Chapman University

Chapman University Digital Commons

Art Faculty Articles and Research

Art

2020

Museums as Realms of (dis)Enchantment

Amy Buono

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/art_articles

Part of the [Latin American History Commons](#), [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Museum Studies Commons](#), and the [Other History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

Museums as Realms of (dis)Enchantment

Comments

This article was originally published in *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture*, volume 2, issue 2, in 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1525/lavc.2020.220007>

Copyright

The Regents of the University of California

On the night of September 2, 2018, a blaze swept through Brazil's national museum, Museu Nacional, in Rio de Janeiro, destroying not only the colonial building, portions of which dated to the sixteenth century, but roughly 92 percent of the 20 million objects in its holdings. This was Brazil's greatest encyclopedic museum, incorporating (among many others) collections of natural history, anthropology, archaeology, and art, thus forming the most comprehensive museum collection in the nation. Along with its many unique and irreplaceable collections, the Museu Nacional was also home to the country's oldest Indigenous Brazilian and Afro-Brazilian materials (fig. 1).

With origins in the nineteenth century, the museum developed from the Portuguese Royal collections and libraries brought to Rio in 1808, after the court fled the Napoleonic invasion of Portugal at the end of 1807. Dom João VI donated the natural history specimens that constituted the core collections of the museum when it was formally established in Rio as the Royal Museum in 1818. The Museu Nacional, as it was renamed, expanded over the next two centuries through expeditions, donations, excavations, and strategic acquisitions and exchanges. Thus, from the time of its foundation, the Museu Nacional was not only one of Brazil's oldest and most venerable institutions but also among the most central public establishments devoted to knowledge production in the biological and social sciences. The museum sits at some distance from the city's more exclusive beach neighborhoods of Ipanema, Copacabana, and Leblon. Located in the northern São Cristóvão neighborhood, within the majestic (and now partially abandoned) Quinta da Boa Vista Park, the Museu Nacional—along with the park's Zoological Gardens—has been a destination point and memory marker since the late nineteenth century. Until the fire, schoolchildren and families strolling through the park and zoo, together with throngs of tourists from across Brazil and the world, visited the museum.

Perhaps less known to those outside Brazil, the Museu Nacional is also a part of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), a “museum-campus” that serves as a preeminent institution for teaching and research. In 1946, during

the Getúlio Vargas regime, the collection and their management became part of the university system. Budding and seasoned anthropologists, archaeologists, paleontologists, zoologists, botanists, linguists, and other specialists work with objects and specimens, teaching, studying, researching, documenting, curating, and conserving. Integrated into the public university system, it has long served as a space where students, staff and faculty worked on and in the presence of mummies, meteorites, funerary urns, insects, paintings, sculpture, and featherwork, to name just a few of the museum's myriad objects. The exhibition spaces of the museum were physically and conceptually attached to offices, classrooms, research labs, archives, and to Brazil's oldest research library. Through its long history, the museum has been a living point of connection between the historic and contemporary spaces of Brazil, binding communities within and well beyond Rio, from Amazonian and *quilombola* (Afro-descendant) communities to scholars, artists, and intellectuals from throughout the country and world.

The world watched in horror as the fire's progress was streamed live on television. The overall list of materials lost is breathtaking. Among those that perished—and this is only a token list—were innumerable holotype biological specimens, fossils, dinosaur bones, Egyptian and Greco-Roman artifacts, pre-Columbian ceramics and textiles, frescoes from Pompei, and the oldest human skeleton in the Americas. The library included one of the largest collections of anthropological literature in Latin America. These losses are appalling not only due to the vast numbers of things destroyed and the uniqueness of so many individual items, which could be the case if any other museum suffered a similar catastrophe, but also because the destruction included entire corpuses of material that existed nowhere else in the world and therefore have vanished entirely.

Although only a small fraction of the millions of artifacts destroyed in a single night, the loss of Brazil's Indigenous material culture is immeasurable, including unique collections of Brazilian featherwork, ceramics, and basketry. Current estimates suggest that the fire destroyed over forty thousand artifacts related to Brazil's Indigenous

FIGURE 1. Fire, Museu Nacional/ Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, September 2, 2018. Photo by Felipe Milanez. Wikimedia Commons, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fire_-_Museu_Nacional_05.jpg (accessed March 5, 2020).

populations alone.¹ In quantity, historical depth, scope and range, this was a corpus of Brazilian Indigenous material and intangible heritage unequalled by any collections still extant in the world.

