

Interview: Rising from the ashes

JOÃO PACHECO DE OLIVEIRA, GEMMA AELLAH & JESSICA TURNER

RAI research officer, Gemma Aellah and publications officer, Jessica Turner, interview João Pacheco de Oliveira, professor of anthropology and curator of ethnographic collections at the National Museum, to find out what has been lost and what the future holds for Brazil's national museum.

João Pacheco de Oliveira on why the burning of the Museu Nacional offers a chance for rethinking the concept of a national museum

On 2 September 2018, the Museu Nacional (National Museum) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil was engulfed in flames, destroying – it is believed – up to 90 per cent of its collections.

Local and international media portrayed this event as an undeniable tragedy. The fire was described as a story of political neglect (Adams 2018) and a terrible warning of the consequences of chronic, global underfunding of museums. It was also described in much more emotional terms as an attack on the memory and soul of Brazil as a country. Bernardo Mello Franco, a popular Brazilian columnist, wrote that 'the tragedy this Sunday is a sort of national suicide. A crime against our past and future generations' (translated in Watts et al. 2018).

But what, exactly, is a museum? And what sort of national identity or soul did the Museu Nacional call forth? The International Council of Museums immediately put out a statement arguing that institutions like the Museu Nacional are 'vital public resources that preserve our collective memory and our legacy for future generations' (ICOM 2018). This is not, however, an unambiguous statement. It is important to critically interrogate what collective memory is being preserved in museums, and what legacy they project.

Gemma Aellah and Jessica Turner (GA&JT): What is the impact of the fire at the National Museum of Brazil?

João Pacheco de Oliveira (JPO): The fire has of course destroyed many invaluable items, and it is certain that in the few hours of that night, 90 per cent of the Brazilian families who own a TV experienced intensely, in colour and in detail, the trauma of the destruction of their National Museum. There is a sense of loss that has taken over the Brazilian people, and this space – in the expectations of both the general and specialized public – urgently needs to be filled with new information, images and narratives. In the days that followed the fire, many indigenous peoples phoned the researchers at the National Museum to express their sadness and to announce that they would make new pieces and collections to send to the Museum and replace those that were destroyed by the fire. So, this loss also asks for hope and regeneration.

One indigenous woman, a Tupinambá leader, who had visited the National Museum before it burnt, was greatly impacted by the strength and power that the palace inspired. But, on returning to this location, she now perceived the fragility of the monuments the whites had constructed. For the Tupinambá, she told me, fire is part of the cycle of life; it creates a small clearing in the forest so that new vegetation can flourish. With this reasoning, she wanted to encourage us, teachers and students, inspired by the tenacity of the natives, to undertake new works and maintain the expectation of doing something better.

Her metaphor is apt in relation to my own ideas about the future of the museum. The history of the National Museum collections has been shaped by colonial encounters, and a reborn Museu Nacional could be a museum for and about indigenous people rather than a museum for exoticism, objectifying looks and tourism. And for this, new ways of collecting, curating and collaborating with indigenous leaders and intellectuals are needed. This is the longer-term project for the renaissance of the National Museum. Towards this end, I would call, in the short term

(two years), for a sharing of knowledge and any existing materials held by major museums around the world, in order to create an international digital repository of the indigenous cultures of Brazil, accessible first and foremost to themselves and the interested national public.

GA&JT: How do you see its history?

JPO: The museum's history – and the collections of the museum – took shape through colonial encounters, and later as part of a nation-building project. The 'Royal Museum', as it was originally called, was created in 1818, alongside other key cultural institutions in Brazil (such as the Public Library and Archives, the Royal Academy of Arts, the Botanical Gardens and the National Observatory). The creation of such institutions was an attempt by the Portuguese crown to establish the cultural conditions for a remote functioning of its colonial empire in Rio de Janeiro as the court fled to Brazil when its capital, Lisbon, was taken over by Napoleon's armies.

After the independence of Brazil (1822), and especially during the long Second Reign (1840-1889), the museum turned its focus towards research on the diversity of the traditions that compose the Brazilian national identity, bringing together collections of ethnology, archaeology, physical anthropology and the natural sciences. With the advent of the Republic, the National Museum was transferred to the old imperial palace, consolidating itself as a research institute that preceded the emergence of Brazilian universities.

