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# **Taboos in Museology: Difficult issues for museum theory Materials for a discussion**

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# Taboos in Museology: Difficult issues for museum theory

Materials for  
a discussion

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**ICOFOFOM** ICOM  
international  
committee  
for museology



**Taboos in museology:  
Difficult issues for  
museum theory**

**Tabous dans la muséologie :  
Questions difficiles pour  
les théories muséales**

**Tabúes en museología:  
cuestiones difíciles para la teoría  
de los museos**

*This publication brings together the papers submitted for the 45th symposium organised by ICOFOM under the general theme **Taboos in museology: Difficult issues for museum theory**, to be held in Prague and Brno (Czechia) 22 - 27 August 2022.*

The “Materials for a discussion” collection brings together, in an inclusive spirit, all the contributions selected for the symposium in the form of short articles, to prepare the ICOFOM Symposium. This publication has been made available before the symposium, in a very short time frame. In spite of the care given to the publication, some mistakes may remain.

The editors thank the following individuals who assisted in the selection and editing of this collection: Bruno Brulon Soares, Scarlet Galindo, Olga Nazor, Ross Tidwell.

\*

*Cette publication rassemble les communications soumises pour le 45e symposium organisé par l'ICOFOM sous le thème général **Tabous dans la muséologie : Questions difficiles pour les théories muséales**, qui se tiendra à Prague et Brno (Tchéquie) du 22 au 27 août 2022.*

La collection «Matériaux pour une discussion» regroupe, dans un esprit inclusif, toutes les contributions sélectionnées pour le colloque sous forme d'articles courts, afin de préparer le symposium d'ICOFOM. Cette publication a été publiée avant le symposium, dans des délais très courts. Malgré le soin accordé à celle-ci, quelques coquilles peuvent subsister.

Les éditrices remercient les personnes suivantes qui ont aidé à la sélection et à l'édition de cette collection : Bruno Brulon Soares, Scarlet Galindo, Olga Nazor, Ross Tidwell.

\*

*Esta publicación reúne los trabajos presentados para el 45º Simposio organizado por ICOFOM bajo el tema general **Tabúes en museología: cuestiones difíciles para la teoría de los museos**, que se celebrará en Praga y Brno, Chequia, desde el 22 al 27 de agosto de 2022.*

La compilación “Materiales para una discusión” reúne, con un espíritu inclusivo, todas las contribuciones seleccionadas para el simposio en forma de artículos breves, a fin de preparar el Simposio de ICOFOM. Esta publicación se pone a disposición muy poco tiempo antes del mismo, por lo que, a pesar del cuidado puesto en ella, puede tener algunos pequeños errores.

Las editoras agradecen a las siguientes personas que colaboraron en la selección y edición de esta colección: Bruno Brulon Soares, Scarlet Galindo, Olga Nazar, Ross Tidwell.

International Committee for Museology – ICOM  
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Comité Internacional para la Museología – ICOM

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# Introduction

# Introduction

*M. Elizabeth Weiser, Marion Bertin and Anna Leshchenko*

A taboo is a social custom that prohibits or inhibits discussion. Originally it was a Polynesian word used to describe aspects of the social, cultural and religious life that are restricted or forbidden. Those who break the taboo may be shunned by their community—they have failed to follow the unwritten rules of “polite society.” At the same time, the ability to use (or break) a taboo can mark one as an insider to their particular community. While the entrance of the word into the Western vocabulary is a lesson in colonialism, carried to England by the published accounts of Captain James Cook’s voyages of so-called discovery in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of “things prohibited” exists in all societies. In the West “taboo” acquired the doubled meaning of aspects either too sacred and special or too repulsive and repugnant to be casually undertaken. It has proven useful to the social sciences in the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries, and its usage was expanded by psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud (*Totem und Tabu*, 1913) anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss (*Mythologiques*, 1964-71) and Edmund Leach (*Structural Study of Myth and Totemism*, 1967), and by scholars of religion and mythology, such as Joseph Campbell (*Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 1949). In museum studies, taboos have been approached through different arenas, ranging from the politics of dealing with difficult pasts to the practicalities of displaying sacred objects. Recently, speaking out about the working conditions of museum employees themselves has come to be seen as breaking the taboo of sacrificial labor.

## **A history of contending with taboos**

As can be expected in institutions which collect, conserve, and exhibit heritage, taboos continue to inhibit both conversation and action surrounding museum collections. As we have witnessed throughout ICOFOM’s three-year investigation of decoloniality and several of our writers address in this collection, contested repatriation efforts are multitudinous across the globe. For instance, George Abungu accused the 2002 *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums* of being a way for major museums to refuse “to engage in dialogue around the issue of repatriation” (2004, p. 5). Ariella Aïsha Azoulay in her institutional critique digs even deeper by saying that “looted objects did not just happen into cultural institutions but are constitutive of the various scholarly, curatorial, and professional procedures (of which collecting is but one example), which have transformed world-destroying violence into a decent and acceptable occupation” (2019, p. 64). The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), passed in 1990, made it law that human remains and funerary artifacts be returned to Indigenous tribes, meaning many thousands

have been repatriated from U.S. museums—but it has been estimated that at the current rate of return, it will take another 238 years to return the human remains alone (Zheng, 2021). A lack of effective communication—overcoming institutional and bureaucratic taboos—has been cited as one of the reasons. Such communication difficulties continue to impede current museal efforts toward co-curation with Indigenous communities worldwide, as our authors note.

As we will also see throughout this collection, many of the taboos with which museums struggle have to do with their relationships to their communities and the changing roles both they and the communities are undergoing. Censorship and self-censorship remain issues as museums struggle with political and community pressures. From pressures to remove works of art considered obscene, insensitive, or politically fraught, to objections to history that complicates the national narrative or gives voice to minority groups, to interference with natural history exhibits questioning everything from received wisdom to resource stewardship, museum staff and their communities frequently struggle to find a balance between upholding, questioning, and breaking taboos.

Even the way that museums address these controversies can be viewed through the lens of taboos. For instance, Dominique Poulot uses the language of taboo as a silencing mechanism when he describes some of the problems with the recent exhibition turn to telling individual, emotional stories of traumatic events, noting that “the very insistence on the emotional specificity of the story means that all trauma stories sound similar: they are histories without history” (2012, p. 9). He cites Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman’s observation that “Both before and after the tsunami, the survivors in Aceh were already victims of political domination, military repression, and economic marginalization... Trauma is not only silent on these realities; it actually obscures them” (2009, p. 281). Lonnie Bunch, meanwhile, writes of seeking out those same emotional stories in order to break taboos as he built the collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture: “I knew that [the artifact ...] was not an inanimate object but a touchstone. It would serve as a totem that would prod Americans to replace the silences that we find so comforting with conversations, though difficult, that could lead to reconciliation and healing” (2019). Several writers specifically tackle this controversy from various angles.

Other scholars and activists have taken on institutionalized taboos in efforts such as the 2018 “Fair Museum Jobs” manifesto (2021) or the 2019 Art/Museum Salary Transparency campaign, in which low-paid staff posted their salaries to a public website. “Just be brave and add your information to the list,” wrote the site’s co-creator, Michelle Millar Fisher, which another participant likened to “undo[ing] some of the secrecy that plagues the industry (Small, 2019). Others dare to raise awareness of “hostile conditions” and institutional racism while trying to create “an alternative model for curators working in white museum spaces who ground their praxis in caring for Black communities” (Autri, 2021).

In many ways, “people issues” play a role in museology taboos as well in the museum. For instance, decolonizing is a process that involves so much more

than a degree of power-sharing, as Shahid Vawda notes: “It is to question and unmask the epistemological, sometimes the ontological, foundations of such ideas, which inform the knowledge that make the societies and people of Africa, Asia and Latin America ‘invisible’ for the colonizers” (2019, p. 76). Such processes are still in their infancy in a field dominated by scholars (writing in languages) of the global North and West. Our collection itself, written in three languages originating in Europe and with a predominance of global North scholars (although other regions are represented), is embedded in that context even as we work to expand beyond it.

As ICOM gathers to discuss the theme of the *power* of museums, then, we in ICOFOM feel it is important as well to speak out loud some of the ways that museums and museology also have the potential to *disempower* those not deemed “insiders”, as we discuss sensitive topics beyond those deemed proper by tradition and authority.

## A rich and varied program

A number of provocative questions, found here, are on the agenda for this year’s symposium:

- What is taboo in museology?
- How does museological scholarship today perpetuate the taboos of the field, particularly taboos of race, gender, class, orientation, ability, coloniality, etc.?
- How do museums address taboos in their exhibitions?
- How do museums address the taboos in their staff and community relations?
- If the museum staff’s and university lecturers’ mindset is not decolonized, will they create more taboo topics as a reaction to decolonial processes?
- What does the museum lose if it addresses topics of deep-seated cultural, gender, religious, social taboos?
- How can museums become part of civic space?
- What role does museum ethics play in our work?
- How do/should museums approach topics that their communities would prefer to keep silent?
- Who decides that something is tabooed? Is “taboo” the same as “censored”?
- Can museology counter cultural hegemony, especially under theocratic or autocratic regimes?

- What can be done, in museums or museology, to break the taboos?

The following papers are presented in alphabetical order in this collection, but some common themes emerge, along with the understanding that many presenters' issues cross multiple taboo boundaries:

Taboos around neutrality. What impact does the myth of museum neutrality have on exhibition decisions? Presenters addressing this issue include Magali Dufau, Amareswar Galla, Bély Hermann Abdoul-Karim Niangao, Mari Viita-aho, and Olga Zabalueva.

Taboos around collection decisions. How do history museum exhibits present difficult heritage and unresolved memory conflicts, or art museums balance differing audience proprieties? Presenters addressing this issue include Manuelina Maria Duarte Cândido & Giusy Pappalardo, Katarzyna Jagodzińska, Laurence Pauliac, and Teresa Scheiner.

Taboos around presentation. How do changing social norms affect the presentation of narratives and artifacts? Who decides how tabooed objects or knowledge are displayed? Presenters addressing this issue include Julie Botte, Clémentine Debrosse, and Rogerio Victor Satil Neves.

Taboos around community/society relations. How to develop/maintain equitable and democratic relationships with local communities? How should museums respond to their audiences? Presenters addressing this issue include Marília Xavier Cury & Rebeca Ribeiro Bombonato, María Gabriela Mena Galárraga, Héctor Valverde Martínez, and Wang Hsiao-Chiang.

Taboos around collaboration. How do differing perspectives on difficult shared histories impinge on collaborative efforts? What to do with repatriation? Can museology successfully address its ongoing racism/sexism/classism homophobia? Presenters addressing this issue include Leonie Leeder, Lynn Maranda, and Mariana Tezoto de Lima.

Taboos around the workplace. How is the museum responding to workplace equity? Presenters addressing this issue include Anna-Lou Galassini and Elīna Vikmane.

Taboos around external pressures. How to address inequities in training, professionalization, and professional publication? How are determinations made of what is appropriate for study? Presenters addressing this issue include Olivia Guiragossian, Barbara Landi, François Mairesse, Nina Robbins, and Olga Van Oost.

We look forward to a lively, thought-provoking set of conference presentations. We hope we will leave Czechia a little uncomfortable as well as inspired, ready to confront overlooked challenges. As Yves Bergeron and Michèle Rivet pointed out in their introduction to the 2021 ICOFOM symposium, “the questions raised by the new museology movement,” called into action some fifty years ago this year

in the Roundtable of Santiago de Chile, have now “ended up rising to the top of the various subcommittees of the International Council of Museums questioning museological dogma” (2021). The willingness to question dogma demonstrates the doubled potential for taboos—such questions run the risk of approbation from those in power, but they also mark one as a member of a museological tradition that is continually raising the difficult questions and pushing at the traditional boundaries.

## Organizing committee

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**Articles**  
**Articles**  
**Artículos**

# Genre, sexualité et féminismes : des tabous persistants dans les musées

*Julie Botte*

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*C'est précisément parce que les musées [...] façonnent aussi bien qu'ils reflètent les réalités culturelles qu'ils sont une source fertile pour comprendre les rôles, les identités, les normes et les différentes expressions de l'inégalité des sexes dans toute société.*

UNESCO

Plusieurs tabous dans les musées sont liés à l'exposition de sujets relatifs aux femmes et au genre, en particulier ceux qui concernent le corps et la sexualité. Certains musées les transgressent et se rapprochent du militantisme. Ils enfreignent ainsi un autre interdit en créant un féminisme muséal.

## Déconstruire les normes de genre dans les expositions

Les représentations féminines sont nombreuses dans les collections. Néanmoins, les musées les considèrent rarement avec un regard féministe en analysant les rôles, les normes culturelles et les inégalités dans les sociétés contemporaines ou passées. Certains sujets sont considérés comme tabous, tels que les règles, les violences sexuelles ou la prostitution. Pour rompre ce silence, de nouvelles acquisitions peuvent être faites, mais les objets acquis et exposés peuvent également être interprétés différemment afin d'inclure ces histoires dans les musées. Quatre thèmes ont été identifiés par Joan Santacana Mestre et Nayra Llonch Molina (2010) afin de concevoir un discours muséologique qui intègre les questions spécifiques aux femmes et au genre : le dimorphisme sexuel, les différentes conceptions des femmes dans le monde, la sexualité et les stéréotypes de genre. Ces aspects se trouvent au cœur des rapports de pouvoir entre les hommes et les femmes et de l'hétéronormativité (Butler, 2006). Les musées sur les femmes et sur le genre cités dans cet article s'opposent à cette absence en centrant leur projet sur ces questions. Ainsi, l'exposition permanente du Gender Museum à Aarhus, intitulée *Mixeur de genre*, invite les visiteurs à s'exprimer et à débattre sur les normes de genre dans la société. Les objets exposés, des œuvres d'art ou des objets du quotidien, sont commentés afin d'attirer l'attention sur les idées reçues, les discriminations ou les luttes relatives aux droits des femmes ou des personnes LGBTQIA+.

## Montrer le corps féminin dans une perspective féministe

Le corps féminin est omniprésent dans les parcours muséographiques, toutefois il est réduit à des visions stéréotypées et présenté à travers un regard masculin (*male gaze*) qui ne sont pas remis en question. Dans l'art occidental, par exemple, les corps des femmes sont très souvent dénudés, érotisés, parfois de manière exotique, sans que le descriptif de l'œuvre en fasse mention de façon critique. Les œuvres exposées sont seulement considérées à travers le discours formel de l'histoire de l'art. Malgré la valorisation sociale de leur beauté ou de la maternité, une grande partie des expériences féminines liées à la sexualité, qui est sous-entendue par l'érotisme et la grossesse, demeure un tabou (désir, plaisir, règles, avortement, etc.).

Le corps des femmes est généralement peu étudié d'un point de vue historique, culturel et social dans les musées, alors qu'il est assujéti à des normes très strictes. La question reste sensible aujourd'hui dans le monde. Le Vagina Museum à Londres est dédié aux organes génitaux féminins qui sont entourés de tabous. Le musée diffuse des connaissances sur l'anatomie des femmes, sur la santé et sur l'orientation sexuelle. Une de ses missions principales est de « faire disparaître les préjugés ». En 2011, le Musée de la Femme à Longueuil a réalisé une exposition sur le sein, qui est également l'objet de multiples normes socioculturelles. Les seins sont soumis à des critères de beauté et d'habillement, entre le dévoilement et la dissimulation. Ils constituent à la fois un symbole de féminité, de désir et de maternité, mais également de revendications politiques pour l'égalité et d'affirmation de la liberté. L'exposition se penchait également sur le cancer du sein et sur son dépistage. Au Gender Museum, le thème du corps dans l'exposition permanente s'interroge notamment sur les idéaux de beauté. Le musée expose des photographies venant d'un mouvement militant qui s'est développé sur Instagram pour considérer les corps avec un regard positif (*bodypositive*). Elles montrent leur diversité qui ne correspond pas aux images stéréotypées et retouchées visibles dans les médias. D'autres photographies montrent des corps féminins et masculins avec une pilosité naturelle.

Afin de rendre leurs vécus visibles, le Musée de la Femme à Dakar et le Vietnam Women's Museum à Hanoï consacrent un thème à la grossesse dans leur exposition permanente et se penchent sur des sujets tels que les rites, la fécondité, les consultations médicales et l'accouchement. L'exposition en ligne *MAMA : la maternité dans le monde*, conçue par l'International Museum of Women en 2013, documente et montre des vies de femmes, mais elle cherche également à sensibiliser à la défense des droits des mères, notamment dans le milieu du travail, et à la protection de leur santé. La maternité permet de réfléchir sur le rôle des femmes dans les sociétés et sur les inégalités entre les sexes, ainsi que sur les luttes et les changements sociaux. L'exposition *Au bazar du genre. Féminin – Masculin en Méditerranée* au musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée à Marseille en 2013 portait sur la virginité, l'éducation des femmes, l'âge lors du mariage, le nombre d'enfants, la contraception, l'avortement, la liberté sexuelle ou l'orientation sexuelle.

## Dénoncer les violences sexuelles

Les violences sexuelles constituent un autre tabou dans la société. Dans les musées d'art ancien, le terme « viol » n'est pas écrit dans le titre des œuvres où il est désigné comme un « enlèvement ». Pourtant, les scènes d'agressions sexuelles sont récurrentes dans l'iconographie occidentale. L'exposition *La moitié du tableau : un regard féministe sur la collection*, organisée par l'Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art en 2018, rassemble une centaine d'œuvres du Brooklyn Museum depuis une « perspective féministe intersectionnelle ». L'objectif est de proposer une autre interprétation des collections et de contredire la neutralité des musées d'art en montrant ce qui n'y est généralement pas visible. Le titre de l'exposition renvoie à l'affiche de 1989 des Guerrilla Girls intitulée *Vous ne voyez que la moitié du tableau sans la vision des artistes femmes et des artistes de couleur*. Les artistes exposés ont en commun d'intégrer à leur pratique artistique des questions sociopolitiques et les œuvres sont mises en relation avec des préoccupations actuelles. Un des thèmes de l'exposition, intitulé « Pas de surprise », s'interroge sur les liens entre pouvoir, violence et genre qui ont été mis sur le devant de la scène médiatique par les dénonciations de harcèlement et d'agressions sexuelles dans le milieu culturel, comme #NotSurprised et #TimesUp. Le Musée de la Femme à Dakar a présenté l'exposition *T'étais habillée comment ?* en 2019 qui donnait la parole à des victimes de viol afin de démentir les idées reçues sur la responsabilité des femmes. Le Women's Active Museum on War and Peace à Tokyo se consacre aux violences sexuelles contre les femmes pendant les conflits armés, et plus particulièrement à l'histoire du système d'esclavage sexuel établi par l'armée impériale japonaise en Asie-Pacifique entre les années 1930 et 1945, appelé euphémiquement le « système de réconfort » (Watanabe, 2019).

## Féminisme et institution muséale : une antinomie ?

Un des tabous qui persistent aujourd'hui dans les musées est celui de la neutralité scientifique et institutionnelle en opposition au militantisme. Le féminisme et le musée sont-ils véritablement incompatibles ? Certains musées ont des pratiques qui concordent avec l'activisme muséal décrit dans l'ouvrage collectif dirigé par Robert R. Janes et Richard Sandell (2019). Ils portent sur des sujets sensibles, politiques et contemporains. Un champ de recherches récent met en perspective les initiatives muséales dans ce domaine (Adair & Levin, 2020). Le Gender Museum se tourne ainsi vers la construction socioculturelle du genre et se considère comme « un musée sur le genre » (Ipsen, 2017), l'International Museum of Women vise à susciter un changement social en impliquant les femmes et se définit comme « un musée de changement social », enfin le Women's Active Museum on War and Peace dénonce l'impunité des crimes de guerre commis contre les femmes et s'identifie à « un musée de la paix ». Ce dernier succède à un tribunal d'opinion sur les violences sexuelles faites aux femmes en temps de guerre dont il poursuit l'action. Le Vagina Museum cherche à « agir en tant que forum pour le féminisme, les droits des femmes, la communauté LGBTQI+ et la

communauté intersexuelle » et à « promouvoir des valeurs intersectionnelles, féministes et transinclusives ». Ces propositions amènent à s'interroger sur le rôle social du musée.

Astrid Schönweger, l'ancienne coordinatrice de l'International Association of Women's Museums, est intervenue dans un colloque sur « le musée éthique » organisé par la Federation of International Human Rights Museums (FIRHM) lors de la 24<sup>e</sup> conférence générale de l'ICOM à Milan en 2016. La FIRHM est une organisation affiliée à l'ICOM réunissant des musées « qui traitent de thèmes sensibles et controversés liés aux droits de l'homme ». Ces musées luttent contre les violations contemporaines des droits humains et les discriminations. De cette façon, l'International Museum of Women œuvre pour un « monde sans discrimination ni inégalité entre les sexes ». L'Istanbul Kadın Müzesi affirme vouloir jouer un rôle pour « la paix sociale et la réconciliation » (Akkent, 2017). Les manières de concevoir un féminisme muséal diffèrent fortement en fonction du contexte socioculturel et historique. Aucun musée ne peut s'extraire complètement des normes qui régissent la société dans laquelle il se trouve. Le Gender Museum au Danemark ou le Vagina Museum au Royaume-Uni seraient ainsi inconcevables dans de nombreux pays où la sexualité est taboue. Les pratiques militantes des musées sont parfois entravées par un régime politique hostile aux droits humains des femmes. Mansoureh Shojaee, une défenseuse des droits des femmes, est la fondatrice de l'Iranian Women's Movement Museum (Shojaee, 2017). Le musée a été inauguré en exil et de manière éphémère à La Haye en 2018. La création d'un musée qui conteste publiquement l'ordre établi est très difficile dans un système politique répressif.

De nombreux sujets relatifs aux femmes, au genre et à la sexualité restent tabous dans la société. Certains musées se positionnent de manière militante en essayant de les briser. Ces tabous contribuent à la violation des droits des femmes et au maintien d'un système inégalitaire hétéronormé. Plusieurs initiatives ont montré que le musée et le féminisme sont conciliables. Cela implique de considérer le musée comme un lieu de débat et de sensibilisation, en accord avec des valeurs placées au cœur de sa mission, comme celle de l'égalité.

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# The hegemonic taboo and collaborative social practices

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## Introduction

Taboos are created to guide practices of hegemonic interests. Therefore, talking about taboos is itself a taboo, for it affects interests. Hegemony in museology and museums, as well as the role of professionals (researchers and technicians) is at issue in the maintenance of taboos that favor certain points of view, in the absence of democratic perspectives in line with diversity and the rights to musealization. We recall the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005), which points to the relationship between identity and cultural goods, the responsibility of the signatory States of protection and promotion of diversity, and the need for international cooperation. In this article we look into the participation of museums in such relationships.

It is also possible to observe how cultural policies can be “used” when absorbed by museums to maintain the *modus operandi* of hegemony. In this case, the discourse is hegemonic and is promoted by using the discourses of diversity and difference – momentary uses that, even if seemingly well-intended, do not intervene in the museum’s hegemonic structure in order to modify it. The growing civil/social participation is counter-discursive to the current museum model and challenges its taboos.

Between the hegemony present in museum structures and the participation of identity groups, this article addresses issues that deserve the attention of museology. Our assumption is that taboos are legacies of a museology that is hegemonically perpetuated, adapting to management (administrative, collections and exhibitions), often supported by neoliberalism. On the other hand, taboos address actions engendered by identity groups around cultural and museum rights.

## **The power in the museum: The invisible and those who hide – alerts for public policies**

In November 2021, we were surprised by the American Anthropological Association's (AAA) apology to Indigenous peoples in the USA for the "field's legacy of harm" (Parsons, 2022). Such news put anthropology (and museology through museums) in an unprecedented situation. It puts under reflection the anthropological field throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and part of the 20<sup>th</sup>, by reviewing issues related to racist agendas, cultural appropriations and/or extractivism, and controversial ways of collecting "material objects and human remains belonging to Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas in the name of scientific research" (Parsons, 2022). Many examples demonstrate an unequal and unbalanced relationship, "in which anthropologists declared themselves 'experts' and built their scholarly reputations by privileging their version of Indigenous knowledge over that of Indigenous communities themselves" (Parsons, 2022).

For a long time, Indigenous peoples have been against the old anthropological practices, whether due to the way they recorded or developed their theories, for not clarifying their purposes to the Indigenous people involved or providing feedback regarding the research results. The collection of objects and human remains for museums is at the heart of criticism of museums, as there were many controversial ways of collecting and forming collections. Sacred objects and human remains are always brought into discussions on how the museum should act in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, overcoming old practices and actively practicing repatriation, whose number of requests has increased over the last few decades largely due to implementation of national legislation and international declarations.

But the AAA's apology brings us to the realization of the "ambiguous and ambivalent legacy" (Parsons, 2022) that we must face with actions in collaboration with Indigenous peoples, a legacy which impacts not only anthropological and museological practices but also the teaching of subjects and professional training for museums. The statement becomes even more relevant when we recall the AAA's Committee on Anthropological Research in Museums, which, in the 1970s, expressed concern about the repatriation of Indigenous objects due to their great historical importance (Simpson, 1996).

What we emphasize here are Indigenous rights in the museum and participation in musealization processes, reversing past decisions while placing the museum in another social and political position, acting in reciprocity with Indigenous peoples and their political agendas.

## **The power of the museum: The visible and the self-narratives – contributions to public policies**

Collaboration with Indigenous peoples is already a reality in museums. As mentioned by Parsons, in the USA:

*Both the National Museum of the American Indian and the National Museum of Natural History have proactive repatriation policies mandated through federal legislation in 1989 and 1990. They are working to return bodily remains and cultural items to tribes across the country, from Alaska to Florida. (Parsons, 2022)*

The restitution of human remains is one of many collaborative actions possible. We can also recall traveling exhibitions, such as *Tuku Iho | Living Legacy* by the Maori of New Zealand, with a passage at the National Museum of Natural History and countries in Latin America, including Brazil; and *Inquiry* (later renamed *Thunder in our Voices*), shown for eight years in more than 40 locations in Canada and the US; or the exhibition *Speaking to memory: images and voices from St. Michael's Indian Residential School* at the Museum of Anthropology in Canada (Roca, 2019).

In Brazil, collaborative actions (Cury, 2017) tend to include exhibitions due to their potential to generate visibility for Indigenous peoples and provide self-representation and Indigenous texts about their lives and cultures, as well as their views on museums (Oliveira, 2021; Melo & Pereira, 2021). Through collaboration, dialogic relationships develop, and discussions bring new parameters into the museum regarding objects that are sacred to Indigenous peoples (Babosa, et al., 2020), and human remains, especially in exhibitions and research (Pereira & Melo, 2020). The involvement of shamans brings Indigenous spirituality into the museum, as well as the presence of the “enchanted ones” acting as museum curators (Cury, 2020). Another current topic that involves research with human remains and archaeologists and Indigenous peoples—and their histories – refers to ancient DNA (Alpaslan-Roodenberg, et al., 2021), reminding us that if there are old views, collaboration between researchers and Indigenous people reveals that conflict can be overcome with dialogue, mutual respect and common interests (Caires, 2021).

Alongside with the development of these new exhibitions is the requalification of collections by Indigenous peoples. Within the museum, Indigenous groups recontextualize and bring objects produced by their ancestors into the present. When such reconnection occurs through new methods of collaboration, new knowledge is also created. The Museum of Archeology and Ethnology of the University of São Paulo, for example, has gone through – and continues to go through – its collections with many Indigenous groups who look for their heritage in the museum. Such is the case of the Terena from the Icatu Indigenous Land and the Ekeruá Village, Araribá Indigenous Land (São Paulo, Brazil) (Camilo, et al., 2021), with the Guarani Nhandewa of Aldeia Nimuendaju, Araribá Indigenous Land (São Paulo, Brazil) (Marcolino, et al., 2021), and the Kaingang of the Icatu and Vanuíre Indigenous Lands (São Paulo, Brazil).

The right of Indigenous peoples over their heritage and history must be a primordial focus of such collaborative practices. The few examples commented on here help bring to light the many experiences in which a change in the status and the relation between museums and Indigenous peoples gains space. Museums

and many disciplines, such as anthropology and archaeology, have recently begun to re-evaluate their own practices, but it is the entrance of the Indigenous voice into the museum space that truly demonstrates a collaborative practice.

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# Museums of ethnography and world cultures as taboo spaces

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Building on the concepts of the museum as ‘contact zone’ (Clifford, 1997) and ‘engagement zone’ (Onciul, 2013), it is pivotal to consider the interventions of artists in museums of ethnography and world cultures with archival material. Whether these interventions happen as artistic residencies, exhibitions or research projects, they prove that museums have entered a phase of active engagement with the taboos of their institutions and of the material they hold. According to Estela Ocampo, “the twentieth century...was not the century of ethnological museums but of contemporary art museums” (Ocampo, 2016, p. 35). I argue that the twenty-first century is the century of ‘contemporary museums of ethnography’ as Anna Seiderer (2014) puts it. With the will for co-creation and co-curation, museums of ethnography and world cultures are trying to reinvent themselves to face the taboo of the past.

