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## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The National Museum and Art Gallery is housed in the Royal Victoria Institute (RVI), one of the oldest buildings in Port of Spain. The Site of the National Museum is located at the corner of Keate and Frederick Streets in Port of Spain (117 Frederick Street). The site is generally a flat area. From the centre of the town, it is most directly reached by taking lower Frederick Street to the top at Memorial Park. A good part of the site is currently occupied by the newly constructed National Academy for the Performing Arts (NAPA).

The Royal Victoria Institute was built as a Science and Art Museum to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee H.M. Queen Victoria and was called the Victoria Institute. It was built at the height of affluence of the British Empire as part of Britain's general policy to fund cultural centres throughout the Commonwealth. It was designed by the Architect –D.M. Hahn. The building was opened on 17<sup>th</sup> September, 1892 by M.S. Devenish due to the indisposition of the Governor – Sir F. Napier Browne. Microscopic exhibits were seen by the public for the first time in Trinidad on this occasion. Soon after the museum began to receive various gifts, one of which was an anchor believed to be one used by Christopher Columbus on his voyage. It was presented to the nation by Francois Agostini, owner of Constance Estate, Icacos on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1912. The anchor was unearthed inland on a reclaimed site in 1877, the location of which corresponds to records of the position at sea when Columbus lost an anchor at sea on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1498.

The Royal Victoria Institute (RVI) was used for research exhibits of natural history and archaeology, and classes in arts and crafts. In 1901, the building was enlarged to include a reading room and a recreation room and lawn tennis courts were developed on the grounds. By 1905, the Institute became a centre for social and dramatic functions.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1913, the Marie Louise Hall was opened by H.R.H. Princess Marie Louise of Schleswig-Holstein. This Hall is located at the King Edward VIII Memorial Wing on the first floor at the eastern side of the building. Around this time, the Institute housed a number of unique natural history collections. Among them were stuffed birds presented by Dr. A. Leotaud; a valuable collection of shells presented by the widow of Robert W. Keate who was Governor of Trinidad from 1857 to 1864; and an interesting collection of reptiles and insects presented by Dr. Courts as well as many minor collections and specimens.

On May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1920, the building burnt. Only the walls remained and most of the collections were lost. The main portion of the building was rebuilt using the same plan of the old building. It was reopened in June 1923 and was used for theatrical and musical entertainment and commercial classes. However, in 1945, the colonial government decided to expand the exhibitions and activities and gave the institute the status of a museum.

By 1958, the building assumed regional importance as the site of the first sitting of the Federal Court of the Federation of the West Indies. The Court met in the King Edward VIII Memorial Wing.

At Independence in 1962, the collections were moved to the former Governor's mansion where it was intended to establish the National Museum and Art Gallery. This plan was not executed and the collections were therefore returned to the Royal Victoria Institute building.

## THE SITE

The Royal Victoria Building in which the National Museum and Art Gallery is housed, occupies a prominent site in Port of Spain, Trinidad. The structure is located on land bounded by Frederick Street on the eastern side, Chancery Lane on the west, and Queen's Park West and Keate Street in the north and south side respectively. Within the confines of the site now lies the National Academy for Performing Arts (NAPA) building. Within walking distance is the Queen's Park Savannah. The Royal Victoria Institute provides enough room for sidewalk and a courtyard.

The front façade of the building faces east along Frederick Street and is flanked by the Memorial Park. This park forms an agreeable link between the hectic downtown core and its calmer residential environs. The southern elevation of the building faces what was once Deluxe Cinema, currently known as the Zen Night Club.

Vehicular traffic moves in a northern direction between Frederick Street and Queen's Park West. Along Keate Street, traffic flows east. On Chancery Lane, the traffic moves in a southerly and northerly direction, while on Queen's Park East, the traffic moves in the westerly direction. Most parking places around the sites are public used, but in the front courtyard of the Institute, a small parking space is reserved for employees and visitors.

Pedestrian access to the building occurs at the main entrance on Frederick Street. The side to the north is used mostly by employees of the Institute or persons on official business. The southern entrance on Keate Street is sometimes used when the main entrance is closed.