1. Jinju National Museum.

Source: <https://jinju.museum.go.kr/kor/>.

-
1. When it was founded in 1945, the National Museum of Korea already had two affiliated museums in Gyeongju and Buyeo. It incorporated two existing museums in Gaeseong and Gongju in 1946, and then opened a series of regional museums in Gwangju (1978), Jinju (1984), Cheongju (1987), Jeonju (1990), Daegu (1994), Gimhae (1998), Jeju (2001), Chuncheon (2002), Naju (2013), and Iksan (2015). Another is scheduled to open in Chungju in 2026.
 2. In 2018 the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art established a storage facility in Cheongju called the Art Storage and Conservation Center, and is using it as an affiliated museum. The National Folk Museum of Korea opened a storage facility in Paju, Gyeonggi-do Province in 2021. The fact that both of these are classed as storage facilities testifies to the difficulty of convincing relevant government authorities of the feasibility of opening affiliated museums in local areas.

Under these circumstances, the regional organizations of the National Museum of Korea have focused on preserving and transmitting the traditional culture of their regions. The museums in the ancient cities of Gyeongju, Buyeo, Gongju, Gimhae, Naju and Iksan are dedicated to the preservation and transmission of the ancient cultures of Silla, Baekje, Gaya, Mahan and so on, while the museums located in metropolitan cities or provincial capitals specialize in regional traditional culture or industrial characteristics, for example ceramic culture (Gwangju), Confucian literati-scholar culture (Jeonju), costume culture (Daegu), metal arts and crafts (Cheongju), island culture (Jeju) and sightseeing culture (Chuncheon). On the other hand, the Jinju National Museum, which is located at a crucial battlefield of the Siege of Jinju (1592-1593), has focused on the history of the Imjin War (1592-1598), but is now expanding its horizons to become a specialized museum of war and diplomacy history.

While it is encouraging that the National Museum of Korea, unlike other national museums, has played a key role by steadily expanding its regional organizations, it is also clear that there is a limit to this. Since its inception, the National Museum of Korea has grown as an institution centered on archaeology and art history in the tradition of the modern Western museum, with relatively little focus on other academic fields or cultural aspects of the modern and contemporary periods. In other words, there is less concern with history and folklore as academic fields or with the modern and contemporary periods in general.

Except for the National Museum of Korea, regional national museums have little interest in foreign cultures that are closely related to the universality of local culture, beyond the interest in local or Korean culture. Since these trends affect the overall functions of museums, including collection, research, exhibition, and education, they need to be balanced to some extent. Whereas Seoul has a specialized national museum infrastructure covering a wide range of academic fields and time periods, including the National Museum of Korea, the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, the National Folk Museum, the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, the National Hangeul Museum, and the War Memorial of Korea, non-Seoul regional museums, which lack sufficient



Figure 2. The News Letter of the Jinju National Museum.
Source: <https://jinju.museum.go.kr/kor/>.

museum infrastructure, have to cover a much wider range of disciplines and time periods.

In this context, the role of regional national museums in the non-capital areas should be expanded. First of all, they need to further develop their own specialized content based on the concept of “local history and culture.” To achieve this, it is essential that they establish and explore their own cultural identities. If we go back to the starting point when the regional affiliates of the National Museum of Korea were forced to search for their own specialized projects, we can understand why they have so far failed to effectively reveal their own cultural identities. As a matter of fact, it was not easy to identify the regional characteristics of the central and southern parts of the Korean peninsula from the perspective of archaeology or the medieval and modern art culture.

However, it would have been much easier for regional museums to identify the cultural identity of the region and incorporate it into museum content if they had first expanded the scope of local culture from

prehistory to include modern times, and then examined the lives and societies of the local people who lived in that time and space in relation to the dynamics of the surrounding areas (or the central government). This could have been a means of overcoming the problem of selecting museum content only from the category of traditional culture, or the past.

In addition, when faced with the task of revitalizing local cultural ecosystems, it is easy to run into the limitations of regional national museums that focus solely on the traditional culture of their particular region's past. We should bear in mind the old sayings such as "retain the old and create the new" (法古創新) or "review the old and learn the new" (溫故知新). We cannot afford to overlook the meaning that the culture of the past can have for people living today. What kind of wishes, hopes, and expectations did the culture(s) of the past originate from? How are they the same or different from mine or ours, and why is that so? When museums apply these questions to their work, it is possible to find clues to the sustainable development and revitalization of local cultural ecosystems.