What status do museums of ethnography and world cultures hold nowadays? Can we argue that museums of ethnography and world cultures have only become taboo spaces because of the media and public attention they have been receiving, due to multiple active calls for restitution and the Sarr-Savoy report? Is the taboo content of colonial archives what has led archival material to gain momentum among contemporary artists since the 1990s? What differs in exhibiting these contemporary archival works in museums of ethnography and world cultures over another type of museum?

In the museum sphere, museums holding ethnographic collections have recently been changing their names, for a new identity as museums of world cultures over that of museums of ethnography. Both a legacy of cabinets of curiosity and a product of the colonisation of the world by European countries, museums of ethnography are described by Nicholas Thomas as “colonial hangovers” (2016, p. 16). While there is a will to change these institutions from within and decolonise them, they are remnants of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and are under the spotlight for the collections they hold or the ideas and legacy they convey, as well as the actions they took (or did not take) in favour of restitution. Considering that “a taboo is a social custom that prohibits or inhibits the discussion of a particular

practice”,<sup>1</sup> I argue that museums of ethnography can be considered as taboo institutions, especially in historical and political terms.

Museums of ethnography are rooted in colonisation through their legacy, which still needs unpacking and criticising but is especially rooted in the material they hold. This material is not only a tangible proof of the colonial crimes committed but also a tangible representation of the past that Europe still has to come to terms with. This taboo around colonisation is today causing some highly sensitive looted objects to be under severe claims for restitution.

With the decolonial movement booming in the past twenty years, museums of ethnography have been looking at reinventing themselves but also questioning their legacy through the creation of European projects such as SWICH (Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity and Heritage, 2018) and RIME (International Network of Ethnographic Museums, 2008-13). These projects looked at “how these histories help...better understand and engage with the present,...basically asking what is the utility of an ethnographic and world cultural museum in the present” (Modest & Gonzáles, 2022, p. 80). Part of the process of such projects was to look at those aspects which, I would say, qualify museums of ethnography and world cultures as taboo institutions: an object’s provenance, its representation in the museum, the accessibility of its resources, inclusivity, the restitution of artefacts, the diversity of voices.

One of the common means of actions for both the SWICH and RIME projects and the museums involved was the in-house residency of artists. While there are many ways artists can intervene in and with institutions, objects related to artistic creations are often preferred, for they are directly related to the collection of objects that museums hold. However, while these objects are usually at the centre of attention, the very practice of ethnography which led them to be collected – or looted for many – is far from making the headlines of newspapers the way that restitution claims can do. Yet, ethnography led to the increasing use of the practices of archiving and photography, “being simultaneously the documentary evidence and the archival record” (Jorgensen & McLean, 2017, p. 19), to serve the colonial endeavour.

Photography productions are all testimonies of the taboos of colonisation and are often still gathered in museums of ethnography alongside objects in the form of archives. The particularity of ethnographic photographs is that they are “a site of intersecting stories...produced and controlled through sites of authority of the collecting society” (Edwards, 2003, p. 83). Not only are they depicting the colonial endeavour of documenting the populations encountered as well as the colonial enterprise, they are also sources of documentation for the Indigenous people represented in these images. Together with other paper documents, photographs are usually part of the archival material that can be found in museums as documentation for the objects held in the collections.

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1. Definition given in the Call for Papers.

The very creation of archives is seen by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay as a “regime that facilitates uprooting, deportation, coercion, and enslavement, as well as the looting of wealth, resources and labor” (2019, p. 170). Archives are intrinsically representing the colonial powers and pursuing their actions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For that matter, Ann Laura Stoler talks about the ‘archival form’ which is part and parcel of these archives, conveying the “intricate technologies of rule [inscribed] in themselves” (2009, p. 20). For many years, the study of ethnographic photographs, and more generally archival material, has been left aside for the benefit of object collections-focused research, but a resurgence of interest has come together from contemporary artists and scholars.

Since the 1990s, artists and scholars have given attention to “material traces of the past” (Jorgensen and McLean, 2017, p. 363), an interest which has been described as the Archival Turn. While major academic texts like *Archive Fever* (Derrida, 1995) were published, museums were giving room to archival installations as “methods of cultural analysis” (Simon, 2002, p. 103). The Archival Turn brought a new type of creative engagement by contemporary artists with archival material held in museums or institutions in order to move “the debate on from the politics of race and injustice, towards multiple, complex and hybrid identities in the present, and into the future” (Hutchens, 2017, p. 301). Someone who has really embedded Hutchens’s perspective through his work is the Wiradjuri (Australia)/Celtic artist Brook Andrew.

Since 1996 with his now famous work *Sexy and Dangerous*, Andrew has presented exhibitions internationally which often present works based on the use and re-use of archival material coming from colonial archives. Through collages, expansions, modifications, juxtaposition or commentary, Andrew alters the materiality of institutional archives he studied or personal archives he collected throughout the years to transform the viewer’s encounter with the image, revoking the ethnographic gaze and mobilizing a moral response (Garden, 2011, p. 259). In prioritising the use of archival material, Andrew shines a light on taboo material by ‘reclaiming the shadows’ (Edwards, 2003, p. 84) of ethnographic photographs and documents. While not restricted to museums of ethnography and world cultures, Andrew’s work has often been exhibited in Europe within these institutions inheriting colonisation. In 2007-08 he created a series of work based on photographic archives from Prussian explorer William Blandowski found in Cambridge at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. He was later appointed Photography Residencies Laureate at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris in 2015, where he also recently exhibited as part of the exhibition *A toi appartient le Regard...* (2020). In 2017-18 he participated at the exhibition *L’Effet Boomerang* at the musée d’Ethnographie in Geneva. With each one of these works, Andrew shifted the gaze on the material used by introducing alternative memories. Indeed, while this material was produced through the practice of ethnography serving colonisation, Andrew exposes this practice to comment on its violence but also to empower the populations depicted. In the words of Paris Lettau, Andrew “rescue[s] weak images from disappearance by making them appear as if they were icons; [he] transform[s] the weak image into something

with a different kind of power, into a strong image” (Andrew & Lettau, 2021, p. 29). One could add that he reveals and makes known the taboo images of colonisation so their narrative is accessible to anyone for evaluation and criticism.

Based on the example of Andrew’s practice, can we in fact consider these artistic interventions in museums of ethnography and world cultures as ways to ‘repair’ and ‘remediate’ the past? I argue that these artistic interventions are a means of reparation for museum institutions which are facing the taboo of colonisation but they are primarily a means of remediation for artists who challenge the colonial discourse embedded in ethnographic photographs.

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# Reflections for reframing the taboos of collections

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The concept of collection and the idea of collecting can be problematized in several ways. In this contribution, we move from Mathilde Bellaigue's notions of institutional collection and operational collection, applied in the Creusot Ecomuseum, and subsequently spread among Brazilian ecomuseums and community museums.

Based on such notions, we argue that collections can be framed differently, not only as a matter of physical objects but – more widely – as a matter of things, a larger concept presented by Ingold (2010), who argued that “The thing...is not just one thread but a certain gathering together of the threads of life” (Ingold, 2010, p. 10). As such, what count are “the processes of genesis and growth that give rise to forms in the world we inhabit” (2010, p. 2). In this sense, we argue that the process of collecting should be seriously discussed, and that collections can have different forms.

First, we contend that ecomuseums and community museums are not museums without collections; rather, they adopt extended categories of collection (Duarte Cândido, 2003). Then we discuss a broader extension of the notion of collections.

In our interpretation, these categories of collections can contribute to the process of the decolonization of knowledge and practices in the field of museology, leading to ruptures with sedimented barriers. Some experiences are considered to be “not-museum-like” because they are not based on traditional collections of movable material objects that are acquired and managed within a museum institution. On the contrary, we argue that the categories of collection need to be rethought in-depth. This is evident, for example, in the case of Italian ecomuseums using community maps and participatory inventories to explore and construct the idea of territorial heritage (Magnaghi, 2020), that could be intended as an extended concept of the collection without possession.

The attachment to the materiality of things and aspects such as antiquity, exceptionality, numerical volume, or financial value takes museums away from the possibility of representing different cultures and social groups in a less asymmetrical way, contributing to the maintenance of privileges and invisibilities.

Opening the notion of collection to things that are not possessed, and are de-contextualized (often violently) by museums, seems to open up some possibilities. It is worth remembering that some museums, or at least ecomuseums, allow themselves to use terms that would be considered heretical in mainstream museology, like the idea of intangible collection.<sup>1</sup>

## The possibilities of operational collections

The classical notion of the collection is defined by Pomian (1984): objects removed from their context and their original function that are subjected to special protection and exposed. According to Desvallées and Mairesse (2011), to obtain the status of a museum collection objects must be preserved in a museum-like institution. However, the practices of ecomuseology and community museology opened other possibilities for dealing with the notion of collection, and these would not be exclusively linked to institutionalization.

Inspired by Mathilde Bellaigue and Hugues de Varine, many other musealization experiences began to adopt the ideas of institutional collection and operational collection:

*Institutional collection is that constituted by systematic collections of movable objects that make up the collection formally registered by the museum under its documental character. In addition to the institutional collection, museums may work with other heritage references not incorporated into their collection, called operational collection. It can be constituted by spaces, landscapes, structures, monuments, equipment, cultural manifestations, socially appropriated knowledge, and practices. (Caldarelli & Duarte Cândido, 2017, p. 202)*

The idea of operational collection was originally developed at the Ecomuseum of Creusot, and it was widely spread in Brazil in courses taught by Mathilde Bellaigue that influenced generations of professionals in the field of Brazilian museology, such as Santos (1996, p. 117), Meneses (1984-1985; 1994), Duarte Cândido (2018a, p. 16). It also influenced the practice of Brazilian ecomuseums and community museums, even though she did not develop the concept in publications. This notion was also included in official museum institutional planning documents, at least in France and Brazil, and in this case not only of ecomuseums but also so-called traditional museums (Museu da Cidade de São Paulo, 2021). In Canada the idea was also developed with the use of a specific form of collection, called the ecomuseum collection – “collection écomuséale” (Ecomusée du Val de Bièvre et de l’Écomusée du fier monde, 2018). Mathilde Bellaigue even mentions Tomislav Sola’s idea of the “total museum” in one of her texts (Bellaigue, 2000, p. 04). In addition to this, the well-known Round

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1. “L’Écomusée constitue depuis son ouverture des collections matérielles et immatérielles représentatives des modes de vie de la société rurale grand’landaise” (Écomusée Marquèze, undated).

Table in Santiago de Chile (1972) ended with a statement that highlighted the notion of integral museums or integrated museums (Duarte Cândido, 2003).

Different ideas of immaterial collection and operational collection put into contrast museums with collections and museums without collections. Breaking taboos and boundaries, we argue that there are not museums without collections, but museums that work with a broader notion of collection.

All these reflections lead us to problematize the notions of artworks or artifact collections, bringing them closer to new categories in the anthropological domain concerned with the relationships between humans and non-humans.

## **The power of the metamuseology**

Current times ask for institutional criticism and self-reflexivity. The bridge between museology and the social sciences, especially anthropology, provides remarkable contributions (Brulon Soares, 2015), opening problems a museology focused on art history tends to ignore. This is probably because the core of the reflections are the objects (rare, exceptional, of aesthetic value, etc.) and not the social relations they raise. Today, several museums are deciding to share with their audiences the decision-making processes, and to present transparently in their exhibits the choices and processes behind being heritage factories. In some cases, this is called metamuseology (Schärer, 2018; Collineau, 2020). In this framework, museums start to admit discussing in their exhibits the violence of acquisition and the unsustainability of accumulation.

Even when not shared with society, these concerns are part of the reflections in the field of museology (Balerdi, 2008; Duarte Cândido, 2018b; Benkass, 2012), and are starting to take over the museums' backstage. Contemporary museums need to establish other collection practices and other relationships with the material world – rationalizing, being frugal, minimalist, acting sparingly, being aware of their ecological footprint.

However, discarding is still a taboo in several countries (Mairesse, 2009), and the idea of acquisition present in the museum's definition (2007) is understood as a systematic enlargement of collections, which to us seems very reductive. That is to say, this text also indirectly problematizes the dispute around some words that should or should not be present in the new definition of museums because the problem may not be in having the words *collection* or *acquisition*, for example, but in the understanding that they accumulate in the different international contexts of application of the definition.

If acquisition is adopted as a synonym of accumulation, having this as a mission establishes – in our view – a disconnection between museums and the future, reinforcing conservative aspects (in its different meanings) linked exclusively to the past. Owning less can allow more space for reflection and the construction of the new. This can make the difference between what is called biophilic museums and necrophilic museums (Varine-Bohan, 1994).

To conclude, we'd like to draw attention to the fact that collections sometimes disappear and only documentation remains – e.g., the fire at the Museu Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, 2018 (Duarte Cândido, et al., 2019). Today we can consider that the information about museum collections is just as important as the things themselves. With this awareness more widespread, much of the panic generated in some museums about the demands of restitution would be mitigated by the realization that a collaborative process of restitution is a potential generator of new data and collections, created in a much more ethical way.

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# Paroles neutres ou paroles taboues ? Ce qui peut être dit ou non au musée

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Je veux souligner que mon propos s’ancre dans un lieu, le muséum d’histoire naturelle de Toulouse. Dans le dernier projet scientifique et culturel, la direction du musée soutient la résolution suivante :

*La montée des préoccupations sociales et politiques qu’engendrent [l]es [...] questions environnementales et leur écho dans les disciplines de sciences humaines et sociales imposent au Muséum de s’en saisir de manière spécifique, assumée et engagée dans l’offre qu’il propose aux publics. L’un de ces engagements est de participer à la construction d’une écocitoyenneté critique. Pour cela, le Muséum s’engage [...] à favoriser la compréhension avertie de l’imbrication des questions de sciences et de société et, plus spécifiquement encore, à faire apprécier avec distance et critique [...] le rôle des savoirs scientifiques dans le débat public (Projet scientifique, 2020).*

Cette intention entre en résonance avec la proposition de définition du musée envisagée en 2019 qui préconisait d’en faire des lieux « dédiés au dialogue critique » et destinés à « améliorer les compréhensions du monde ». Face à ses équipes, le directeur du musée soutenait pourtant la réserve de l’ICOM France remettant en cause la « tonalité politique » de cette formulation. Comment un musée peut-il éclairer des enjeux environnementaux et sociétaux de manière engagée tout en maintenant une neutralité de ton ? Ces enjeux d’actualité ne représentent-ils pas un tabou en raison du caractère potentiellement politique qu’ils pourraient prendre ? C’est ce que je vais explorer à partir de ma double expérience de pratique professionnelle et de recherche académique au sein du muséum d’histoire naturelle de Toulouse.

## Les limites de ce qui peut être dit

Lors de la saison 2019-2020, le muséum accueillait l’exposition *Extinctions louée* au Natural History Museum de Londres. Son parcours témoignait des extinctions d’espèces et de la crise actuelle de la biodiversité. À la demande des équipes de conservation, il fut augmenté de vitrines qui mettaient en lumière l’impact de cette crise dans les écosystèmes naturels régionaux. Ils ne souhaitaient pas seulement sensibiliser le public toulousain à la crise écologique par la mise en lumière de spécimens emblématiques mais l’impliquer directement par le recours à la proximité spatiale. Peu avant l’ouverture de l’exposition, l’équipe de

médiation fut réunie pour évoquer la manière d'aborder ce contenu sensible. Il fut rappelé que le terme d'anthropocène n'avait pas de valeur paléontologique et qu'il ne fallait pas l'employer. Il fallait s'en tenir à des faits objectifs pour rester dans un cadre scientifique, surtout en période électorale – nous étions à quelques mois des municipales. Il existe ainsi un décalage entre les souhaits des équipes de soutenir un propos engagé et la forme finale que peuvent prendre les réalisations.

Voici un autre exemple issu de l'exposition *Les Savanturiers*. En 2015, le musée mettait en lumière la violence des appropriations de spécimens naturels et de biens culturels témoignant d'une volonté de faire face à un héritage colonial embarrassant. La dimension critique du propos était néanmoins restreinte aux contextes d'acquisition lors des campagnes militaires, des missions religieuses d'évangélisation ou des modalités d'administration coloniale. Les missions scientifiques étaient épargnées, indiquant une difficulté à prendre en compte le cadre politique du développement des sciences dites modernes et à se confronter aux liens qui existent entre savoir et pouvoir.

Un dernier enjeu d'actualité est apparu au cours de la saison liée à l'exposition *Magies, sorcelleries* (2020-2021) avec la publication sur le blog du musée d'un article signé par la directrice adjointe du musée et intitulé « Sorcières : nom féminin pluriel ». L'article évoque la reprise de la figure de la « sorcière » dans les « mouvements féministes, écologiques, écoféministes ou anarchistes » contemporains qui s'en servent pour « dénoncer les normes du patriarcat et du capitalisme » (Nottaris, 2021). L'éclairage de ce phénomène de société évoqué dans l'article n'était pas abordé dans l'exposition : même si son contenu était riche en informations, il était aussi plus consensuel.

## Les paroles taboues au musée et à l'université

Ce décalage entre l'engagement affirmé d'une grande partie des personnels du musée et la tonalité consensuelle que prennent les projets constitue un indice de l'existence de « paroles taboues » (Frazer, 1911). Celles-ci génèrent une neutralité de ton à mettre en lien avec la supposée objectivité des faits scientifiques. Le débat sur la politisation des musées fait ainsi écho aux polémiques qui entachent actuellement les productions académiques de certains courants théoriques. Elles touchent les études décoloniales, les études féministes et de genre ainsi que les études intersectionnelles qu'elles accusent d'être partisans (Heinich, 2021). Ce phénomène n'est pas nouveau, Bourdieu (1997) affirmait ainsi :

*Si vous essayez aujourd'hui de dire à des biologistes qu'une de leurs découvertes est de gauche, ou de droite, catholique ou pas catholique, vous allez susciter une franche hilarité, mais il n'en a pas toujours été ainsi. En sociologie, vous pouvez encore dire ce genre de choses.*

Cette fois, ces critiques de la politisation des savoirs, relayées au plus haut niveau de l'état, sont marquées par l'apparition de néologismes d'une grande violence verbale qui associent les individus et leurs productions scientifiques ou artistiques

à des formes de terrorisme. Pourtant, des études en anthropologie, sociologie et philosophie des sciences ont remis en cause la représentation objective de la science et montré qu'elle n'était qu'une construction culturelle (Latour, 2005). De la même manière, la neutralité des musées ne doit pas être conçue comme un principe universel mais une valeur culturelle portée par les modalités d'organisation administrative de l'État français. Si les principes de neutralité des musées et d'objectivité des sciences se font aujourd'hui écho en France, c'est parce qu'ils sont constitutifs du statut des fonctionnaires qui sont tenus à un « devoir de réserve ». Celui-ci laisse entrevoir les mêmes limites discursives dans le monde des sciences et de la culture : les enjeux environnementaux, féministes, décoloniaux et intersectionnels. Comment expliquer cette forme de tabou autour de l'engagement politisé?

Les limites de ce qui peut être dit au musée ou à l'université distinguent deux espaces : un espace politique dans lequel peut prendre place un positionnement engagé et un espace neutre dans lequel la parole doit rester objective. Nombre d'études remettent en cause la distinction entre un domaine politique « spécialisé » réservé aux professionnels et un autre « profane » (Agrikoliansky & Aldrin, 2019). L'émergence des notions de « politisation » ou de « politiques ordinaires » témoignent de la porosité de ces deux sphères lorsqu'il s'agit de défendre « le commun » et je fais mienne la formule de deux universitaires toulousains pour qui : « [d]ire et faire le commun, c'est énoncer une intention politique et lui donner matière » (Judde de Larivière & Weisbein, 2017). Ces notions permettent de prendre en compte des formes citoyennes d'engagement en dehors du champ spécialisé de la politique.

## **Vers des musées « réfractés » et réfractaires ?**

En ce sens, les musées fournissent déjà des exemples d'action citoyenne. À Toulouse, les équipes du muséum s'interrogent sur leur capacité d'action et sur leurs pratiques. En réponse aux enjeux environnementaux, le musée propose des ateliers au cours desquels sont transmis des savoirs et des savoir-faire très concrets pour agir directement sur la préservation de la biodiversité. Le musée développe aussi une réflexion sur la question du genre dans ses pratiques professionnelles : dans le service des publics, des temps d'échanges ont permis de mettre en évidence le fait que ce sont avant tout les personnels féminins qui sont mobilisés auprès du jeune public ou pour des temps de rangement. Les enjeux de décolonisation des collections et des savoirs furent mis en avant au cours de certains projets développés de manière collaborative, en particulier en lien avec des représentants de populations amérindiennes d'Amazonie brésilienne. Ils témoignent d'une volonté de faire évoluer les pratiques de documentation et d'acquisition des collections mais ils demeurent pour le moment circonscrits géographiquement et ne sont pas associés à des objectifs pérennes. Plus récemment, en tant que jeune chercheuse et en concertation avec une chargée de collection du muséum, j'ai pu contribuer à enrichir les informations encore lacunaires autour des biens en provenance du Bénin conservés à Toulouse. Je développe actuellement un projet d'étude sur ces objets qui fera intervenir tant

des partenaires des mondes des musées que de la recherche, du Bénin et de France. Le muséum d'histoire naturelle de Toulouse compte y prendre une part active et se prépare ainsi à engager un dialogue autour d'objets sensibles alors même que l'État béninois a initié depuis 2016 une campagne de demandes officielles de restitutions.

Il apparaît que les limites de ce qui peut être dit ou non, au musée ou à l'université, ne sont pas immuables. C'est notre rôle en tant que personnels de musées ou universitaires d'éprouver ces limites puisqu'elles définissent des lignes de crispation et manifestent une crainte face à un potentiel d'altération voire de destruction de l'ordre politique. Il s'agit alors de développer ce que Bourdieu (1997) désigne sous le terme de capacité de « réfraction » de nos institutions, c'est-à-dire notre capacité à absorber les contraintes extérieures pour rester autonomes dans la pratique de nos missions et dans nos propos. J'adhère pleinement à la formule d'un de mes collègues toulousains (ATECOPOL, 2020) qui soutient que « la seule façon d'être neutre est de se taire » et qui me conduit alors à formuler l'interrogation suivante : peut-on vraiment envisager, en ce début de XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, que le musée ne puisse pas assumer un rôle critique ?

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# Travailler au musée : tabous au sein des professions

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Les conditions de travail au sein des institutions muséales sont un enjeu peu discuté publiquement, voire une question taboue, qui semble avoir du mal à sortir des cercles de parole de la sphère privée. De fait, les muséologues André Desvallées et François Mairesse constataient déjà en 2011 la méconnaissance du public pour les questions relatives à la gestion interne des institutions muséales et surtout au vécu des employé·e·s dans l'exercice de leurs fonctions (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2011).

On observe pourtant que les tâches incombant au personnel des musées se sont complexifiées au cours des dernières années avec l'essor des nouvelles technologies et, bien entendu, la pandémie de COVID-19 qui a frappé de plein fouet le monde muséal dans de nombreuses régions du monde. Ces événements très récents sont venus s'ajouter à d'autres problématiques plus anciennes, dans des institutions parfois elles-mêmes pluri-centennaires : relations hiérarchiques, précarité de l'emploi, surmenage, discrimination, conflits de travail ou encore harcèlement sexuel, comme en témoignent les crises internes qui ont récemment secoué plusieurs grands musées canadiens (Malone, 2021). Ces bouleversements amènent de nouveaux défis, individuels et institutionnels, et obligent les professionnel·le·s à se repositionner et s'adapter. Un ajustement que l'on devinera plus ou moins facile selon les contextes.

Dans cette perspective, la présente étude<sup>1</sup> interroge le vécu des employé·e·s de musées dans l'exercice de leur profession et analyse la question de leur bien-être au travers du prisme de la sociologie du travail, plus précisément via la notion d'injustice sociale, définie de la manière suivante :

L'analyse des injustices sociales suppose donc que l'on se place à l'articulation des inégalités objectives et des principes de justice qui font que telle situation et telle conduite sont définies comme injustes (Dubet, 2014).

Cette recherche recueille des témoignages au sein de deux musées nationaux en France (musée du Louvre) et au Québec (Musée de la civilisation) ayant durablement marqué le paysage muséal. Cette analyse comparative est une des rares études se concentrant sur le ressenti des employé·e·s de musées.

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1. Cette analyse a été menée dans le cadre de la maîtrise conjointe en muséologie entre l'Université de Montréal (UdeM) et l'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), en 2018.

À l'heure où il est question, plus que jamais, que les musées prennent part à des actions sociales (ICOM 2019), étudier leur fonctionnement interne par le biais de la notion d'injustice sociale relève un paradoxe. La question à laquelle nous répondrons est la suivante : comment s'expriment ces sentiments d'injustice sociale pour les employé·e·s du secteur muséal?

## Un cadre théorique

Après une étude approfondie des écrits parus en France et au Québec consacrés aux professions muséales et à leurs évolutions (Association Générale des Conservateurs des collections publiques de France, 2011 ; Société des musées québécois en collaboration avec le Conseil québécois des ressources humaines en culture, 2000a et 2000b), le constat est unanime : la multiplication des tâches nuit aux employé·e·s, qui peuvent être sujet·te·s à des situations de surmenage créant des tensions dans tous les secteurs d'activités des musées.

Nous avons privilégié une grille d'entretien pour réaliser des entrevues semi-dirigées. Elle fut construite sur les principes de justice organisationnelle, fruit de deux écoles : française et nord-américaine. La théorie nord-américaine développée par Jason Colquitt et Jerald Greenberg (Colquitt, 2001) scinde la question de la justice organisationnelle en quatre dimensions : procédurale, informationnelle, interpersonnelle, et distributive. La justice procédurale porte sur le caractère démocratique des prises de décisions ou des procédures. La justice interactionnelle se focalise sur les rapports entre les membres d'une même organisation. Cette dernière comprend deux aspects : d'un côté la justice interpersonnelle, de l'autre la justice informationnelle. La première vise à analyser la manière dont les informations sont énoncées (les délais, la précision, la transparence) alors que la justice interpersonnelle se focalise sur les relations entre les membres du personnel et, plus précisément, le rapport à la hiérarchie. Enfin, la justice distributive examine les perceptions et réactions de chacun face aux rétributions vis-à-vis des rétributions réalisées. La théorie française développée par le sociologue François Dubet (2014) divise quant à elle la justice organisationnelle en trois catégories : l'égalité, le mérite, l'autonomie. L'égalité renvoie à la justesse de la place de l'individu dans son organisation. Le mérite fait écho à l'équitable répartition entre les contributions et les rétributions qu'un individu reçoit. Pour finir, l'autonomie permet de mesurer la satisfaction de la réalisation d'une tâche chez l'individu.

## Résultat de l'analyse

Les personnes interrogées dans les deux institutions occupaient des postes de conservateur·rice·s, d'archivistes et de chargé·e·s de projets. Les résultats révèlent que les deux institutions s'inscrivent dans des contextes de travail très différents. Le musée du Louvre témoigne d'une culture organisationnelle très hiérarchisée et cloisonnée. Le Musée de la civilisation, à l'inverse, présente une culture organisationnelle où les défis ne sont pas conflictuels, mais structurels.

**Justice procédurale :** Au musée du Louvre, plusieurs employé-e-s faisaient référence à l'impossibilité d'interagir avec le directeur général à moins d'y être invité-e et regrettent que les informations émanant de sa personne soient communiquées par une tierce personne. Ce sentiment de frustration se conjugue avec des prises de décisions unilatérales, perçues comme arbitraires, de la part de la direction ayant des conséquences importantes sur des projets en cours. Une participante précise également que la liberté de prendre la parole sur des sujets relatifs à la gouvernance de l'institution présente un risque qui par la suite peut avoir des impacts sur la carrière. Les employé-e-s du Musée de la civilisation dépeignent, *a contrario*, une atmosphère de travail saine et respectueuse où ils et elles sont placé-e-s sur des projets en tenant compte non seulement des qualifications mais aussi des intérêts. Cela ne signifie toutefois pas que les conflits sont inexistantes. Ceux-ci sont en réalité d'une nature différente et ressortent spécifiquement d'un manque de cohésion d'équipe du fait d'un découpage de travail difficile entre conservateur-ric-e-s et chargé-e-s de projets.

**Justice informationnelle :** La communication d'informations dans des délais acceptables par les employé-e-s semble être difficile au sein du musée du Louvre, ces derniers n'ayant pas toujours des retours en temps et en heure. De plus, la charge de travail accrue que représente une communication majoritairement via des courriels, est qualifiée extrêmement chronophage par certain-e-s alourdissant les procédés. À l'inverse au Musée de la civilisation, les rapports en termes de communications semblent bien établis, même s'il arrive que les informations soient communiquées par une tierce personne. Ainsi ces témoignages attestent non seulement de modifications dans les traditions de travail, mais révèlent aussi toute l'importance de maintenir des canaux de communication actifs permettant la bonne poursuite des tâches.

