

Museum is the world

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Introduction

In 1966, Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica wrote: “Museum is the world”.¹ This phrase could be part of the definition of ‘universal museum’ – a place where cultural assets produced in every area of the planet are preserved, studied and exhibited, in a wide temporal arch.

Considering that ‘universal museums’ generate knowledge that subsidises the narratives of many different peoples, the relationships between universal museums and Brazilian museums may elucidate common points and emphasise differences. If ‘museum is the world’, then it reflects the manner in which cultures are understood and presented among themselves.

The concept of universal museum has been debated since the publication of *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums*.² This document was signed by many different museums; among them the ‘Big Five’ – three of which are located within the European Community: the Louvre, the Berlin State Museums and the British Museum, which was responsible for composing the text.

Heritage and legitimacy

In the Declaration, the self-denominated universal museums affirm their right of ownership over archaeological, artistic and ethnical artefacts of exogenous cultures that were incorporated into their collections. This affirmation is supported by two series of arguments: one regarding the legitimisation of actions that resulted in the incorporation of such artefacts; the other exalting their historic role as their preservers.

¹ Oiticica, Hélio (1966). From the series *Programa ambiental*. Typed document, dated and preserved: 0253/66. Available at

http://www.itaucultural.org.br/aplicexternas/enciclopedia/ho/detalhe/docs/dsp_imagem.cfm?name=Normal/0253.66%20p03%20-%20235.JPG (accessed on 9 July 2013).

² Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums (2004) *Icom News*, 1(4). Paris: International Council of Museums Magazine. Available at <http://icom.museum/media/icom-news-magazine/icom-news-2004-no1/> (accessed on 8 July 2013).

According to Geoffrey Lewis, Chairman of Icom Ethics Committee, “The real purpose of the Declaration was, however, to establish a higher degree of immunity from claims for the repatriation of objects from the collections of these museums. The presumption that a museum with universally defined objectives may be considered exempt from such demands is specious”.³

The main criticism of the Declaration comes from the museum field in Europe, particularly the UK. Among various articles dedicated to this issue,^{4,5,6,7} I would like to highlight *Enlightenment Museums: Universal or Merely Global?* In it, Mark O’Neil notes that their self-denomination as ‘universal’ evokes some form of authority that presupposes their right to represent every existing culture (O’Neil, 2004: 190).

This conception of universality is based on Enlightenment ideology, contemporary to the formation of collections that have originated from the European ‘Big Three’. This same ideology inspired the creation of a vast field of disciplines that, under the patronage of rationalism, aimed to create universally valid knowledge.

Archaeology is one among these sciences. Its development happened *pari passu* with colonisation actions, consolidating them through the extraction of artefacts that formed the original core of the great European museums’ collections.⁸ The antiquity departments

³ *Icom News* (2004) 1(3).

⁴ Bailey, Martin (2003) “A George Bush Approach on International Relations.” Available at <http://www.elginism.com/similar-cases/the-universal-museum-a-reckless-approach-to-international-cultural-relations/20030216/4557/> (accessed on 12 July 2013).

⁵ Brodie, Neil & Renfrew, Colin (2005) “Looting and the World’s Archaeological Heritage: The Inadequate Response.” Cambridge: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 34: 343-361. Available at <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev.anthro.34.081804.120551> (accessed on 8 July 2013).

⁶ Curtis, Neil G. W. (2006) “Universal Museums, Museum Objects and Repatriation: The Tangled Stories of Things.” London: Routledge, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, vol. 21(2). Available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09647770600402102#.Udr6UqN0rIU> (accessed on 8 July 2013).

⁷ Knox, Christine K. (2005-2006). “They’ve Lost their Marbles: 2002 Universal Museum’s Declaration, the Elgin Marbles and the Future of the Repatriation Movement.” Suffolk: *Suffolk Transnational Law Review*, # 315. Available at <http://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/sujtnlr29&div=18&id=&page> (accessed on 8 July 2013).