3. The Roles and Challenges of Regional National Museums in Local Cultural Ecosystems

With the reopening of the National Museum of Korea after moving to the former Joseon General-Government Building in 1986, the museum began to develop museum education programs in earnest, recognizing the need for social education.³ In addition to exhibition activities, it began to actively conduct programs to disseminate museum content to the public. As this initiative soon spread to regional national museums, programs for children, youth and adults began.⁴ Various types of programs such as exhibitions, lectures, field trips, and hands-on activities based on traditional culture, began to be rolled out across the country. This trend has continued without

3. The Social Education Act was enacted in December 1982.

4. However, the Children's Museum School program at the Gyeongju National Museum began in 1954, shortly after the armistice of the Korean War, and continues to this day.

any change to this day.

Nevertheless, it is still questionable whether the regional national museums, which constitute the central cultural infrastructure of the region, actually function as key cultural centers. This is because there seems to be a clear limit to the task of going beyond the mere promotion of traditional culture of the past and expanding the meaning and value it can have in today's culture. Traditional culture once played an effective role in giving self-esteem to the community through national cultural discourses, especially in the heyday of nationalist ideologies. Although this function of traditional culture is still valid, it has limitations in revealing the colors and characteristics of localities, and its role is relatively weak at this level.

Finally, it is essential to identify and express the identity of local cultures that embody unique local color on the basis of the universality of life, and to seriously consider how it is connected to the lives and concerns of local people today. This requires paying more attention to them and their lives in order to seek better ways to recognize, express and create local cultures in the context of their wishes, desires and expectations. ICOM's new definition of museum, approved in August 2022, can be understood in this context: "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing."⁵

Korea's regional national museums have the potential to function as complex cultural centers that accommodate the diverse needs of people today through the medium of cultural heritage, i.e., the material evidence of humanity's cultural activities in the past and present. Therefore, it is necessary to expand the spatial and temporal scope of the content that museums deal with and to broaden their fields to encompass all aspects of life and society. Furthermore, museums must embrace the diverse interests

5. <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>.

of their visitors, regardless of age, gender, education, race, or disability. Based on these considerations, the next section of this paper will discuss in more detail three major tasks related to the role of regional national museums in revitalizing cultural ecosystems.

3.1. Expansion of Accessibility

The most important way in which museums can contribute to the revitalization of cultural ecosystems is to expand their accessibility. To do this, museums must ensure access to their collections and related information and recognize this accessibility as an issue. The notion of accessibility refers not only to access to the physical spaces of the museum, including exhibition halls and education rooms, but also to access to and use of all the tangible and intangible content that museums hold. Museums should make constant efforts to improve the accessibility of content information, and the progress in this area should be considered as a key indicator in any evaluation of a museum's performance.

To protect and promote cultural diversity, UNESCO recommends pursuing the concept of the "inclusive museum," which takes into consideration the diversity of museum visitors.⁶ They argue that museums should ensure their accessibility through various modes of participation and delivery, whether they be in the material dimension (class, locale, family, and circumstances), the physical dimension (age, race, sex and sexuality, and physical and mental characteristics), or the symbolic dimension (language, culture, gender, family, affinity, and persona).

The language used by a museum is one of the key determinants of its accessibility. Museums in South Korea usually provide information in both Korean and English, but in light of Korea's rapid globalization and increasingly multiethnic society, museums located in areas with large numbers of foreign migrants should now go one step further. In order to enhance accessibility and embrace local migrants as potential future visitors, museums should cater to speakers of other languages

6. UNESCO, *The Inclusive Museum*, 2008.

whenever possible. It is also important to ensure that people with physical disabilities do not face physical barriers in accessing museums and related information.

A customer-friendly attitude is also essential. Museum users should be made to feel welcome and have access to the appropriate services and facilities that they want. The installation of effective and clear signage to guide visitors around the museum can be the starting point for creating such an impression.

Another key to creating a user-friendly museum is to provide accurate and timely information about all of its services: location, directions, opening hours, facilities and services, current exhibitions, future programs, collections, and so on. If there are artifacts with difficult accessibility, sufficient information should also be provided as to why this is the case and what alternatives are available.

3.2. Provision of Effective and Connective Learning Experiences

A museum's users can experience the museum's "learning services" through multiple channels, such as exhibitions, research and education. Therefore, museums must strive to utilize the various forms of display available to them to facilitate communication between audiences and collections. Displaying artifacts is not an end in itself, but a means of communicating with audiences. The various auxiliary tools that facilitate this communication, such as description cards, panels, pamphlets, audio guides, guided tours, information maps, and checklists, are indispensable to learning, the ultimate goal of museums.