**Justice distributive :** Au musée du Louvre, relevant de la fonction publique française, les employés perçoivent leur salaire en fonction d'une échelle salariale établie par l'État qui semble rigide et peu alléchante surtout en début de carrière. Le Musée de la civilisation semble se démarquer sur ce point, les conservateur-ric-e-s signalant qu'ils et elles ont les meilleures conditions de travail au Québec.

**Justice interpersonnelle :** Outre le salaire perçu, les relations interpersonnelles sont partie intégrante des critères permettant l'évaluation du bien-être d'un-e employé-e. Au musée du Louvre, cette question semble épineuse car la reconnaissance est en creux. Pour les employé-e-s du Musée de la civilisation à l'inverse, l'institution semble mettre un point d'honneur à remercier ses employé-e-s pour le travail effectué envoyant systématiquement des courriels lors d'ouverture d'expositions.

**Autonomie :** La satisfaction de travailler dans le domaine muséal semble être unanime dans les deux institutions bien que le climat de travail dépeint soit parfois difficile à suivre. Au musée du Louvre et au Musée de la civilisation, les employé-e-s soulignent le caractère passionnant de leurs tâches.

## Perspectives d'avenir et de recherche : nouvelle définition, nouvelles missions, nouvelles tâches

Depuis 2018, bien que la problématique de l'augmentation des tâches de gestion telle que présentée par messieurs Mairesse et Desvallées soit toujours présente, des paramètres se sont ajoutés. L'annonce de la nouvelle définition proposée par l'ICOM en 2019 (Conseil International des Musées, 2019) a recentré le débat. Les nouvelles propositions qui seront débattues à Prague en 2022 s'inscrivent en filiation avec la conférence de Santiago du Chili de 1972.

Par conséquent, la question de la justice sociale au musée est un phénomène qui ne prendrait pas seulement racine en 2019, mais dont les ramifications s'étendraient plus largement au concept de la « muséologie sociale » préminente en Amérique latine (Duarte Candidô, 2019). Ainsi, parmi les pistes de réflexion pour actualiser cette recherche, la perspective de questionner des épistémologies peu employées dans le monde occidental serait à envisager. D'un point de vue méthodologique, la grille d'entrevue s'intéresserait plus largement aux questions de bien-être et d'inclusion relatives aux employé-e-s minorisé-e-s.

*In fine*, les témoignages récoltés en 2018, reflètent le paradoxe voire l'ironie du débat autour de la nouvelle définition constatant que les dynamiques de gouvernance ne satisfont pas aux objectifs sociétaux défendus.

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# Are Indian museums or museology ready for change?

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The cry the world over, and especially in India, is of the demise of humanities and liberal arts set at arms-length to political dispensations. The disappearance of funding. Reactive governments. The inertia of bureaucracies. Class mobility of the subaltern into compromising and aspiring middle class/elite establishments. Replacement of creativity by show-and-tell presentations. Festival performances that are frozen in time. The proliferation of conferences solely for ticking the boxes of academic scoring and hierarchy. In this circus of contemporary India, who are the puppeteers? Who are the performers? Does orthodoxy stand in the way of creative freedom? How do we interrogate propaganda and the press? Has individualism become dominant in the digital domain? How well can we interrogate, with evidence and informed by deep research, all the things that add value to creativity and museums in a country like India? Where are the safe places for unsafe ideas? Whatever has happened to the creative and intellectually engaging spaces – the Adda, the Rachabanda – and more to the point the idea of museums as civic spaces? Festivals and extravaganzas – often flash in the pan events providing only photo ops – consume most funding. No outcome analyses and statistical profiles based on scientific methods are considered. Footfall has become the new mantra, without qualitative and quantitative indicators.

Much-needed national and international think tanks addressed some of these concerns in India in early 2021 and then again during and post-pandemic. Conversations were hosted by the Indian International Centre, Bihar Museum Biennale, and the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manava Sangrahalaya (National Museum of Anthropology). These are brave, inspirational and much needed engagements, given the predominance of conservative and legacy museums from colonial times. They are rare gatherings of deep-thinking minds in 21<sup>st</sup> century India, focusing on museums, creativity and freedom. Universities and cultural amateurs from bearers and transmitters of living heritage joined together, providing leading-edge dialogue grounded in the very dynamism that was once quintessential to Indian culture and its ability to propose, present and further the discourse of creativity and museum development. Leadership demonstrated a commitment to humanities and creativity for softening the hard edges of technology, engineering, architecture and design in museum development.

It has been emphasised in the past three years in India that museums are not just about valorising the past. Museums are of all kinds. The typology of museums

is extensive, and it is also porous. The more market-driven or interdisciplinary museums become, the more permeable they are. Relevance is the key word – to collections, audiences, the multiplicity of stakeholders, Indigenous, and culturally and linguistically diverse populations. My interventions have focussed on museums and drawn on reflections from both the closing conference in Vienna of the 2018 European Year of Cultural Heritage, ICOM Kyoto 2019 and the International Research Conferences on the Inclusive Museum over the past fifteen years (<https://onmuseums.com/about/history>). Transformations is the touted mantra.

How change is driven and by whom continues to be critical in India. Change needs to be linked to sustained maintenance and development. Introvertedness within the museum sector results in more of the same. Several museum spaces that were once enviable have been left to decay into oblivion in India. They are occasionally tarted up with show-and-tell activities with no sustainable results. Spaces are becoming venues for events rather than museums. Resistance to change and relevance mean new museums are born, especially in the private sector. Sooner or later governments force change in the public sector. That is reality, as no audience will support dead organisations. The future is mission-driven change, and clarity of mission is critical for any museum to aspire to become better.

ICOM's ongoing endeavour to rethink and revise the existing museum definition is timely for India, which is on the cusp of momentous change. There is an urgent need for a national museum policy in India. We need strategic and collaborative vision and policy making to move forward. India works ad hoc in the cultural sector without reliable cultural statistics or policies. These are different from the product driven cultural industries. Manufacturing of data has become common: Pilgrims are cast as tourists, overseas Indians coming back to see families are counted as tourists and not as VFR – Visiting Friends and Relatives. Such distortions skew any potential planning based on museums and creativity that could genuinely contribute to India's GDP.

The intersectionality between museums and diverse communities is dynamic and evolving. A take away for me from the think tanks in India is a dilemma that Australia and Canada faced two decades ago. Resourcing cultural maintenance often assumes that culture is frozen in time and static. We freeze performers in an anthropological past. Both Australia and Canada opted instead for Cultural Development policy approaches. They prioritized and resourced the importance of creativity and freedom, contributing to new forms of energy through the arts, museums and humanities. A think-tank could have been catalytic to reflect on how we could shift the paradigm of Art and Aboriginality in India. Unfortunately, they are still perceived through a colonial past and framed in 'primitivity', a legacy of a racist past that permeates museums, cultural projects, heritage and academies in India. The dynamic nature and potential of contemporary art, culture and heritage of Aboriginal/Indigenous people in India in all its diversity and richness is sadly neglected.

There are four emerging museological principles for guiding future directions:

- to support and provide all-inclusive access to museums and creative excellence;
- to promote and enable participation in museums for all with universal access complying with the 2018 National Legislation for Persons With Disability (PWD);
- to develop audiences both in India and overseas;
- and to invest in Aboriginal/Tribal/Adivasi/Indigenous spaces through their first voice.

Inclusion in all possibilities is the preferred future. It is evident from the contemporary thinking in India that we need to ReImage and ReImagine museums to become relevant and inclusive.

An interrogation of the framing of Indigenous Peoples in their diversity across the Global North and South is yet to be appropriately addressed by museums. It is more than return, repatriation and restitution of human remains and secret and sacred objects. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007, (UNDRIP) is the most comprehensive international instrument on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, over 6% of the world's population. It establishes the universal framework of minimum standards for the dignity and well-being of Indigenous Peoples. The ICOM Code of Ethics and ICOM Cultural Diversity Charter, as well as the UNESCO 2015 Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, are all amenable to the UNDRIP Declaration (<https://onmuseums.com/about/scope-concerns>). It is in this context that research shows the need for museums to address inclusion and decolonization in countries such as India. The current building of major museums 'for' Indigenous people in India without the participation of primary stakeholders and the urgent need to rethink university museums has brought to the fore a contestation on the rhetoric and reality of inclusion. In particular, disputes arise over the ethics of engagement; framing of self and the other; questions of who owns whose heritage and interprets it; the false colonial dichotomy of nature and culture; and the urgent need for appropriate capacity building for all concerned.

Indian museums often sustain colonial binaries defining the self and the other as hierarchical, or hegemonic and subaltern. Race, ethnicity, caste, gender, sexuality and several other cultural borders are often interpreted in stereotypical paradigms informed by systemic legacies of colonialism. The liminal spaces between these borders and their intersectionality are poorly understood. The contextual spaces are rarely theorised. Inclusion is often projected in a deficit rather than an affirmative model. While rare efforts are evident to decolonise some of these layers, the pandemic has led to the establishment museums, especially their counterparts the so-called universal museums, to go back to their old ways and perpetuate colonial and neo-colonial constructs that have become

popular with the elite museums in India. The poverty of museological discourse addressing decolonisation from the Global North, not much balanced from the Global South, continues through its privileged position. The transformation of museums is a project without an end. The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could provide benchmarks for ethical and engaging changes, but ICOM needs to provide leadership.

During the pandemic, with minimal visitation and a steep decline in tourism, many museums had to look to their neighbourhoods and local stakeholder communities. It is in this context that I argue, based on first hand work in India as well as Vietnam, that ecomuseology as a methodology could provide for the resilience of local communities in safeguarding their heritage in most of its manifestations. The eight states of Northeastern India with the majority of Indigenous peoples have rallied around the manifesto of ecomuseology and the Shillong Charter. Ecomuseology has also become a framework for addressing the SDGs. In South India, Amaravathi Heritage Town, the birthplace of Mahayana Buddhism, used ecomuseology as a tool to foster an innovative project entitled *Maa Vuuru Maa Kodallu* or *Our Village Our Daughters-in-Law*. It is one of the most innovative ways that SDG 5 (gender equality and women's empowerment) is being addressed in India through the solidarity of women and their own community cultural action. Elsewhere, the National and State Governments are considering a range of new initiatives that are endeavouring to come to grips with the First Voice of Indigenous Peoples and the need for the centrality of their participation. Caste, colour and racism are major impediments. Defining from the outside, hence containing Indigenous Peoples, has been a challenge to overcome in local legacy museology of India. Ethical engagement is needed as much as benefit analysis focussing on the primary stakeholders.

India continues to witness a plethora of museum conferences raising a number of important questions interspersed with a few case studies of transformations, as well as plenty of show-and-tell of the conventional demonstrations. Parachute consultants and vendor-driven culture of transformations without institutional capacity building is evident. But even if meetings are limited to urban elites and their cultural reproduction in a market economy, these are conversations one must have to open up the legacies of the past and start decolonising Indian museums. I have consistently asked the question as to what is national in the several National Museums of India and what is Indian in the Indian Museum, the oldest and the largest in South Asia. The silence is resounding! Villages, more than 70% of the country, are forgotten by the museums in India.

The Government of India has just come up with a new five-year plan with a substantial budget, even pledging to shake up the entry level training sector and to prompt professional development. I hope that it will not be more of the same and that there will be new and conscionable change agents beyond the national capital and other major metropolises in India. India was an active member in the UNESCO General Conference that adopted the text of a new standard-setting instrument on the Protection and Promotion of Museums

and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society in November 2015. It was drafted in close collaboration with ICOM. It affirms the Code of Ethics of ICOM. Member States have agreed on setting and implementing a set of global guidelines for the protection and promotion of museums and collections that is to become the cornerstone of international and national museum policies and legal instruments. The guidelines refer to the current ICOM museum definition from 2007. They reflect the international community's strong commitment to assisting museums in fulfilling their roles in contemporary society to promote sustainable development and intercultural dialogue, safeguarding heritage in all its manifestations. I therefore hope that ICOM will edit and amend its definition through negotiation with its constituent committees and UNESCO and adopt a progressive new definition in 2022.

The new Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Lonnie G. Bunch III, historian and founding Director of the iconic and phenomenal National Museum of African American History and Culture on Washington, DC's National Mall, offers three suggestions for museum transformation when and where appropriate: "A community-driven model of interpretation, collecting, and relationships that might assist them in navigating the tensions between history and memory" so that "museums matter"; a goal to "help audiences find the contemporary resonance of a museum's efforts"; and the need to "reposition cultural institutions as sites of value that are the centres and not peripheries of their communities".

To conclude, during the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032, ICOM could be proactive in promoting Indigenous knowledge, culture and languages as avenues to inclusion through museums. It could be an avenue to decolonise museological discourse in general and chart out new pathways to safeguard the cultural and linguistic diversity of humanity. With the majority of the Indian population living in villages, rural and Indigenous communities, ecomuseology could become vital for making museums relevant in India. It will be a change or even contestation for the minority upper middle-class urban elites who dominate the museological landscape in India. My argument is that the Power and Authority of museums need to be disaggregated and understood in critical community engagement if genuine transformation is to occur.

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# Un tabou nommé concurrence

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## Introduction

L'évolution du phénomène muséal s'est manifestée, notamment depuis les années 1970, par une augmentation exponentielle des institutions muséales dans le monde, traduite par une extension géographique et une diversification de leurs formes et de leurs enjeux. L'ICOM, constitué comme un espace d'intégration et de coopération, a joué un rôle fondamental dans le renforcement de cette logique et dans le poids dont les musées jouissent aujourd'hui dans le monde. Autour d'eux et dans la perspective de mieux les connaître – rappelant l'ambition portée par Jan Jelínek à la création de l'ICOFOM – se sont développés des systèmes d'informations et de production des connaissances. Ceux-ci fonctionnent, comme le musée, sur la base d'un système de thésaurisation de données, de tri et d'analyse, dont peut être issue une partie des théories muséales. Fondamentalement liée à des rapports de coopération, l'accumulation des connaissances – celles que nous avons acquises et celles que nous produisons, construites « sur les épaules des géants » (Eco, 2018) – est évidemment tributaire des systèmes politique, économique et social dans lesquels ce processus s'intègre.

Le tournant commercial (Bayart & Benghozi, 1993) et néo-libéral (Mairesse, 2021) du musée a fait émerger depuis une vingtaine d'années le sujet des mécanismes concurrentiels à l'œuvre, touchant dans le même temps tous les secteurs de la société et toutes les formes d'organisations, qui se manifestent ici notamment au travers d'une course aux financements et à la fréquentation des établissements. Loin d'être une logique qui s'appliquerait passivement aux acteurs, ceux-ci participent à sa dynamique, qu'il s'agisse de sa définition et de sa régulation, et en établissent le périmètre (Castel et al., 2016). Dans le cas des institutions muséales, les enjeux ne se cantonnent pas seulement à l'aspect pécuniaire et à la nécessaire diversification de leurs ressources, mais soulèvent aussi tout un ensemble d'effets liés à l'attractivité, au prestige et à la domination de modèles muséaux (Mairesse, 2021). En faisant un pas de côté, on pourrait se demander dans quelle mesure ces mécanismes affectent – ou non – les structures et les acteurs impliqués dans la production de connaissances et, par ce fait, dans le processus de représentation du phénomène muséal.

Cette contribution n'a nullement la prétention d'apporter des réponses définitives sur le sujet, mais cherche principalement à soulever les problématiques qui lui sont liées. Il est important de noter, en préambule, qu'il n'existe pas ou peu – à ma connaissance – de travaux prenant cet angle d'approche. Comme tout tabou,

la constatation de mécanismes concurrentiels – d’autant plus délicat dans un contexte de valorisation des coopérations et des collaborations – est apparue au fil d’observations, d’expériences, de rencontres avec des acteurs de la production de connaissances sur les musées à partir de trois secteurs : l’université, la production de données statistiques et la définition du musée. Au regard de la place de l’ICOFOM dans la formalisation des théories muséales, nous prenons la possibilité qui nous est donnée, de réfléchir non pas sur ce que l’on ne peut pas dire au musée, mais de ce que l’on ne connaît pas, de ce qui est tu, de ce qui est délicat et donc rarement mentionné. C’est donc par ses silences que ce sujet peut – et doit – être abordé.

## La muséologie comme science : une idée fragile ?

La capacité auto-réfléchissante de la muséologie (Brulon Soares, 2015) suppose à la fois la force de sa construction théorique, mais également sa très forte malléabilité. Dans l’interstice entre ces deux modalités, les débats autour de la muséologie comme science restent prégnants, tant il est complexe de définir sa place dans le système académique et de lui conférer une spécificité méthodologique. Cette problématique est perceptible à partir de la recension récente de formations muséales dans le monde (Doyen & Mairesse, 2022). D’une part, celle-ci souligne la forte inégalité dans la répartition géographique des cursus d’étude, puisque les deux tiers des pays dans le monde n’en possèdent pas (au bénéfice des pays disposant de réseaux muséal et universitaire denses), et que l’implantation au sein d’un même pays n’est pas homogène. D’autre part, le nombre de formations a, globalement, fortement augmenté, accompagnant les transformations du monde des musées et son besoin en compétences spécifiques. Cependant, les auteurs remarquent que « l’ancrage spécifique de [celles-ci] dans une perspective spécifique est loin d’être prédominant » (Doyen & Mairesse, 2022, p. 38). En effet, outre les *museum studies* mobilisant une approche interdisciplinaire, la muséologie même investit les sciences de l’information et de la communication, l’esthétique et les sciences de l’art, l’histoire des mondes modernes ou encore l’anthropologie. Le contact avec d’autres entités disciplinaires pourrait évidemment renforcer sa présence dans le système académique, mais en tout état de cause, le risque de sa dilution est accru par l’absence d’une méthodologie qui lui serait propre. Cette fragilité pose d’autant plus question au regard du fonctionnement du domaine universitaire (Wauthy, 2006), où la concurrence peut s’exprimer de manière externe (entre universités), mais également au sein des institutions (entre départements, entre chercheurs, entre fonctions d’enseignement et de recherche). L’harmonisation des formations, la valorisation de classements mondiaux, et les débats autour de l’organisation des universités s’inscrivent dans ce mécanisme. Derrière les volontés affirmées d’attractivité se trouve une situation, bien plus contrastée, de rationalisation budgétaire – d’autant plus forte selon les contextes nationaux – et de précarisation des emplois. Peut-on alors supposer que le développement de la muséologie, dans un tel cadre, est assujéti à une multiplicité de facteurs dont les seuls chercheurs ne sont pas les maîtres ?

## Produire des données statistiques sur les musées

Un deuxième domaine permet d'offrir une représentation du phénomène muséal : la production de données statistiques – qui a notamment accompagné le développement des politiques culturelles – contribue à en établir un panorama, à former des populations muséales particulières et à circonscrire les enjeux majeurs pour son développement (Guiragossian, 2020). Un portrait sommaire des acteurs recensés en Europe, agissant à l'échelle nationale, laisse apparaître une typologie en quatre catégories, assez proches des modèles d'infrastructures d'informations définis par Schuster dans le domaine des politiques culturelles (2002). Il s'agit notamment d'organismes gouvernementaux (départements ou administrations générales dédiées à la gestion d'un ensemble de musées, agences gouvernementales de recherche), des offices statistiques nationaux, des associations de musées ou de professionnels de musées et, dans une très moindre mesure, de départements ou de regroupements de départements universitaires. L'intégration de la question muséale au sein du champ plus large des politiques et des statistiques culturelles pose de nombreuses questions en ce qui concerne le développement de données. Évidemment, quelques entités s'illustrent par leur mandat et leurs compétences, comme l'Institut für Museumsforschung (Allemagne), le Museum Documentation Center (*Croatie*) ou l'*Observatorio de museos de España* (Espagne). Cependant, la majorité des acteurs sont affiliés à d'autres domaines de compétence et d'expertise (la culture, le patrimoine ou le sport par exemple). Là encore, l'absence de spécialisation laisse fortement entendre la possibilité d'une concurrence endogène, au sein d'un même secteur, qui va conditionner le développement ou non de projets qui lui sont dédiés. Une deuxième difficulté repose dans la configuration et l'organisation de ces structures : la responsabilité du périmètre d'observation peut ne pas être du fait des observateurs et les relations et les partages de compétences entre les différentes entités sont variables. Le cas des Pays-Bas est intéressant à cet égard, puisqu'avant un processus d'harmonisation enclenché en 2015, les données étaient recueillies par trois entités, Statistics Netherlands, la Cultural Heritage Agency et l'association Museum Vereniging aux périmètres d'observation inégaux, provoquant une situation non optimale dans la production de données sur le musée, et quasi concurrentielle. Plusieurs schémas de collaboration peuvent ainsi être mis en place pour créer des infrastructures solides et efficaces, en adéquation avec les compétences différenciées des acteurs. Cependant, cette nécessité révèle la forte fragilité du secteur, d'autant plus que celui-ci est tributaire de l'évolution des contextes économique et social. La crise économique en 2008 au Portugal a par exemple entraîné la suppression de l'Institut portugais des Musées (Portuguese Museum Institute) et de l'Observatoire des Activités Culturelles, remplacés plus tard par d'autres institutions aux compétences modifiées. D'après Clara Camacho (Directorate-General for Cultural Heritage), « les musées ne font plus l'objet d'autant d'attention que par le passé, lorsqu'il existait un organe directeur normal pour eux<sup>1</sup> ». Les connaissances élaborées sur les musées sont ainsi fonction

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1. « Museums aren't being paid so much attention as they were in the past, when there was a normally

de l'intérêt des politiques publiques qui y affectent – ou non – des ressources humaines nécessaires, mais également des personnalités qui en ont la charge et de leur intérêt pour la question.

## L'ICOM et la définition du musée

La qualification de l'Assemblée Générale de l'ICOM à Kyoto en 2019, désignée comme une « bataille » (Mairesse, 2020) n'est pas imméritée, laissant notamment apparaître une rivalité de visions du musée et, dans une certaine mesure, entre des idéologies différentes. La volonté universaliste de la définition de l'ICOM ne doit pas occulter son rôle premier, celui de séparer « le bon grain de l'ivraie » (Mairesse, 2002) et d'établir des critères d'adhésion au sein de l'ICOM. Dans le même temps, la définition dépasse les compétences de l'ICOM *stricto sensu*, investissant les législations internationales (UNESCO) et nationales (Rivet, 2017), participant de l'analyse historique de l'institution (Walz, 2021) et créant un cadre particulier pour la compréhension et la représentation du phénomène muséal. Pourtant, peut-on véritablement définir le musée sans en prendre l'entièreté de ses composantes ? Fiona Candlin, étudiant les micromusées de Grande-Bretagne, souligne l'aspect ironique d'une définition se voulant inclusive – en parlant de la définition élaborée par la Museums Association – mais qui finalement « disqualifie les musées qui sont fondés et dirigés par des personnes n'appartenant pas nécessairement à une élite institutionnelle ou professionnelle<sup>2</sup> » (Candlin, 2016, p. 11). Dans un contexte où les systèmes de reconnaissance et d'accréditation vont influencer l'octroi de financement et de légitimité institutionnelle, a-t-on véritablement intérêt à connaître l'ensemble du monde des musées et dépasser les limites de la définition ?

Pour nous, la question est apparue de la place accordée à la recherche au sein de ce processus. De même que le symposium de Calgary en 2005 avait contribué à marquer les discussions et à poser des jalons dans les réflexions sur la définition du musée sans avoir d'effet décisionnel (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2011), finalement, quelle est la place de la recherche – entendre « des chercheurs » – au sein de l'ICOM ? Alors que le processus de définition semble soulever des questionnements en termes de légitimité, de positionnement voire même de stratégies de carrière, comment entendre aujourd'hui le rôle de la recherche dans une association professionnelle ?

## Conclusion

L'ardeur des débats qui ont émaillé le processus de redéfinition du musée mené par l'ICOM, depuis la Conférence Générale de Kyoto, a peut-être eu un effet

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governing body for them » (traduction personnelle).

2. « [disqualifies] museums that are founded and run by people who do not necessarily belong to an institutional or professional elite » (traduction personnelle).

bénéfique, outre la remise en marche d'un processus démocratique au sein de l'organisation. Au-delà d'apporter une réponse à la question naïve « Qu'est-ce qu'un musée ? », les discussions ont pointé du doigt, sans véritablement le formuler, que peut-être nous ne le savions pas. Car le champ muséal est loin d'être appréhendé dans sa globalité : il constitue un espace de vides et de pleins, où les aspérités sont silencieuses et signifiantes. Un rapide examen des structures liées à la production de connaissances sur le champ muséal laisse transparaître une fragilité, que ne laisse pourtant pas présager le dynamisme – apparent – des institutions muséales dans le monde. À partir de la notion de concurrence, qui revêt de multiples aspects, on observe une dépendance très forte entre trajectoires de carrières, choix individuels et effets politiques. Celle-ci doit nous pousser dans une même direction : préserver la diversité muséale et orienter nos propres actions, en remettant en question les savoirs que nous produisons. Et finalement, le plus grand tabou ne serait-il pas celui de l'incomplétude du phénomène muséal que nous avons du mal, encore aujourd'hui, à appréhender dans son intégralité ?

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# Can museums play war?

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Museums as institutions working with objects and narratives, having competencies to build relations with communities and individuals and experienced in animating discussions around collections, are well equipped to address complex issues of the contemporary world. Their holdings often include objects which are ambiguous or politically incorrect. These are documents of particular times and as such are precious elements of museum possessions; however, on principle, they are kept away from public view. Shedding light on tabooed issues requires building bold and smart yet sensitive narratives.

In the article, I discuss taboos surrounding a collection of toys that refer to the most current topic of war. My argument is that museums should not be silent about difficult issues which link their exhibits to current political and social contexts; instead they should seek proper tools and frameworks to speak about them. Museum of toys and a narrative of war during wartime – what can be said and what should remain silent?

## **Toys are a mirror of the world**

Toys reflect the world around us, only in miniature – the history of society could be told by toys. Historically, toys embody the issues of social injustice, racism, intolerance, overproduction of goods, climate crisis or violence. These are issues many people would not associate with narratives developed by a toy museum—a type of museum associated predominantly with a young public and bound with carefree play and joy. As a co-founder and director for programming of the Toy Museum in Krakow, I have envisaged this institution as a forum for discussion on difficult matters, encompassing all the above and many more. It is a museum that uses its collection as a vehicle to speak about topical issues of today and tomorrow.

Funding is a decisive factor for what museums say and keep silent. Be it self-censorship or taboo, despite formal independence the source of money influences programming. The Toy Museum in Krakow is run by a non-governmental organisation which manages a private collection of over 40,000 historic toys. This model provides flexibility; however, independence is limited – programme activities of the museum depend on public grants (state and municipal) which by definition would not support a stance that is inconsistent with their political agendas. Another factor is appropriateness – sensitivity in approaching the subject with regard to the emotional condition of the public.

## Military toys and the war

Military toys constitute a significant part of the collection. “They were one of the first toys in human history,” says Marek Sosenko, founder of the collection (personal communication, 27 March 2022). Imitating their mother, a child played with a doll, while imitating their father, who either hunted or fought, the child played with a weapon. The weapon appeared in a very realistic form, but there were also games that were supposed to imitate combat. The collection includes guns and other weapons, military vehicles, little tin soldiers, and board games. These last ones also serve to teach history. “This way victories were glorified and enemies were condemned,” adds Sosenko.

The topical issue of today is the war in Ukraine. Museums in Poland nationwide responded immediately to urgent needs and took measures to help refugees – organising collections of food products, clothes and other goods, promoting fundraising, offering accommodation in museum guest rooms, creating day-care for children, special workshops and other cultural events – and organising help for people in Ukraine. From the very beginning, the Toy Museum has operated in two ways, preparing more systemic solutions of a long-term nature without losing sight of the current needs.

The outbreak of war coincided with the final days of the exhibition *Toy Clinic*, organised in rented rooms of the former hospital. The exhibition space was turned into creative workshops and a playroom—a place for building relations and bonds for young refugees from Ukraine and their families. After dismantling the show, creative workshops have continued in a different location. A new project entitled *Toy Clinic #2: Difficult Questions*, composed of discussion and creative workshops and resulting in a small exhibition of only five objects, is underway in April-June 2022. The main idea of the *Toy Clinic* was recycling and care for the natural environment, resources, climate and criticism of overproduction, while *Toy Clinic #2* focuses on human well-being, emotions, state of mind, and mental condition. Attention is focused on such notions as: chaos-order, war-peace, destruction-reconstruction, flight-return, other-own, love-loss, coexistence-understanding-community, evil-good, violence, responsibility and hope. The goal is to extract new meanings for objects from the collection – to read them in a specific place and time by people with specific emotional baggage. Discussions are centred around things that are naturally good, which in certain circumstances may also have bad connotations – train, window, sky, table or puzzle. The project shows how a context influences the change of meaning. Toys were staged against white backdrop, which is a direct reference to the white-painted exhibition space of a contemporary art gallery and which is supposed to give the appearance of neutrality, abstracting objects from the context, while in fact neutrality is only seeming. Workshops, followed by the exhibition of toys discussed in the workshops locked in white boxes and a panel discussion with experts, are the first phase of the project aimed at developing toolboxes (chests) for conversations on difficult topics that will be produced by the Toy Museum for kindergartens and early school education.

