Decolonising the museum: exhibition and mediation of African collections in European museums

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Abstract

The first museums emerged in Europe, in the context of colonial empires and hegemonic thinking, based on contemporary evolutionist theories, becoming an instrument in the service of the dominant power. The end of colonialism caused a rupture in the model of evolutionist museums, bringing to debate new ways of interpreting, displaying and communicating collections from non-European cultures. This paper aims to analyse the phenomenon of the decolonisation of the museum, starting from a diachronic analysis of issues related to the restitution of objects to the origin cultural groups and the reformulation of museological discourses, namely through projects of co-curatorship. This investigation is qualitative, descriptive and conceptual, based on bibliographic research and critical analysis of the gathered data, whose results are structured into four points: colonialist discourse of the first museums; post-colonialist debates; decolonisation and restitution of objects to the origin cultural groups; agents and factors of the decolonisation of museums in contemporary times. As a research hypothesis, it is suggested that the decolonisation of the museum is an ongoing process that develops by recovering the original meaning of objects and by representing the origin communities, assuring the inclusion of their narratives and their active and equal participation in the museum's practices.

Keywords

co-curatorship; museological discourse; exhibition; colonial museum; post-colonial museum

Descolonizar o museu: exposição e mediação dos espólios africanos em museus europeus

Resumo

Os primeiros museus surgiram na Europa, no contexto dos impérios coloniais e do pensamento hegemónico, assente nas teorias evolucionistas da época, tornando-se um instrumento ao serviço do poder dominante. O fim do colonialismo provocou uma rutura no modelo dos museus evolucionistas, trazendo para debate novas formas de interpretação, exposição e comunicação dos espólios provenientes de culturas não europeias. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar o fenómeno de descolonização do museu, partindo de uma análise diacrónica para abordar as questões relacionadas com a restituição dos objetos aos grupos culturais de origem e com a reformulação dos discursos museológicos, nomeadamente, através de projetos de curadoria partilhada. A investigação realizada é qualitativa, descritiva e conceptual, fundamentando-se na pesquisa bibliográfica e na análise crítica dos dados recolhidos, cujos resultados se estruturam em quatro pontos: os discursos colonialistas dos primeiros museus; debates pós-colonialistas; descolonização e restituição dos objetos aos grupos de origem; agentes e fatores da descolonização do museu na contemporaneidade. Como hipótese de investigação, sugere-se que a descolonização do museu é um processo em evolução e que se desenvolve através da recuperação do

sentido original dos objetos e da representação das comunidades de origem, assegurando-lhes a integração das suas narrativas e a participação ativa e paritária nas práticas museológicas.

Palavras-chave

curadoria partilhada; discurso museológico; exposição; museu colonial; museu pós-colonial

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Introduction

The founding of the first museums, in the late 18th century, is connected to the building of identity of European nations, with an underlying idea of the Western superiority which legitimised colonial power. Two centuries later, a fading European hegemony, decolonisation, and multiculturalism give rise to the debate on how museums deal with the old colonial collections and with claims from the origin cultural groups, either regarding the restitution of the collections, or the active participation on the elaboration of museological discourses.

Historical analysis is crucial for understanding how European museums with colonial collections evolved until the challenges of contemporaneity. Considering that the museum's presentation (exhibition, communication, mediation) of these collections amidst extrinsic cultures is done in an aesthetic or decorative perspective, or through a biased anthropological interpretation, the research's underlying questions are built around this problematic in an European context, aimed at analysing the purpose of the incorporation and exhibition of these objects and assessing how museological discourse keeps up with political, social, and cultural changes.

As research in the field of Social Sciences, formalising itself as qualitative and conceptual study (Jaakkola, 2020; Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2015), the methodological process is based on the bibliographic research related to the generic topic of colonialism in the museum, without prejudice to references to case studies that may contribute to illustrate the theoretical framework.

Literature review

Based on Michel Foucault's arguments (1980) on how power uses emergent civic spaces, and cultural and leisure activities to create new ways of control and discipline, Tony Bennett (2004, 2006) analyses the way museums become involved in these power games and how, since the mid-19th century, they take upon themselves the aim to civilise society according to contemporary bourgeois values. This mission to regulate and civilise society was combined with the civilising discourse of the European colonial powers *vis-à-vis* the colonised world. The contestation to the way museums appropriated and decontextualized the objects of non-Western civilisations has been analysed according to authors such as Sally Price (2001), Chris Gosden (2001, 2002), or within the anthropology of senses of Seremetakis (1996), Constance Classen and David Howes (2006). The

Pitt Rivers Museum is referred to as the epitome of colonialist and evolutionist museums (Chapman, 1985; Gosden & Larson, 2007; Hicks, 2013; Keuren, 1984; Simine, 2013), to which Francis Boas opposed, by proposing that ethnographic collections were ordered based on affinities between cultural groups (Jacknis, 1985; Jenkins, 1994).

