

The first museum in Lithuania – the Museum of Antiquities – was founded in Vilnius in 1855. The date is significant not only to the history of museums in Lithuania but generally to the Lithuanian culture. The National Museum of Lithuania, the inheritor of the collections and successor of the Museum of Antiquities, celebrates its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2005.

The aspirations of the educated members of the society in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to collect the national heritage, systematise and promote it, and to preserve it for the future generations resulted in the idea of establishing a public museum in Lithuania. The ini-



tiator of establishing this museum was Count Eustachy Tyszkiewicz, a culture historian, patriot of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) and a person with wide scholarly interests. He applied to the tsarist administration in 1848 with a proposal to establish a museum in Vilnius. However, this first official proposal was lost in the labyrinths of the administration. Tyszkiewicz filed another application in 1851, but it was not until 11 May 1855 that the Tsar signed a decree on establishing the Vilnius Archaeology Commission and the Museum of Antiquities in Vilnius.



The goals of the museum as defined in its statutes and programme of work were similar to most other museums of the time: registering, collecting and preserving the cultural and natural heritage of the country; studying it and creating the opportunities for public access. It was named as a museum with a historical profile in the statute. From the very first day of its establishment it collected and represented the heritage of the GDL. The Museum's collections started with the donated personal collection of Tyszkiewicz (approx. 6,000 exhibits, including coins, medals, historical paintings, engravings, maps, the historical heritage of the GDL and a library containing more than 3,000 volumes). The libraries, manuscripts and documents of monasteries and churches that were closed after the uprising of 1831 were included in the collections of the young Museum, as were the remains of the collections of the closed Vilnius University. Later the collections of the Museum were supplemented with exhibits donated by private individuals and public organisations. The most significant pieces were given to the Museum by the families of the nobility and landlords that had long historical and cultural traditions. These exhibits served as an important source about the history of the Lithuanian state. They included a large collection of weapons donated by Count P. Kosakowski; a collection of an-

tiques by Adam Honory Kirkor; donations by the families of Duke Oginsky and Duke Radziwill, Count Plater and Count Tyszkiewicz, and others. Exhibits were also donated by ordinary citizens, public servants and students. The catalogue of the Museum of Antiquities listed 195 donors in 1858 and 323 in 1862, who had donated 6,595 exhibits to the Museum. The Museum was opened to the public on 29 April 1856 in the premises of the closed Vilnius University. It exhibited the weaponry of the Lithuanian nobility, tunics and flags of the army of the GDL; portraits of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, such as Vytautas, Sigismund Augustus, Stephen Bathory, Stanislaus Augustus and other historical personalities; privileges of the rulers; tombstones, seals and other historical items containing coats of arms of the nobility and national symbols; and goods manufactured in the GDL. All of that represented historical monuments of the GDL that fostered the historical consciousness of the society and raised pride in Lithuania's historical past. A separate section of the exposition was devoted to Lithuanian mythology and archaeology represented by statuettes of Lithuanian gods and goddesses and archaeological finds discovered in the lands of the GDL. Two halls were occupied by the Natural Department consisting of the remains of Vilnius University collections of mineralogy,

zoology and botany, an ornithological collection of over 1,000 exhibits donated to the Museum by Count R. Tyzenhauz, and other exhibits that supplemented the Museum's collections year after year. The halls of the Natural Department were used for holding classes for students of Vilnius gymnasiums. The Museum turned to be popular and had significant cultural influence. In 1862 it received as many as 10,360 visitors. Eustachy Tyszkiewicz was not only happy that the antiquities held in the museum were protected from ruin but also because they were increasingly viewed by the public as an important symbol of historical memory. The Museum of Antiquities and the Archaeology Commission functioning under it represented the only centre of scholarship in Lithuania at the time. Historical



sources and studies were published in the press, the catalogue and album of the Museum was published in 1858, and the publication of the Annals of the Museum began.