## Taboos, responsibility and social change

Addressing potentially tabooed issues proves, in my view, responsibility towards the public and towards the heritage which museums look after. It is also related to the concept of social change driven by museums. Readiness to initiate and moderate difficult conversations may contribute to the development of public discourse and empowerment of civil society in general terms. Mike Murawski (2021) advocates for museums to act as agents of change by

*bringing people together, contributing to local communities, and changing people's lives. Yet, for far too many institutions, this potential continues to go largely untapped. [...] Given the ongoing pandemic and our current moment of continued political polarization, highly contested social debates, and widespread global efforts to confront oppression, now is the time to challenge the entrenched traditional notions of museums and proactively shape a new future. (Murawski, 2021, p. xi)*

Discussions about changes in museums have been ongoing since the 1960s, when the New Museology movement began. Museum theorists and practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic emphasised the position of the community and the need to shift the focus from the collection to the public. Publications on social justice, democratisation or museum participation (e.g. Sandell 2003; Sandell & Nightingale, 2012; Janes, 2009; Janes & Sandell, 2019; Message, 2013; Chynoweth, et al., 2020) bring arguments for a proactive museum approach. Confronting taboos should also be a part of the discussion.

Piotr Piotrowski, as a director of the National Museum in Warsaw in 2009–2010, attempted to employ characteristics of a “critical museum” to a universal museum, arguing that programming – especially through active participation in the current public debate on important, also sensitive issues (e.g. LGBT, democracy) – can compensate for the lack of world-class masterpieces in the collections. He defined a critical museum as

*engaged in public debate, undertaking important and often also controversial problems of a given community, regarding both past and the present. A critical museum is an institution working for democracy based on argument, but also an autocratic institution reviewing its own tradition, taking issue with its own authority and the historical and artistic canon it has shaped. (Piotrowski, 2011, p. 9)*

Piotrowski failed in turning his theoretical thinking into museum practice; however, his brief episode as the manager of one of the most important Polish museums followed by scholarly writings sparked a heated debate in Poland on the role of a contemporary museum.

After over a decade, we are in a different place in discussions on the responsibilities of museums. There are many progressive museum projects that respond to the critical, activist, inclusive concept of a museum institution; the same concept that has also been articulated in the debate on changing the ICOM definition of

a museum. The Toy Museum in Krakow follows this path with the ambition of taking up current topics and setting out new solutions and ways of thinking, as well as participating in the debate on the contemporary condition of museums. The topic of war (and the question that all museums needed to respond to is *how to react?*) is timely in discussing the responsibility of museums.

“Regardless of the times and the age of children, we will never get rid of military toys,” comments Sosenko. On what terms, then, should the war find its way to the museum? In the beginning of 2021, when the Toy Museum initiated its inaugural project *Toy Showcase* – a five-part exhibition of historic toys curated by people drawn from the general public and presented in three partner museums – selection of a visual motif for the poster sparked a discussion on the appropriateness of some toys appearing in public space. A visually attractive photograph presenting a regiment of lead soldiers was identified by one of the project partners as promoting military actions and war. The exchange of views confirmed a belief that the subject of military toys needs to be developed in the form of a separate project. No one could have predicted that only a year later such a project would be more pressing than ever.

The current project *Difficult Questions* was programmed together with Dr Monika Nęcka, who is an authority in the field of art pedagogy. Referring to museums taking up the subject of war, she affirmed:

*It would be dishonest for a museum to eliminate things that involve some difficulty. The exhibition, which for me is a conversation with the public, should include various elements of the collection – elements that are problematic or terrible, because they were created for a reason. But the most important thing is not to put an emphasis on the fact that something is terrible, bad, and serves for killing, but to reflect on why something like this was created in the first place and how it is used. [...] There is no such thing as a taboo, but a taboo should not be exaltation, it should, in my opinion, be presented as a part of reality, which for some reason was hidden, concealed, embarrassing. (personal communication, 26 March 2022)*

That is why the project does not ask questions related to trauma in a straightforward way, and war is not represented by soldiers, guns or tanks. Child refugees – the target group of the project – already experienced that the window can not only show a beautiful view, it can shake and fall out, just like the train that is not necessarily bringing people closer to a holiday adventure but taking them away from their home. Questions that appeared during creative activities included: What do you see through your window? What would you like to see? Are you afraid of shadows / lights at night? The answers (in the form of words, images, installations) indicated that there was a need to continue working with memories, emotions and feelings. And the project itself proved that the museum – a safe place filled with empathy – is the most appropriate location to work on difficult and timely topics.

Nęcka notes that “there is a war always going on somewhere, but we are not at all interested in thinking and talking about it until it reaches our borders.” Recently war has come very near the Polish border and has become our reality. Referring to the current situation, there can be only one conclusion: museums must respond in their programme activities.

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# Defining a method for uncovering “taboos” in museums

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## Introduction

Taboo comes from the Polynesian ta-pu, where ta means ‘marked’ and pu acts as a reinforcing. Depending on the various cultures, it can be considered as an intrinsic feature of something or as a value that is applied to something.

As Angelo Brelich mentions in his book *Introduction to history of religions*, a taboo is based on a relationship: e.g. a certain food is prohibited in a certain community, but is totally accepted by another group of people; furthermore, the same food can be prohibited only to some social categories and not to all the community.

Talking about taboos in the Museum is tricky.

Firstly, because a taboo is something extremely defined and codified: a set of rules that is commonly well known and shared by a community and the consequences of breaking those rules are pretty clear as well.

Secondly because taboos change over time.

With regards to the first aspect, the point is that “taboos” in museums are mostly hidden. There is not a system of shared rules that everybody knows and decides to apply, but instead, there is a set of beliefs that often is taken for granted and becomes sort of transparent for both the audience and the museum professionals. That means that museums suffer the risk of perpetuating some kinds of “taboos” without being conscious they are doing so.

And this is connected to the second point: being aware that we, as museum professionals, are applying – more or less consciously – certain “taboos” today and acting to get past them does not protect us from avoiding the risk of applying other “taboos” in the future.

Generally speaking, more than “taboo” for museums a concept of “censorship” probably applies, both imposed (explicitly or subtly) or auto-imposed.

## Context

If some contexts, due to their specific history, present clear signs of exclusions (of a group of people, of objects, of narratives, etc.) and “taboos” / censorship, and if museums have already started asking themselves some questions about

these taboos and how to move forward, in some other contexts it may be difficult to uncover biases, prejudices and in general to understand that “we” (whatever that “we” means) are not – and cannot – be totally neutral in any case.

Exploring the range of unveiling and dealing with an impossible neutrality is the basis for bringing up our points of view in order to stop letting them be transparent and taken for granted, and instead to start finding a way to identify “taboos” and censored items and the reason why they are (still) there.

## Method

It seems necessary to identify a method that allows museums to guide themselves into a process of discovering their own “truth” and its biases. This would involve a process that looks inside the institution and outside of it, that gives museums a path to be followed, asking questions such as:

- Which are the “right” questions to ask to ourselves to start the process?
- Which competencies and tools are necessary for digging into the museum’s history (people and institutions who created it and made it evolve over the years; events that have affected it physically, economically, politically, etc.) and into the museum’s collections history (where do they come from, how were they acquired, etc.)?
- Which competencies and tools are necessary for listening to and engaging all the people and communities involved in our “taboos”?

## Research

ICOM Italy is working on creating a similar method for Italian museums with regards to the false dichotomy of physical vs. digital in order to understand how to create a new “phygital” cultural offering, starting by listening to and engaging the internal and external stakeholders, then proceeding with the identification of the necessary competencies and the making of co-created projects.

We are using a specific methodology called a charrette, in cooperation with the MEET Digital Culture Centre in Milan and the Institute Without Boundaries in Toronto. A charrette is a process of participated design thinking guided in each of its phases, from identifying the goals to the definition of ideas and projects and their sustainability.

We had the first meeting on March 28<sup>th</sup> and the second session on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2022, both online, with a final restitution (hybrid: in person in Milan and on-line) on June 20<sup>th</sup>.

The idea is to expand cooperation with the Italian museums – the ones directly involved and the ones who would like to be an active part in it – to the subject of this abstract, in order to bring the first results to Prague 2022.

# Taboos of confronting coloniality within the Google Maya Project

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## Introduction

Published as part of the British Museum (BM)'s "Google Maya Project" (GMP) on Google Arts and Culture (GAC), two digital exhibitions explore Maya Indigenous cultural heritage, community museums, community heritage projects, Indigenous art and activism. These exhibitions are titled *Yucatán Today* by the BM (2019) and *The Cos-Maya-Politan Future* by Indigenous Maya anthropologist Genner Llanes-Ortiz (2019). The content and curatorial processes of these exhibitions raise questions regarding the interaction between cultural heritage, decolonisation and Western hegemonic coloniality. I was particularly drawn by ICOFOM's choice of phrase, for 'museums and museology to *disempower* by inhibiting discussion of sensitive topics' (Weiser, Bertin & Leshchenko, 2022, p. 2). I suggest that the BM propagates the taboo of failing to confront inequitable power dynamics and refusing to relinquish authority for Indigenous peoples and communities to curate their own narratives, including that of activism and land rights.

This study converses with Quijano's (2000) notion of 'coloniality,' denoted as the systemic and oppressive modern world system resulting from the historical colonisation of the Americas. I engage also with Mignolo's (2017, 2018) concept of decoloniality and border epistemological 'de-linking' for epistemic shifts to work toward the restitution of colonial difference from subaltern perspectives. Such decolonial theory is eloquently applied to community and new museology by Morales and Camarena, whereby communities contest 'the logic on the construction of colonial, Eurocentric knowledge, and [transform] the coloniality of self by creating sites where subaltern communities represent themselves' (2022, p. 1). Clifford's (1997) notion of 'contact zones' within museums is also a central theme to these discussions, as is Onciul's (2017) conception of 'engagement zones' as a model for decolonised museum collaboration and relationship building with communities.

Decolonial discourse has yet to be applied to exhibits from GAC. There remains a gap in the literature concerning if and how decolonising methodologies can be applied when museums are representing Indigenous cultural heritage, to facilitate an authentic space centred around co-curation, decision-making and agency. Is it possible for museums imbricated with coloniality to acknowledge and subvert the taboo against confronting coloniality and attempt to de-link with Western epistemologies through decolonial curatorial practise?

My research methodology involved applying Latin American decolonial theory to practical processes of curating the Google Maya Project. I wish to acknowledge my positionality as a British, white, female student researcher and recognise that suggestions made here are by no means prescriptive. Insightful interview responses by academics, curators, Indigenous community representatives and artists have enriched this study greatly; however, this analysis does not mean to speak for the peoples represented, nor to assume extrapolated homogenous perspectives.

## Yucatán Today

The GMP's aim was not to decolonise representations of Maya heritage with this exhibition, but rather to digitise the BM's Alfred Maudsley Collection. A contradiction emerges, as *Yucatán Today* discusses how Indigenous cultural heritage in the Yucatán Peninsula is used to combat discrimination and promote self-determination for Maya peoples, yet the BM is itself imbricated with coloniality, which it does not acknowledge or confront. Through sections on community museums, music, poetry, epigraphy teaching and activism, the exhibition aims to show how Indigenous communities strengthen pride in their cultural identity, fight for land rights and interact with 'worlds' in ways 'that are meaningful for them in the present' (British Museum, 2019). However, the absence of decolonial endeavours results in the propagation of Western perspectives.

*Yucatán Today's* choice of wording exemplifies colonial rhetoric and favouring of Western epistemology; "the Maya living there today are owners of a vibrant culture that is part of our times and is in continuous dialogue with the *modern world* (British Museum, 2019)."<sup>1</sup> The BM places itself within a dominant Eurocentric world, claiming ownership of hegemonic worldviews, while implying that the value or charm of subaltern Maya culture is conditional to, or enhanced by, its relation to Western modernity. Maya culture is presented as 'catching up' to modernity, rather than Vasquez's (2021) argument that Indigenous peoples are oppressed *under* modernity. Furthermore, the exhibition's conclusion states that "the future of Maya communities relies on their own people" (British Museum, 2019), denying any activist role the BM could play in supporting Indigenous cultural and social justice movements. It does not acknowledge its central position within the colonial world order against which community initiatives contest, nor does it address the inequitable power dynamics with represented peoples.

## The Cos-Maya-politan Future

*The Cos-Maya-Politan Future* was also produced for the GMP, as an attempt from the BM to include a contemporary Maya perspective. It explores how Maya peoples embrace and celebrate diversity between Maya groups through art and cultural heritage, which is proposed as an empowering vehicle for social and

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1. Author's emphasis.

political expression. Significantly, examples demonstrate how communities and artists resist and interact with globalised influences, in order to promote Maya epistemologies and ways of life. Llanes-Ortiz advocates for research practises based on intercultural dialogue and decolonising methodologies; for him, the exhibit was an opportunity to dialogue with fellow Maya academics, activists and practitioners around the concept of ‘cos-Maya-politanism (personal communication, 2021).

In contrast to *Yucatán Today*, Llanes-Ortiz presents his message by centering Indigenous perspectives and agency. Walter Paz Joj, a Kaqchikel graphic artist from Guatemala, stated that “taking part in this process has been a way of continuing to contribute to a cultural growth where contemporary Mayans are the main actors and builders of our own present and not just of the past” (personal communication, 2021).

While being a more respectful effort to represent heritage, the context of the wider GMP raises questions regarding the potential to provide a decolonised narrative. It is a taboo topic for museums to introduce an Indigenous perspective within an exhibition and then label it as being ‘co-curated’; the inclusion of Llanes-Ortiz’s perspective does not excuse the BM from failing to confront their colonial rhetoric and practise. However, to what extent can this be a ‘seat at the table,’ for Llanes-Ortiz to subvert the colonial narrative by advocating for Indigenous activism centred around Maya epistemologies?

## **Collaborative processes**

Time and effort dedicated to ‘collaboration’ for *Yucatán Today* was grossly insufficient to be labelled co-curation. Curator Claudia Zhert admitted that collaborative efforts were left far too late, only managing a “flying visit” to community museums in Yucatán. The original aim was for colleagues from the Yaxunah community museum and Radio Yúuyum to curate their own exhibits, however, this was not possible with the short timeframe. *Yucatán Today* was the compromise of at least “wanting to do something” to showcase these initiatives, even if it came “from our point of view rather than their point of view” (Claudia Zhert, personal communication, 2021).

In some cases, peoples featured were seen as passive informants rather than co-curators. Alfredo Hau, a representative from Ch’okwoj Maaya Ts’iib, spoke with curator Ana Somohano about Ch’okwoj’s activities, however, neither he nor the group were aware of the exhibit being published, nor were they sufficiently credited (Alfredo Hau, personal communication, 2021). The Tiholop community museum was not sent the page link for feedback prior to launch (Claudia Zhert, personal communication, 2021), neither did Múuch’ Xíinbal activist Pedro Uc recall having participated in this exhibition, suggesting that “perhaps it was part of some research work that was done and I did not know it” (personal communication, 2021).

Any collaborative efforts are undermined by the prevalence of an external European voice, which favours Western audiences over Indigenous interests. Zhert had received criticism from an Indigenous activist, stating that:

*He was very very critical because he was saying [...] that is yet another colonialist point of view. It is again you trying to make your fellow white people aware of the fact that the Maya are still there, which doesn't give us, them, the voice. (personal communication, 2021)*

By contrast, Llanes-Ortiz was much more self-reflective over his positionality, stating that:

*It's something that I need to be very careful with, when I write about my own people, my own experience, and other people who are brothers and sisters, Indigenous brothers and sisters, in order not to reproduce a scholarly aesthetic that objectifies those experiences. (personal communication, 2021)*

Llanes-Ortiz's curatorial collaborations with artists and community members were conducted with much more transparency and honesty, either based on personal positive working relationships or pre-agreed outcomes. Collaborators were sent drafts of the article prior to launch for feedback and approval (Llanes-Ortiz, personal communication, 2021). Interview responses from Hau and Paz Joj reflected that effort was given to ensure that their information was presented in ways that were meaningful for them.

## Conclusion

The GMP does not prioritise decolonising endeavours and instead propagates coloniality and Western epistemology. The BM exemplifies the taboo of refusing to confront its positionality within the colonial matrix of power and co-curate with Indigenous stakeholders. Llanes-Ortiz's contribution, however, encourages one to reflect how 'seats at the table' can be used to prioritise Indigenous agency, commence dialogue and subvert colonial rhetoric to promote Maya activism and epistemologies.

Decolonising methodologies cannot be applied to GAC exhibitions as long as the external 'collaborators' producing the exhibitions remain in possession of a dominating amount of curatorial power. Museums must decentre their institutional authority and facilitate capacity for previously silenced voices to curate their own narratives on their own terms. Indeed, it is ironic for an exhibition to present Indigenous culture as an empowering tool of self-determination, while presenting interpretation from a Western perspective. However, there is potential for GAC to act as a digital contact zone for meaningful relationships between museums, Indigenous peoples and activism, if decolonial mindsets and methodologies are prioritised.

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# Taboos and conflict in museums

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The word “taboo” can startle any reader. It is a “harsh” word from which many other words and interpretive concepts follow. Its meaning includes the forbidden, the restricted or the distasteful. With such a range of meaning, the term evokes so many reactions that it is difficult to judge the degree of severity that is being applied. This ambiguity is certainly the case when exploring museum taboos, and this paper touches on the kinds of “taboo-ness” and the conflicts they create within the museum itself. Here, “taboos” are not “black” and “white”. They are not readily definable, in the true sense perceived by the hard and fast meaning this word elicits, and they can range from “ought not to be done” to “how best to do this so we do not offend”. This paper addresses some of these conflicts.

## Museum anthropology collections

Museums holding human osteological materials have discovered that this is fast becoming a “taboo” issue. While much information can be gleaned from these collections, their display (a practise which began to be rethought and halted in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) is no longer acceptable. After all, these are human remains, often referred to as “ancestor” remains by Indigenous peoples, thus giving them a sacred reverence. Yet, there are those aspects which still attract attention from both museums and visitors. For example, cranial deformation (over-moulded skulls) was a world-wide phenomenon also practised by some Indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast, as was the practise of trepanation. Mumification (e.g., Egyptian mummies), tattooed mummified heads (e.g., Maori *Mokomokai* or *Toi moko*), and Jivaro shrunken heads or *tsantsa* are still sought by museum visitors. Public curiosity and a desire to satisfy same places a strain on museums holding such objects and any associative “taboo” can become compromised, thus creating a conflict.

Nevertheless, many museums have complied with the inappropriateness of displaying human remains in response to grievances articulated by the originating cultures. Associated with these grievances are the accelerated requests for their return along with any accompanying burial objects. The return of these objects is not as easy as it might sound. While museums want to comply, there remains a conflict within physical anthropological study. In addition, there can also be extenuating impediments to effecting an open and uncontested return. Individual and even locale identification at point of acquisition is, in many instances, lacking. Even if these are known, it is common that the process can be contested by more than one family or community. In such cases, museums are having to leave the resolution of contestation up to the claimants. In addition, there are Indigenous communities which do not want remains returned for a variety of

reasons, such as worry about negative spiritual consequences for those living in the community or not knowing the correct ceremonies to mark their return.

For those museums which hold these materials in their collections, this might be the closest to a full taboo which it has to address for public display. It is certain that further acquisition of these materials is not permitted unless archaeological excavations are done in concert with the extant Indigenous descendants of the sites, who would also determine the disposition of the findings.

Also associated with taboos are requirements for the storage and display of cultural objects that are “restricted” or “sensitive”. Human osteological materials and sacred or culturally sensitive objects all fit into this catchment. Indigenous peoples give guidance to how such objects are handled and stored and whether any can be displayed. For example, Coast Salish First Nations Sxwaixwe masks and pecten shell rattles are used in important ceremonies where the doors to the big house are closed after the dancers arrive and during which no one is permitted to enter or to take photographs. As these sacred objects are found in museum collections, they are subject to being out of public sight and accessible to only those originating peoples. Museum curatorial staff are responsible to see that the trust of “restrictiveness” is honoured and not breached. If such items require conservation, museums need to seek permission to do so from the relevant Indigenous community and any necessary work might be overseen or even undertaken by these peoples. Currently, it is the case that sacred objects are still subjected to museum display, and until museums incorporate Indigenous peoples into their operation, this will continue to be a “colonialistic” blight on these institutions. Thus, the consequence of a taboo in this realm is certain to create conflict.

There is a penchant for building anthropological collections which comprise objects that are considered the finest, and the older and the most aesthetically appealing of these are often in the forefront of acquisition efforts. In fact, museums are predatory in their search for the best objects and often compete for them in the marketplace with both private collectors and other museums (Brulon Soares & Maranda, 2016). The excellence associated with acquiring such objects is firmly ingrained in both museum ethos and activity. It could be argued that this kind of undertaking is deleterious to museum interface with the Indigenous communities it serves, as these are often seen by museums as objects of art and not as sources of cultural importance, of knowledge, or of representing family histories. Such predation in the marketplace sets standards of both collectability and monetary value, and the conflict of any associative taboo can seriously change the community perception of the museum’s collection building status from “holding in trust” to one of “ownership”.

Nevertheless, “old” cultures evolve with time and material culture output changes accordingly. Peoples change as do the tangible objects which represent their lives as both respond to their own diachronic place in time. Nevertheless, there has grown a resistance to acquiring objects which are indicative of the cultural continuum. Some of these objects are classified as “tourist art” and deemed

unworthy of museum consideration. While collecting contemporaneous Indigenous objects continues, the trend is to classify these as artistic productions and not as representing cultural lifeways. Thus, there is a taboo involving perception on the museum's part along with an attending conflict.

## **Museum anthropology exhibitions**

Exhibitions are the museum's primary source of communication to the world. They are created to present museum holdings in illustration of a narrative in concert with its institutional mandate. While there are objects, whether culturally sensitive or restricted in museum collections, that ought not to be displayed, there are also objects the interpretation of which is the subject of decolonization debates involving Indigenous peoples. Museums have not yet reached a state of meaningful decolonization, and this has become a sore point with some of the communities within its catchment as issues of representation, interpretation and voice are looming ever larger (Maranda, 2022). In this way, avoiding partnerships with Indigenous communities creates a conflict where the displaying of such materials becomes a taboo.

Here museum "neutrality" is not balanced because museums set their own parameters and are either reluctant or slow to change, regardless of the external pressures under which they are placed. Conforming to a "new" reality means "sharing", and this is still not a museum priority even though pressure is ever mounting to do so. The easy way out may be to opt not to display materials from anthropology collections, thus skirting the pressures being applied. With ICOM's triennial under the title "The Power of Museums," there seems to be little attention paid to those communities from where museums have built their anthropological holdings. Why is a symbiotic relationship so difficult to achieve? Such a "power", however it is channeled, can be a help or a hindrance to mitigating conflict.

Museums are part of a community made of peoples to whom it provides a service and who, in return, visit its premises to see its exhibitions or partake in its programmes. Museums have become an accepted revered pillar in the community. Relations with their communities vary depending on the mandates, ethos, and inner workings of the museum itself. It is a universal fact that museums promote physical and social accessibility by opening their doors, but intellectual access is not part of an ongoing museum-generated agenda beyond visitor attendance at exhibitions, reading of texts and labels, and participation in public programmes. Since curators remain aloof from the public and are seldom seen, it feels that access to the collections and museum-based knowledge is not always readily available. Should this apparent elitism be considered to be "taboo" as it is certain to lead to conflict?

## Museum department

Reviewing the internal workings of the museum reveals a variety of activities perceived as morally distasteful which can be attributed to a breach of ethical principles or to poor judgment. What is or should be “taboo” needs to include the borrowing and exhibiting of materials from private individuals, including from museum staff members. The conflict inherent in this taboo is that exhibitions add prestige to the objects’ provenance, which follows with an increase in their monetary value in the marketplace. There is also the taboo question of museum staff members building personal collections in parallel and possibly in competition with those same areas covered by the museum in which they are employed.

Issues of intellectual property rights, copyright and privacy can also be disputed, and such contestation may be seen as the inability of museums to encapsulate these into their policies and/or their behavioral codes of conduct. Museum relations with external assessors for the purpose of issuing tax receipts to private individuals for donations is another area of concern. While this is normal practice for non-profit organizations such as museums, it still ascribes value to objects, which benefit donors. Nevertheless, in Canada it is moot as to whether this is an ethical contravention. Many years ago, primarily to stop “pot-hunting”, Canadian archaeologists made the decision not to ascribe any monetary value to archaeological objects, thus ensuring that they cannot be sold and that museums cannot issue tax receipts for them, thus lessening any cause for conflict.

The lack of cultural equity is an issue created by colonization, and the existence of this issue challenges the museum mindset to look beyond the elitism of its highly trained staff. New standards need to be constructed in the museum’s approach to displaying materials and to highlighting the human stories beyond the objects to also focus on the descendants of their creators (Besterman, 2011). In addition, it is currently “taboo” for Indigenous peoples to borrow museum objects for their ceremonial use and this stance needs to be rethought.

Taboos and what are perceived as taboo are open to interpretation within museums, many of which are prone to setting their own standards rather than encouraging a pan-museum compliance. In fact, museums act in a competitive manner – vying for recognition, status, prestige, and monies – and are reluctant to give this up or share outside of their ingrained ethos of superiority and the attending power that goes with it. Most have become a law unto themselves, and this has had consequences in and for the communities they serve. So long as this standard is in play, the consequence of taboos will continue to be the conflicts they spawn.

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# La muséologie au risque de l'inégalité

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L'usage du mot « tabou » n'est apparu que relativement récemment dans les langues occidentales. Cette notion traduit cependant un phénomène général évoquant à la fois la « personne, animal, chose qu'il n'est pas permis de toucher parce qu'il (elle) est investie momentanément d'une puissance sacrée jugée dangereuse ou impure » et, par extension, un interdit ou une règle d'interdiction respectée par une collectivité, d'ordre culturel, notamment religieux, « qui pèse sur le comportement, le langage, les mœurs » (Trésor de la langue française).

Un certain nombre de tabous existent, dans le cadre muséal, aussi bien pour les professionnels que pour les visiteurs ; il s'agit cependant la plupart du temps d'une utilisation métaphorique du terme. Pour les visiteurs fréquentant les musées traditionnels, (à l'image du musée du Louvre ou du British Museum), un certain nombre d'interdits « légers » peuvent ainsi être observés. Communément partagés au sein de la plupart des établissements, ils ne sont pas sans rappeler ceux que l'on retrouve dans de nombreux lieux de culte occidentaux : interdiction de courir, de parler fort, de toucher aux objets, etc. (Mairesse, 2014). Les visiteurs peu coutumiers de la fréquentation de ces établissements n'éprouvent d'ailleurs aucune gêne à braver ces différentes interdictions – avant d'être rappelés à l'ordre par un surveillant. Si l'observation de ces interdits relève très partiellement de la question qui nous occupe, celles que l'on trouve au niveau des pratiques professionnelles apparaissent plus intéressantes à analyser. On distinguera, dans cette perspective, trois registres ou niveaux d'interdits : un registre relatif à la présentation des objets et aux sujets abordés au sein du musée, un autre lié aux pratiques muséales internes et à leur déontologie, ainsi qu'un dernier, plus global, lié au contexte dans lequel cette institution s'est développée.

## Objets et pratiques

Les méthodes de sélection et de présentation des objets, ainsi que les sujets abordés par le musée intègrent de nombreuses interdictions. On songe d'emblée aux musées d'ethnographie et à la présentation des objets évoquant la culture des « Autres ». Plusieurs publications attestent des débats et des changements de pratiques autour de l'exposition de ces objets, considérés comme sacrés par les groupes les ayant produits et qui furent longtemps présentés à partir d'une perspective occidentale, dans un esprit scientifique (Karp & Lavine, 1991, Phillips, 2011). Les musées d'ethnographie ne sont pas les seuls à être soumis à ce type d'interdits. On peut ainsi observer une tendance similaire au niveau des musées d'archéologie, d'histoire ou d'histoire naturelle, même lorsqu'aucune demande

n'est émise en ce sens (notamment pour ce qui concerne les civilisations disparues). À l'inverse, alors que de nombreux objets naguère exposés ont rejoint les réserves, plusieurs thématiques longtemps occultées font l'objet d'expositions. La plupart d'entre elles sont liées à l'histoire récente, notamment à la décolonisation. Ainsi, le traitement réservé à nombre de minorités, et notamment aux peuples autochtones, jusque dans les années 1960 (au Canada, en Australie, aux États-Unis), n'a pu être évoqué que très récemment dans les musées présentant l'histoire nationale. En revanche, nombre de sujets « sensibles », au passé trop douloureux, continuent d'être passés sous silence.