The transformation of the museum, as a cultural space in a post-colonialist context, has been addressed in works such as *Museums in postcolonial Europe* (Thomas, 2010), whose contents present a few of the most relevant debates on this issue, or *The postcolonial museum* (Chambers, Angelis, Ianniciello & Orabona, 2014), proceedings of a conference held in 2013, and which is intended to be a compilation of critical analyses and reassessment of museological practices focused on experiences carried out in former colonies spaces. The subject has also been addressed in scientific papers (Aldrich, 2012; Boast, 2011; Fox, 1992; Tolia-Kelly, 2016). In turn, the opening of the Musée du quai Branly (Quai Branly Museum) initiated a broad debate on the musealisation of anthropological collections and the representation of the "other" in a post-colonial perspective (Clifford, 2007; Dias, 2007; Herle, Wastiau, Gryseels, Bocoum & Bose, 2017; L'Estoile, 2007; Lebovics, 2006, 2009, 2010; Price, 2007).

The decolonisation of the museum involves cultural identity questions (Hall, 1992) that trigger the request to return colonial objects to the origin cultural groups (Gurian, 2006; Simpson, 2001). This issue takes on quite particular contours when it comes to human remains (Cury, 2020; Ikram, 2011). The Parthenon Marbles, however, lead the most high-profile and paradigmatic case of tension between a museum and a country of origin[1].

Since the late 20th century, museums have been promoting inclusive programmes and co-curatorships with indigenous communities in a phenomenon described by James Clifford (1997) as "museums as contact zone" (p. 188). Following Clifford, several are the authors that consider that the museum is no longer a monolithic and static institution, and has taken on, instead, a dynamic action, even if unstable, integrating the narratives of the origin cultural groups (Aldrich, 2010, 2012; Gurian, 2006; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Phillips, 2005). The new interpretations created together with the producers of cultural references bring along new exhibition proposals and broaden the anthropological perspectives of the museological discourse (Lima-Filho, Abreu & Athias, 2016), which can fit into the concept of activist museum (Janes & Sandell, 2019).

The colonialist discourse of the first museums

The public museum, as institution, emerged in Europe between the late 18th and the early 19th centuries, during the Age of Enlightenment, which attributed it, through goals of preservation of heritage and culture and organisation of the knowledge intrinsic to them, the purpose of constituting a repository of national identity. "Detaching the display of power – the power to command and arrange objects for display – from the risk of disorder, it also provided a mechanism for the transformation of the crowd into an ordered and, ideally, self-regulating public" (Bennett, 2006, p. 99). Consequently, the public

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[1] Retrieved from https://www.bringthemback.org/

museum became an instrument of new ways of power and a means of promoting the dominant ideology (Bennett, 2006) and its imperial and colonial policies (Bennett, 2004).

Throughout Western history, exotic artefacts, brought from foreign lands by soldiers, merchants, missionaries, scientists, explorers, travellers, were signs of military, economic, social or cultural dominion over their former owners and places of origin (Classen & Howes, 2006). Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1979), analyses the way the Western world conceptualised the Orient in a set of false and romanticised ideas, considering that

> the Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and the oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and more recurring images of the Other. (Said, 1979, p. 1)

It is within this conceptual framework that the great expeditions which enhance the collections of the first great museums emerge: the search for material testimonies of the early days of Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Aegean civilisations, in colonised areas between the Middle East and Western Asia.

In the 19th century, the gathering of artefacts in their places of origin and their transference to Western museums was made under the pretext of rescuing them from obscurity and abandonment, in order to provide them, instead, with the civilised, illuminated and protected environment of the museum. Using these patterns of conquest and supremacy, the museum developed a colonisation model which underlies the management of collections and exhibitional discourses beset with biases and stereotypes. However, under the pretext of epistemological reasons, the interest on those artefacts reflected a political, social and cultural purpose, combined with the propaganda of the superiority of the coloniser.