It is also very important to recognize that the losses were not only of the material objects but also field notes and contextual materials, such as audio recordings of languages either no longer spoken or in decline. All of these materials were of crucial importance for contemporary Indigenous groups across Brazil, who used them to trace relationships to the past and to constitute memory. In a similar manner, the Museu Nacional's Africana collections, as well as objects produced by Afro-descendants in Brazil, were particularly

significant: these were the oldest and best documented collections in Brazil, dating from the time of slavery and giving testimony to everyday life, religious life, and histories of enslavement and repression on a systemic level. While an unknown amount of related material survives elsewhere, it lies piecemeal in a variety of institutions across the country, some in hard to access police and legal medicine collections, others in more accessible state museums and university collections. The fragmentation of the collections makes their public contemplation and scholarly study logistically and practically problematic, if not impossible, to study.

As the largest and oldest collection of historical and cultural artifacts in Latin America, this extraordinary loss has global consequences for Indigenous rights, the histories and collective memories of entire populations. It also renders future scholarship that might have been based upon these collections, including my own, now impossible. Like the Africana materials, what does survive of the historical and material record of Indigenous cultures of Brazil from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries now exists only in fragmented and scattered form throughout archives, museums, and other institutional collections across the

Special thanks Tatiana Flores and Harper Montgomery for creating a forum for this discussion, and to Flávia Nogueira de Sá, Roberto Conduru, and Wendy Salmond for valuable conversations on museums in peril.

1. For losses, see Ana Lucia Araujo, "The Death of Brazil's National Museum," *American Historical Review* 124, no. 2 (April 2019): 572; For a historic look at the catalogs of anthropological and ethnographic holdings of the National Museum, see Crenivaldo Regis Veloso Júnior, "Índice de objetos, índice de histórias: o catálogo geral das coleções de antropologia e etnografia do Museu Nacional," *Ventilando Acervos*, special issue, no. 1 (September 2019): 71–89.

world, mostly in Europe. Long before modern-day museum tragedies, Brazil (like so many other nations in the Global South) had already been historically dispossessed of its material and intangible heritage through colonialism. As we have now seen, what remains in domestic collections, whether in Museu Nacional or in countless other places in the Global South, exists in perilous states of neglect or disrepair from severe budget shortages.

The Museu Nacional had experienced drastic budget cuts in recent years that made its compliance with proper safety standards impossible. As detailed in an April 2019 report by the Federal Police in Brazil, an overheated air conditioning system was believed to be the cause of the fire.² Because of an inactive smoke detector system, malfunctioning sprinklers, missing water hoses, open fire doors, and faulty security cameras, the inferno could not be contained. Thus, we know that the disaster was also completely preventable. The financial precariousness of the public sector in Rio de Janeiro, with its budget cuts, delayed infrastructural improvements, poor oversight, and general neglect, was ultimately the kindling upon which the blaze was ignited. In fact, although the Museu Nacional fire was certainly the most catastrophic in Brazil, it was by no means the first or only such disaster. Brazil has witnessed multiple museum fires that signal consistent problems with both infrastructure and staff oversight, resulting in devastating effects for the cultural and scientific sector and its valorization in Brazil. Most notable for readers in the art world, no doubt, is the devastating 1978 fire in Rio de Janeiro's Museum of Modern Art (MAM), which destroyed 90 percent of the famed modernist collections. In 2010, a fire broke out in one of Brazil's (and Latin America's) most important biological and research centers, the Butantan Institute in São Paulo, destroying laboratories and the institute's entire collection of 85,000 snake specimens. In 2015, a fire ravaged the much-beloved Museum of the Portuguese Language, also in São Paulo. These tragedies point to systemic negligence in the public sector for the sustaining of scientific and cultural heritage. Private safeguarding of artistic works has proved just as insecure, as was seen in the 2009 fire in a private home in Rio de Janeiro, where two thousand works by contemporary Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica (1937–1980) were destroyed.

2. Fabio Serapião, "Curto em ar-condicionado causou fogo que destruiu Museu Nacional, diz perícia" [Short-circuit in the air conditioner caused the fire that destroyed the National Museum, says criminal investigation], *Estado* (São Paulo), March 23, 2019, <https://brasil.estadao.com.br/noticias/rio-de-janeiro,curto-em-ar-condicionado-causou-fogo-que-destruiu-museu-nacional-diz-pericia,70002765595>.

