

Jul 22, 2011

KNOWLEDGE EDUCATION

Museums are meant to be expansive

IN HER commentary, Ms Ong Sor Fern asserted that the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research's bid to buy a trio of dinosaur skeletons for \$12 million is extravagant, intended only to lure undiscerning visitors, has no historical or biological links to Singapore and is, therefore, irrelevant; and that the money is better spent on the museum's infrastructure and training ('What have dinosaurs got to do with S'pore?': last Saturday).

Mr Ignatius Low's rebuttal the next day ('Why we need dinos') suggested that the skeletons would be an inspiring influence on budding scientists and artists, argued that they would give Singaporeans a sense of their place in time, and then conceded his arguments to be 'silly'.

Surely the greatest creatures ever to have roamed the earth deserve a better case.

Museums are intended not simply as a reminder of what is pertinent and familiar to our lives and surroundings. They guide us out of our comfort zones into the vast untapped universe that is human knowledge, imbuing us with surprising facts and ideas as yet unknown to us.

Any self-respecting museum would aspire to a set of exhibits that is broad and as representative as possible of the entire body of knowledge that it has set out to present, whether it is modern visual art or war history.

One would surely balk at the notion that Singaporeans should study only the writings of Edwin Thumboo or watch only the films of Eric Khoo because these works are homegrown and more relevant. Similarly, a zoo that showcased only dogs and cats, or a history museum focused only on Sang Nila Utama would be neither educational nor popular. Things we deem irrelevant are inevitably things we do not understand and know little about.

Even if one is merely questioning prioritising dinosaur skeletons over other museum needs rather than criticising the intrinsic educational value of the skeletons, a natural history museum should strive to educate its visitors on what was arguably the most important period in the natural history of the world.

The skeletons will draw crowds to learn about not just the dinosaurs, but also the vast collection of other natural specimens already on exhibit in the Raffles Museum, while boosting the museum's coffers. I struggle to see anything wrong with this outcome.

The day the ArtScience Museum throws out works by non-Singaporean Salvador Dali, or the Singapore Zoo decides its Ethiopian *Hamadryas* baboons should be replaced by the monkeys of Bukit Timah, will be a sad one indeed.

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