The concept of "orientalism" was not limited to the European interest over the Arab and Asian worlds, but involved the whole complex of representations and projections with which it built the image of the "other". In the same sense, Bernard McGrane states that the way that, in the 19th century, the West transforms "the Other into a concrete memory of the past" (McGrane, 1989, p. 94) led to an anthropological approach which was not focused on who the colonised peoples effectively were ("in themselves"), but what they represented for the coloniser-"us"; that is, the speech "speaks of the Other but never to the Other' (McGrane, 1989, p. 96).

The great expeditions provided the museum with countless artefacts which, because they reflected the spirit of the cabinets of curiosities, were considered exotic or used as study subject, but belittled in the confrontation with the artistic collections of European origin. The evolutionist theories which, after Lamarck and Darwin, developed during the 19th century, along with Auguste Comte's philosophy, supported the historicist narratives of the museum. The management of the collections reflected the scientific knowledge of that time which, in its turn, was in tune with the interests of the European states regarding the justification of a civilising and colonialist expansion.

Therefore, in their genesis, museums embody the memories and representations of mankind's history according to an evolutionist perspective, in which colonialism was presented as an evidence of that progress: "the modern museum was about 'showing and educating' people in accordance with a pre-established discourse that would lead the activity of thinking towards predesigned conclusions about the position and status of indigenous peoples as opposed to the 'white man'" (Sauvage, 2010, p. 107). So, colonialism became inherent to most part of the museums created and developed during the 19th century. While the great international museums kept the universalist trend of their collections, in European and American metropolitan centres, throughout the 19th century, museums lean towards the disciplinary specialisation without, however, totally abdicating from eclecticism in their collections. That was the reason why even art, archaeology or natural history museums kept ethnographic collections, which reflected the same evolutionary and, thus, discretionary, principles applied to the human societies they came from.

The exhibitional criteria were based on the pedagogical assumption that learning, or apprehension of knowledge, was a passive process of visualisation (see to learn and know). "It was thought that the educational purpose of museums could be achieved merely by putting items out on display in the appropriate order" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, p. 13). It gave the museum the responsibility of exhibiting the artefacts in continuous and thorough sequences, by filling the empty spaces, which showed the natural order of evolutionary development. Hence the designation of "evolutionary museum" proposed by Tony Bennett: "for one of the guiding principles of evolutionary museums was that things should be so arranged that they might be clearly and distinctly seen if they were to achieve the forms of public legibility to which they aspire" (Bennett, 2004, p. 166). The remaining sensory values of the object were obliterated, forgetting that its essence depended on social use and that its discursive capacity had a parallel relevance to that of Western knowledge (Classen & Howes, 2006). This decontextualisation is an integral part of colonialism and of its concomitant practices in the museum (Seremetakis, 1996).

On the other hand, the profusion of objects and the primacy given to looking did not propitiate the introduction of interpretative texts or any references to their intangible components. "This dynamic web of sensuous and social meaning is broken when an artifact is removed from its cultural setting and inserted within the visual symbol system of the museum" (Classen & Howes, 2006, p. 200). The objects were distant from their place of origin, not only in a material or geographic sense, but also from a conceptual and symbolic point of view, having lost the meaning inherent by context and use. All these factors, together with the evolutionist rationale, contributed to their marginalisation and subalternisation under the generic classification of "primitive art". The concept, being reductive, deals "with some of our basic and unquestioned cultural assumptions – our 'received wisdom' – about the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'" (Price, 2001, pp. 4-5). The museum promoted the opposition between the prototypes of the civilised and the savage, serving the negative attributes of the colonised to validate, by antinomy, the superiority of the European coloniser. "The invention of the idea of primitive society

(...) enabled Europeans to define their own Enlightened modernity against the imagined disorder and lack of regulation of colonized others" (Edwards, Gosden & Phillips, 2006, p. 16). In these terms, the evolutionary theory implied the concept of supremacy serving as a foundation for the museological discourse.

The Pitt Rivers Museum, founded in 1884 by August Pitt Rivers, who donated his ethnographic and anthropologic private collection to the University of Oxford, is usually quoted as a paradigmatic example of a colonial and evolutionary museum. Reflecting the scientific theories of that time, Pitt Rivers designed what he considered to be the ideal museum as a "giant anthropological rotunda", composed of concentric circles adapted to the "exhibition of the expanding varieties of an evolutionary arrangement" (Pitt Rivers, 1988, quoted in Chapman, 1985, p. 39). The selection and or organisation of the objects in the exhibition space obeyed to exclusively formal criteria, without considering their geographical provenance or cultural context of origin. "Using criteria of comparative relative homogeneity and simplicity to chronologically order similar sets of artifacts, the researcher could establish a sequence of material objects which displayed the progress of culture from the more to less primitive" (Keuren, 1984, p. 176). The disposition of the artefacts intended to demonstrate the evolution of manufacturing techniques in different cultures and over time, in a gradual evolutionary line, from primitive improvisations to complex European elaborations (Simine, 2013), that is, until Victorian England which, symbolically, became the vortex of human accomplishments. This linear ordering was adjusted to the Western ethnocentric ideology, and the museum became a model of the empire and of the civilising order it imposed to natives from other cultures.