Au même titre que l'exposition des restes humains, d'autres pratiques muséales longtemps tolérées se sont vues progressivement condamnées, comme les méthodes de collecte (ou le pillage) : le code de déontologie de l'ICOM évoque à cet égard l'ensemble du spectre des « bonnes pratiques » à respecter, et des limites à ne pas franchir. Un tabou chasse l'autre : si la présence d'objets sans provenance apparaît désormais comme largement répréhensible au sein de la communauté muséale, il en va autrement de deux pratiques qui, pendant longtemps, ont fait l'objet d'une interdiction respectée par la plus grande partie du monde muséal : l'aliénation et le commerce. Le tournant commercial des musées, à la fin du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, semble avoir largement transformé la relation que les conservateurs pouvaient entretenir avec l'argent (Mairesse, 2010) mais aussi la valeur vénale des objets possédés dans les collections, et les interdictions liées à la notion de profit, voire à la vente de collections sont de plus en plus nuancées, voire dépassées.

## **Liberté, inégalité**

L'observation des interdits au niveau de ces deux premiers registres semble montrer des évolutions partiellement différentes : apparition de nouveaux tabous (présentations, acquisitions troubles, certains sujets), disparition d'autres (argent, commerce). Ces différentes actions ou pratiques doivent être perçues à partir d'un troisième niveau, intégrant les structures ayant conduit à ces interdictions. Ce niveau s'inscrit sur un plan à la fois plus global et plus institutionnel, porté notamment par les grands organismes régissant l'activité des musées : l'ICOM d'une part, l'Unesco de l'autre. Ce système a été mis en place au sortir de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, à partir d'un monde dominé, sur le plan économique, par les États-Unis, dans un climat conflictuel avec l'Union soviétique (Aboudrar, Mairesse & Martin, 2021). Ce contexte a certes évolué (fin de la Guerre froide et passage d'un monde bipolaire à l'hégémonie américaine), mais il intègre globalement toujours les principaux acteurs qui l'ont mis en place. L'examen des tabous, à ce niveau, nécessite de se pencher sur les textes régissant l'organisation du système mondial actuel. L'un des principaux documents de ce système est la Déclaration universelle des droits de l'homme (Nations Unies, 2022). Deux notions y apparaissent de manière déterminante, qui sont d'emblée évoquées dans la première phrase de l'article premier : « Tous les êtres humains naissent libres et égaux en dignité et en droits ».

Les principes de liberté et d'égalité sont présentés par la Déclaration de 1948 comme « l'idéal commun à atteindre par tous les peuples et toutes les nations ». On sait le contexte fondamentalement différent qui prévalait encore au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle à cet égard ; l'inégalité se présentait alors comme un fait, à travers celle des races et des peuples, ayant conduit d'une part au système colonial moderne, de l'autre à l'extermination de masse de peuples considérés comme inférieurs.

On peut se demander, actuellement, si la remise en question du principe d'égalité, inscrit au cœur de notre civilisation, n'apparaît pas comme une sorte de tabou ou d'interdit ultime. Qui oserait le contester ? Sa présence demeure affichée à tous les niveaux, et les valeurs inscrites dans la Déclaration des droits de l'Homme sont envisagées comme universelles. L'égalité entre les nations demeure ainsi au cœur des structures institutionnelles : au sein de l'ICOM comme de l'Unesco, elle offre ainsi les mêmes moyens d'expression et de vote à tous les Etats membres. Ces principes ne sont pourtant que de façade : l'inégalité apparaît partout, au niveau de la répartition des musées à travers le monde (UNESCO, 2021), de la pensée muséale à travers le monde (Brulon Soares et Leshchenko, 2018) et de manière plus générale, du poids économique des nations, de leur pouvoir politique et militaire (Abouddrar, Mairesse et Martin, 2021). La remise en cause de ces principes, fruits d'un consensus atteint au sein du monde occidental au mitan du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, semble ainsi conduire à celle de l'équilibre mondial développé après 1948 dans son ensemble. Ultime tabou ? Un musée qui, en 2022, présenterait une autre vision que celle développée à partir de ce cadre, pourrait-il intégrer la communauté muséale internationale ?

## **De quoi les tabous muséaux sont-ils le nom ?**

Les tabous reflètent les systèmes de pensée et les valeurs qui les ont mis en place. On peut s'interroger, dans cette perspective, sur les principaux vecteurs qui auraient déterminé la transformation des registres de valeurs et, dès lors, celle des tabous y afférant. Deux tendances particulièrement importantes sur le plan muséal peuvent être évoquées ici. La première est directement liée à l'évolution du rapport aux sciences, porté par le mouvement des Lumières, alors frontalement opposé au cadre religieux occidental. C'est bien au nom de la science que les artefacts et les êtres vivants, considérés comme autant d'items muséalisables, ont été collectés puis exposés. Le rapport des sociétés à la science, triomphante à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, a permis d'exposer de la même manière une vénus romaine, un crucifix roman et une tête maorie. Il a progressivement été remis en cause après le premier conflit mondial, pour être interrogé – et de plus en plus régulièrement rejeté – au cours des dernières décennies (en biologie, en ethnologie, etc.).

La seconde tendance englobe probablement la première, étant directement conditionnée par l'équilibre des puissances à travers le monde tel qu'il peut être analysé sur le plan géopolitique. Cet équilibre, très largement en faveur de l'Occident durant deux siècles et demi, a conduit pendant une centaine d'années à l'hégémonie du Royaume-Uni puis, au sortir de la Première Guerre mondiale, à celle

des Etats-Unis, sur les plans économique et militaire aussi bien que scientifiques et culturels. Les grands principes sur lesquels l'ensemble de ce système s'appuie – égalité, liberté, droits de l'homme, mais aussi propriété privée – apparaissent comme autant de fondements sacrés – et largement dogmatiques – du système actuel, ne souffrant aucune discussion... sauf pour les puissances cherchant à contester l'hégémonie même du système actuel.

La période dans laquelle nous vivons, conditionnée par un climat particulièrement belliqueux et anxiogène, est loin d'apparaître comme un moment de stabilité pour l'équilibre international. Les registres d'interdictions que l'on peut trouver au sein du musée comme dans l'ensemble de la société, témoignent des évolutions passées et de l'état actuel des rapports de force en présence. Nul doute qu'un tel état soit amené à évoluer dans les prochaines décennies, conduisant probablement à d'autres systèmes de valeurs, et à d'autres tabous qui leur seront associés.

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# El museo como un tabú para la sociedad: Revolucionarlo desde prácticas museológico-afectivas

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## El Museo percibido desde su propio tabú

La creación de la noción del museo, desde el coleccionismo hasta la apertura pública de estos espacios como lugares que coleccionan, exhiben, conservan e investigan los grandes tesoros de la humanidad, constituye una noción occidental que se ha implantado alrededor del planeta bajo un mismo modelo, en una especie de acción colonizadora.

Si bien a lo largo del tiempo han existido importantes rupturas en la visión tradicional de los museos (por ejemplo, desde postulados nacidos en Europa con la Nueva Museología, o desde América Latina con la Sociomuseología), no podemos pretender pensar que los museos han dejado de ser en muchos casos entendidos por sus audiencias así como también administrados por sus trabajadores, bajo los parámetros que se establecieron entre los siglos XVIII y XIX, manteniendo vigente el legado colonial de estos espacios. Por ello, resulta fundamental que nos sinceremos sobre la percepción social que existe frente a los museos y que miremos analíticamente aquello que estamos haciendo para mantener vigente o para romper este tabú en el cual las comunidades no dejan de percibir a los museos como espacios sagrados, silenciosos y hegemónicos.

La palabra museo en sí misma podría ser considerada como un tabú desde su origen epistemológico hasta la comprensión social que hay alrededor de su institucionalidad. Así, nos encontramos con una problemática clara: el tabú transversal al que deben enfrentarse los museos consiste en haberse convertido en sí mismos en un tabú para la gente, quien los ve como una especie de templo del saber, un espacio elitista que demarca aquello que se dice y no se dice, donde la población debe asistir para aprender y adquirir prestigio académico, tornándose imposible cuestionarlo o catalogar como insatisfactoria o innecesaria su visita.

No cabe duda que muchas veces la gente encuentra dificultad en decir que no le gustan los museos, o en mencionar que su experiencia no fue satisfactoria. Afirmación que podemos constatar en la encuesta de Percepciones sobre museos realizada en Quito-Ecuador, donde el 20% de entrevistados afirma que nunca ha asistido a un museo, indicando principalmente que esto ocurre por falta de tiempo más no de interés. Del 80% restante (quienes sí han asistido alguna vez a un museo) encontramos una evaluación positiva de entre el 95% a 100% de satisfacción general de la visita. Notamos que estos datos se contraponen con

el hecho que, entre los entrevistados que sí han asistido alguna vez a un museo, alrededor de un 70% realizaron la última visita hace aproximadamente 67 años (FMC, 2011), evidenciando una bajísima tasa de retorno.

El museo que lleva un tabú implantado en su percepción, obliga a las personas a mostrarse interesadas por estos espacios, pese a que no los visiten, debido al riesgo de ser catalogados como incultos. Afortunadamente siempre hay quienes rompen el tabú, causando cierta incomodidad como ocurre con el artículo de James Durston (2013) titulado *No fijas más*, en el fondo todos odiamos los museos, título que al ser mencionado en conferencias o presentaciones entre trabajadores o estudiantes de museos genera reacciones de asombro, confusión o indignación entre los asistentes, ya que nos obliga a ver al tabú con frontalidad y asumirlo con sinceridad.

## **Transformaciones museológicas en torno al tabú**

Sin duda, el siglo XXI, con dos décadas transcurridas, ha transformado a la sociedad encontrando que hoy existen más museos que han decidido romper con el tabú, a fin de que las personas dejen de percibirlos como espacios elitistas y ‘cultos’, poseedores del conocimiento y jerárquicamente superiores a sus visitantes. Un ejemplo de transformación museológica en torno al mencionado tabú, es el proyecto *Divas de la Tecnocumbia* del Museo de la Ciudad de Quito que tuvo lugar en el año 2003, y que, en palabras de la entonces directora buscó que el museo pueda acercarse a prácticas culturales alejadas de los museos generando ruptura de mitos y democratización de los espacios (Museo de la Ciudad, 2003). El proyecto integró a artistas de Tecnocumbia con una propuesta expositiva y un concierto en el museo, habiendo sido juzgado por la opinión pública y los medios de comunicación al dejar entrar al museo una práctica ‘poco culta’ y popular, como se percibirá a la Tecnocumbia desde las clases más acomodadas. Esto llevó a la cancelación del concierto a último minuto con el cierre de puertas a un público que por primera vez en la historia, había hecho fila para entrar al museo existiendo una razón cercana a sus intereses y afectos. *Divas de la Tecnocumbia* fue el punto de partida, que en su momento consolidó el tabú hegemónico de los museos, al cerrar sus puertas a aquello considerado como ‘no culto’, pero que, con el paso del tiempo, dio paso a una verdadera ruptura del tabú, siendo hoy en día el Museo de la Ciudad de Quito uno de los espacios más comprometidos con el trabajo horizontal-comunitario en su localidad, pero sin haber logrado ser visto por la totalidad de la población como un espacio fuera del tabú que la palabra museos genera.

También encontramos ejemplos que dan cuenta que si bien en nuestra región hoy existen varios museos con este enfoque, evidentemente no se trata de la mayoría, ya que muchos mantienen prácticas más tradicionales de funcionamiento y relacionamiento vertical con la sociedad. Además, evidenciamos que siguen existiendo censuras sobre lo que debe o no debe decirse en los museos debido a la percepción social del museo como el espacio de ‘lo culto’, por ejemplo se puede mencionar la polémica que vivió el Palacio de Bellas Artes al exponer en 2019

la pintura “La Revolución” de Fabián Cháirez que presenta al héroe mexicano Emiliano Zapata con elementos afeminados; o el caso de la obra “Altar Blasfemo” del colectivo Mujeres Creando expuesta en el Centro Cultural Metropolitano de Quito en 2017, que ocasionó su cierre por unos días debido a la presión social por mantener a los museos como espacios con discursos tradicionales.

En este contexto, se enfoca el presente análisis social enfrentando una realidad de los museos colonizada por el pensamiento occidental, donde si bien, a lo largo del tiempo encontramos varios indicios de cambio y transformación hacia percepciones más comunitarias y humanizadas, estos cambios en su mayoría se ven cristalizados en algunos museos ‘privilegiados’ que cuentan con mejores condiciones financieras, solidez institucional, personal suficiente y capacitado, entre otras condiciones que no son la realidad de la mayoría de museos, siendo por lo tanto indispensable que busquemos nuevas propuestas museológicas para afrontar un tabú que hasta nuestros días se mantiene vivo con fuerza.

## **Una propuesta museológico-afectiva que camina hacia la ruptura del tabú**

Para romper el tabú, vale la pena mirar el postulado teórico del Giro Afectivo de las Ciencias Sociales, encontrando que “representa en parte una emocionalización de la vida académica” (Lara y Domínguez, 2013, p. 115) ya que tradicionalmente las ciencias estuvieron marcadas por la extrema racionalización dejando de lado las emociones que según las nociones occidentales del saber “se habían considerado impulsivas y faltas de razón; por tanto, alejadas e impensables como productoras del conocimiento”. (Domínguez y Lara, 2014, p. 280), preceptos que son parte de la concepción occidentalizada del museo y su implantación como un tabú asociado al poder que otorga el conocimiento, y en consecuencia desasociado de lo humanamente afectivo.

Sin duda, al hablar de afectos y emociones en el museo, considerando el universo individual de cada visitante y sus necesidades afectivas, se sitúa en un lugar incómodo a la práctica museológica tradicional, contraponiéndonos al tabú que perenniza el saber sacro e indiscutible de un museo, obligándolo a dejar los lugares comunes y las fórmulas que tradicionalmente se han venido aplicando. Por otro lado, vemos que incluso en prácticas museológicas que parecerían progresistas, existe cierta normalidad en mantener la autoridad jerárquica, viéndose al museo como el posibilitador de detonar emociones en función de lo que se quiere que experimente el público, manteniendo esa línea vertical, ahora enfocada en la provocación de emociones controladas por la agenda institucional, perennizando el tabú del museo como una autoridad.

Una renovada práctica museológica debería permitir que los visitantes partan de sus afectos individuales, necesidades emocionales propias (sin la influencia del museo) y produzcan su propia narrativa en el espacio expositivo. Al respecto Munro (2014) menciona que las respuestas afectivas que los visitantes tienen en los museos probablemente sean contrarias al sentido de autoridad de estos

espacios, haciéndonos notar que es imperante dejar de pretender tener el control sobre la construcción de la propia narrativa de los usuarios-protagonistas de los museos.

## **Una invitación abierta a la construcción colectiva**

A través de esta mirada crítica hacia este tabú que acarrear los museos, percibidos como espacios jerárquicos del saber y autoridades indiscutibles del conocimiento, se busca poner de manifiesto esta problemática con el fin de abrir una invitación a su transformación. Por ello, esta presentación se plantea como una puerta de entrada para pensar en posibles nuevas prácticas museológicas, que parten, tanto de la experimentación empírica que ocurre en los museos, como también desde las reflexiones teóricas revolucionarias.

En este contexto, se articulan nociones de una posible práctica museológica más humanizada presentando un postulado provocador de una idea denominada Museología del Alma, que ha sido compartida por la autora en espacios de reflexión y debate sobre museos de manera virtual durante 2020 y 2021. Esta noción surgió tanto de las reflexiones propias generadas por el estudio de una realidad museológica actual, como también desde el análisis de acciones que muchos museos han llevado a cabo a partir de la experimentación y el deseo de conectar de formas más humanizadas con sus públicos, sobre todo durante estos últimos tiempos que evidenciaron la necesidad de generar una relación más humanizada centrada en las emociones del ser.

La Museología del Alma propone prácticas museológicas que consideren al individuo como eje central, incluso sobre los contenidos y colecciones, que atesoran las emociones, que valoren primero el sentido humano. Prácticas que conectan simbólicamente con el individuo, para propiciar la ruptura del tabú en el contexto actual, fomentando museos que curan es decir que cuidan, museos que sanan: no el cuerpo sino el espíritu, considerando que la coyuntura vivida en los últimos años rompió con todas las dinámicas conocidas, logrando que a partir de ello regresemos a ver a los afectos como pilar fundamental para el sostén de la sociedad.

De allí que esta es una invitación abierta para que colectivamente se siga construyendo y trazando el debate alrededor de nuevas prácticas museológicas de acción más humanizada, en miras a lograr romper este tabú que perfila al museo como un espacio hegemónico, una autoridad del saber, un templo poseedor de aquello que es 'culto'. Un tabú que debemos reconocer que existe entre los trabajadores de museos, y que además está ampliamente extendido en la sociedad en general, lo cual no les permite ser instituciones pertinentes y necesarias para la sociedad contemporánea.

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# Émanciper les esprits et décoloniser le musée

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Le Musée national du Burkina Faso (MNBF) a été créé en 1962. Après avoir connu de nombreuses péripéties à la recherche d'un site définitif, le MNBF a fini par se voir attribué en 2004 une superficie de vingt-neuf hectares. Soixante ans après sa création, son rôle social reste davantage à prouver pour la majorité des Burkinabè dont les préoccupations se situent à une autre échelle. Les politiques et les décideurs hésitent à investir dans le musée en arguant de la question « que peut rapporter un musée ? » et à laquelle les professionnels apportent des réponses encyclopédiques sans convaincre.

Nous pensons que les personnels des musées n'ont pas encore accédé à leur autonomie intellectuelle. Notre réflexion s'inscrit donc dans le débat général qui incite à la décolonisation des musées en Afrique ou, plus exactement, à la décolonisation des mentalités des professionnels du patrimoine (pas des musées seulement), condition de l'émergence d'une muséologie adaptée au contexte du Burkina Faso. Rarement, les professionnels eux-mêmes se remettent en cause tant ils sont convaincus qu'ils marchent dans la bonne direction. « J'accuse » donc les professionnels de musée (moi y compris) d'entretenir le mutisme sur notre responsabilité historique. Il est donc temps de se parler sans tabous.

Loin d'être anticonformiste, ce texte n'est pas écrit pour plaire. Il traduit un double point de vue : celui d'un Conservateur de musée qui apprécie son travail et qui entend bousculer un certain nombre d'habitudes pour se remettre en cause. Ce texte est également une tentative de replacer la communauté au début et à la fin de l'activité muséale.

## **60 ans de pratique muséale, quel bilan ?**

En 2004, lorsque le MNBF se voyait attribuer une superficie de vingt-neuf hectares pour y abriter son siège, le monde de la culture et du tourisme avait accueilli avec joie cette décision des plus hautes autorités du pays. Dix-huit années sont passées aujourd'hui et toutes les joies se sont estompées. En dépit de ses riches collections qualifiées encore d'ethnographiques, le MNBF est toujours un chantier ouvert dans une ville en pleine expansion. Le mur d'enceinte qui a été bâti avec des décorations inspirées de l'architecture communautaire menace de s'écrouler tant les commerces installés autour l'ont fragilisé. À cela s'ajoute les dépotoirs d'ordures de plus en plus fréquents. Un bois sacré qui se trouve à l'intérieur est aussi menacé de disparition. Tout ceci témoigne du désintérêt général ou d'une méconnaissance du rôle de l'institution. De 1962 à 2004, nous avons rêvé d'un

musée moderne aligné sur des normes internationales, dynamique et expansif. Toutefois, nous avons continué notre marche, en toute bonne foi, avec le reste du monde sans une évaluation régulière des attentes des publics locaux. Nous nous sommes noyés dans les modèles universaux comme si c'est dans ces seuls cadres que le musée devait évoluer. Sommes-nous obligés de continuer à voir le musée suivant le trio collecte-réserves-expositions ? Nonobstant les grandes expositions dont on dit qu'elles ont eu du succès, le MNBF, à la veille de ses soixante ans, demeure une institution en quête de ses publics qu'elle ne connaît toujours pas.

Pendant plus d'un demi-siècle, l'offre du MNBF est rarement allée au-delà des trois fonctions qui lui avaient été assignées à sa création. La réalisation de ces missions se fait dans un contexte difficile marqué par l'insécurité, les inondations régulières, la démotivation des ressources humaines, l'absence de budgets conséquents ou leur mauvaise gestion, la faiblesse des arguments sur la contribution de la culture au développement, etc. À leur création, les musées nationaux de l'Afrique francophone furent baptisés, pour la plupart, « musées ethnographiques » avec un discours déjà construit autour des objets collectés par les anthropologues et ethnologues occidentaux. Le MNBF continuant sa marche dans les sentiers du modèle « universel » de musée, a gardé le modèle du musée ethnographique sans toutefois déconstruire/reconstruire le discours sur ce qu'il convient d'appeler dorénavant ses collections. Par ailleurs, la politique de collecte devrait permettre un enrichissement des collections tout en ne perdant pas de vue la volonté de préserver le musée comme un symbole national, reflétant la diversité culturelle au Burkina Faso et surtout au service des communautés. La principale finalité des collectes du MNBF avait été d'augmenter le nombre d'objets des collections. Cependant, d'énormes ambiguïtés ont existé quant à la mise en œuvre des missions de collecte à un moment de son histoire, conduisant les équipes de terrain à collecter de nombreux objets en série dont la gestion relève pratiquement d'un sujet tabou au MNBF.

La question des expositions, principale offre du MNBF mérite une réflexion approfondie. Les objets exposés ne suscitent visiblement pas une grande attention des publics locaux. Pour y remédier, il a été proposé de redoubler davantage d'efforts en misant sur les moyens de communication en vue d'atteindre un large public, ce qui nécessite le déploiement de moyens financiers conséquents que le MNBF, « musée imitant », ne peut avoir le luxe de s'offrir. Au bilan, il y a donc lieu de retenir qu'en soixante ans d'existence, le MNBF n'a pas réussi à se construire suivant ses réalités propres. Au contraire, il a davantage créé des incertitudes sur son rôle dans la société burkinabè qui se voit « contrainte » de l'accepter.

## **Une gouvernance élitiste pour un musée à re-contextualiser**

S'il est vrai que le MNBF a été construit pour les burkinabè, il faudra se demander quelle est l'orientation que nous devons lui donner. En tant que gardien

d'un pan de l'héritage culturel national, les changements de statuts au niveau administratif ne doivent pas nous faire perdre de vue qu'il s'agit avant tout de créer la proximité entre le musée et les Burkinabè. C'est à ce titre qu'il pourrait être considéré comme un symbole national légitime au service des Burkinabè, au même titre que l'école.

## **Il faut « restituer » le musée aux burkinabè**

Plusieurs organes dirigeants (Conseil d'administration, Conseil scientifique, Direction générale, syndicat) participent à la gestion du musée, dans lesquels siège encore la même élite formatée par les grandes théories classiques. Or, comme on l'a signalé depuis le début, la situation du MNBF n'a pas fondamentalement évolué après soixante ans d'imitation. On se demande alors si cette gouvernance élitiste suffira à changer le destin du MNBF.

C'est pourquoi, nous pensons qu'il faut autoriser un autre organe consultatif au MNBF. Dans cet organe, pourront siéger les représentants de la société civile, les publics de proximité, les représentants de l'autorité de gestion du bois sacré, du personnel éducatif. Il faut faire appel à de nouvelles idées qui ne sont pas nécessairement celles qui interdisent aux visiteurs de visiter les réserves au même titre que les salles d'exposition. Il faut se séparer momentanément de cette élite qui a toujours défini de manière unilatérale la politique muséale. Il faut expérimenter autre chose avec les communautés et les publics de proximité. Si les Burkinabè décident aujourd'hui que leurs musées s'appelleront des « instituts culturels », des « maison de nos cultures », des « centres d'expressions culturelles », etc., il y a lieu de leur prêter une oreille attentive. Le diktat des intellectuels sur la culture doit cesser pour que s'ouvre une ère nouvelle vers une réforme de l'institution et cela est valable pour les autres secteurs de la culture en tant que socle du développement endogène.

## **Exposer les traditions vivantes au MNBF**

En 1969, à l'occasion du Symposium du premier festival culturel panafricain, il a été adopté à Alger le Manifeste culturel panafricain sous l'égide de l'Organisation de l'Unité africaine. Ce document considéré comme un des instruments majeurs de politiques culturelles en Afrique reconnaissait déjà le rôle prépondérant du patrimoine vivant dans les cultures africaines. Le manifeste a été suivi plus tard par la *Charte de la Renaissance culturelle africaine* adoptée à Khartoum en 2006. Ces exemples montrent les pistes à suivre pour une reconstruction du discours sur les musées. Un musée sans consensus et qui ne sert pas la communauté est inutile. Le programme de valorisation des cultures immatérielles des communautés mis en place en 2015 a eu un succès car la fréquentation du musée n'était plus liée aux seules expositions d'un patrimoine tangible. Le patrimoine vivant est en ce sens une opportunité pour changer de paradigme.

Dans cette courte réflexion sur le MNBF, il est évident qu'après tant d'années d'existence du musée au Burkina Faso et devant le désintéret général des po-

pulations, il y a lieu d'affirmer que le modèle actuel du MNBF ne nous convient pas. On continue de se demander à quoi sert un musée. Dans cette analyse critique, nous proposons de mettre fin au contrat des élites omniprésentes au cœur des politiques muséales pour restituer le MNBF aux Burkinabè. Cela passe évidemment par une prise en compte des politiques culturelles énoncées dans les instruments juridiques adoptés par les africains, sans élitisme tout en maintenant le cap de l'ouverture au reste du monde.

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# Le tabou des sculptures polychromes en muséologie : l'exemple français

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En Europe, la polychromie qui recouvrait la majorité des sculptures et monuments antiques et médiévaux a, dans la plupart des cas, disparu – au point qu'on en ait oublié l'existence même pendant des siècles et que l'on pense que, par exemple, contrairement à l'Antiquité égyptienne, l'antiquité grecque étaient blanches. Aujourd'hui encore, malgré le nombre croissant d'études sur le sujet, d'essais ou de reconstitutions (notamment grâce aux nouvelles technologies), l'idée même que la plupart des œuvres sculptées étaient peintes suscite toujours des réactions mitigées, tant de la part du grand public que de certains spécialistes.

Ces traces de polychromies ont été observées dès la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle sur nombre de sculptures, et éléments architecturaux de l'Antiquité et du Moyen Âge. Dès leur (re)découverte, elles ont souvent fait l'objet d'un dénigrement massif de la part des historiens et même des archéologues qui pourtant les mettaient au jour. Ce refus d'une réalité factuelle a été la plupart du temps soutenu par les instances religieuses, politiques ou intellectuelles des différentes époques, condamnant les encombrants vestiges au silence, les détruisant même parfois volontairement (Grand-Clément, 2018 ; Jockey, 2015). En France, un débat a occupé les intellectuels de l'époque avec, d'un côté, les partisans de la polychromie et, de l'autre, les opposants, dans la lignée du débat théologique entre chromophobes et pro-couleurs au Moyen Âge (Pastoureau, 2004) ou de la Querelle du Coloris à Paris au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle (Lichtenstein, 2013). La controverse s'est rapidement transformée en dénigrement voire en déni des couleurs. Une idée courante conférait par exemple à la polychromie le statut d'enveloppe superflue, nuisible à la perception de la forme. On ne comprenait pas comment les anciens, si habiles en matière de sculpture, avaient pu tout gâcher avec des couleurs. Et même si quelques figures entêtées ont fermement défendu les poly-

chromies (pensons notamment à Quatremère de Quincy<sup>1</sup> et à Louis Courajod<sup>2</sup>), l'ensemble des ouvrages de référence sur la sculpture ne s'en préoccupait pas ou très peu, et ce jusqu'à assez récemment ; il en va de même pour la plupart des catalogues de musées jusqu'aux années 2000 et [...] encore de nos jours.

Dans la majorité des musées, le visiteur qui parcourt les collections antiques ou médiévales se trouve face à des artefacts où les vestiges colorés ont souvent disparu ou sont parfois à peine visibles. Les cartels ne font que très rarement mention de l'aspect original coloré des œuvres avec, la plupart du temps, une simple indication : “traces de polychromie”.

Ce phénomène de mise à l'écart des couleurs va au-delà de la seule histoire de l'art, du patrimoine et/ou des musées et commence doucement à être analysé par les chercheurs. Philippe Jockey parle ainsi de mythe :

*Cette réticence moderne ne peut s'expliquer que parce qu'elle est le fruit d'une construction, consciente et inconsciente, très ancienne. Il faut d'emblée en convenir, une telle résilience blanche relève d'abord et avant tout du mythe. Un mythe qui n'est pas simple élucubration de poètes ou de mystiques, nostalgiques d'un passé hellénique révolu. C'est en réalité l'un des mythes fondateurs de notre conscience d'Occidentaux. (2015, p. 13)*

Jockey pousse même la réflexion en affirmant que le mythe s'est progressivement cristallisé en une opposition entre l'occidental, aux sculptures blanches, “le bon” versus l'autre, le barbare, l'Ottoman, l'Amérindien, le colonisé, aux artefacts colorés, bigarrés, “le mauvais” (Jockey, 2015, pp. 140-141). D'autres chercheurs évoquent une “patrimonialisation par la blancheur” ou un “déli patrimonial des couleurs” (Béguin, Renaud & Triquet, 2019).