⁸ “Despite a widely held belief, the creation of the Louvre’s Department of Egyptian Antiquities was not a direct consequence of Napoleon Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt between 1798 and 1801. The English confiscated as spoils of war the antiquities collected by scholars during that trip, which included the famous Rosetta Stone, now in the British Museum.” <http://www.louvre.fr/en/departments/egyptian-antiquities> (accessed on 24 April 2013). “Interest in

in these museums serve as material proof of scientific archaeology's successes and the celebrations of the knowledge it generates regarding different cultures.

Universal museums allow the public to access archaeological findings. Their aim is “to foster knowledge by a continuous process of reinterpretation”⁹ through possession of objects and control of hermeneutical operations that allow visitors to forge a narrative of which they are the only authors. Physical possession and linguistic domination over collections express the political view of the countries that keep them as symbols of their cultural superiority and of the universal validity of their values.

In *The Whole World in our Hands*, the British Museum's Director Neil MacGregor wrote: “... One of the fundamental purposes for which the British Museum was set up by Parliament in 1753, and for which it exists today: to allow visitors to address through objects, both ancient and more recent, questions of contemporary and international relations... Parliament decided to ... set up the British Museum as the first national museum in the world. It was an act of intellectual idealism, and political radicalism ... The ideals articulated by the museum's founders were without doubt part of the Enlightenment conviction that knowledge and understanding were indispensable ingredients of civil society, and the best remedies against the forces of intolerance and bigotry that led to conflict, oppression and civil war.”¹⁰

the classical antiquities determined how the collection developed during the beginning of the nineteenth century. A number of high profile classical antiquity acquisitions were made such as the Rosetta Stone (1802) and the Townley collection of classical sculpture, including the Discobolos statue and the bust of a young woman Clytie (1805). The importance of antiquities was recognized when the Department of Antiquities was founded in 1807. Throughout the century, more classical antiquities became part of the collection including sculptures from the Temple of Apollo at Bassae (1815), The Parthenon Marbles (1816), the Nereid Monument (1842) and the remains of the Mausoleum of Halikarnassos (1856-57). [...] In 1860, the Department of Antiquities was divided into three new departments which reflect the new priorities of the collection: Greek and Roman Antiquities, Coins and Medals, Oriental Antiquities.” http://britishmuseum.org/about_us/the_museums_story/the_collection (accessed on 26 April 2013). The Berlin State Museums do not offer on their website information about the formation of their collections. In regards to Pergamon Altar, it says “[it] was recovered between 1878 and 1886”, and successively accommodated in two different buildings erected especially for it, in 1901-09 and 1910-30. <http://www.smb.museum/smb/standorte/index.php?lang=en&p+2&o>. (accessed on 26 April 2013).

⁹ *Icom News* (2004) 1(3).

¹⁰ MacGregor, Neil (2004) “The Whole World in our Hands”, *The Guardian*, 24 July 2004. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2004/jul/24/heritage.art> (accessed on 22 March 2013).

These ideas still guide the museum's discourse today; by setting itself up as universal, it extends its mission to the global realm, where it assumes a pacificator and civilizatory character: "A collection like that held in trust for the world by the British Museum is surely a powerful weapon in a conflict that may yet be mortal, unless we find means to free minds as well bodies from oppression. World museums of this kind offer us a chance to forge arguments that can hope to defeat the simplifying brutalities which disfigure politics all around the world. The British Museum must now reaffirm its worldwide civic purpose... Where else can the world see so clearly that is one?"¹¹

This same 'worldwide civic purpose' is evoked in the Declaration, where the museums try to legitimise themselves as purveyors of humanity's cultural heritage based on time spent for its preservation. "Over time, objects so acquired – whether by purchase, gift, or partage – have become part of the museums that have cared for them, and by extension part of the heritage of the nations which house them."¹²

Legitimacy is also a central issue for critics of the universal museums' discourse. To them, however, it is not linked to heritage, but to knowledge generated through it, of which museums are equally owners. According to O'Neil, that legitimacy is conditioned to a deep ethical and epistemological review, which would cause these museums to present cultural values from a universal, and not solely Western – or, to put it properly, European – perspective. "Communicating the idea that 'there are many good ways of organizing the world' and inspiring visitors to conclude from this that respect for world cultures is a good thing, would require a far more radical change in display philosophy than any other museums is even contemplating" (O' Neil, 2004: 197).