The display based on the concept of cultural hierarchy was, meanwhile, altered by eliminating the series system. "Although many objects are still grouped according to their form or function, 'typologically', (...) the displays show different cultural solutions to common problems, and the diversity of human creativity and belief systems" (Gosden & Larson, 2007, p. 3). Despite this, the museum still reflects a colonial attitude towards other cultures, serving as representation of 19th century museology, anchored in concepts underlying the exhibition of ethnographic collections. Although this might be a reason to keep the museum as a case study, it does not evade the risk of triggering a nostalgic attitude regarding the past: "nevertheless, the popularity of the museum rests to a large degree on what visitors believe (and are positively encouraged to believe) is an untouched Victorian display" (Simine, 2013, p. 132).

Adverse both to the museological discourse based on evolutionism and the narrative of progress through technological stages, which set up a cultural hierarchy with western Europe at the top, Francis Boas advocated that "classification is not explanation" (quoted in Qureshi, 2014, p. 278) and proposed an alternative model for ordering the objects, now based on criteria of affinity between cultural groups. "Boas promoted a cultural relativism and pluralism that was to become one of the hallmarks of American anthropology after the turn of the century" (Jenkins, 1994, p. 266). In a dispute he had, in 1887, with Otis Mason and John Wesley Powell (Jacknis, 1985; Stocking, Mason & Powell, 1994), Boas criticised the typological and evolutionary model because he considered

that to separate an object from the cultural group it was created for, and from the set of its productions, would render the understanding of its multiple meanings, as well as the knowledge about its ethnicity, impossible. This perspective, already following a functionalist approach, provided each cultural group with an autonomous and unitary relevance, eliminating hierarchies and comparisons between them, and contradicted the tenets of evolutionism, even though evolutionary schemes have remained broadly rooted until the second half of the 20th century.

Post-colonialist debates

The disintegration of the European empires brought about several post-colonial theories that address the circumstances and consequences of European colonisation and the social effects of imposing the coloniser's identity on the colonised. "Postcolonialism is the academic cultural component of the condition of postcoloniality. It represents a theoretical approach on the part of the formerly colonized, the subaltern and the historically oppressed" (Nayar, 2015, p. 122).

Evolutionist museums, or those that still exhibit artefacts from former colonies, without considering them works of art at the same level as the great western masters, are analytically and critically reassessed, which includes exhibition criteria and the formulation of their discourses. The way objects are displayed in evolutionist museums is denounced in their colonialist purposes and inability to represent the "other": "the place assigned the primitive within these was designed exclusively for western eyes, for telling a story to and about a metropolitan 'we' by means of the representational roles assigned to 'them'" (Bennett, 2004, p. 110). The objects are used to substantiate the hegemonic discourse of Anthropology, Art, and History museums.

The logic that had inspired the creation of the first museums dissipated with the end of colonialism. For this reason, post-colonial studies reach the very core of western museological activity, forcing us to question the matrices of their functioning, the legitimacy of possessing these artefacts and the way they are displayed.

The question, which has been highly focused on the Anthropology and Ethnography museums, gained relevance on the occasion of the creation of the Musée du quai Branly (currently Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac), which annexed the ethnology collections of the Musée de l'Homme (Museum of Mankind) and of the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (National Museum of Arts of Africa and Oceania). The permanent exhibition presents around 3.500 objects, selected from the about 280.000 that constitute the collection, most of them coming from ethnic groups from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas, and which date back to the 19th and the early 20th centuries.

The museum was announced as the place "where cultures converse", creating a controversy synthesized by James Clifford: "cultures don't converse: people do, and their exchanges are conditioned by particular contact-histories, relations of power, individual reciprocities, modes of travel, access, and understanding" (2007, p. 16). Clifford (2007) also formulates a series of questions that frame the issue of post-colonial

anthropological museology: "exactly how "cultures" will be able to "converse" – speaking what languages? supposing what epistemologies? what political agendas? with what degrees of authority? representing whom? – remains to be seen" (p. 5).