Accordingly, museums should adopt the most effective and appropriate methods of displaying their exhibits and should properly place various communication tools. Museums that are too small to employ staff with the relevant knowledge or experience in this field must formalize procedures that enable them to consult and employ experts. In contrast, national museums with large staffs and facilities need to develop diverse approaches to interpreting their collections. They should disseminate these approaches to different museums to create a positive impact.

In order to support professional research activities museums should ensure access to their own collections, whether on display or in storage, and to related information about these collections. Accessibility can be improved through artifact access services, guided tours, school or group sessions, artifact catalogs, online collections, and so on. Other methods to achieve this goal include enhancing access to materials in storage, facilitating the loan of artifacts to other institutions, developing online resources, producing educational materials, and promoting special exhibitions.

In particular, regional national museums have a responsibility to the entire museum community in their region. Within their area(s) of expertise, they should be able to provide information and advice to regional museums at all levels, and have a curatorial staff with the necessary academic background and experience required to support their research if requested. This obligation should also extend to museums within the international academic community.

In order to effectively motivate their visitors and foster learning, museums need to provide learning and exploration experiences. This idea should be shared with the museum staff and be implemented by creating a user-friendly environment within the museum. Whether the learning style is visual, auditory, or tactile, it should be chosen based on connective learning experiences that are tailored to all levels of users, taking into account all relevant criteria, such as age and ability.

To promote learning experiences and increase their impact, it is essential to build effective partnerships. Museums are no longer cultural institutions that exist in isolation from civil society. They should make efforts to expand and promote learning experiences in cooperation with a range of partners, including local governments, schools, research institutes, non-governmental organizations for arts and culture, traditional culture preservation societies, religious institutions, charitable organizations, and adult learning centers. In particular, museums should encourage and support citizens to voluntarily engage in various cultural and artistic activities, including academic activities, literature, art, music, dance, theater, film, animation, and photography, by making wide use of

their exhibition halls, auditoriums, seminar rooms, libraries, and other facilities.⁷

It is crucial to remember that the content of museums should no longer be used only for learning and re-experiencing the past. Because the artifacts and traces we leave behind reflect the universality of life across time and space, museums can and should connect them to the interests of people living today. Moreover, these efforts should not be limited to museum administrators alone. It is essential that citizens become more involved in museum management and activities. For example, the special exhibition “A Short Record of Paintings: Establishing the Art History of Jinju” hosted by the Jinju National Museum in 2022 demonstrated effectively the cultural capacity of civil society in the Jinju area. This high-quality exhibition, organized by a civic cultural organization (Jinjumok Community for Culture), is a good example of the museum’s strong commitment to building partnerships with civil society.



Figure 3. Special Exhibition, “A Short Record of Paintings: Establishing the Art History of Jinju.”

Source: <https://jinju.museum.go.kr/kor/>.

7. In 2022 the Jinju National Museum hosted an exhibition entitled “A Short Record of Paintings: Establishing the Art History of Jinju,” organized by the Jinjumok Community for Culture (Jinjumok Munhwa Sarangbang). The museum also co-hosted the special exhibition “The Flow of Korean Polychrome Painting” with the Rhee Seund Ja Jinju Art Museum.

The children's museums within the national museums should provide a welcoming and stimulating space for children's artistic and cultural activities. Regional national museums should not only support the activities of arts and cultural organizations formed voluntarily by local people, but also provide a space for these organizations to interact with the general public. They should go a step further by promoting cultural and artistic programs that have been designed and run by the museums in collaboration with experts or professional interest groups.

3.3. The Museum as a Forum

What is the ultimate goal of communication that museums pursue? Museums should always guard against being satisfied with a one-way transfer of knowledge. Concrete efforts are needed to capture and reflect on how visitors think about and respond to the information provided to them. More specifically, museums need to collect and respond to the voices of their visitors in a sincere way through regular satisfaction surveys, monitoring, and advisory committees on exhibitions, education, and overall museum operations.