Protectionism and superiority

For Brazilian museologists, the debate regarding the legitimacy of universal museums is situated strictly on a reflective sphere, where it is associated with *past* actions – such as those referring to the origin of collections – or conditioned to *future* actions – such as the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Icom News* (2004) 1(3).

review of values and discourse reorientation. This debate has no implications in the *present*. In the *present*, the natural heirs of the heritage that is preserved by universal museums have little or no contact with it. Consequently, they are deprived of the knowledge that can be generated from it.

We apprehend the future from present fact. No request for repatriation will ever be fulfilled. Heritage monopoly will continue to subsidise epistemological monopoly. It is evident that universal museums will never return to Brazil the gold and jewels that adorn their pieces' frames – as well as the interior of palaces and heads of governing authorities. It is equally evident that universal museums will never clarify the origins and legitimacy of their heritage to visitors.

The silence of museums and critics in regards to the treatment *currently* dispensed to this heritage formed on the basis that *today* would hardly be considered legal is noteworthy. That silence covers profits. In the *present*, universal museums generate revenue through visitation and commercialisation of the by-products of the artefacts they preserve.¹³ That revenue is not shared with the descendants of those who produced them. On the contrary: it can even be enhanced by them as eventual consumers.¹⁴

Institutional businesses also generate profits. Management fees for itinerant exhibitions, for loaning works and for the rights of image reproductions of works generate high

¹³ According to data supplied by the French government, in 2009, the Louvre received 8,388,000 million visitors, of which 69 per cent paid an entrance fee; 90 per cent of these visitors saw its permanent collections (*Culture chiffres* (2010) France, Culture et Communication, 3(7). Available at <http://www.culturecommunication.gouv.fr/Politiques-ministerielles/Etudes-et-statistiques/Les-publications/Culture-chiffres-2007-2013> – accessed on 12 July 2013). Data from Germany indicates that, in 2004, cultural industries represented 1.6 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), among which 25.4 per cent came from the Museum Shops and Art Exhibitions segments. We must note that this segment grew 4.1 per cent from 2003 to 2004 (*Culture and Creative Industries in Germany* (2007) Germany, German Commission for UNESCO, 10(17), 20. Available at <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/cultural-diversity/cultural-expressions/tools/ci-mapping/europe-and-north-america/germany/> – accessed on 12 July 2013). Official data from the UK show that the British Museum received about 5.8 million visitors in 2011; the number of paying visitors to temporary exhibitions is not discriminated. We must note that 42 per cent of the 44.5 million visitors to British state museums come from abroad (*Sponsored Museums: Performance Indicators* (2012) UK, Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-culture-media-sport/series/sponsored-museums-annual-performance-indicators> – accessed on 12 July 2013). None of these reports present data regarding the business volume of museums comprising shops, cafés/restaurants, associations, courses, lectures, performances, closed group visits, publications, image rights, pieces loans, etc.

¹⁴ Reports by the French, German and British governments do not offer consistent data regarding the precedence of visitors in their main museums.

figures. It is not by chance that the European ‘Big Three’ protect the images of exogenous pieces of their collections so well. Guidelines ruling the use of images evoke the laws of intellectual property and copyright, covering commercial through to private spheres. Images of works celebrated as humanity’s heritage can be seen on the ‘Big Three’s’ websites. However, access to higher quality versions of these images, as well as copy and printing, are denied to cyber visitors.¹⁵

Those practices clearly show that the ‘Big Three’s’ current policy is based on values from the *past*, more precisely on a colonisation-biased past. It reflects a certain imagination that is still inhabited by a predatory relationship with the ‘Others’: those who are non-white, non-Christian, non-civilised. From the Others, natural, cultural and spiritual wealth are extracted so that they can be exhibited in a scientific and supposedly neutral manner in universal museums. From these locations, Europe believes itself capable of representing all cultures and, thus, serving humanity: “. . . Museums serve not the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation”.¹⁶

Brazilian museologists usually see in the success of the museum industry in Europe the result of some highly protectionist policy that, even though it tries, does not succeed in hiding a presumption of superiority under its universal discourse. When they “serve” Brazilian institutions – by loaning pieces of work, for instance – European museums take advantage of their superior standing that propriety confers on them and interfere in the curatorial field by deciding what can or cannot be loaned – not to mention the exceedingly high cost. Thus, superiority becomes authority.

