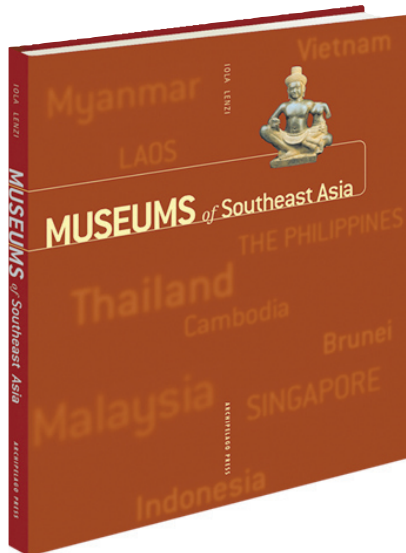


TOKO BUKU

Reviews of English language books on Indonesia

Museums of Southeast Asia by Iola Lenzi



When you read the Southeast Asia history, you read world history. The region is a subtle blend of every culture that ever landed here - Chinese, Indian, Melanesian, Portuguese, Polynesian, Arabian, English, Dutch, American - wave after wave of invaders and migrants who either absorbed earlier arrivals, killed them

off, or pushed them into more remote regions. This ongoing and unending process explains Southeast Asia's astounding ethnic and cultural diversity.

Museums of Southeast Asia is a catalog of 78 selected museums in Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. An invaluable resource for discovering the region's vast but dispersed institutional wealth, each museum listing includes the address, contact details, opening hours, admission and directions in a sidebar at the top. This is followed by concise well-written information about the museum's main buildings, galleries, collections, rooms and outdoor spaces.

Small informative boxes and illustrations cover a museum's specific highlights such as paintings, remarkable exhibits, open air artifacts and sculptures, artist's portraits and biographies or different views of the museum. All illustrations are meticulously captioned, describing the item, historical origin, provenance, dimensions, materials and media used, as well as explaining the meaning of symbols, inscriptions and scripts.

A map in the front shows the locations and cities where all the museums are found. Contact information and points of interest in the vicinity of each institution are also listed. In the section entitled "Other Spaces," the book also provides an up-to-date guide to the region's locally known alternative art and cultural spaces.

Many of the region's museums would not have come into existence were it not for European colonizers. Even the whole concept of Southeast Asia as a unified geographic and political fraternity would not have evolved without 19th century Western powers bringing the disparate populations of each country - many perennially at war with each other and speaking different languages and practicing different religions - together under a single administrative mantle.

Though the Europeans were economic conquerors, they recognized the significance of indigenous culture and sought to preserve it by researching, cataloging and displaying its material manifestation. Thus, the modern museum, an invention of the European enlightenment of the late 18th century, was introduced to Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, a long line of Westerners, starting with Sir Stamford Raffles, created public displays of beautiful and original artifacts of past Indonesian civilizations.

Of Indonesia's 33 notable museums, 14 are included: the Purbakala Archaeological Museum (Gilimanuk), Le Mayeur Museum (Sanur), Museum Bali (Denpasar), Museum Semarajaya and Kertha Gosa (Singaraja), the Blanco Renaissance Museum (Ubud), the Agung Rai Museum of Art (Ubud), Museum Puri Lukisan (Ubud), the Neka Art Museum (Ubud), the Ambarawa Railway Museum

(C. Java), the Jakarta History Museum, the National Museum (Jakarta), Museum Prabu Geusan Ulun (Bandung), Museum Seni Lukis Affandi (Yogya) and the Ulen Sentalu Museum (Yogya).

I like the way the book includes lesser known, more esoteric but intriguing collections such the Museum Prabu Geusan Ulun in the backwater city of Sumedang in West Java which comprises five main buildings erected over the last three centuries (oldest is 1706) and exhibits Sundanese works of art, sacred traditional weapons and vehicles, three complete and historic *gamelan* orchestras and antique furniture, china, books, coins and umbrellas from pre-colonial to colonial times.

Until I perused *Museums of Southeast Asia*, I wasn't even aware of Singaraja's Museum Semarajaya housed in an early 20th century Dutch administrative building just east of the more famous Kertha Gosa (*lontar* manuscripts) museum. Its galleries display an ethnographic collection, the art of Emilio Ambron (an expatriate artist who lived and worked in Bali during the 1930s), courtly paraphernalia from Klungkung, vintage photos, household wares and textiles.

Not all the museums included are filled with exquisite artistic or historical objects. The book presents a wide variety of institutions. Besides the big well-endowed national museums with magnificent collections, also represented are smaller regional museums specializing in modern art, maritime history, hotels, philately, archaeology, tribal cultures, ceramics, police and science. Indonesia's Ambarawa Railway in central Java owns 21 steam locomotives and carriages dating from the last decade of the 19th century.

Cambodia's Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, which operated as a prison, torture centre and execution venue under the murderous Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979, harrowingly documents one of Southeast Asia's darkest periods of 20th century history. Another prison museum is Hoa Lo Museum in Vietnam, the notorious "Hanoi Hilton" of the Vietnam War (1964 to 1973).

By highlighting the museums' architecture, the often Byzantine history of their collections, and discussing their works of art in depth, author Iola Lenzi offers practical guidance and effectively conveys the museum's character. Her coverage is so complete that the traveler is even able to design an itinerary to the region based just on visits to outstanding museums.

Iola Lenzi has worked in the arts for the last 20 years. Her career began in London where she trained at Sotheby's and subsequently gained expertise in early Chinese art. Lenzi is a curator of regional contemporary art, frequently publishes essays about Southeast Asian culture, and contributes articles for *Asian Art* magazine.

Museums of Southeast Asia is a unique reference tool for those keen on deepening their understanding of Southeast Asia's complex and ancient cultural arena, but also a richly illustrated and down to earth guide enabling visitors to maximize their cultural tour of the material culture of the region. A must for cultural travelers and art enthusiasts.

Museums of Southeast Asia by Iola Lenzi, Editions Didier Millet 2004 (www.edmbooks.com), ISBN 1588860841, 195 pages, glossary, bibliography, picture credits, index, acknowledgements, dimensions 20.5 cm X 24.5 cm. Available from Meliana at meliana@edmbooks.com.sg or buy it online from www.edmbooks.com.

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