

# A STUDY ON CAUSES OF DECAY OF TEXTILE POUCHES AND THEIR CONSERVATION

: With special reference to Betel Pouches in Colombo National Museum  
Collection



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# **Study on Textile Conservation**

Conservation is the customized display of textiles to protect and preserve while augmenting their graphic power or subtle beauty, with special reference to betel pouches, in Colombo National Museum's Collection.

A thesis presented to the University of Moratuwa, for the Master of Science degree in the Architectural Conservation of Monuments and Sites.

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16<sup>Th</sup> June 2010

## DECLARATION

I declare that this Thesis represents my own work and that it has not been previously included in a Reports submitted to this University or to another institution for a degree, postgraduate diploma or other qualification.

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## **Introduction**

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The traditional betel pouch in Sri Lanka has a very long history, and goes back to the dates of earliest civilization of the country, and, continues to remain to date, absorbing impacts from changing societies and various external forces. Majority of those traditional betel pouches have been made either made of finished wrapped in textiles, and are unique in their production, decoration, characteristics, and usage.

National Museum of Colombo, which was established in 1877, is a repository of cultural and historic objects, specially possessing the most valuable collection of ancient and historic textiles, which reflect diverse categories of societies along with their social, economic, and, political background. Among those valuable textile collections at the Colombo Museum, the Betel Pouches are outstanding in their use of materials and techniques. However, due to improper measures of preservation and display, they are facing threats of decaying and extinction, requiring immediate remedial measure for their preservation for the posterity.

### **a. Purpose of the Study:**

Betel Pouches could be considered as one of the best example to display ingenuity of Ancient Sri Lankans in refining utility objects into products of high aesthetics and refined craftsmanship. They have reached their climax in the medieval period, especially at the time of the seat of government is located in the wet-zone climatic region of the country. But, with the passage of time, the art and the technology of Betel Pouch manufacturing faced its own degradation, and gradually began to disappear leaving the remaining few of them becoming important cultural objects. At present, the Colombo National Museum has a collection of them, and is considered as the only collection in the country.

However, though the collection is very valuable in terms of its rareness, the measures of preservation and the modes of display in the National Museum seems to be unsatisfactory. A present, they have been safe-kept at the Colombo National museums, but have not followed an appropriate methodology for their prevention, and in a very

vulnerable situation facing deterioration. If the present way of protection continues, there is a high possibility of disappearing them in the near future. Therefore, it is the high time to study the concepts behind Betel pouch preparation, techniques, and, design along with evaluating measures taken for preservation of them.

#### **a. Aims and Objectives:**

One of the objectives of the study is to identify primary and secondary causes of decay, and to find remedial measures to mitigate their impact, and to ensure the cultural objects to be preserved for posterity. The secondary object is to identify the most appropriate intervention to mitigate further decays, which could enhance the life-time of Betel Pouches.

During the study it came to light that the existing conservation practices adopted by the Colombo National Museum are not very convincing , mainly due to the fact that they are not based on appropriate and recognized scientific methods. This leads to venture on new conservation strategies and techniques etc. especially for embroidered betel pouches in the Colombo National museum collection.

#### **b. Scope and limitation**

Altogether there are more than seven hundred pieces of different varieties of textiles objects in the Colombo National Museum Collection, and, it is not an easy task to examine each and every piece under the current study. Out of all the historic textile objects, the embroidered Betel Pouches are one of the outstanding group, yet not been studied in-depth to identify their causes of decay and an appropriate methodology for preservation of them. Therefore, it was decided to confine the current study on the embroidered Betel Pouches preserved as part of the Colombo National Museum Collection.

There are altogether 67 Betel Pouches in the National Museum Collection, and an in-depth study into each and every Betel Pouch also was not an easy tasks. Due to their



vulnerable conditions as well as the total time period available for the research, it is found the impractical to do a such a study. Therefore, it was decided to confine the study to selected group of pouches, which belongs to the period between 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, and, the study is to be based on more scientific and technical aspects.

### **a. Methodology**

Cursory examination of the pouches suggested that they could broadly be categorized in to four different groups, and the case study was based on the said grouping.

Literature review and references on various specific documents were carried out to collect data on historic background including origin and development of betel pouches in Sri Lanka; process for preparation of pouches; traditional materials used in the product; and, Cultural Significance, Legendaries and Customs associated with Betel and their Products etc.

Case studies, which include on the object examination of Colombo National Museum Collection enabled gathering first hand information on materials and techniques of manufacturing betel pouches; their form and finishes; present status of betel pouches in National Museum Collection; causes of decay of betel pouches in the collection; and, measures adopted for their Preservation.

Case studies were carried out for selected samples from the Four Groups of pouches identified by the cursory examination, and comparatively analyzed them to trace the generic causes of decay and appropriate intervention for their preservation for the posterity.

It is the intention to extend the study to cover Textile pouches in the Branch Museums, as well as Martin Wickramasinge Folk Museum in Koggala, Galle.

## **b. Outcome of the Study:**

Outcome of the study clearly indicates that the National Museum Collection of textiles and not preserved in the best way of preservation, mainly due to the non-availability of advance knowledge as well as trained personnel in the museum. The study and its results are presented in this dissertation as indicted below, and comprised of four chapters, Conclusion ,Appendix, Bibliography and a List of Illustrations.

Chapter 1 is a background study to the dissertation, and comprised of findings on historic development of Betel Culture in Sri Lanka, and its contribution to society. Chapter 2 is a case study, and is an attempt to identify form, shapes, materials and techniques used in Betel Pouches available in the collection of National Museum. The study further examined the present status of the betel pouches, as a prelude to identify causes of decay and their preservation in the museum collection. Chapter 3 is an extension of the case study, and is an attempt to trace the actual causes of decay. Concurrently , conservation methods adopted in the museum too is studied, referring to comparative conservation proposals. Chapter 4 is an analytical chapter, examining the conservation measures adopted in the museum referring appropriate interventions in the wake of particular causes of decay. Further, the chapter four plays the role of identifying most appropriate preservation measures for textile base historic objects and materials in the country. Conclusion is drawn with directives for further research in the field.

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