Despite the claimed identification of the museum with the local cultures and the announced dialogue with its agents, its opening in 2006 started a broad debate around colonial legacy in museum collections, the representation policies within the articulation between Anthropology, Archaeology or History of Art, and the inclusion of origin communities. The very designation of the museum (related to its location, near the quai Branly, by the river Seine), refusing to be named *arts premiers* (Price, 2007, p. 47) or similar, reveals the difficulty in defining the museum's collection, between Art and Anthropology, and the rejection of a terminology that evokes evolutionary theories. While Fabienne Boursiquot (2014) considers that the Musée du quai Branly reconfigures the ethnographic museum as art museum, Nélida Dias (2007) understands that the museum, "thus escaping all disciplinary influence" (p. 76), is situated within the scope of arts and civilisations, fact that allows it to inaugurate a new museological model.

In the inaugural speech of the Musée du quai Branly, the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac (2006), while affirming the homage of France to the peoples that, over the years, suffered the violence of Western countries, also defined the establishment of the museum as "the refusal of ethnocentrism, of this unreasonable and inacceptable claim of the West to carry, in itself, the fate of mankind" (n.p.). Besides that, he rejected the ideological basis of evolutionist museums:

> there is the rejection of this false evolutionism which claims that certain peoples would be frozen at an earlier stage of human evolution, that their so-called 'primitive' cultures would only be valid as objects of study for the ethnologist or, at best, as sources of inspiration for the Western artist. (Chirac, 2006, n.p.)

This might be seen as the announcement of a new perspective on the "other", through the recovery of their cultural practices, but innovation was limited to Jean Nouvel's bold architecture and to scenographies of a spectacular museum arrangement (Lebovics, 2006). Apart from a few occasional temporary exhibitions and their parallel programming, the museological discourse, which was not very informative, maintained the ethnocentric view of the "other", referred to in the third person. "Objects from widely varied cultures are all shown in homogenizing, elegantly shaped, adequately lit glass cases. Here and there particularly handsome pieces were isolated in dramatically highlighted cases to emphasize their qualities as great art" (Lebovics, 2006, p. 99). The original contexts are evoked through vulgarised biases and a stereotypical view of the rainforest, dark and mysterious, in an artificial suggestion, simplistic and very reductive. The objects, regardless of their function or symbolism, are aestheticized, presenting themselves as a work of art and having the underlying purpose of showing that there are other artistic universes outside Europe and the Western world. What apparently could be seen as a promotion, from artefact to art object, is a distortion of the meaning and use

of these objects, given that they were not created as art objects nor are seen as such by the origin cultural groups (Herle et al., 2017, §8).

The president of the museum, Stéphane Martin, justified, in an interview, the absence of texts in the permanent exhibition through the dichotomy between the Anglophone museology, focused on a didactic and informative intention, and the French one "obsessed by the purity and authenticity of the object" (quoted in Naumann, 2006, p. 122), which prevented, simultaneously, the presence of indigenous narratives. At the same time, it recovers the predominance of the visual aspect of the first museums which is here expressed through the aestheticization of objects and the staging of space.

Neither the "other" takes on the narrative, nor is the object displayed in the complexity of its evocations and representations. The heart of the matter is that this "other" keeps its otherness instead of, definitively, claiming to be the "I" in the exhibitional discourse. "This new Musée du quai Branly represents the Other, the colonised, mainly from the perspective of the aesthetic culture of the contemporary West. The connection between the beautiful and the exotic primitive has a long history in France" (Lebovics, 2010, p. 443). Nonetheless, Benoît de L'Estoile (2007) argues that, in the post-colonial world, the museum must be more a space of rapport between the "us" and the "others" than just about the "others'. By arguing that the museum "proposes an initiatory experience that provides access to a timeless and dreamlike universe" (L'Estoile, 2007, p. 272), the author believes that "it is paradoxical that in a museum which intends to give back 'three quarters of mankind' their rightful place the others do not speak" (L'Estoile, 2007, p. 272). To a certain extent, the misunderstandings and tensions surrounding the crisis of ethnographic representation derive from contemporary myths about the objects of other cultures, generically referred to as "first arts", in a reformulation of the evolutionary primitivism that continues to allow the decontextualised display of objects.

Decolonisation and restitution of objects to the origin groups

The inability to contextualise objects from other cultures has been used as pretext to claim their return to their origin groups. However, the restitution of objects has to deal with the myths of origin pointed out by Stuart Hall (1992), thus providing the construction of alternative narratives, previous to the colonisation ruptures, and which underlie the new decolonised nations. "I say 'myths' because, as was the case with many African nations which emerged after decolonization, what preceded colonization was not 'one nation, one people', but many different tribal cultures and societies" (Hall, 1992, p. 295).