In any archaeological or artistic exhibition taking place in Brazil, one hardly sees any important piece belonging to a European collection. Brazilian cultural institutions pay a high price for something secondary, as the main pieces must remain in their ‘rightful’ place, generating visits and income. Maybe this explains why European companies

¹⁵ Rules regarding image use are available on the institutions’ websites. See <http://www.louvre.fr/en/conditions-use-images> (accessed on 26 April 2013); http://www.britishmuseum.org/about_this_site/frre_images_service.aspx (accessed on 26 April 2013); <http://www.smb.museum/smb/presse/index.php?p=2&objID=9334&n=3> (accessed on 26 April 2013).

¹⁶ *Icom News* (2004) 1(3).

installed in our country rarely sponsor exhibitions, even though there are legal resources in place to foster participation in Brazilian cultural life through significant reductions in taxes owed to the state.¹⁷

Evidently, the situation of the ‘Big Three’ is very different, particularly when we talk about European art. The circuit of grand exhibitions is sponsored by many different corporations and has strong state support. Masses of visitors are attracted by works of recognised artistic and historic worth, thus stimulating sales of entrance tickets and related products.

Experience and diversity

These very distinct realities have historical roots in the relationship between coloniser and colonised. As a former colony, Brazil has inherited from Europe the values that have inspired our young and tumultuous democracy, as well as the main references of our artistic traditions. However, this legacy was conveyed to us through books, whose access is limited and whose contents are no substitute for direct contact with cultural assets. Brazil’s museum culture is quite recent. The country’s pioneering art museums are a little older than 100 years and they were conceived according to the European model.¹⁸ Collections at the main museums have European works or pieces that directly allude to European culture and aesthetics, alienating the public that is not familiar with them. Present in many different collections, this characteristic contributes to the advancement of different and complementary notions about museums in Brazil. In the common person’s imagination, a museum is a space aimed at those who have been initiated in cultural matters, people who are economically wealthy. For the elites, local museums have inexpressive collections when compared to European institutions, hence they do not deserve any attention. The combination of these two perceptions results in the huge hindrance Brazil has historically suffered in order to build collections, fund exhibitions and attract visitors.¹⁹

¹⁷ See, for instance, Lei Federal de Incentivo à Cultura, n. 8313/91, known as Lei Rouanet. Available at http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/l8313cons.htm (accessed on 6 August 2013).

¹⁸ The Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo was founded in 1905 with government funds.

¹⁹ Unlike European surveys regarding museums’ visitations, aimed at the economic impact of the museum industry, Brazilian surveys are focused on understanding the composition of their audience (gender, age, ethnicity, monthly

Brazilian museological institutions are kept in a permanent state of crisis. After the years of Brazilians being charmed by Modernist European utopia, when the main private museums were founded,²⁰ the 1960s were marked by many institutional shocks in this industry. This situation certainly contributed to Hélio Oiticica formulating his *Environmental Program*.²¹

By conceptualising his art as a recovery of anti-art, Oiticica proposed that people should appropriate elements from reality and from their surroundings, objects and common-use spaces such as the street, the beach or a vacant lot. The artistic sense of this operation was conferred through collective participation, aimed at transformation and re-signification of places and things. In *Environmental Program*, contemplative art was replaced by interactive art, implying a revision of the concepts related to museum, gallery and exhibition.