S'il est maintenant acquis que la blancheur des sculptures est devenue un pilier de l'identité culturelle occidentale, nous proposons ici de franchir un pas de plus et ainsi parler de tabou. La définition du tabou donnée – “une coutume sociale qui interdit ou empêche la discussion d'une pratique spécifique” – peut en effet aisément illustrer l'attitude chromophobe occidentale visant les sculptures et éléments architecturaux antiques et/ou médiévaux. Et si cette attitude est en train de sensiblement se modifier, elle n'en reste pas moins encore ancrée dans la mémoire commune et s'annonce difficile à surpasser. Les musées ont longtemps participé à ce tabou, volontairement ou non. Le mythe de la neutralité muséale ne semble pas avoir joué en faveur des couleurs et, malgré des avancées certaines et de plus en plus de projets s'attardant partiellement ou entièrement

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1. Particulièrement dans son ouvrage *Jupiter Olympien (1815)*, où il met en valeur la polychromie de la statuaire grecque.

2. Directeur aux Musées nationaux au Louvre du Département de sculpture du Moyen Âge, de la Renaissance et des Temps modernes de 1893 à 1896. Également l'un des fondateurs de l'École du Louvre en 1882.

sur les couleurs, le tabou de la polychromie est toujours là, en filigrane dans l'inconscient collectif français et même occidental.

Notre étude en cours sur l'histoire de ces traces polychromes dans les contextes muséaux<sup>3</sup> nous amène à mieux comprendre l'évolution des mentalités, l'impact des enjeux religieux ou politique, des modes, des tabous et à nous interroger sur les différents acteurs ayant co-écrit cette histoire. Dans les musées, ces réticences face aux couleurs se sont manifestées essentiellement dans la restauration des œuvres et dans les pratiques de présentation. On peut ainsi s'interroger sur le rôle joué par les restaurateurs et les conservateurs dans l'histoire des polychromies. Il faut savoir que pendant des décennies, certainement des siècles les œuvres ont majoritairement été lavées, voire grattées ou chimiquement décapées. Notamment lorsqu'elles faisaient leur entrée dans un musée. Le concept d'une statuaire blanche a donc une double origine : la disparition naturelle des couleurs (l'arrêt de l'entretien, l'usure du temps, les conditions météorologiques, etc.) mais également les nettoyages "musclés" intentionnels. « Ainsi le rejet de la couleur ne s'exprime pas uniquement dans le discours des acteurs, mais aussi par la transformation des sculptures elles-mêmes : ces dernières ont été rendues matériellement conformes à un idéal de blancheur » (Béguin, Renaud et Triquet, 2019).

De nombreux témoignages existent sur le sujet. Ici on ne se souciait même pas de savoir s'il y avait des traces de couleurs ou non. L'idée était d'enlever la crasse, les traces du temps afin de restituer la "blancheur" supposée d'origine des artefacts. "Ainsi, entre 1797-1798, le marbrier Scellier, soucieux de "faire revivre la blancheur du marbre" nettoie avec un mélange d'eau seconde, préparé avec ponce écrasée et savon noir", des statues et éléments sculptés en marbre, antiques et modernes, de la Grande Galerie du Louvre" (Bourgeois, 2008, p. 162).

Il serait pertinent de penser qu'à partir du moment où on a commencé à parler des couleurs et à les retrouver, ces procédés n'ont plus eu cours. Mais ce n'est finalement qu'entre la toute fin des années 1970 et les années 1990 que des normes ou en tous cas des protocoles ont été mis en œuvre en France (Deschamps-Tan, 2014 ; Serck-Dewaide, 2014). Avant que ces protocoles soient effectifs, nombre d'artefacts ont perdu leur polychromie faute de nettoyage et de restauration adaptés. Ainsi, les sculptures romaines retrouvées lors de fouilles à Bordeaux dans les années 1980 étaient encore systématiquement lavées à grande eau, voir même brossées.<sup>4</sup> Ce qui surprend le plus est, encore une fois, l'inégalité totale dans la prise en compte des couleurs selon les musées, les régions, les restaurateurs, et ce jusqu'à récemment. Aussi, "force est de constater que cet équilibre nécessaire entre les différentes compétences semble régulièrement remis en cause par des contraintes de toutes sortes : délais toujours plus contraignants, budgets limités

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3. Thèse en cours, *Polychromies antiques et médiévales à l'épreuve des musées en France et au Québec de la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours*. Direction, Philippe Jockey (Université Paris Nanterre), Codirection, Yves Bergeron (Université du Québec à Montréal).

4. Propos recueillis par nos soins auprès du Musée d'Aquitaine, octobre 2021.

(Deschamps-Tan, 2014, p. 33) Les conservateurs interrogés lors de notre enquête en cours ont avoué, de manière générale, manquer de connaissances sur le sujet, manquer de données sur les artefacts de leurs collections concernant les couleurs et donc ne pas accorder, ou que très peu, de place au sujet des polychromies. Ici encore, le manque d'homogénéité entre les musées est frappant et il s'avérerait judicieux de s'interroger sur l'importance de ce tabou au sein des universités et autres lieux de formation des futurs spécialistes.

Cependant, les énormes progrès technologiques des vingt dernières années dans les outils permettant l'analyse des surfaces des artefacts et de leurs couches chromatiques ont engendré de plus en plus d'essais de reconstitutions des couleurs et l'émergence récente de plusieurs projets muséaux. Des facsimilés en plâtre peint ont tout d'abord été proposés et, à présent, de nombreux projets virtuels se développent grâce aux images numériques et autres procédés 3D proposés par les nouvelles technologies. On peut ainsi multiplier les hypothèses, les essais de rendus sans impact sur les œuvres. Ces reconstitutions virtuelles ont un côté séduisant, qui plaît au grand public et quelques expositions temporaires ont permis de commencer à démocratiser cette idée d'un passé antique et médiéval coloré.

Il semble ainsi que malgré des réticences encore très présentes, et ce à tous les niveaux, le tabou des couleurs en sculpture qui a longtemps occulté les domaines de l'histoire et de la muséologie soit lentement en train de s'étioler, grâce, entre autres, aux nouvelles technologies – qu'elles concernent les outils d'analyses ou les propositions de restitutions virtuelles. Il s'avérerait pertinent de s'interroger sur le rôle que les musées peuvent prendre pour briser ce tabou et les enjeux encourus vis-à-vis du public. Aussi, le manque de dialogue entre les différents spécialistes est encore trop présent et il paraît primordial de favoriser les échanges et la création d'équipes pluridisciplinaires entièrement consacrées aux polychromies. Il est maintenant du devoir des historiens, chercheurs et institutions muséales de déconstruire ce mythe. Non pas en faisant table rase sur tout ce qui a été produit autour mais en cherchant à l'expliquer, le comprendre pour arriver à le transcender.

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# Should an educational imbalance in the Finnish cultural sector be seen as a taboo?

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The word taboo is an historically and spiritually charged one, especially when viewed from its traditional vantage point. Nevertheless, the Cambridge Dictionary gives a very neutral definition of the word: “action that is avoided for religious or social reasons”. We all have at least a vague idea as to what the word means, especially if considered from a spiritual or unspoken viewpoint. However, the focus of my paper will not be on anything sacred or forbidden. Instead, I will use the term taboo to describe how an educational imbalance might cause difficulties for younger academic disciplines such as museology or conservation science in their attempts to balance their two essential tasks, namely theory and practice, and how this has an impact on collection work conducted in museums. This is an area that would not necessarily be seen as a taboo at first glance in the heritage sector. However, avoiding and not addressing the problem might help make some of the more severe taboo-forming mechanisms remain unnoticed (Poulot, 2012).

In 2017 a dissertation study by Kristiina Ojala published by the University of Turku in Finland showed that the same level, higher academic degrees obtained from traditional universities (MA) and universities of applied sciences (UAS master’s degree) do not give the same credentials to graduates for entering working life. After negotiations to standardize the degree system in Finland, UAS master’s degrees received permanent status in the Finnish higher education system in 2005, but the degree imbalance has yet not been addressed. This is, no doubt, not only a Finnish phenomenon. Already at the turn of the millennium, the Bologna Process aimed to harmonize the various educational degree systems in Europe (European Ministers of Education, 1999) and, as can be detected, the unequal approach to these same-level degrees has been a Europe-wide issue (Ojala, 2017, pp. 25-26). It seems that there is still work to be done in order to also reach consensus on a practical level.

In recruitment situations, for example, the two degrees are not seen as corresponding that much to one another. In the study, lack of knowledge and a low level of appreciation towards UAS master’s degrees are given as reasons for the uneven acceptance of the two degrees (Ojala, 2017, p. 133). Furthermore, the possibility for UAS master’s degree conservators to continue their studies on a doctoral level is not the same as for students receiving their master’s degrees from traditional universities in Finland. This means that on a practical level their degrees do not qualify as full master’s degrees; they need to acquire

a second master's degree from a traditional university first, in order to study on a doctoral level (Janne Vilkkuna, personal communication, 24 March 2022). The 2017 study pointed this out as well (Ojala, 2017, p. 170). There is no law (Finlex 426/2005, 2005) that states this requirement outright, but it appears to be "just the way it is done."

This incoherence may not be as dramatic and severe as some other taboo-forming mechanisms, such as a difficult heritage, contested histories or staffing inequities as part of the museum legacy. Nevertheless, it remains an unspoken hindrance within our own profession, and a hindrance that helps separate theory and practice within museology and conservation science, potentially affecting collection care. One needs to keep in mind that collection items are cared for by professionals from both degree systems who enter the various museum professions. Therefore, it seems that those working in the field of academic museology and UAS master's degree conservators have common ground, namely collection care, in the market regarding academic credentials. This concerns professional collection care processes in real-life working situations and also touches our profession in a more philosophical way when, for example, adjusting our ethical codes and definitions (Behm, 2008; E.C.C.O Code of Ethics, 2003; ICOM Code of Ethics, 2017; Muños Viñas, 2020; Miller, 2020). It is no wonder that this common ground was also recognized at the Kyoto 2019 Conference during the joint session between ICOFOM and ICOM-CC (Mairesse, 2019a and b). The recognition of the need to work toward a mutual goal has been an important step. This is vital since by Finnish law a candidate must complete studies in museology in order to qualify for a museum post, giving museology an umbrella role in our field (Finlex 314/2019, 2019).

The educational imbalance and the gap between theory and practice can be further exemplified by truly emphasizing collection care as a starting point. We museum professionals are all familiar with the current process, in which there is a rewriting of numerous unjust histories (Anderson, 2012; Azoulay, 2019). There are various factors to consider when conducting the sensitive task of rewriting the past, especially when collections and collection care are involved. Current museum professionals need to wisely balance theoretical understanding and hands-on collection care tasks.

It has already been some time since the museum profession has actively shifted its theoretical focus from the notion of *how we do museum work* more towards that of *why we do museum work* (Šola, 1997; Vilkkuna, 2010). This change was a fundamental turn and was, at least to some degree, necessary to deepen the academic legitimacy of the discipline. As the former Finnish museum professional Jorma Heinonen already put it forty years ago: "Museology – Science or Practical Skills?" (Heinonen, 1983, p. 1, translation by the author). Along with this turn the *how* might have retained some lesser role on the sidelines (Heinonen, 1983).

It may be time to call into question this role and try to find ways to bridge the gap between the *how* and the *why*. This kind of dual-yet-equal approach is perhaps seen as much more standard in traditional academic sectors such as

medicine or archaeology, but is also very much embedded in museology and conservation science. They also have an opportunity to fully operate in both of these areas, i.e., the *why* and the *how*.

We can easily visualize this if we take collection items as our point of departure and look at all the different museum professions that are involved in their care. In many museums there are understandably separate professional groups that are directly involved in collection-related issues, such as curators, conservators and museum technicians. In addition, other museum professions such as educational personnel or museum guards indirectly work with collections. It is the museum collection item itself, used as a focal point, through which we can form a bridge between theory and practice. However, in order to succeed in this we might need to adjust our own thinking.

The Finnish philosopher Esa Saarinen (1953) has worked in the field of applied philosophy and is an advocate for encouraging his audiences to pay attention to their own thinking, i.e., to actively pay attention to the foundation of their own line of reasoning. He calls it “*ajattelun ajattelu*” (thinking of thinking) and has brought philosophical thinking closer to everyday practices in general (Saarinen & Lonka, 2005; Saarinen, 2022). To pay attention to the origin of our own thinking may seem a simple task, but in many cases it is challenging to alter our own traditional way of evaluating our own values, identity or professionalism (Brulon Soares, 2020; Keene, 2011). In any case, this effort is worth making, since we can use such an approach in our own museological context. We need to adjust our own thinking to allow educational coherence to take shape in the field of collection care.

In earlier contexts I have written about the importance of a museological value discussion, to raise the level of professional understanding in museums and to raise the ability to respond to difficult issues that might arise in one’s own museum context (Robbins, 2019; 2021). Making time for value discussions in everyday museum work is not very easily done, as is known to many museum professionals. However, this is just the kind of *thinking of our own thinking* that is needed, especially now, when traditional museum practices are being questioned and we need to work towards addressing the issues we consider taboos. It is beneficial to start this task already on an educational level. For example, from the collection care viewpoint, we do not often have the option to delete unjust historical events or dispose of the physical evidence of any difficult heritage. Rather, we need to learn how to critically analyze these events and, perhaps most critically, to analyze our own work in conjunction with these events. After all, museums are in the making-of-history business. It is important to openly present these contemplations, as has been done in the Turku Art Museum and their current permanent exhibition *Pari sanaa keräämisestä (A Few Words on Collecting)*, where they openly address issues of often invisible collection work for their audience.

This open-value process has to start on an educational level. Only then will it grow to help point out taboo-forming mechanisms of our own doing. Regar-

ding many of our everyday issues, we need to rewrite the book, so to speak, for ourselves as well. This in-depth value discussion works as an internal tool for professional development, and it is especially beneficial when communicating with stakeholders outside our own profession. Working to build a strong bridge between theory and practice in our own field makes our profession stronger vis-à-vis the various outside pressures. All in all, the practical side of museum work remains essential and must be seen as an enriching element in theory formation. The field must also work towards an equal recognition of same-level degrees. Museology as an academic umbrella is now strong enough to allow the *how* to coexist with the *why*.

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# Museum practice and taboo: The difficult art of approaching difficult themes

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The term taboo evokes the idea of prohibition, interdiction, of something that cannot be accessed. Present in all societies, it impregnates behavioral norms and systems of thought. It may include practices related to life and death, sex, to the rites of passage and the contact to what is considered divine, paranormal, special or rare. It is also associated with the negative side of eschatology, to what is considered dirty, inappropriate, of bad taste – or at least inadequate by the norms of the social trait, and thus, outcast – or to what is inviolable because it is sacred. The theme is repeatedly approached in the fields of philosophy, theology and in the human and social sciences. Since Freud, psychology has analyzed the seductive aspect of taboo, reinforced by the ambivalence between interdiction and impulse.

Relating the idea of taboo to objects and actions that are significant to the social order helps to include it within a general system of individual and group control. Lesser attention is given to the relationship between the communication process and the forbidden themes; and to how the idea of taboo is recognized, diffused and multiplied among social groups.

This is the exact dimension that nurtures the relations between difficult themes and museum practice: the idea of non-consented behavior, founded in social narratives that tend to reinforce, or put under quest, such perceptions. All is part of a behavioral complex associated with “difficult”, “outcast” themes, and which revolves around the idea of interdiction. In such a context, two undeniably strong signs emerge: the speech and the image.

Museology as social practice has always defended the idea of the politically correct; yet such movement has not prevented “inadequate” or “inconvenient” issues, present in the symbolic universe of the different cultures, from being relegated to a second plan. Museums have interpreted difficult themes and social taboos through a “scientific” approach based on socio-anthropological guidelines, which tended to present such themes as an absolute epistemic “other”: as case studies. The use of a “scientific”, “artistic” or “academic” vocabulary has contributed to reinforce such tendencies, reiterating the detachment – an attempted aseptic approach of human impulse.

The sociopolitical strategies of the last four decades have enabled the multiplication of studies around the issues that minority groups were bringing to the

social sphere. Debates about ethnicities, culturally differentiated groups, human rights and post-colonial societies gained relevance in the public arena and also gained great visibility with the help of digital technologies. The opening of the media to diversity has also enabled a wider debate around themes previously seen as improper and gloomy, such as gender issues – especially those themes related to the LGBTQIA+ universe, political torture, or new narratives of racial themes, focusing on prejudice and the trajectory of enslaved groups.

The perception that the museum has a Dionysian face, tending to the excess and to the breaking of limits, has made possible the development of broader narratives of Difference and their incorporation into the theoretical realm of museology. They were added to museological discourse as from an international strategic platform that advocated the development of inclusive museums, open to sensitive themes. Naturalized and linked to museum practice, such narratives have helped museums of all kinds learn how to deal with the proposals, claims and values of the most different communities.

Apparently open to all tribes, narratives and experiences, contemporary museums are the ground of a reiterative discourse on inclusion that seems to percolate through all the communication folds, not leaving space for any kind of prejudice. Professionals are invited to develop, in museums, “open” projects that imply the active participation of individuals from all ethnic, linguistic, religious, ideological and behavioral matrixes.

Yet this can be, in many cases, an illusionary perspective: the so-desired inclusion is essentially aligned to the foundations of the “politically correct”, leaving in the shadow those groups, themes and perspectives that still represent a taboo for museology and that are seldom the object of analysis in the museological sphere, either because they relate to difficult aspects of the individual psyche or because they indicate deviant behaviors of specific individuals and groups. Recurrent in psychology and social studies, such themes are not usually approached and debated in museology and seldom appear in museum exhibitions – where the combined impact of image and discourse is considered too shocking, aggressive, or inappropriate.

Such themes include aspects related to psychosocial deviant behaviors and/or to the economic exploitation of individuals and groups. They may be: a) the brutal treatment inflicted on women and children in the family sphere, such as family rape, incest, physical beating, private incarceration, psychological and verbal violence; b) the veiled violence of bullying at home, in work or school, resulting in deep emotional trauma, specially today, when bullying through the Internet has taken on alarming proportions; c) the violence and the sub-human conditions of prisons in many countries; d) the difficulties of elders to adapt to a society conducted by digital technologies – this happens mostly in Western societies where experience and the capacity for reflection are disdained in favor of innovation; e) the difficult social adaptation of individuals with psycho-behavioral syndromes; f) problems resulting from life in large urban centers, such as loneliness, depression and the impotence related to social menaces; g) child and

juvenile prostitution; sexual tourism; h) babies and human organs trafficking; i) economically marginalized individuals, the socially “invisible” who are not present in the statistics, including beggars and the homeless.

Some museums have long been dealing with those matters, such as the Women’s Museum in Aarhus, Denmark, founded in the 1990s; recently renamed as KØN – Gender Museum, it has extended its discourse to all gender issues (VisitAarhus, 2022). In Brazil, the Museum of Images of the Unconscious (1952) takes a masterful approach to the theme of madness. Yet most museums link their narrative to artistic images, in a subtle balance between taboo and the politically correct. In some cases, proposals of a more direct approach have not become reality – as with the Women’s Rape Museum (Gage, 2017), conceived to analyze the situation of women who have survived sexual violence in times of war; others are not properly acknowledged, such as the fierce exhibition *Finding Our Voice: Sister Survivors Speak*, organized in 2019 by the museum of Michigan State University, about sexual violence as an issue of public health (Michigan, 2022).

Torture is approached by some museums in Europe and the US, but it is usually related to mediaeval torture, as if abolished by the Modern Age in all societies. More incisive is the narrative of the Tuol Sleng Museum in Phnom Penh that presents the Cambodian genocide by the Khmer Rouge (Tuol Sleng, 2022). The museum is a part of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, founded in 1999 and currently linking 300 members in 65 countries. The Coalition, as it is called, has wide resonance in the field of museology: it is directed by Alissandra Cummins, ICOM President 2004-2010; its Treasurer is Richard West, ICOM Vice-President during the same period (International, 2022).

Some initiatives attempt to integrate issues such as loneliness and degenerative diseases (dementia) into museum practice; but they usually remain in the realm of theory, with some tentative debates (Deakin, 2022).

The difficulty of developing a wider approach to taboo dwells in the relatively hermetic quality of some museums of the traditional model, which remain as spaces that favor the installation of the myth and the reiteration of the “sacra”. In such a context, the use of narratives and images as unveiling artifacts is still an act of courage and rebellion that may generate certain social commotion.

The relationships between the museum and difficult themes reveal that what is placed outside memory and history clearly indicates who has put them there. But they also make us understand that not all demands in the public arena can, or may, be met as expected. Some constructs or ideas may be unveiling only one side of reality, leaving in the shadows other folds whose existence we do not wish to admit. The risk of leveling hides under the proposal of “democracy” and the idea of “equal rights”: the politically correct may imply the suppression of aspects that are part of the human spirit, without which we could not live in society. As Serres (2006/2015, p. 148) points out, “the Muses build the walls of the black box”.

Therefore, we must avoid superficial evaluations of facts and perspectives that only disguise our prejudices; those that we baptize as truths (Nietzsche (1886/2002, p. 36). Aligned to Nietzschean provocations, we could dare conceive museology as a theory of the evolution of the will of power. In case the hypothesis proves right, we would see the fading of the idea of museum as a potency; and the possibility of museology to reach through practice the plenitude of the museum as freedom. In its place there would be only an arena of vain disputes, where prejudice hides under the cover of equality and inclusion.

We must not forget that what is called “good” and “evil” in a culture results from evaluation and valuation – a specific perspective, a specific vision: “there are no moral phenomena, only a moral interpretation of phenomena.” We must thus acknowledge: “which one of us is Oedipus? Who is the Sphinx?” (Nietzsche 1886/2002, pp. 27-33).

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# The museum is coming out of the closet: The paradox in the genesis of the LGBT museums

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## Introduction

Museums are spaces where an audience can access knowledge. They play a prominent role in influencing the public's legitimization of its social practices. LGBTQIA++-related topics are still seen as taboo in many contexts and therefore pose a series of challenges in museology debates.

The emergence of museums related to LGBT<sup>1</sup> issues started in the 1970s (e.g., Stonewall National Museum & Archives, USA 1972, Schwules Museum, Germany 1985, Leather Archives and Museum, USA 1999, etc.). The emergence of these museums in the 1970s came with a paradox: from one point of view, the creation of these spaces results from the previous non-representation of LGBT concerns in traditional spaces. Consequently, this community seeks or creates spaces to fill their representation where they can feel represented – or, at least, can reproduce a much stronger sense of belonging and horizontality – even though this community will have a sense of connection with the traditional museums. Here, we can see the paradox. The traditional museum displays attributes related to LGBT individuals as they are tied to the larger community, forming a link between them. At the same time, this will generate conflict in terms of belonging and connection; in other words, a feeling of being within and without in the representation practices.

Sometimes, the subjects related to LGBTQIA++ issues displayed in traditional spaces are categorized as taboos. We can consider the “social field” theory of Pierre Bourdieu (2016) to understand this process. In the sense of representation practices, the museal space is a construction, a museal arena that presents conflicts and tensions and showcases the individual's disposition (representation) in the museal framework. These traditional museal fields tend to maintain the structure and the form – in the same sense as the Bourdieu theory – to retain the binary heteronormative system that has echoed in the core of the display

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1. Notice that I use “LGBT” since most of these spaces created in the 1970s were focused on one of these identities. Hence, when the “LGBT” term is used it refers only to the emergence of these spaces, and the term LGBTQIA++ refers to the contemporary debate.

practices. Hence, the representation of LGBTQIA++ issues in traditional spaces conflicts with the established rules that represent the dominant museal actors. As a result, it generates a contesting collective feeling in a specific audience usually represented in that space. Therefore, the subject displayed becomes taboo.

## **The museum is coming out of the closet: A new typology?**

According to their typology, museums are material and immaterial unfinished constructions always engendering different representations of the time.<sup>2</sup> Generally, many factors make a museum a museum – classifiers such as the collection, the architecture, etc. However, it is different in the contemporary world. The museum's content is vital for its typology, but it does not constitute a determining factor for its emergence; a contemporary process in which museums can acknowledge and legitimize their classification is through their memories. This process leads to a complex challenge for heritage representation and interpretation because the *musealium* and the individual reach a state of fluidity and subjectiveness almost impossible to be grasped.

The museum typology influences how the public reads the subject, as was demonstrated by Jordanova (1989). In this sense, some typologies of traditional museums will contribute to maintaining a heteronormative social practice, as illustrated by Amy K. Levin (2010) and Rebecca Machin (2010). However, this new typology leads to a question: why should we have museums dedicated to the LGBTQIA++ community if the easiest solution would be to rethink traditional collections to represent those not included in their display practices? Indeed, some traditional museums are already re-making a different reading of their collections. In addition, the revision of the ICOM *Code of Ethics* (2004) could ensure the representation of this marginalized community. However, is it enough?

That LGBTQIA++ communities do not feel that traditional museums represent their identities in every layer is not accounted for in the academic debate. Here I would like to offer a new perspective on this debate, using the theory of Brubaker and Cooper (2000). The term “identity,” they write, can assume many forms and sometimes can result in ambiguity. For this reason, they propose breaking the term apart to analyze a subject better. This paper aims to give new light on the museological perspective on identity.

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2. According to Foucault, a museum could be seen as a heterotopia site of accumulation of “all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place” (Foucault, 1986, p. 3).

## **The museum is gay as folk: From imagined communities to one of the reasons for the LGBT museums' genesis**

The idea of a nation as an imagined community, explained by Benedict Anderson (1991), can be used to rethink the construction of the museum image (identity). According to Anderson, a nation is imagined as a community because of the horizontal ties uniting its inhabitants. Even if it presents inequalities, following this perspective, even with different memories and overlapping identities, a museum creates a sense of horizontality in the community. For instance, if we imagine a national museum, we will tend to agree with its existence and even validate it, although it may not represent all the identities. This process of horizontality plays an essential role since it traverses the fact that the national museum will display general attributes that we share as a community (e.g., language, tradition, symbols, etc.)

Subsequently, this will create a self-identification that will drive people to believe that they share “commonality” and “connectedness”, notions explained by Brubaker and Cooper (2000). In this perspective, the museum audience would tend to believe that they share some common attributes and, as a result, they will develop a relational sense with the museal space. This sense will connect them as a community since these general attributes hide the inequalities in the representation process that compose the collection represented in the museal space.

Nevertheless, the above-mentioned does not answer the question about the emergence of museums dedicated to LGBT issues. According to Brubaker and Cooper (2000), the sense of “commonality” and “connectedness” does not engender the meaning of “groupness,” the sense of belonging to a group. From the perspective of the museum’s representation, some communities will generate an ambivalent self-identification; that is, they will feel connected by shared general attributes displayed to them, but they will not feel represented as part of the group. Hence, museums, such as the national ones, as an imagined community reproduce in specific communities an ambivalent self-identification. From this point of view, we can see that the sense of groupness will not always correspond to a sense of commonality.

Visiting an exhibition about the history of a nation can guide the public to self-identification. However, the general attributes displayed will make some groups feel both connected and excluded. This tension between the two feelings corresponds to the sense of belonging. Moreover, when there is a project (exhibition/program) focusing on LGBTQIA++ in an existing heteronormative museum, even if it is presented in an inclusive way, an “othering” takes place in this historic space, even if not intended, especially since these museal spaces may not be inclusive of this community in future projects that they stage in the same space. Consequently, one of the alternatives for the community that experiences this othering is to seek spaces that would offer that sense of belonging. Thus, the creation of these LGBT museal spaces is a form – from a perspective of postmodernist studies on “otherness” – where this community can represent

themselves to subvert the dominant museal discourses. Subsequently, these spaces will provide a museological curatorial project that works with a process of deconstruction – in the sense of Derrida’s (1984) notion – in which the pre-fixed notions echoed by traditional museums will start to melt to construct a new museal framework.

The musealization process is crucial for creating a space where the excluded can feel part in a complete sense. For instance, the foundation of the Schwules Museum, Berlin, in 1985, illustrates this. The Schwules Museum’s creation started before its physical foundation. In 1984 three museum workers from the traditional Berlin Museum convinced the director to organize an exhibition called *Eldorado – the History, Everyday Life and Culture of Homosexual Women and Men 1850-1950*, which resulted in the creation of the Schwules in 1985 (“About Us”). The exciting aspect of this case is the initiative taken by the museum workers who have a musealization gaze and comprehend the role of a museum in terms of representation. Afterward, this exhibition created the association Friends of a Gay Museum in Berlin, where one can see the community organizing themselves to establish a museal space.

This example illustrates that the genesis of LGBT museums can be associated with an identity paradox crisis and a sense of belonging – and a struggle for a sense of belonging.