These myths relate to the devaluation of interculturality, especially in peripheral societies or vulnerable to Western influence by the very phenomenon of colonisation, favouring the "colonial fantasy" of pure cultural groups: "the idea that these are 'closed' places – ethnically pure, culturally traditional, undisturbed until yesterday by the ruptures of modernity – is a Western fantasy about 'otherness'" (Hall, 1992, p. 305). The deconstruction of these myths does not mean, however, that the epigone communities of the origin groups, faced with the display of collections gathered for aesthetic reasons,

disconsidering the creators, uses and meanings of the objects, have lost the sense of belonging and the desire to reappropriate items that are part of their cultural origins.

> It is then also easy to appreciate how descendants of the makers of the objects – understanding their original uses and meanings and wanting to reestablish a sense of historical continuity or to reconnect with their culture's spiritual life – might want the objects either back in their own care or presented quite differently in their current location. (Gurian, 2006, p. 195)

Anthropological artefacts have a meaning that goes beyond any aesthetic and patrimonial values, namely, a religious or magical sense that remains active in the origin communities. This situation is particularly sensitive when it comes to sacred objects and human remains.

> Indeed, the issues surrounding the display and possible repatriation of human remains and sacred objects have begun to effect quite radical changes upon museum practices in the latter part of the twentieth century, resulting in restricted access, non-display of sensitive materials and repatriation. (Simpson, 2001, p. 108)

Considering the sensitive nature of these collections, the Michael C. Carlos Museum, in Atlanta, decided to return the mummy identified as Ramses I, the founding pharaoh of the XIX Dynasty of the New Kingdom (1292 or 1295 BC). Its arrival to Egypt, in October 2003, accompanied by official honours and ceremonies that recovered the imaginary of ancient rituals, caused great commotion among the population.

> The return of the mummy and the attendant ceremonies, broadcast throughout the country, made a marked impression in Egypt and were a moment of great nationalistic feeling and pride in their past as people celebrated the return of a pharaoh. (Ikram, 2011, p. 145)

Although the modern man is not ruled by the same network of beliefs, myths and symbols as those of ancient civilisations, that connection may be restored, what comes to show that the ties to the past, though subtle, are immanent.

The transformation of human remains into museological objects may well be the most radical decontextualisation ever in a museological context, besides involving ethical questions of the utmost importance (Cury, 2020). Nevertheless, the display of anthropological artefacts, ignoring the existence of a religious or magical sense still active in the origin communities, is perceived by these as an offense to their primordial meaning.

In the case of the objects of Pre-classical or Classical Antiquity, the effect of the decontextualisation does not appear to be so pressing. However, the fact that they were taken in a context of war or of foreign domination, determines that the colonised peoples are to demand the replacement of what has unduly been taken away from them. The sense of belonging, along with the design to take possession, is still present in the places where the collections were taken from, whether in the countries of Ancient Mesopotamia,

in Egypt or Greece. Between the 19th and the 20th centuries, these areas were under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, very favourable to the large-scale removal of monuments, sculptures and ancient objects for Western public and private collections.

There is still a colonialist attitude in the refusal to recognise the illegal nature of the incorporation of many of the objects in the great museums, so-called universal due to the scope of their collections. The British Museum, in London, one of the most relevant of these museums, has been one of the main targets of reproach and criticism, especially due to the lack of an adequate response to the successive requests for the return of cultural, religious and historical artefacts, directed at it by various nations plundered by the British Empire. The inability of the museum (and the country) to recognise the mistakes from the colonial past and the illegal acts committed during the appropriation of heritage is interpreted as an arrogant attitude and a way of somehow upholding the rights of the coloniser-dominator in the face of the rights of the colonised-subaltern in relation to (its) cultural and patrimonial property.

The issue gained increased relevance after the campaign started by Melina Mercouri, Greek minister of Culture and Sciences (1981-1989), for the return of the Parthenon Marbles to the Acropolis, Athens, which were part of the architectonic structure when the 7th Earl of Elgin, Thomas Bruce, ordered them to be taken and transported to London, taking advantage of his position as British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire which, at the time, dominated Greece. They were later acquired by the British government which placed them at the museum. The matter of the Parthenon marbles has particular nuances that arise from the process of appropriation and the fact that Athens offers conditions for their display in context, at the gallery of the Acropolis Museum, especially designed for that and with a privileged view of the Parthenon. Nevertheless, despite all the efforts, the debate is still open and has expanded to other museums and other countries, such as France and Germany.