This history was reflected in the ethnographic collections. It is true that an enormous amount of important and irreplaceable objects were lost in the fire. In particular, I feel great sadness over the loss of unique objects, such as a beautiful Tikuna mask, collected, it was supposed, by the expedition of Spix and Martius (1817-1821), taken as a model for magnificent drawings by Jean-Baptiste Debret and published in his travelogue (*Voyage Pittoresque et Historique au Brésil*, Paris, 1834-1839). Similarly, the wonderful featherwork done by the Mundurucus Indians in the 19th century, the basketry and ceramics of various peoples and the artefacts no longer produced today as a result of the devastation of the Amazonian forest, the Mata Atlântica and the savannas of Central Brazil.

GA&JT: Did you suffer any losses of your own?

JPO: One of my greatest personal losses concerned a painting hanging in my office of a boy with a Brazilian name, Guido. He was a Bororo from Mato Grosso who was adopted by the wife of the governor of Mato Grosso and he was brought up like a son by her. She was a woman who was very curious, an extraordinary woman, much ahead of her time. She used to collect ethnographic artefacts and gave the National Museum a large and rich collection of pieces from the indigenous peoples of Mato Grosso. It is a beautiful painting and an exceptional narrative. I wrote an article about it, and of course I would love to get it back.

In my research, I discovered that the picture represents a scene that never existed. Guido had really posed for photographer Marc Ferrez in Rio de Janeiro, along with another Bororo boy who had come for a health treatment in the capital. After Guido's death, his adoptive mother, using this photo as the basis, commissioned a portrait of Guido to a Parisian (anonymous) painter, who mixed the physical characteristics and adornments of the two Indian boys. The portrait of Guido thus represents a re-elaboration of a foreign painter, who had never been in Brazil and

who combined the images of two children, not just Guido (Pacheco de Oliveira 2005).

But the eclectic nature of this painting leads me to a significant point about the museum's collections, one which has not been addressed in public outpourings of grief about the loss. It is important to note that in the National Museum, as in many colonial museums, the collections themselves were the product of ad hoc collecting, often by non-indigenous, wealthy families and travellers. I have been a curator of ethnology at the museum for more than 20 years, and it has been a difficult task to make ethnographic identifications of many of the artefacts and collections. The travellers who collected all this material didn't know the people who had created them. They often identified the pieces and their functions, technologies and ritual value incorrectly and sometimes even got the tribes wrong as well. Pieces that drew attention from an aesthetic point of view (from a Western perspective) were often devoid of relevant ethnographic and historical information.

GA&JT: How do you see the future of the National Museum after the fire?

JPO: I think we should always try to move away from the trap of seeking the authenticity of pieces and collections and replace this with a narrative of their stories and their connections with living people and communities. How can we do that?

There has been an important criticism of colonial material culture and the de-historicizing of museum collections (Nicholas Thomas, James Clifford, Alban Bensa, among others). Jean Jamin (1998), for example, poses an astonishing question: 'should we burn the ethnographic museums?' Of course, we are obviously not going to burn all the museums, but he was showing, intellectually, that the colonial museums end up objectifying the pieces they display. They make a great spectacle, they are beautiful. But now, we should try to use this spectacle in different ways.

During my own fieldwork, many years before the fire, we created a collaborative museum in the Amazon region, with the Tikuna. It was a way that the indigenous people could show the greatness of their culture to the local non-indigenous population, to people who had always considered them to be miserable, wild savages. This museum has become very important for the indigenous population themselves and for the Brazilians also. Collaboration with the indigenous people, leaders, intellectuals and common people was central.

An idea I have often used is the museological illusion. Every museum should evoke emotions, identifications and dreams in its visitors. A museum is like a box of surprises and enchantments, bringing a magical dimension and a production of knowledge and empathy that I call 'museological illusion'. The colonial museums always play with an illusion of authority and distance, perhaps because they prefer to create their illusion through exoticization or aesthetic phenomena.

So now, I think, for the anthropologist who works with non-colonial collections, the new challenge is to create a museum with another illusion, one that has more to do with the life lived by the peoples the museums talk about.