“Museum is the world; it is daily experience,” said Oiticica. The dissolution of boundaries between art and life opened paths to contemporary production, which has not restricted itself to specialised spaces. It also opened up new possibilities for museums. If it is true that experience makes a museum, then it should be a place of transformation that happens through the integration of the audience and the dialogue regarding the works of art. The aesthetic experience and knowledge called forth by it should be accessible to the largest number of people possible, without restrictions.

income, occupation), and the reason for their visit (school, tourism, spontaneous) aimed at supporting the creation of public policies for the cultural field (*Pesquisa perfil opinião* (2008). Brazil: Ministério da Cultura, Ibram, Observatório de Museus e Centros Culturais. Available at <http://www.fiocruz.br/omcc/cgi/cgilua.exe/sys/start.htm?sid=33> – accessed on 12 July 2013). Figures appear in the analysis of distribution of Brazilian museums per region. São Paulo state’s GDP represents 33.1 per cent of the Brazilian GDP (SEADE, Fundação Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados (2010). Available at <https://www.seade.gov.br/produtos/pib/> – accessed on 6 August 2013). This is the state with the largest population in the Federation, and also with the highest per capita income. This is where the largest number of museums is located, as well as the largest number of visitors. That state hosts 517 of the 3,025 Brazilian existing museums; 25.5 per cent of them are located in the state’s capital city. About 17.5 per cent of the state’s population (40 million) have visited one museum in 2010, corresponding to 7 million visitors to 517 museums.

²⁰ Museu de Arte de São Paulo (1947), Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (1948) and Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (1948).

²¹ Oiticica, Hélio (1966) From the series *Programa ambiental*. Typed document, dated and preserved: 0253/66.

Available at

http://www.itaucultural.org.br/aplicexternas/enciclopedia/ho/detalhe/docs/dsp_imagem.cfm?name=Normal/0253.66%20p03%20-%20235.JPG (accessed on 9 July 2013).

In Brazil, most museums focus their efforts on interactions with the public. This happens through educational actions, monitored group visits and assistance to spontaneous visitors. These services are free of charge, as is the entrance in the majority of museums.²² All institutions that charge an entrance fee have discount policies for different segments of the population and are free of charge on specific dates. Brazilian museums invest in building audiences. This is why they serve diversity. Facilities and visitor services have been adapted to welcome people with different needs,²³ coming from all social segments.²⁴ Services to these groups – as well as to correctional and psychiatric institutions – are not limited to the exhibitions. Courses, artistic activities and shows that are accessible to all audiences are part of the schedule of most museums and are free of charge.²⁵

With such a diverse audience, Brazilian museums find ways to battle economic adversity. Sparse budgets are a huge hindrance to the maintenance of facilities, workforce wages, building collections, and organising exhibitions. However, they do not prevent connection to the public. Electronic tools are allies in this task. They are increasingly used by Brazilian museums, allowing free access to collections and publications.

Democracy and integration

Democratisation of access to museums and investment in audience building have both direct and indirect effects. Among the direct effects, we observe growing numbers and

²² In the state of São Paulo, 54 per cent of museums have educational sectors. In them, 80.5 per cent of visits are monitored: 96.5 per cent for the children; 83.1 per cent for adults; 71.1 per cent for seniors. These data are similar to national figures (*Museus em números* (2011). Brazil: Ministério da Cultura, Ibram, 2 vols, 463-4. Available at <http://www.museus.gov.br/publicacoes-e-documentos/museus-em-numeros/> – accessed on 12 July 2013). Entrance is free in 81.3 per cent of the museums in São Paulo state. Among those charging an entrance fee, 25 per cent charge less than \$1.00; 6.3 per cent charge more than \$5.00 (*Ibid*, 2011: 453).

²³ 58.8 per cent of museums in São Paulo state have facilities adapted to special needs visitors (*Ibid*, 2011: 457).

²⁴ Regarding the composition of visitors, São Paulo museums present the following indicators: 7 per cent earn up to \$200.00 monthly; 34 per cent between \$200.00 and \$1,000.00; 22 per cent between \$1,000.00 and \$2,000.00; 27 per cent over \$2,000.00. 10 per cent of visitors surveyed did not disclose their earnings (*Pesquisa perfil opinião* (2008). Brazil: Ministério da Cultura, Ibram, Observatório de Museus e Centros Culturais. Available at <http://www.fiocruz.br/omcc/cgi/cgilua.exe/sys/start.htm?sid=33> – accessed on 12 July 2013).