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, has asked two scholars, Bénédicte Savoy, from France, and Felwine Sarr, from Senegal, a report on the return of items from the African cultural heritage. The concluding document *Rapport sur la restitution du patrimoine culturel africain: vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle* (Savoy & Sarr, 2018), was delivered in November 2018 and published the following year. Savoy and Sarr (2019) recommend that the objects, taken and sent to France without the authorisation of the country of origin, be permanently returned, if the latter so requests, as part of a collaborative process of data gathering, research and training.

In line with these recommendations, the German minister of Culture, Monika Grütters, confirmed, earlier this year, that almost two million euros were allocated to museums, archives and libraries so that they can investigate the provenance of the objects acquired during the 19th and the early 20th centuries, justifying: "for many decades, colonial history in Germany has been a blind spot in the culture of memory (...). Provenance research on collections from colonial contexts is a decisive contribution to taking a closer look" (Grütters, quoted in Brown, 2019, §5).

On the other hand, the English Secretary of Culture, Oliver Dowden (Malnick, 2020), warned that government-funded museums and galleries may lose the support of taxpayers if they return artefacts from their collections. In statements to the BBC, the British Museum assured that "the British Museum has no intention of removing controversial objects from public display (...) Instead, it will seek where appropriate to contextualise or reinterpret them in a way that enables the public to learn about them in their entirety" (British Museum 'won't remove controversial objects' from display, 2020, § 5-6). If the return of objects to their countries of origin is only one side of the problem, where the need for reasoned and well-grounded options is emphasised, the other side, perhaps more relevant and equally complex, is here stated by the British Museum: the need to incorporate the narratives around these objects and their cultural, functional, ritual or symbolic recontextualisation.

Eurocentrism is still active in Western museums, maintaining the hegemonic view of a greater competence to conserve and display the items which, in their places of origin, would be at risk. "A mistaken view, quite paternalistic, for it sees in the 'other' a fragility that can be remedied by protection. (...) Control of what belongs to the 'other' and the 'other' itself" (Cury, 2020, p. 6). When it comes to museums' argumentation regarding the return of collections, this view is articulated with the conviction that heritage is universal and, therefore, belongs to all, and is not a particular prerogative of a certain cultural group.

Agents and factors of the decolonisation of the museum in contemporary times

In a post-colonial context, Western museums have been feeling the pressure of the claims of former colonised peoples, for the restitution of the collections, as well as for the reformulation of the discourses. However, the response is still weak and superficial, namely through the updating of a few narratives and museographies, reconfiguring them in a more contemporary approach, but lacking the courage to carry out a deep review (let alone contrition) of the past, of the cultural relations among peoples, of acculturation phenomena. What is requested from museums is the assessment of the colonial past legacies in relation to the contemporary post-colonial reality (Thomas, 2010). The museums, however, tend to deal with this past through obliteration, forgetting the colonialist and imperialist roots, and neglecting their legacies or integrating them in general collections (Phillips, 2005), or through the exploitation of the values of the colonised peoples indigenous cultures (Aldrich, 2010).

In spite of all the changes in museums, knowledge is still colonised, as argues Irminguard Staueble (2007), in the sense that colonialism means "the imposition of Western authority over all aspects of indigenous knowledges, languages and cultures" (p. 90). Therefore, the peoples in earlier colonised areas claim their inclusion, as active subject, in the museological discourse, contesting the museum's authority in its elaboration and the way it deals with the collections that are culturally extrinsic to them. The supposed neutrality of a linear discourse is replaced by the interlocution between the various

perspectives on the same phenomenon, recovering the original meaning of objects and continually questioning stereotypes and conventionalisms.

> Such contextualization of previously established collections allows the museum to recover one of its former functions, that is to say, as a fulcrum for debate in which the final discourse is to be decided by the visitor, whose thinking is nurtured by the objects and the different discourses that have been given to them throughout time. (Sauvage, 2010, p. 109)