In the rebirth of the National Museum, because of the loss of the original objects, a new narrative must be put in practice – that of indigenous people bringing objects to the museum and making objects for the museum. We could, therefore, recompose the National Museum's physical collections from the donations of researchers and indigenous people themselves. This would impose a radical change in the modes and forms of collecting practices.

The pieces that are to be assembled would no longer correspond to the heap of objects informed by the traveller's foreign gaze or by the exoticism typical to the market of

ethnographic objects. They would be selected and identified by the indigenous populations themselves and through the ways in which they intend to represent their own culture – or, also, by those who accompany and study them in solidarity, respecting their particularities, and supporting their political and cultural strategies.

GA&JT: How do you reconcile these tensions between a museum created out of the colonial gaze and a museum responsive to indigenous sensibilities?

JPO: I am not arguing against the idea of the museum as a treasure trove of illusions and enchantments, because this is fundamental. The museum can't be an academic thesis, filled only with scientific classifications or rational arguments. Even if it has only a secondary message, extremely subtle and without written expression, the museum needs to enter into dialogue with the common experiences and dilemmas of its visitors in order to become wanted, complicit and seductive. Museums have to touch the heart – but in a very different way, I think, from the original colonial museum. They have got a new form, a new agenda and presentation, and a new way of curating as well.

There is the possibility of doing something new and completely different from colonial museums. Indigenous peoples need to be the agents of their rights, giving authorization for the use of their image, and their beliefs, and I think this would be a much better way of curating things. This style of curating implies that we make a journey with the indigenous people. We are not distant from them, we are fellow travellers in the action.

GA&JT: What role can other national museums and institutions play in supporting the reconstitution of Brazil's National Museum?

JPO: Immediately after the fire, there were a number of crowdsourcing initiatives that sprung up with the aim of recreating the physical collections. We are not thinking about the devolution of pieces. But what would be very productive would be to create an archive of all the digital collections around the world to respond to the necessity of preserving the memories of Brazilian indigenous cultures.

We have to rely on the big European and American museums to make visible, and give us information on, the Brazilian collections that they have, which indigenous people and researchers could access and read in Portuguese, even on their mobile phones (used intensively by the new generation of indigenous people). The aim is not to rebuild the collections we had, but to gather and make more widely accessible all the information, images and narratives held by international museums that are directly related to Brazilian indigenous cultures. And in the second stage, after about two or three years, when we are receiving the collections produced in collaboration with indigenous peoples and communities, we'll start to reconstruct a new museum.

In June 2018, the National Museum was 200 years old, three months before the tragic fire. But 36 years earlier, Luiz de Castro Faria, dean of anthropology and former director of the museum, said emphatically: 'Our museum is not a guardian of memory, but it is a producer of memories; it is a generator of knowledge, and not a warehouse of relics' (de Castro Faria, 1993: 77). This is very much in keeping with my own thoughts on the future of the ruined museum now. How far this vision of a new museum for indigenous peoples can be realized in Brazil's current political climate remains an urgent challenge, necessarily articulated with international support. ●

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FIRE AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM, BRAZIL

Oil painting, undated and without the artist's signature, that used to belong to the National Museum, Brazil, until the recent fire destroyed it. Depicted is a Bororo boy, baptized as Guido, who was adopted at approximately 7 years of age by a lady of fine education, wife of the governor of Mato Grosso, D. Maria do Carmo de Mello Rego.

Without children and of relatively advanced age, the couple treated Guido as if he were their own son. D. Maria do Carmo made great efforts to win his affection, teaching him the first letters and introducing him to the arts. For four years, from 1888 to 1892, Guido lived with her and her husband, first in Mato Grosso, then in the city of Rio de Janeiro until he died on a nearby farm due to natural causes, possibly pneumonia.

Donated by D. Maria do Carmo before his death, this painting became part of one of the oldest National Museum collections composed of about 400 Indian artifacts from Mato Grosso she had gathered (a large part of these from Bororo origin), including an album with drawings and watercolors made by Guido and carefully arranged by her.

Not only this painting, but the entire collection of ethnographic pieces and the album of drawings and watercolours were unfortunately destroyed by the fire

In this issue, Gemma Aellah and Jessica Turner interview João Pacheco de Oliveira, professor of anthropology and curator of ethnographic collections at the National Museum, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

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