## Considerations

These museal spaces dedicated to the LGBT community at the beginning of the 1970s are a contemporary phenomenon regarding its genesis and reflect a new museological paradigm. Hence, these museums can show that taboos are circumstantial, and every museum’s space could have its taboos. Consequently, some traditional museums will see something as taboo because they demonstrate that their values are rooted in a museal social field and that the rules in the museal framework do not accept diversity.

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# Repatriation: both a taboo and a trending topic

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Despite the term “taboo” being a commonplace regarding certain topics in psychology or sociology, the usage of the word in museology might not be so obvious, although it is certainly an existing phenomena in the field. In regards to museums and museology, there are several stigmatized topics and practices, i.e. taboos, but one of the most prevalent and imperative taboos is unarguably the repatriation of artifacts, especially those in Western museums’ collections. In order to understand how museums are dealing with or maintaining this specific taboo, it is necessary to first understand why and how this stigma is constructed and perpetuated.

In this sense, one of the factors that contributes to establishing the taboo status around the repatriation of artifacts is the connection that these objects have to the difficult heritage of colonialism. That is, by returning part of their collections, museums would have to acknowledge that they were acquired in ways that are often the result of non-ethical, illegal or violent acts. After all, the act of restitution is something that affects and is related to the way in which these institutions deal with their objects of memory (Borges & Botelho, 2010).

Another two aspects that explain the stigma around repatriation are, first, the memory conflict caused by the lack of control of the narratives present in Western museums by the owners of the artifacts, which is often combined with another aspect: the lack of possession of such culturally significant objects by their own original communities. By owning such objects, these museums are in control of an expressive part of the history, memory and identity of other groups and thus, by telling the history of the “other”, museums often perpetuate colonialist and paternalist attitudes by centralizing themselves and their narratives in exhibits (Almendra, 2016). A second factor that adds to the explanation of why this is a stigma is the fear that museums have of losing their status, which is greatly linked to their massive collections. However, what is disregarded is not only the fact that those objects could still be exhibited in Western museums by loans and exchange, but also the importance for these communities to own and control their own heritage, a factor that should be central in the repatriation discussion.

Once having pointed out some of the factors that contribute to establishing the taboo status of repatriation processes, it is possible to comprehend how these stigmas are then perpetuated. One of the most common attitudes responsible for this perpetuation is precisely the neglect of the issue. Due to the apprehension

linked to handling such a sensitive past, many museums tend to superficially mention or even omit the context of acquisition of their artifacts, which were often taken by unequal, non-consensual or illegal transactions and even as a result of violent colonial events, such as war spoils.

Another contributing cause is the myth of neutrality that sustains museum collections. This myth consists of the idea that museums and their collections are somehow exempt from political, historical, social or economical issues. In other words, it is the conviction that once an object becomes a museological artifact, it is automatically detached from its acquisition history and original community, since what matters is that it now belongs to an institution and it performs as an object to be studied and displayed.

Amid the institutions that actively support and engage in this belief and practice are the so-called “universal” museums. According to the 2002 *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums*, it can be inferred that a universal museum is defined by its vast collection of artifacts and by its international character, serving “not just the citizens of one nation but the people of every nation”. By defining themselves as “universal”, these museums are implicitly claiming that their collections are somehow more relevant or impactful than others, which, in its turn, justifies the possession of others’ artifacts. In this same document, the “universal” factor is utilized as a way to account for the avoidance of repatriation requests, as has been pointed out by George Abungu (2004).

Although there’s a truth to stating that the “universal” argument is a way to avoid the repatriation debate, the issue lies beyond simple avoidance. The problem is that not only do these museums refuse to engage in the dialogue, but also that, by affirming that they are “universal”, they are implicitly minimizing the importance of other museological institutions in the world. After all, aren’t all museums universal, serving people from all around the world? What assortment of characteristics would actually be sufficient to distinguish a “universal” museum from any other institution? And whose interest is it to study and preserve such artifacts and for whom do these efforts serve? (Costa, 2018). By affirming this “universal” identity, these museums are reinforcing the power structures that were responsible for the original removal of such artifacts from their homeland.

Once having explored the ways in which the repatriation taboo is constructed and maintained, it is possible to trace a first conclusion in regards to how the matters of collection ownership and repatriation are being avoided or dealt with. Certainly some museums, especially “universal” ones, are responsible for maintaining the taboo status of repatriation acts by reinforcing colonialist and paternalist attitudes, but the ways in which museological institutions are responding to this subject are varied. While some more conservative institutions are avoidant or in denial of either acknowledging or acting on their wrongfully acquired collections, others show themselves to be more receptive to the idea of giving back artifacts, whether they are being reclaimed or not by their original communities.

In this sense, it is also worth noting that there has been a growing trend of museums in the process of rethinking their conduct and strategies and gradually making changes in relation to the display and ownership of wrongfully acquired artifacts. One way that this can be attested to is the fact that institutions are being more and more transparent as to how their collections were acquired, often dedicating a section of their websites or exhibitions to explaining the provenance of said artifacts, although the way that some institutions are doing this needs to be questioned. Another indication that points to this growing trend is the recent publication of the *Guidance for Restitution and Return of Items from University Museums and Collections* (ICOM-UMAC, 2021).

Despite the variation in the efficiency of such efforts, what they all have in common is the fact that they are the result of not only the emergence of new studies regarding the topic of repatriation, but also of the resurgence of a discussion that has long been silenced and purposely left aside. In addition to that, there wasn't as much public interest or pressure on the subject, which then made it easier to shut the debate off.

In contrast, in recent years, there has been a significant growth in the public interest regarding the subject of repatriation, mostly due to the augmentation of media coverage on the topic. In comparison to 2018, in 2020 there was an increase of around 36% on the number of online published media articles related to the issue of repatriation, while just in 2021 there were more than 230 journalistic publications. These numbers are strong indicators that the media acts as an important agent that influences and foments the discussion around repatriation inside and outside museums. In that way, what was once a taboo subject is now an object of discussion even to those outside the museological community.

While the media is definitely a contributor to the expansion of the discussion on this matter, a critical analysis of how repatriation has been addressed is necessary. That is, while raising awareness regarding repatriation, the media also tends to reproduce the same paternalistic and Eurocentric attitudes that sustain the arguments of those who are opposed to or resistant to repatriation. This is often done by focusing on the narratives of those who detain the artifacts instead of amplifying the voices of reclaimers. This issue can also be attested not only by the camouflaging of the context involved in repatriation requests (insinuating that the return initiative comes from the countries and museums that detain requested artifacts), but also by the withholding of the historical context linked to the acquisition of such objects. Oftentimes, the lack of any mentions of the term "repatriation" is also a contributor to the problem, since it can be understood as a way of avoiding mentioning what is still a taboo topic.

In this sense, besides having a critical assessment of such articles, it is important to question why the media is pushing this discussion forward instead of museums. Even more urgent than that is the need to question the reasons why museums are so afraid to tackle the taboos that they themselves created and continue to foment. A good starting point for the discussion is recognizing that,

in order to break the repatriation taboo, museums should be centralizing the voices and opinions of those who are reclaiming their artifacts and letting them decide what is best for themselves, while doing whatever possible to support their choices; after all, it is *their* own heritage. In other words, the only way to break the taboo around repatriation is to decolonize museum collections, mindsets and attitudes. And for that, it is critical to understand that repatriation “is not an end, but rather the beginning of a new museum mobilized in new conceptions and roles” (Cury, 2020); that is, by redefining the role of museums in consequence of centering repatriation and decolonization as fundamental practices, it is possible to remedy the taboo that was created by the institution itself.

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# El problema de conocer a los públicos

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## I.

El interés por medir la cantidad de visitantes que entran a un museo llevó a que autores como Hooper-Greenhill (1994), Falk y Dierking (1992, 2000, 2013), Rosas Mantecón (2002), Schmilchuk (1987, 2000, 2012), Bitgood (2013), Beltran y Kawajiri (2014), Shah (2018), y Pérez (2016-2019), por mencionar algunos, se preguntaran quiénes son esas personas, cómo es que llegan, por qué lo hacen, y una vez dentro, qué es lo que hacen, por qué regresan y qué se llevan de su experiencia en el museo. Así, nacieron los llamados estudios de públicos, también conocidos como estudios de visitantes en el mundo angloparlante, los cuales, a decir de la museóloga mexicana Leticia Pérez, forman un área de especialización dentro de la museología, y que buscan analizar diversos aspectos del fenómeno de la visita, así como de la no visita, a los espacios museales para mejorar y renovar las prácticas expositivas, museísticas y culturales (Pérez, 2016, pp. 8-15).

En este artículo argumento a partir de las experiencias recogidas en algunos museos de México y Cuba (Museo Nacional de Antropología, Museo de El Carmen, Museo Internacional del Barroco, Centro para la Interpretación de las Relaciones Culturales Cuba-Europa: Palacio del Segundo Cabo, entre otros) que las metodologías de los estudios de públicos prácticamente circunscritas a las encuestas de [satisfacción/evaluación de la] visita necesitan ser repensadas. Reformulados, los estudios de públicos pueden proporcionar información [valiosa] sobre la relación que se establece entre las instituciones culturales y sus diversos visitantes, como la experiencia de visitar el museo, las necesidades [de información, de infraestructura, de vinculación social] que [se] tienen y la lectura que se hace sobre los temas abordados.

Sumado a lo anterior, es imperativo recordar que de igual manera que todos los campos de investigación, el de los estudios de públicos es un área viva que no solo requiere revisarse, sino que de hecho se encuentra en constante revisión y ampliación, pues el desarrollo de la mayoría de las técnicas que hoy se aplican de forma más o menos sistematizada son el resultado de un proceso guiado por el deseo tanto de las instituciones museales por enfocarse en mejorar el servicio que ofrecen a sus visitantes, como de una continua experimentación metodológica, vinculada a los avances en el aprendizaje, la psicología y la educación (Zuazúa, 2016, p. 46).

Sin embargo, cabe señalar que hasta el momento se ha primado el éxito de una exposición con el flujo de visitantes que ésta tiene, lo que ha presionado a los museos a ponderar la cuantificación de los visitantes por sobre otros criterios que brindarían más información sobre la relación que se establece entre los museos y sus públicos.

## II.

De entre todas las técnicas, la más empleada en los estudios de público continúa siendo la encuesta, pues ha permitido homologar las respuestas para sistematizar de una mejor manera la información referida por quienes visitan una exposición, y al mismo tiempo cuantificar esas respuestas.

Lo anterior ha permitido la permanencia de la encuesta como el instrumento preferido para conocer a los públicos de los museos, pues es una herramienta evaluadora de la exposición, que más allá de permitir un análisis de la relación que establecen los públicos con el museo a partir de la opinión recogida a través de este instrumento. Sirve, además, para medir estadísticamente las tendencias en las respuestas, pues para museógrafos y curadores, tiene mayor sentido tomar decisiones sobre cómo realizar las nuevas exposiciones a partir de la moda que arrojan las respuestas.

El problema que se detecta en este tipo de recolección de información es que su objetivo busca reafirmar los presupuestos con los que llega el investigador a aplicar la encuesta, haciendo de los estudios de público y la evaluación de la exposición una encuesta de satisfacción.

Lo anterior no implica que buscar identificar si los visitantes están satisfechos con una exposición o los servicios que ofrece el museo no sea información valiosa, sin embargo, su empleo genera una falsa idea de éxito o fracaso por no tomar en cuenta otros factores como el horizonte de conocimiento con el que los públicos se aproximan al texto expositivo, el contexto social a partir del cual emiten su respuesta, o si hubo una real comprensión de los contenidos de la exposición.

## III.

A pesar que por diversas cuestiones los estudios de público aún no tienen el impacto esperado, en el contexto mexicano han tenido lugar ejercicios bastante interesantes como: la Estadística de Museos, que desde 2017 se realiza de manera anual por el Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística (INEGI), el cual busca medir y conocer la información relacionada con la infraestructura y características de los museos mexicanos, así como las características sociodemográficas de sus visitantes; la Estadística Nacional de Visitantes del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) que mide el flujo de visitantes nacionales e internacionales a los espacios y recintos culturales que resguarda este instituto; o el Programa Nacional de Estudios de Público de la Coordinación Nacional de Museos y Exposiciones, también perteneciente al INAH, que ha empleado

distintas herramientas para conocer, además de cuántos y quiénes visitan las exposiciones de la red de 162 museos que opera el INAH, acompañar a los museos en su exploración de acuerdo a sus inquietudes y necesidades, analizando información y brindando recomendaciones a los equipos curatoriales y museográficos que trabajan en estos espacios a partir de lo encontrado.

En contraste, en el contexto cubano no se identifican estrategias conjuntas que articulen los esfuerzos institucionales para conocer la manera en que los museos se relacionan con sus distintos públicos, pues en su mayoría, la información recopilada se emplea para medir y conocer todo aquello relacionado con la infraestructura de los museos, así como la oferta cultural que éstos programan. Sin embargo, salvo por algunos ejemplos como el correspondiente al Palacio del Segundo Cabo que reúne en una memoria las experiencias recogidas de los diferentes públicos en los talleres realizados, o de algunas tesis de posgrado, parece que aún falta por explorar más la experiencia de visitar el museo.

La falta de literatura más extensa que dé cuenta del trabajo que realizan los espacios expositivos tanto de manera individual como de manera conjunta da una falsa idea de lo poco preocupados que están los espacios expositivos cubanos por conocer a sus públicos.

#### IV.

La preocupación que tienen los espacios expositivos por conocer a quienes los visitan se debe a una necesidad de identificar la manera en que se acercan al mismo, cuál es su horizonte de conocimiento y cuáles son las herramientas interpretativas que emplean o podrían emplear para comprender mejor el texto que representa la exposición.

Como lo señala Hooper-Greenhill (1994/2011), los estudios de público son un tipo de investigación y evaluación que involucra a los museos y sus públicos actuales, potenciales o virtuales, tratan de hablar con los usuarios para obtener una comprensión de sus necesidades, deseos y niveles de conocimientos, así como de lo que se llevan después de su visita. Pretenden ocuparse de toda la gama de comportamientos y actitudes, hábitos culturales y construcciones imaginarias ligados al modo en que la gente utiliza su tiempo libre para obtener información que permita tomar decisiones informadas para el funcionamiento de todas las áreas del museo (Schmilchuk, 1997, como se cita en Pérez, 2016, pp. 23-24).

Sin embargo, el riesgo de una evaluación negativa como resultado de los estudios de público, ha llevado al museo a experimentar una especie de ansiedad debido a la contradicción entre lo que se es y se quiere ser (Pantoja Ferrari, 2019, pp. 41-42). En ese sentido, entre los retos que enfrentan los museos, específicamente los latinoamericanos en el siglo XXI podríamos mencionar:

- Los presupuestos raquíticos de las instituciones culturales y la depredación de la industria del entretenimiento contra la que compiten y que se relaciona con la cantidad de visitas que pueden recibir.

- Unas prácticas arraigadas tan profundamente en su interior que es difícil modificar estructuras y formas de trabajo propias de una forma de pensamiento decimonónica en donde el discurso y las políticas de representación se han mantenido intactas frente a nuevas dinámicas sociales.
- La hibridación entre la tradición con las reflexiones que tienen lugar en los síntomas actuales de su crisis y la adopción de un futuro que parecen negar.
- La incompreensión de los hábitos de consumo de sus públicos objetivo.
- La renovación y realización de proyectos museísticos innovadores que terminan siendo un movimiento meramente estético que busca rejuvenecer los museos.
- La relevancia que [puede] tiene[tener] el Museo para gran parte de la población.
- La necesidad de articular estrategias desde órganos centrales para el [re] conocimiento de los diversos públicos.

Esto deja muchas líneas de indagación sobre cómo abordar [reconocer] el conocimiento de los diversos públicos que más allá de ser un instrumento evaluativo sobre el éxito de una exposición, sirva como instrumento de análisis para comprender la relación que guardan las Instituciones culturales y sus [diversos] públicos, es decir, cómo se dan los procesos de recepción a partir de los medios utilizados y no solamente como instrumentos contabilizadores de asistentes.

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# The (ir-)relevance of research in the ‘public’ museum

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Conducting research is part of the core remit of a museum, as defined in the ICOM museum definition (2007). Museum professionals generally tend to agree upon the importance of research, as well as of the role the museum plays in the production of knowledge. However, what does “research” actually mean in a museum, and is it really at the core of the institution? Should it be? In any case, the subject is rarely explicitly broached: in this sense, it seems to be largely taboo. We need to address it, not in the least because many museums engage individuals and communities to contribute to a growing ‘culture of debate’ within these institutions. Museums are opening up and addressing social issues, and are trying to give space to multiple voices to express their views, feelings and emotions. This more bottom-up, participatory museum approach is often soothing for participants. Nevertheless, a strong or exclusive focus on sharing of emotions and experiences has a downside because a culture of debate needs ‘solid’, ‘rational’ arguments as well. Otherwise, debate quickly fizzles out.

In this paper we will argue that museums need to work on this balance between ‘reason’ and ‘emotions’ and ‘feelings’ in order to nurture a genuine culture of debate. Therefore, they need to start unravelling what research and the production of knowledge may mean. It is striking that research is often viewed narrowly: it pertains to (art-related) historical research on an object or collection. And yet so many more activities can be defined as research. Moreover, we believe it is more of a *mindset*, a reflective attitude and a perspective of action in an organisation. In the process, ‘practitioners’ often conduct ‘research’ without realising it – let alone getting credit for it. It is therefore essential to start to deepen the conversation about the meaning of ‘research’ in and for a museum. It is time to withdraw these questions from the realm of the taboo, at least if museums aim to present themselves as *genuine* ‘public institutions’ where there is room for debate.

## **The rational and ‘neutral’ museum**

Since time immemorial, social thinkers have tried to demonstrate that human identity is determined primarily by thought, recalling the words of Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes’ ‘I think, therefore I am’. This idea permeates Western society: we explain and understand everything from the rational in order to arrive at ‘the truth’. Fortunately, there were also thinkers who called this model into question, highlighting feelings, emotions, physical sensation, and

even transcendental dimensions in their work. Inspiring figures in this regard include Dewey (1933/2005), Cohn (1976/2010), Weil (2021), and Sontag (2001).

Yet reason always had the upper hand in Enlightenment ideas; emotional and physical aspects were secondary. We also see this reflected in the way the museum was and is defined. Since the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the focus has been on research or the systematic compiling and ordering of objects and collections, based on academic methodologies. In the museum context – the white cube comes to mind – the objects were stripped of their original contexts and, as it were, “objectified” (O’Doherty, 2000). In short, research into objects and collections had a high level of *sérieux* and scientific value, given that reason was fundamental. This rational approach ensured that academics (as well as policymakers and the public) were long convinced that the museum was a neutral, truth-seeking place because everything was underpinned by science – as though the museum were a clinical environment where only reason could be found.

This intangible belief in the so-called neutrality of the museum has been called into question since the 1960s. Explicitly, clearly, but still usually in the margins. In recent decades, however, we have seen a major reversal in this regard. Museums are increasingly seen as places to foster dialogue with their public, promote inclusion, start a conversation with diverse voices from diverse communities (Golding, 2009).

## **Towards a museum of feeling?**

As a result, there has been a shift from a generally *closed*, object-oriented museum to a more open and people-oriented one. This has also created a space for emotions, sensitivities, physicality, and debate. The idea that a museum would be “neutral” and proclaim “the” truth is rapidly crumbling away. The focus we see today on museum activism, for example, neatly illustrates this trend (Janes & Sandell, 2019). It is an exciting development given that museums, first in the Anglo-Saxon world but also beyond, are questioning whether they should take a role or a standpoint in public debates around current social issues. Can a museum still stand on the sidelines when it comes to issues such as migration, decolonisation, social inequality, racism and discrimination, and the climate issue?

We also raised this question in the 2016 book *Museum van het Gevoel (Museum of Feeling)*. In it, we posed the question of whether the museum could not be much more responsive to social issues and take on a role (or multiple roles) in this regard. One of the conclusions was that a museum that functioned exclusively or primarily on “feeling” would be just as undesirable as a museum where “thinking” or “reason” predominated:

*In the Museum of the Future, feeling is a form of thinking and thinking is a form of feeling. The holistic experience plays a central role. This museum helps people in their personal, social and empathic development, in developing their capabilities in relation to the capabilities of others and society. It stimulates narrative imagination and thinking. The ‘Museum*

*of the Future' takes moral responsibility itself and encourages others to take (moral) action. (Van Oost, 2016, p. 48, author's translation).*

## **The agonistic museum?**

In our view, the museum of the future formulates a holistic view whereby any difference between thinking and feeling, or any supposed polarity, is eliminated. A utopian idea or a starting-point for museum practice?

Interestingly, a group of museums that work on contested heritage have addressed these issues in recent years in Flanders (Van Oost, 2022).<sup>1</sup> How explicitly can museums take a stand (or not)? And why is that? The working group drew on the agonism theory of Chantal Mouffe (Allegaert, et al., 2020). The core idea is that debate and dialogue should be based on principles of democracy and diverse voices. Keeping in mind the basic principles of democratic debate, the aim is to put forward different visions, not necessarily seeking consensus but rather establishing a respectful dialogue between different voices with diverse perspectives (Mouffe, 2008; Sheik, 2006). The working group agreed on the conditions for engaging in real debate and dialogue with diverse voices. There is also openness to allow emotions and feelings, and to include these voices as much as possible.

## **A debate that is worthwhile**

Nevertheless, we are not there yet. It remains difficult to actually create a substantively strong debate. In addition, debates sometimes take an unforeseen turn that threatens respectful dialogue. We were confronted with this in a very direct way during the pandemic. The COVID period prompted digital experimentation and a proliferation of interactive webinars. All very engaging and positive, but the digital format could give rise to a lot of noise and even intense discussions. When we organised a webinar on decolonisation, for example, in the chat function, arguments and reasoning were put forward that were historically incorrect. For example, the appalling practice of chopping off hands, which was rife in the Congo Free State, was linked to the origin myth of the city of Antwerp (in which a hero chopped off the hand of his opponent, a giant). At such moments, we need to ask ourselves whether the debate is contributing something, or rather causing harm. Moreover, is it still a 'debate' or is it more about spouting opinions, expressing frustrations? It is important to give negative emotions a place and not ignore them. But where is the balance?

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1. The In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres; the Dr. Guislain Museum, Ghent; the Red Star Line Museum, Antwerp; and Kazerne Dossin, Mechelen have conducted intense debate on this question. This group was joined by the Africa Museum, Tervuren; and the Flemish Peace Institute, FARO; and other interested museums such as Industriemuseum, Ghent; Mu.ZEE, Ostend; DIVA, Antwerp; and Museum Hof van Busleyden, Mechelen also regularly took part in consultation sessions.

## **A public institution also needs ‘reason’**

This brings us back to the dichotomy between reason and feeling with which we started this paper. In our ideal holistic vision, thinking and feeling are interwoven and the difference is inconsequential. In practice, however, we find that this age-old contradiction stubbornly persists. Whereas a few decades ago the museum focused exclusively on reason and thought, drawing its legitimacy from the pursuit of truth, today the exact opposite sometimes risks happening. The focus has shifted so much to ‘feeling’, to the emotional, often hyper-individual ‘I,’ that the space for thinking – based on study, research and knowledge development – fades into the background. If we are to realise a holistic vision of the museum of the future and live up to the role of public institution, we need to think about this. Otherwise, the ‘public institution’ risks losing its legitimacy.

## **More research in the museum: how?**

Research and knowledge development should therefore be highlighted more strongly as part of the core remit. An inspiring example in this regard is the 2017 Swedish Museum Act, whereby museums are expected to create exhibitions based on research, and to actively contribute to knowledge development. Furthermore, they are also expected to contribute to theorising and the development of new research methodologies. The aim is to contribute to the scientific, museological field, in collaboration with research institutions (Grinell & Högberg, 2022).

This does not mean that museums will become closed, introspective institutions as a result, quite the contrary. Research does not only have to contribute to the scientific field. It is a way to fully live up to the museum’s role as a distinctly *public institution*. Hence the fact that there is a strong link in the Swedish Act to inclusion and the promotion of democracy. The focus on participation, education and maximum accessibility to a diverse public is very explicit.

## **A reflection process in stages**

In conclusion, we believe museum professionals should join forces and start a process of reflection and discussion on this topic. The following key questions come to mind.

First, what does it mean today for a museum to be a ‘public institution’ that nurtures debate and seeks a balance between arguments/reason and feelings/emotions? Second, we need to have a conversation about the meaning of research and knowledge development and get the scope of this function in focus. The more conventional academic research into a collection and/or in function of an exhibition remains important, but ‘knowledge production’ is also much broader. Consider the more social science-based or pedagogical research that involves working with interviews and testimony. Or the insights that arise from various participatory processes in heritage organisations. Third, and in the same vein, we ask the question, who is a researcher? What about all the ‘practitioners’ in

museums who do conduct ‘research’ and are involved in knowledge production, even though they are unlikely to refer to it in those terms? How can we deal with the question more consciously, document processes, and recognise ‘practitioners’ in their roles? Because it is made explicit to such a limited extent, certain conceptions and value judgments about what constitutes ‘research’ (and what does not) therefore persist. Recent work by Pringle (2020) provides a very useful framework in this regard. Both ‘the researcher’ and ‘the practitioner’ are given a certain status – Michel Foucault comes to mind – where research and knowledge have ‘power’ and the practitioner plays more of a subordinate role (Bennett, 1995; 1998). Fourth and finally, we will need to consider how to integrate the conclusions of this reflection process into museum practice.

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# Does the desire for digital advancement put museum staff at exploitation risk?

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After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many scholars have studied the similarities and influences of post-colonialism and post-socialism (Dzenovska, 2018, p. 24). Having introduced harsh liberalism, Eastern European countries were and still are catching up with Europe (Borocz, 2006). Although European post-socialist spaces are trying to shake off their seemingly permanent former status by striving to become European, they are still predominantly seen as ‘not-yet-European’ or ‘not-quite-European’ (Dzenovska, 2018, p. 42) and keep struggling to fit in with the West and Rest framework because they are neither the one nor the other. Or as Pupovac (2010) put it, “not anymore, not yet [...] between the past and the future”.

This struggle to fit in plays a role in the museum sector as well. The current study of digital innovation in Latvian museums rests on a mixed strategy. A survey of museum directors was conducted in September 2021, with a sample size totaling 92% of all accredited museums in Latvia, and additional semi-structured interviews with museums that self-reported as some of the most innovative in the field. Results show that digitally innovative museums are overwhelmingly perceived as a desirable Western norm, but technological advancement relies on overstretching their already thin resources in the guise of voluntary work or unpaid extra duties from museum staff.

## Digital advancement as the Western image

In 2000, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri wrote their seminal work *Empire*, describing the replacement of local territorial rule with global flows, decentralisation and reterritorialisation, the effacing of tripartite geography of ‘second’ and ‘third world’ divisions, and the raising of the idea of techno-utopic liberalism disseminating the notion that digital technology can and will remedy the world’s maladies, spread real-time freedom of information to all, and telescope the ‘backwards’ and ‘uninformed’ parts of the globe into techno-utopic futurity (McElroy, 2017, p. 6). However, techno giants quickly received criticism, such as that the internet is a form of colonialism that whitewashes Facebook’s techno-imperialism (Toyama, 2014) under a claim of bringing benefits. If colonialism can be defined as a practice of domination involving the subjugation of one people by another through military, economic and political means, techno-colonialism

is a complex structure of management and control that underlies Western civilization (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018, p. 116) and can be described as centralised control and ownership of technology used to exercise some forms of domination (Verdi, 2020). This problem is not exclusive to countries with a colonial past. Purtschert (2016, p. 4) calls this phenomenon “colonialism without colonies”, talking about countries whose sense of self was being formed within this European colonial frame of Europeanness. For Central and Eastern Europeans, the compensatory behaviour after extended Soviet subjugation was the desire to “return to Westernness that once was theirs” (Moore, 2006, p. 21).

In the current study, a survey on digital innovation diversity and diffusion in Latvian museums was conducted in September 2021, with a sample size totalling 92% (n=102) of all Latvia’s accredited museums (N=111). In 95% of cases, the questionnaire was completed by the highest museum official: museum director or head of a museum, acting director or deputy director. Qualitative data were also obtained through 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews with museums that self-reported as some of the most innovative in the field.

According to the findings of this study, the overwhelming majority of museum directors (92%) sees digital technologies as a tool in image building and popularity, but also a way to stay relevant and in-demand by meeting the public’s needs (87%). Asked to recall the motivation for the first digital developments, one museum director remembers: “And one other thing, [digital innovation] that, let’s say, other institutions or other places in Latvia did not have. We’ve started to introduce it. Also, our restoration workshop – we tried to make it more Western”. Another museum director admitted: “I had this ambition to get [...] to earn the museum prestige, through whatever means possible”. Nevertheless, only a few have research tools and a development strategy in place. Three percent of museums have separate digital strategies, 63% have included digital development in existing policies, while 34% make no mention of digital development in any strategic documents or struggle to answer the question. Fourteen percent of the respondents use digital tools to research their visitors’ socio-demographic profiles and only 11% to trace visitor experiences.