²⁵ 56.1 per cent of museums in São Paulo state offer free cultural activities, following a national trend of 57.8 per cent (*Museus em números* (2011). Brazil: Ministério da Cultura, Ibram, 2 vols, 467. Available at <http://www.museus.gov.br/publicacoes-e-documentos/museus-em-numeros/> – accessed on 12 July 2013).

diversification of visitors and museological institutions;²⁶ among the indirect effects, we see the significant expansion of the artistic sector in Brazil, comprising an economic spectrum from academic courses to the art market.

Brazilian museums do not profit; they create profits for society. That profit is mainly social.²⁷ Educative and accessibility policies eliminate physical, intellectual and social barriers. They are the first step towards integration of the public, which makes the aesthetic experience offered by museums sensorially irreplaceable, epistemologically unique and socially democratic.

To democratise is to promote the integration of what is diverse. This is extremely important in divided societies. In Brazil, social divisions are economic; in Europe, they originate in the ethnic-cultural sphere. Heritage and financial resources in Brazilian institutions are scarce. However, practices aimed at diminishing social gaps are abundant. In European museums, particularly the universal ones, these resources are growing. However, are those practices aiming towards the same goal?

A considerable part of the ‘Big Three’s’ heritage comes from regions in which Europe exerted predatory action. Many among those artefacts were produced by ancestors of different ethnic-cultural groups established in Europe today. That heritage is public. It can be freely visited and appreciated, sometimes even without any charge, by everyone. However, this does not mean their access is democratic.

In order for democracy to exist, there must be representation, and this is accomplished through relationships between representatives and those who are represented. In universal

²⁶ In the state of São Paulo, 47 museums were founded between 1981 and 1990; 63 between 1991 and 2000; and 41 between 2001 and 2009. 21.9 per cent of the museums in São Paulo state are private (*Ibid*, 2011: 446-7).

²⁷ Examples are museums installed in low-income areas through community initiatives. This is the case of Museu da Maré, founded in 2006 by residents of the favela complex of the Maré suburb in Rio de Janeiro. The museum has a permanent exhibition, online exhibitions and a document collection; it also promotes seminars, art workshops, professional training courses, and editorial production projects. All activities are facets of its institutional mission: to collectively build the history of the Maré communities and to preserve their memory. The museum is installed in a warehouse provided by a maritime logistics company; it is the main meeting place for the complex’s residents. Funds come from the private sector and from the city and state administrations. The workforce, including experts in museum activities, come from within the communities.

museums, heritage represents many different cultures. However, do visitors see themselves represented in it? Do the many different ethnic-cultural groups living in large European urban centres identify with the heritage preserved by those museums? Maybe the best question to ask is: “Do universal museums promote such identification?” Probably not. What groups that are not familiarised with the abstraction of museum space do actually identify with *their* cultural heritage extracted from its primary context and destitute of its original intentions? On the other hand, any group can easily identify museums as products of outrageous actions and identify themselves as the object of such actions.

Approximations of heirs and legacy is the first step towards museum democratisation, and this is what conditions their legitimisation. The universality of museums does not rest on the encyclopedic diversity of their heritage, but on the democratic access they offer to this heritage. That does not happen naturally, just by opening doors. It happens culturally and politically, through educational, inclusive activities aimed at producing knowledge and integrating different audiences.

Universal museums “... serve not the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation”. If they assume the right to represent every culture, people from every culture must see themselves represented by them. The ‘Big Three’ will have accomplished their mission when *every* citizen of Paris, London and Berlin feels they are represented – instead of outraged – by the heritage they preserve.

If ‘museum is the world’, maybe we can say that the world is museum. The museification of European cities is a fact. Urban spaces have been constantly adapted in order to integrate renewed historical monuments and contemporary buildings with audacious design. This new architecture contemporises a past full of glories, delimitating iconic areas in which circulation and services are associated with the tourism industry or high luxury consumption. Museum-cities are inaccessible to the majority of their inhabitants. Hopefully, everyone who lives in those cities will be able to take possession of them and bring forth a collective experience of understanding.

About the author

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