The formal reconfiguration of the museums with non-Western collections has been slow and superficial, accentuating the graphic updating in detriment of a conceptual rectification. The collections of the colonial past need to be repositioned in new interpretative frameworks, and elaborated as collaborative projects with their origin communities. James Clifford (1997), describing "museums as contact zone", advocated this articulation in inclusive programmes, although he warned that "neither community 'experience' nor curatorial 'authority' has an automatic right to the contextualization of collections or to the narration of contact histories" (p. 208). Similarly, Hooper-Greenhill (2000) argues that, in order to produce polysemic exhibitions, museums must recognise the existence of multiple "interpretative communities", those that see objects and texts in a similar way through "common repertoires and strategies used in interpretation" (p. 121), pointing out that the interpretation of objects is not something that occurs from the testimony of an isolated individual, and only happens within a social context. Likewise, Ruth Phillips recognises that museums "are learning that they must modify the Western ideals of open access to objects and information on which public museums were founded, in order to respect other systems of knowledge management" (Phillips, 2005, p. 109). The literature of the early 21st century shows the convergence of the authors in the defense of the museum as a contact zone, despite Tony Bennet's warning (1998), foreseeing the possibility of instrumentalisation of intercultural dialogues. In fact, the museum, "as a site of accumulation, as a gatekeeper of authority and expert accounts, as the ultimate caretaker of the object, as the ultimate arbiter of the identity of the object, as its documenter and even as the educator" (Boast, 2011, p. 67), even as contact zone, is still used to camouflage bias and neo-colonial appropriations.

Colonialism and imperialism were strongly legitimised by the Western hegemony and assimilated by hierarchies of race and culture, in a pattern that keeps shaping the geopolitical and cultural map, even after the colonised peoples achieved political autonomy (Kilomba, 2010). In this context, the decolonisation of the museum, too, is processed in a game of tensions and unbalances: the colonial and Eurocentric matrix, dominant in museological discourses, does not reflect the increasing detachment from the values that were once inherent to them; Western museums keep material collections without attaching to them their corresponding intangible elements, the knowledge of which persists in indigenous communities; the groups of other cultures that have adopted the concept of museum for the conservation of their heritage do not manage to recover the collections kept in Western museums. The museums that are assumed to be contact

zones, adopting a model of collaboration with the origin or epigone communities, do not ensure a reciprocity pattern in which they contribute more effectively and equally, and benefit from the exhibitions they take part in (Hoerig, 2010).

However, even if museums with colonial collections are still cultural institutions with a relevant role in society, "the current intellectual, juridical and political context provides other historical possibilities and the pure and simple representation of a homogeneous nation or of a white and Europeanised mankind does not become more stimulating or sustainable" (Oliveira & Santos, 2016, p. 17). Over time, the museum has become a stable institution, safeguarding values considered fundamental and immutable, but has also proved to be able to transform and adjust to historical contingencies and to the becoming of society. The proclaimed neutral character of the museum is currently seen as resignation, when it is required to take an active and reactive stand on social issues, diversity and inclusion. This is where takes shape the concept of "museum activism, in the sense of museum practice, shaped out of ethically-informed values, that is intended to bring about political, social and environmental change" (Janes & Sandell, 2019, p. 1).

The continuity of the museum depends on its action as agent of change, able to interrupt a long cycle of bias, including the way the knowledge on other cultures is produced, disseminated and exposed, and the promotion of active policies of diversity and inclusion, and, consequently, the decolonisation of collections and discourses.

Conclusion

The first museums incorporated objects from other cultures, aestheticising them and concealing their original meaning, with the purpose of justifying the Western hegemony and imperialism. The permanence of colonial collections in the museum, maintaining past exhibition and discursive parameters, is still indicative of dominance behaviour. Even the museums that reformulate discourses, replacing the reference to primitive arts with early arts, persist in the adulteration of the meaning of artefacts created with intent to use, or with a magical or religious sense, and keep this colonialist imprint, particularly evident in the refusal to dialogue with the origin or epigone communities.

Decolonising museums involves transforming the evolutionary and positivist aspect of the exhibition into a co-curatorship in which local communities' narratives take precedence, participating actively in the management, interpretation, display and mediation of their heritage. In some museums, the notion of obligation associated to a new discourse has already led to substantial changes, as assuming a shared curatorial model. This model includes local communities as the dominant enunciator and recognises the authority of their knowledge. In Europe, however, this process has proved to be more time-consuming and hard, and rarely reaches the great universalist museums.

The process of decolonising museums, beyond the different models and rhythms in which it occurs, is inevitable. But it is also broader than the return of objects to their places of origin or the introduction of native narratives. It is the colonial past itself that needs to be questioned – if the past cannot be altered, it can be analysed, scrutinised,

discussed, understood and taken on in its circumstances and consequences. The results of this analysis ought also to be integrated into the museum discourse, assuming that this past is part of the very existence of these objects, as of the history of museology.

Translation: Helena Antunes

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