Digitalisation of the collection and maintaining an online presence can also indicate an innovation potential, according to Borowiecki and Navarrete (2016), and accredited Latvian museums are mandated to digitise their collections and store them in the National Museum Collection Catalogue to ensure public access to the 95% of museum objects currently unavailable through permanent exhibitions and displays. The survey suggests that 30% of the respondents have zero to 10% of their collections available online with sufficient-quality pictures. Another 14% struggle to answer the question. Forty-eight percent of the respondents rate the online availability of their collection as 10 to 49%. Only 9% of museums have more than 50% of their collections online with high-resolution images. Public access is further compromised by complexity and technical shortages of the state-developed online system; for example, “the search options were unclear, difficult to use and often did not yield the expected results” (Spurina, 2021, p. 8). Some

museums try to address these issues through duplication, either creating their own platforms or using global platforms to make collections available online. This approach is an additional strain on their already thinly stretched resources.

## Embracing or exploiting digital innovation champions

During the interviews, museum directors admitted they and their staff lack digital competencies. For instance, “well, we are all rather far from technology, which is somewhat strange,” or “they don’t count on me much anymore in that respect. If they say we need it, I say go ahead”. To become more technologically advanced, Latvian museums often rely on their internal ‘champions’ (Rogers, 2003, pp. 414-417), who embrace and encourage new digital initiatives. The study suggests that 53% of the respondents have at least one such champion. In 33% of the cases, this person is employed in the education or communication department, and in 21%, it is the director or the collection manager. In 10% of the cases, the person is working in the IT department, and in 8%, it is the museum’s project manager. Thus, the status of ‘a champion’ is rather related to their digital competencies or interests, not their primary responsibilities in the museum. For instance, one museum director recalls the admirable work ethic of the museum’s innovation champion:

*We discuss many things in our museum meetings. Then we said we were working on such [digital] programmes, and the museum educator voiced their concerns [regarding digital competency], and that’s when X joined the conversation and said: “Well, I could try and help!” X is a junior historian, responsible for visitor services in the museum’s research archive.*

They are celebrated as volunteers, but according to national legislation, “a volunteer cannot be a substitute for an employee on the payroll”, and “legal relations regarding volunteers are regulated by the Law on Voluntary Work” (Saeima, 2018). In Central and Eastern Europe, action-mindedness is being identified with the socialist past, but an ‘action-oriented mindset’ and a ‘work-oriented mindset’ (Reifova, 2020, pp. 12-13) are favoured as work ethics of the West and its progressive capitalism as opposed to stagnant, underperforming socialism. Or as Pupovac (2010) puts it, “With the promise of the liberal-capitalist utopia, the existing state of affairs receives a benediction, whilst the entirety of the mechanisms of exclusion, domination and exploitation that structure this existence vanish before our eyes.”

In Latvia’s largest conference for museum professionals earlier this year, this concern came up in various discussions. A long-term civil servant, when asked about concerns regarding the museum sector’s future challenges, said: “A museum is not an institution with an 8-hour workday, where you put down your pen and start another life. [...] I have to say I have unpleasant and worrying thoughts about who [the younger generation] and how [work ethics] will work

in our museums". However, during the closing session, one of the younger generation museum professionals admitted, putting it as a half joke:

*Listening to my colleagues today made me want to cry. [...] We are already a one-player orchestra. And after the pandemic [when new digital skills were learned and new digital practices introduced], we've been playing in two orchestras. [...] It's certainly cheaper to have one employee take five positions instead of hiring experts.*

This critical voice together with other examples and data let us suspect that tension, which has been interpreted as a potential work ethics issue related to a generational change in museums, uncovers alarming consequences from Eastern European efforts to catch up with the West, imagined as digitally advanced and highly progressive. (1) A digitally innovative museum is overwhelmingly perceived as the desired Western norm. (2) This image clashes with reality and available resources according to the study, and (3) it overstretches the already thin resources in the guise of voluntary work or unpaid extra duties for the digital innovation champions in museums.

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# The taboo of activism in the museum field

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*Are museums here to document these disastrous trends passively,  
or to do something about them?*

*Tomislav Šola (1997, p. 17)*

## Introduction

As Brulon Soares and Leschenko have shown, the basis of museological thinking is firmly rooted in the Western tradition (2018). We have seen suggestions for making museums more inclusive, plural, and open to other forms of knowledge than Western (see e.g. Modest, 2019). However, I suggest that museums have unrecognised boundaries – or taboos – limiting their actions. One of these taboos is adopting a radical, activist position. This paper demonstrates the slow process of museums when appropriating a new theme – in this case, climate change – and how the process reveals museums' uncomfortable position towards radical thinking. I argue that this is descriptive of museums' relation towards prevailing hegemonies as more strengthening than deconstructing or decolonising them.

The research case studies presented here are exhibitions from three museums located in different parts of Finland: Salo,<sup>1</sup> Joensuu,<sup>2</sup> and Helsinki.<sup>3</sup> All the cases were contemporary art exhibitions curated on climate change, and they are part of my PhD research in progress. The analysis methods were artefact review and interviews with a discursive approach. Aside from the exhibition materials, I have explored the changes in the last two Finnish museum policy programmes from 2000 and 2018. These materials show how adopting the theme of climate change to the museum field has happened in Finland during the 2000s.

A starting point for this paper is a theory of ideologies in reproducing societies. Louis Althusser wrote about ideological state apparatuses in the 1970s, arguing that public institutions are tools for recreating the prevailing hegemonies (1976, p. 105). For example, the church fosters values that enhance people's coexistence and support adapting to social norms. The Finnish social scientist and economist Toni Ruuska has studied education in the Althusserian spirit. He has demonstrated how mechanisms of higher education are deepening the climate crisis by

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1. *Halikonlahti Green Art Trilogy in the Roundhouse Art Museum in 2006, 2008 and 2011.*

2. *Forecast: Warmer in the Joensuu Art Museum Onni in 2010.*

3. *Weather report. Forecasting Future hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, but presented both in Venice biennial in 2019 and in Helsinki 2020.*

strengthening the prevailing ideology of endless economic growth (Ruuska, 2017). Ruuska points out that, even though well-intended, education will enhance and reinforce the general doctrine, explicitly articulated or not.

Similarly, museums as public institutions strengthen the prevailing ideologies. For example, Sheila Watson studies these processes in national museums and demonstrates how they use emotions to create national narratives and identities (2021). However, museums work well only when in accord with the status quo. I will continue this idea and ask how radical approaches are visible in exhibitions with discordant topics. Janes and Sandell call after museum activism, stating it to be “shaped out of ethically-informed values, that is intended to bring about political, social and environmental change” (2019, p. 1). I will study the cases by contrasting the status quo with museum activism.

I argue that museums have many purposes in their exhibitions, which might make them hesitant in selecting radical positions. I will call these purposes here *institutional*. By avoiding activism, museums might strengthen the prevailing hegemonies and thus deepen the ecological crisis. This tendency to support hegemonies demonstrates that they are ideological apparatuses in the Althusserian sense. Positioning museums in the field of political activism is complex for them to acknowledge: it is taboo.

## **The museum exhibitions have institutional purposes in addition to the message**

Environmental concerns have been rooting slowly in Finnish museum policies during the 2000s. In the Finnish museum policy programme from 2000, climate change is, unsurprisingly, an unknown concept. Museums are increasingly competing with the entertainment sector, and a new tool, quality control, is introduced. In the 2000 programme, museums *cherish, produce, serve* and *convince*. The idea of *the Great Finnish Museum*, referring to the museum as a place to preserve all national cultural heritage, is considered (Ministry of Education, 2000). In contrast, in the 2018 policy, museums *enable, provide, create* and *engage*. The programme emphasises participation, social engagement and opportunities for making an impact. Museums are encouraged to produce benefits, like social well-being, in their work. Ecological sustainability is visible in the programme, but no practices to realise it are named (Mattila, 2018). Whereas in 2000 museums were seen as a service, in 2018 they appeared more as platforms for interaction and places for contribution. Museums in Finland are leaning on these policies, but they do have more boundaries and guidelines. The museum law and international regulations, such as ICOM museum ethics and UNESCO conventions, are guiding their practice.

The museums' goals in the exhibitions and connections with their communities become visible in the case studies. Salo and Joensuu had strong ties to their cities, for they function as part of them. They also are responsible as regional museums for advancing local arts and culture. Both exhibitions got extra support

from public foundations in addition to funding from the city. The interviewees noted that crucial tasks for the exhibitions were to disseminate knowledge and update the local art profile to a higher standard. In Joensuu's case, the city's cultural manager emphasised the exhibition's opportunities as a high standard art exhibition, which would raise both the city's and the museum's profile and increase the number of visitors and tourists to the museum. In the third case, Kiasma had obligations to the international art field. The director noted that these international happenings have an essential role in lifting Kiasma's profile as a noteworthy actor and raising interest in Nordic art. These notions remind us that museums are not disconnected from the economy, city policies or funding structures. On the contrary, exhibitions perform several simultaneous purposes.

### **Museums are reluctant to be in discord with the prevailing hegemonies**

Museums justified their practices in all the cases with natural sciences. In Salo, the museum collaborated with limnologists. In Joensuu, the museum hosted a series of lectures on forest ecology with the university. In Helsinki, Kiasma raised the prominent climate change figures at the beginning of the exhibition catalogue to set the scene for natural science (Haapala, 2019). Leaning on science brought the topic from the possibly radical field to one of the facts: a strategy to be seen as a neutral mediator. Museums needed more justifications to present climate change in 2006 than in 2019. When in 2006, the curator was planning the exhibition for Salo, she had to be very specific with her purposes and carefully articulate the need to root this topic in the art museum. On the contrary, in 2019, Kiasma did not need any justifications for the subject, for it was not in danger of being interpreted as radical.

An interesting finding from the interviews is that all the museums were reluctant to present uncomfortable or negative emotions, even though they acknowledged these. Their main intentions were either to provide information about the topic (Joensuu), to create collaborative interventions in the city space (Salo) or to enable lingering for the visitors and to allow them to think about different species inhabiting the ecosystem (Kiasma). The curators wanted art to be easily accessible and understandable (Joensuu) and not to raise negativity because the climate crisis is already all over and unavoidable (Kiasma). A future-oriented perspective was present in all exhibitions, which might be a strategy to avoid negativity.

### **Conclusion**

I have shortly presented two observations here. Firstly, museum exhibitions have institutional purposes on the side of their messages. Even when the theme is considered radical, such as the climate crisis in Finland in 2006, exhibitions have institutional goals, like updating the museum's profile or raising visitor numbers. Secondly, museums are avoiding positions they consider radical. For

example, for museums to make climate change a legitimate topic, they need to justify it with natural sciences and thus bring it to a field of presumed objectivity or neutrality. These two notions show how museums are bound to dominant hegemonies. However, museums strengthen the prevailing ideologies when abstaining from actions they consider political or activist.

It remains an unsolved question to consider what kind of opportunities museums have as public institutions – or ideological state apparatuses – to detach from enhancing dominant hegemonies and give space for something else. Recently, visions of plurality and ideological multiplicity have been discussed, but the outcomes are yet to be seen. Maybe the first step would be to identify and analyse taboos in the museum field. As an endnote, I wish to return to the opening excerpt. As I have shown, remaining in the background silently recording the events is not an option. There is no such thing as a passive agency for museums, only choosing between a visibly or less-visibly active role.

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# Overcoming the taboos of collaboration: Primary research project of Indigenous museum value

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## Introduction

Many civilisations, not solely in the western world, have established institutions, systematic rules, and comprehensive methods to preserve memory, knowledge and material culture over a long period (Kreps, 2006; McCarthy, 2020; McCarthy, et al., 2013; Schultz, 2017). However, mainstream ideas tend to privilege the western perspective that museums are evolved from the cabinet of curiosity and the development of taxonomic knowledge of modern society. Furthermore, this kind of preconception appears repetitively in other regions when the dominant group has the power to define the value of the museum. In Taiwan, the western model of museum value also shapes but limits many museums.

As a result of unequal power and underlying bias, taboos and unsolved questions exist in museum theory and practice. Firstly, who has the right to define the value of museums? Whom should we listen to, the voice of experts or that of marginalised groups? Additionally, more and more museums claim they care about people and display Indigenous culture; however, do they care about these people's lives or the collections and the rhetoric of history? Lastly, as co-creation and collaboration become buzzwords in the museum sector, do museum practitioners create a democratic engagement zone and benefit the community, or merely invite people to decorate their mission and enrich the museum?

This research aims to respond to these questions concerning value, subjectivity and collaboration from an experimental but empirical case in the Kamcing tribe. During the co-curation process, the community found momentum from its cultural roots, and the agency ran a museum by themselves. This case might not represent all the Indigenous museums, but it paves the way for people to imagine a new Indigenous museum value framework.

## The Kamcing tribe case in brief

The Kamcing tribe is in the mountain area of Taitung, Taiwan. Since 1917, a few Bunun people have moved in for farming. In the 1930s, the Japanese colonial

government forced different tribes to move to Kamcing in order to govern them, which caused many families to depart from their own cultural contexts, resulting in diverse but fragmented memories in this town (Kamcing Tribe Curatorial Team, 2017; Qiu et al., 2020).

In 2017, some youths recognised that it had been one century since other tribes had been moved into their area, and even though their story had been recorded in ethnography and their music Pasubutbut is renowned internationally, those are not their own story. Finding their own voice became the momentum for this project. Meanwhile, the NMP was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture (MOC) with the Local Context Knowledge and Museum Systems Scheme project (MLA). Thus, they initiated a partnership that was based on the agreement of mutual empowerment. The museum took the role of bridge and supporter, introducing public sector resources and providing museum working methods; the community dominated the narrative and conducted fieldwork (Kamcing Tribe Curatorial Team, 2017; Qiu et al., 2020).

The ‘engagement zone’ (Onciul, 2015) was created in the tribe, unlike most collaboration projects which are conducted in the museum. This decision erased the barrier to participation. Not only had the space become more accessible for all tribe members, but the museum members could be more empathetic about the worldviews and respect the tradition.

Under the consensus of community-centric aims, the team completed a flash exhibition which was only five hours long but spoke of one hundred years of history. It focused on the co-curation process rather than the gorgeous result, valued feedback from within the community rather than pleasing the attention of external audiences, and most importantly, kept the polyphonic narratives, which did not generate or merge into the major narrative. Overall, the contributions of this project are:

- Cultural governance returns to the local context
- Tribes hold the right to speak
- Knowledge systems come back to life experience
- Individuals regain group identity

Some unexpected consequences happened after the project. Firstly, more tribe members understood their family history. Thus, another exhibition, *Where did my name come from*, was held. In addition, one tribe member donated his old house as a display and storytelling space. In 2019, the Kamcing 3062 old house was erected. The place has now become a meaningful hub for the community and promotes the local economy.

## **Decolonising museum methodology and embracing Indigenous museums**

Many museums contain Indigenous collections and exhibitions with the theme of Indigenous culture in Taiwan. However, the voice of authority, the renaissance epistemology and the encyclopaedic knowledge system of museums have tended to dehumanise, standardise, and simplify the culture of “others”. Under this “epistemic violence” (Vawda, 2019), Taiwanese Indigenous people encounter multi-layered difficulties when their culture is represented in the museums. First, they are framed into 16 official groups and frozen in the past. Museums used to display attractive objects and clothing considering only the official categories, ignoring the nuance between areas and the fact that Indigenous people identify themselves in the units of tribes rather than groups.

In addition, they might be depicted as vulnerable humans, tragic victims, or noble heroes to cater to specific views of history. It seems like museums care about their poetic past more than current status, and cherish their items more than their memory and worldviews. Finally, museums are also monopolised by (or are part of) the nationalism mechanism. Some narratives tend to claim everyone on the island of Taiwan is part of the Indigenous people, declaring that ‘we are family’ even though there are still many unsolved problems of colonial history and social justice. These narratives then blur the identity and make decolonisation become a metaphor.

Therefore, the first step to find the value of museums is to face the problematic, political, and complicated museum methodology, acknowledging bias might play a part in every process (collecting, cataloguing, categorising, interpretation, and representation). After decolonisation, museums would have space for the voices of the Indigenous community. Moreover, communities will have their own museums.

### **The Indigenous museum value**

Some researchers have recognised that Indigenous museums have unique values which differ from those of Western components (e.g. Kreps, 2006; McCarthy, 2016; Stanley, 2008). It is necessary to formulate the fundamental momentum of Indigenous museums and illustrate a clear value framework rather than following the western model. Museums are created by society, so society preserves memory and creates history to cater for this need in a social context.

In the Kamcing tribe case, the unique value of an Indigenous museum is demonstrated because the space for Indigenous epistemology was well-preserved, so the community created a museum concept that suits them. The representation and interpretation are within their cultural context.

This research refers to and modifies the theory of the Museum Values Framework (Davies et al., 2013) which describes four modes (the club, the temple, the visitor attraction and the forum) in a western cultural context. Keeping the horizon-

tal axis as internal/ external focus, and the vertical axis as flexible/ controlled interpretation, the Indigenous Museum Value Framework (IMVF) emphasises that core members are Indigenous communities.

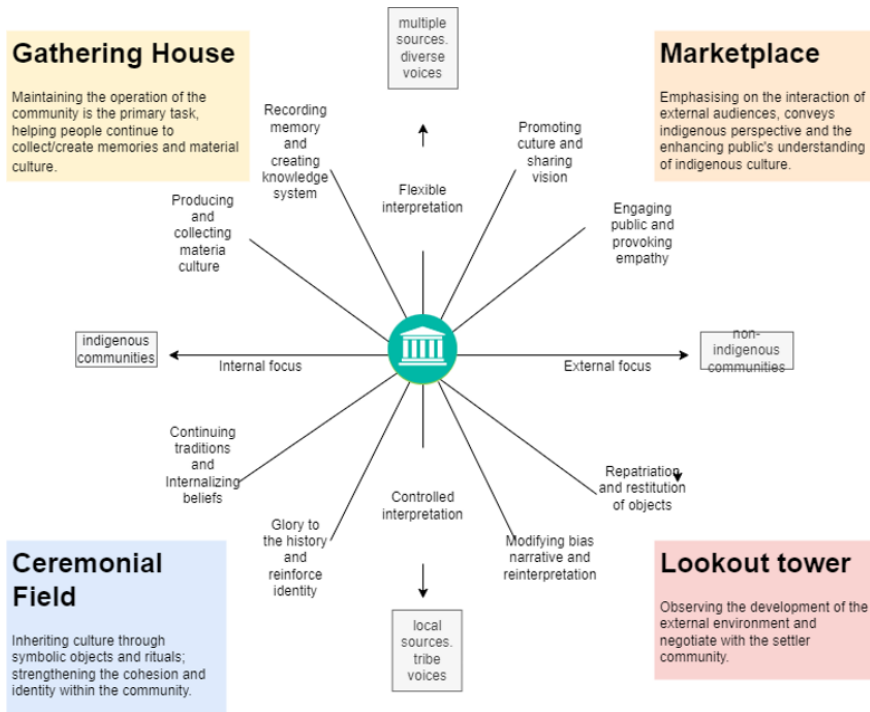


Figure 1. The Indigenous Museum Value Framework. Image created by the author.

- In the Ceremonial Field mode, the main role of the museum is to inherit culture through symbolic objects and rituals, strengthening the cohesion and identity within the community.
- In the Gathering House mode, maintaining the operation of the community is the primary task, helping people continue to collect/create memories and material culture.
- The Marketplace mode emphasises the interaction of external audiences, conveys Indigenous perspectives and enhances the enhancing public's understanding of Indigenous culture.
- In the Lookout Tower mode, the museum observes the development of the external environment and negotiates with the settler community.

There are three traits of the IMVF that need to be emphasised. Firstly, the interpretation is created in its cultural context. Second, its main duty is to preserve the lives rather than collect the dead. The Indigenous Museum is a future-oriented and full of mobility institution. To continue the traditional knowledge and convey

the technique of creating material culture are more important than collecting and paper research. Thirdly, Indigenous museums are for all, but the priority of serving objects is the Indigenous community.

## Conclusion

This study has explored the Kamcing tribe case, outlined the IMVF and differentiated it from the western culture form. It will be a valuable tool for setting development strategies and making cultural policies for community-run Indigenous museums. Moreover, it challenges mainstream concepts, overcomes the taboos of collaboration and broadens the spectrum defining museums. Still, the research contains imperfections. Only one case is revealed, and other Indigenous museums run by the government are overlooked. Furthermore, museums in other communities outside of Taiwan are worth exploring. Therefore, there is room to dive into this topic profoundly and many unknown territories for further research. While it has limitations, it paves the way and offers a new perspective for understanding the value of Indigenous museums.

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# Museology is not neutral: Thinking museums politically

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Museums today often find themselves entangled in the hot political debates, be it diverse social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter or the issue of colonial looting and repatriation, the contemporary documentation of the COVID-19 pandemic, or the threats to international collaboration and cultural flows following the Russian invasion into Ukraine in 2022. However, ever since its introduction in August 2017, the hashtag #MuseumsAreNotNeutral, launched in social media by Mike Murawski and LaTanya Autry (Murawski, 2017), was contested and discussed in numerous arenas as it questioned the neutrality and objectivity of knowledge production in the museum institution (i.e., *Museums have never*, Brenham Heritage Museum, 2017).

In this text I am addressing politics – this elephant in the room of museology – as a deeply-rooted issue not only in museums as institutions (Gray, 2015), but as something constitutional for museology as a discipline, a taboo that remains unspoken but greatly affects our writing and thinking with and about museums (cf. Message, 2018).

Desvallées and Mairesse (2009) in their definition of “museums” and “museology” suggest the concept of museal as a theoretical field dealing with museum- and heritage-related issues “in the same way that politics are the field of political reflection” (p. 19). However, the political in the museal field is still mostly related to “politics” as opposed to “poetics” – a set of exhibition practices. Politics in this case is understood as “the role of exhibitions/museums in the production of social knowledge” (Lidchi, 1997, p. 185) – the way of organizing the world without questioning the power which allows it to do so. Nevertheless, it has been argued by many museum scholars that museums are political institutions representing power (re)distribution within societies (Bennett, 1995; Gray, 2015; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). A museum, in contemporary museum studies discourse, is certainly proclaimed as an institution that is “both shaped by and shape[s] the socio-political landscapes in which [it] operate[s]” (Sullivan & Middleton, 2019, p. 107).

What about the discipline that studies this field and institution, what kind of landscapes does it shape and is shaped by? Museum studies or museology (depending on the academic tradition and language) has been established as one of the traditional Humanities disciplines and equipped with the methodological apparatus of historical sciences, art history and, sometimes, other field-oriented disciplines (such as natural history for natural history museums, etc.). However,

sometimes it is also considered to be a part of Social Sciences (e.g. Portuguese and Latin American “sociomuseology”) and has a strong focus on education.

Kylie Message calls museology a “boundary discipline” (2015) to contextualize its interdisciplinary nature and relationship to other branches of academic knowledge. The concept ‘boundary’ here comes from sociology via museum context as well as the notion of “boundary objects” (Leigh Star & Griesemer, 1989) in museum collections, which have the ability to inhabit different social worlds simultaneously, and thus facilitate the translation between these worlds. Museums as objects for scientific inquiry, therefore, can ‘inhabit’ different disciplinary discourses, and museology becomes lingua franca to address diverse problems and challenges which these institutions encounter across the fields.

However, despite this fluidity and interdisciplinarity, the core problem remains the same: every theoretical framework that is based on ‘borderlands’, ‘contact zones’ or ‘boundaries’ relies on the very idea of the border/boundary that defines ‘us’ against ‘others’ in any given taxonomy – the distinction which is “constitutive of social life” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 142).

The recent strand in museum studies continues the direction suggested by the new museology of the 1980s. All kinds of museologies have been emerging on the way (and also preceding it, like social museology in Latin America): transformative museology, reflexive museology, human rights museology, cybermuseology and post-critical museology, to name just a few. In most cases, however, the new “branch” of museology emerges in the works of a specific author/circle of authors and is either never reused by other scholars or is reassessed and refurbished (for instance, as the webinar organized by Linköping University and ICOFOM on “Epistemology of Museologies” in March 2021 showed, there are several mentions of “reflexive museology” in the literature where authors rarely refer to each other; or, for another example, the “human rights museology” suggested by Carter and Orange in 2012 was rethought by Armando Perla in 2020, with an emphasis on a “human rights-based approach” adapted from UN documents). The discussion in the literature around the separation between theory and practice often includes the critique of the critique, as in the case of art museums (Dewdney, et al., 2013).<sup>1</sup>

This fragmentation of the discipline itself highlights the interdisciplinary potential and “boundary” nature of the field, and it works similarly to the separation

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1. Ironically enough, the “post-critical” standpoint follows the same line as the “critical” one, emphasizing the divide between theory and practice, the “‘bottom-up’ approach of grounded theory” and “‘highly situated and multi-textured accounts of an action research project” in contrast to the “politics of guilt and representation posed by the academic discourse of postcolonialism” (Walsh, 2015)—whereas the project described by Walsh, *Tate Encounters*, was initiated from above as the answer to “failed” cultural policies on engaging black and minority ethnic audiences with the museums. Furthermore, the divide as “post-critical” museology sees it lies not within the museums but outside, between museums and academia, turning museums into the “sites of producing practice”, a *non-implicated subject* of knowledge production.

into subject matters in “old” museology (where one could find natural history, art history, science and technology etc.). Swedish museologist Kerstin Smeds names the “Cartesian principle of a subject – the observer – being separated from the object – the observed” (2012, p. 51) as one of the grounding principles of museums and exhibitions. It is similarly grounding for the broader field of academic knowledge. Smeds also argues that the ‘reflexive’ exhibitions of contemporary museums – those that focus on multimodality, pluralism and participation – are reflecting trends in science and philosophy to the same degree as those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but instead of taxonomies and positivism we now have “phenomenology, (post)structuralism and information technologies” (p. 68).

One of the telling examples of such a token usage of “political” vocabulary is the Museum Definition Debate of 2019. The current museum definition existed since 1974 (the latest version since 2007), but in 2016 ICOM launched a Standing Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials (MDPP) to reassess it. The mandate for MDPP included “identifying the museological and epistemological imperatives for revision of ICOM’s museum definition, as a shared and international framework that reflects current conditions, potential, and priorities for museums” (MDPP, 2018). The proposal, published by MDPP in July 2019, evoked a lively discussion which continued at the ICOM general conference 1-7 September 2019 in Kyoto, Japan. One of the issues with this alternative proposal, which its critics were repetitively emphasizing, was its “political” or “ideological” nature (e.g. de Varine, 2019).

If we put the existing museum definition<sup>1</sup> and 2019’s proposed alternative<sup>2</sup> against each other, we will see that the same museum functions (collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit) are mentioned in both. The alternative proposal, however, focused very much on how museums should perform these functions (by being democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces, etc.) and, more importantly, on why museums are doing it (cf. “for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” in the current definition and “to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing” in a new proposal). Furthermore, the proposed definition problematized a somewhat essentialist idea of “society and its development” which – exactly due to its ‘neutral’ nature

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1. “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM, 2007).

2. “Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.” (ICOM, 2019)

– allowed diverse readings from the different sides of the political spectrum. Therefore, it was the questions of how and why that engendered ‘ideological’ debate which, at the Kyoto conference, postponed the decision about the new definition and led to the work of a new committee, ICOM Define.

The Museum Definition Debate of 2019 highlights the disapproval of the concept of “political” in the international museum community and delineates the museum’s presumed neutrality as a hegemonic practice. Belgian political scientist Chantal Mouffe describes such practices as those “of articulation through which a given order is created and the meaning of social institutions is fixed” (2013, p. 2). In her article on museums and radical democracy (2010),<sup>3</sup> Mouffe argues for museums as possible spaces for counter-hegemonic practices, and against the perception of art (and heritage) as a commodity. “In fact,” she continues, “following the neo-liberal trend, many museums have abandoned their original function of educating citizens and have been reduced to sites of entertainment for a public of consumers. [...] The type of ‘participation’ they promote is based on consumerism, and they actively contribute to the commercialization and depoliticization of the cultural field” (2013, p. 101).

As I argue in my ongoing dissertation project based on a particular museum case, reintroducing the political to museology relates very much to reintroducing the human dimension to it. The Córdoba Declaration by South American sociomuseologists states: “A museology that is not life-oriented is not worthy” (Córdoba Declaration, 2017) – putting a disciplinary ethos on display alongside theory and practice. The question of “democratizing” museums therefore relates not to the form of governmentality, but to a productive understanding of institutional politics, the tensions and relationships that lie at the foundation of museum work. Thinking (with) museums politically should help “to formulate the problems facing society in a political way and to envisage political solutions to these problems” (Mouffe, 2013, p. 143).

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3. It is worth mentioning that Mouffe mostly addresses art institutions—contemporary art to be precise—however, the epistemological framework of *agonism* is applicable to any museum.

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