The work of the Museum was disrupted by the policy of Russification, which especially intensified after the uprising of 1863. In 1865 the major part of the exhibits of the Museum of Antiquities was taken to Moscow. The remaining ones were given to the Vilnius Public Library opened by the authorities. From 1866 to 1914 the Museum functioned as part of the library. In 1915, with the approaching front line of World War I, part of the exhibits was again taken to Russia.

1919 saw the foundation of the Museum of History and Ethnography on the basis of the collections of the Museum of Antiquities and the Lithuanian Scientific Society. Jonas Basanavičius, one of the leaders of the Lithuanian national liberation, was appointed as its director. However, after Poland occupied Vilnius in 1919, the work of creating the Museum was disrupted. From 1920 to 1940 the collections of the Museum of Antiquities were held at Vilnius University.

In 1941 the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences took over all the museum collections in Vilnius. Owing to the efforts of Vincas Žilėnas, a well-known museum expert and culture historian, the structure of the Museum of Antiquities was recreated on the basis of the collections of the

Museum of Antiquities and the Lithuanian Scientific Society, and the Museum of History and Ethnography was formed. A rich comprehensive exposition of Lithuanian history was opened to the visitors in the Museum established in the New Arsenal in the territory of the castles of Vilnius on 5 November 1968. In this way, the work of establishing a national museum, initiated by the educated elite in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, continued. When Lithuania regained independence, the Museum, as the keeper of the main collections relating to the history of the state and its cultural development, was renamed in 1992 as the National Museum of Lithuania.



At present it is a museum of the history of the Lithuanian state and its culture of a comprehensive nature. On 1 January 2004 the Museum held over 998,000 exhibits. They represent the largest and most unique collections of archaeological studies, historical heritage and traditional national culture in the country, organised in seven museum departments: Archaeology, Medieval and Post-Medieval Archaeology, Ethnic Culture, Iconography, History, Modern History and Numismatics. In addition to collecting and preserving cultural heritage, these departments are also engaged in research, and the main findings are published in the serial publications of the Museum, collection and exhibition catalogues, and presented in expositions and at thematic exhibitions. Since 1948 the Museum has regularly organised ethnographic and historical expeditions and conducted archaeological excavations.

The Museum is located in the historical centre of Lithuania, the buildings of the complex of Vilnius castles.

The Old Arsenal contains the largest archaeological exposition in the Baltic region "Prehistoric Lithuania". It presents unique Baltic exhibits, Lithuanian culture from the time of the first settlers in the territory of the country around 11,000 BC to the formation of the Lithuanian state in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The exposition "Prehistoric Lithuania" is in a way extended by the exposition devoted to the



Lithuanian state and culture in the New Arsenal, reflecting the times of prosperity and decline of the GDL from the formation of the state in the 13<sup>th</sup> century to its collapse in 1795. This is the most representative exposition on the country's history and ethnic culture in Lithuania.

The exposition in the tower of Gediminas Castle presents the models of reconstructed Vilnius castles of late 16<sup>th</sup> century and early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the weaponry of the time and iconographic material relating to the old Vilnius. A wonderful panorama of Vilnius opens up from the viewing point at the top of the tower.

The objectives of the National Museum of Lithuania are to foster national consciousness of the society, ensure preservation of the historical heritage of the Lithuanian state and its public access.

*Birutė Kulnytė*

**COIN DEDICATED  
TO THE 150<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF LITHUANIA**

Silver Ag 925  
Quality proof  
Diameter 38.61 mm  
Weight 28.28 g

Words on the edge of the coin: PRO PUBLICO BONO  
Designed by Antanas Žukauskas  
Mintage 1500 pcs  
Issued 2005

Information is available at the Bank of Lithuania  
Tel. +370 - 5 268 03 16  
Fax +370 - 5 268 03 14  
www.lb.lt

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Lithuanian Mint  
www.lithuanian-mint.lt

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## LITHUANIAN COLLECTORS COINS



*To all the monuments of ancient glory  
We shall stand guard,  
And to the venerable founder of this sanctuary  
Pay our grateful regard.*

*L. Kondratavičius  
Verse on opening the Museum of Antiquities. 1856*