The object of communication is not limited to information alone. All museums assert and embody certain "values" through the exhibition and education of their collections. Value neutrality is often regarded as a key objective for museums, but in reality most museums often serve as advocates for the values of the era and society to which they belong. On the contrary, museums can also play a leading role in promoting and encouraging the values that society should pursue. They can be forums for discussion of and communication about the values that Korean society is struggling with in the global era, such as coexistence in a multiethnic society, diversity, the coexistence of the majority and the minority, the gap between the central and the local, and the balance and harmony between universality and particularity. If the modern museum was a kind of temple for admiring its exhibits, now the museum of the twenty-first century

should become a forum where thoughts and ideas meet and communicate.⁸

From this perspective, museums should consider how to encourage people who visit exhibitions and participate in educational programs to closely examine the artifacts on display and cultivate their own thoughts, how to fully enjoy the museum and its collections, and how to make the museum a place where people's ideas meet. Through a process of close observation and thought, museum visitors should be encouraged to discover for themselves the people who made the artifacts, the people who used them, and the different ways of thinking and living in the times to which they belonged. In the twenty-first century, museums can no longer be unilateral transmitters of knowledge, and moreover they must recognize that the knowledge they offer is no longer unquestionable.

In this context, the special exhibition "The Manchu Invasion of Joseon in 1636," organized by the Jinju National Museum in 2022, is noteworthy. This exhibition was about a lost war which lingers even today as a bitter memory in Korea, and has always been a difficult subject for public museums to deal with. The attempt to confront the Korean public with the history of Joseon's defeat and suffering at hands of China's Qing Dynasty had a significant resonance. This is because the agony over the country's fate in the rapidly changing international order of the seventeenth century has considerable parallels with Korea's contemporary situation. The Jinju National Museum was able to provide an opportunity for exhibition audiences to reflect on the harsh realities of the international order both then and now, and discuss how to respond to them.

8. Duncan Cameron, "The Museum, a Temple or the Forum," *Journal of World History* 4.1 (1974): 189-202.



Figure 4. Special Exhibition, “The Manchu Invasion of Joseon in 1636.”

Source: <https://jinju.museum.go.kr/kor/>.

Just as important as communication is its means and method. The most basic means of communication are speech and writing; museums should be proficient in both in order to prepare exhibitions and education in language that is easy for the general public to understand. In this age of globalization, foreign languages are becoming increasingly important as a means of communication. If museum content can be presented and interpreted in English or other major languages, the impact will be far greater.

With the recent developments in information and communication technology, the use of online media has gained popularity as a means of communication that can significantly widen the audience while shortening the distance to that same audience. Internet websites, blogs, and social media services are innovative media for sharing not only information and materials, but also every aspect of their activities with the public. However, the interest in online media is still relatively low compared to offline media.

Since 2020, the Jinju National Museum has been producing annual YouTube content on traditional weapons and war-related history with great success. By the end of August 2023, its YouTube channel had received a total of 8.05 million views, and the aforementioned “The Manchu Invasion of Joseon in 1636” exhibition had garnered 3.41 million views. These impressive figures show how effective it can be to disseminate content through the internet.



Figure 5. “The Age of Gunpowder in Joseon,” YouTube Content of the Jinju National Museum.

Source: <https://jinju.museum.go.kr/kor/>.

The advantages of disseminating online content can be quickly confirmed by the volume and form of communication that users are employing. There are limitations in conveying visitors’ reactions to the actual museum experience, other than the inactive channel “Visitor Voice.” By contrast, with online media such as YouTube we can monitor users’ reactions in real time and observe how they are using such tools. It is clear that YouTube is being used not only to evaluate and criticize museum content, but also as a forum for user discussion. This suggests that social media has the potential to become an even more useful space

for communication between museums and the general public in the future.

It is more important than ever to make effective use of online media. It should be noted that the success or failure of their use depends on the effort made to develop, create, update and disseminate diverse customized content.

4. Conclusion

The study of past lives and societies, as well as the study of lives and societies in other regions, is important because the people and their societies belonging to different times and spaces have a universality, and thus their lives are connected to ours. Accordingly, the artifacts they left behind are also connected to us today, and this is why museums collect and display artifacts. In particular, the efforts and passions of people who lived in the same space may have had direct and indirect influences on our lives today, and for this reason we are eager to remember their lives and what they left behind.

Museums, which collect material evidence of the meaningful and valuable experiences of human societies in different times and spaces, have accumulated traces of many forms of cultural activity. Their achievements in accumulating material evidence of various experiences, including food, clothing, shelter, language, customs, religion, ideology and beliefs, academic activities, literature, art, science and technology, will contribute to the creation of a new culture based on understanding the diversity of life and society.

After all, it is life in a variety of colors that museums focus on. And it is the life in society. When numerous lives shine with their own patterns and colors, and in harmony with other lives in different patterns and colors, that is culture. The *raison d'être* of a museum is to be able to praise and celebrate these different lives as they are, while remembering the cultures and lives of different times and spaces.