The same financial and political tinder-by-neglect is repeated in too many cities across Latin America and the Global South to name. The scale and dramatic nature of the losses at Museu Nacional highlight the importance of safeguarding ethnographic collections, which are not only of importance to historians, but also vital for writing about modern and contemporary visual and material culture in Latin America. As *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* readers, and as writers, art makers, curators, and cultural historians, we might do well to consider that ethnographic, historical, and archaeological collections help give voice to diverse histories and give testimony to diverse artistic practices. As art historian Ruth Phillips has so poignantly stated: "Historical objects are witnesses, things that were *there, then*. They bear their makers' marks in their weaves, textures and shapes, and have a compelling agency to cause people living in the present to enunciate their relationships to the past."³

Within the United States, art museums are facing demands for reckoning in the wake of the opioid epidemic, the #MeToo movement, and the Trump presidency. Increasingly, the ethical stakes of museums and cultural heritage sites are being raised; their powers to display, educate, and define history are being challenged; and, in a closely related area, the power of monuments and memorials to endorse or stage violence, as well as to assuage, heal, and embody grief, are being questioned. Museum publics are increasingly asking institutions to face up to their fraught financial donor base and colonialist legacies, hiring policies, and exhibition and acquisition practices, the mechanics of which were for so long discreetly and deliberately hidden from view. The context of these dilemmas is both long-standing and intractable: the Eurocentric, patrician roots of art history and its founding subjects, methods, and practitioners; the gutting of public funding for the arts and humanities across the Americas; and the power of the global contemporary art market to construct canons. How do museums today begin to reconcile these legacies with their new realities—with intersectional identities, with social media, with the visual, material, and artistic worlds of local, global, and transnational communities? However important these ethical issues related to museums and the behavior of their donors and staff are—and I in no way dispute that importance—they are of a fundamentally different order than the truly existential nature

3. Ruth B. Phillips, "Re-placing Objects: Historical Practices for the Second Museum Age," *Canadian Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (March 2005): 108.

of what has transpired in Brazil. Do not governments, economies, and societies have an obligation to take the necessary steps to ensure that the objects in these collections continue to exist?

Indeed, the very definition of what a museum is has now become a source of confusion. Prior to the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Twenty-fifth General Assembly in Kyoto this past September 2019, ICOM held that “A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution, . . . 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’s recently drafted new definition began with a declaration that museums are “democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the past and future.”⁴ France was quick to critique the proposal, stating that the definition was too ideological, leading to a prolonged and unresolved debate which itself deserves rich study. After hours of deliberation, a consensus of non-consensus led to a postponement in formally adopting the revised definition, with France winning the support of 88 out of 125 national and regional delegations, and no date in sight for a revised definition or new vote. What is significant, in the context of this essay, is that ICOM’s new museum definition, despite the jargon, was trying to emphasize the significance and role of objects and collections that lie in limbo outside dominant cultural patrimonies. This is the disenchanting realm—poorly funded and politically marginalized—in which so many museums and research institutions of ethnology and culture in the Global South find themselves.

In a larger framework, cultural heritage disasters bring even more questions to the surface in relation to museums and international spaces of cultural display, because they open up the stage for large-scale reckoning about the role of cultural sites for the modern nation-state. The fire that ripped through Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris in April 2019 received extraordinary international attention and led immediately to fundraising on a massive scale, no doubt spurred on by the iconic status of Notre-Dame de Paris not only as a marker of French national identity but also as an international tourist site. In a Latin American context, the Museu Nacional fire resulted in a near-total cultural loss on an almost unimaginable scale, including the archaeological,

ethnological, historical, biological, and artistic works, analogous to losing the Smithsonian Institution or the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In contrast to Notre Dame, however, the Museu Nacional fire elicited a briefer and less impassioned international response, and vastly smaller philanthropic impulses. These losses push the conversation from one dominated by markets, values, canons, and identity politics—the issues swirling around US institutions—into the terrain of cultural memory, the relevance of the past to the present, and the construction of identities today. Furthermore, these collections help us both understand and question the very objects that we study and what we consider of cultural relevance. Rather than comparing what happened in Rio to either Notre Dame or to the current travails of the Met, perhaps the proper analogy is to the looming threat of species extinction writ large, also attributable to societal neglect. To push the analogy still further, the extinction of the entirety of the extant material and intangible culture of many Indigenous populations of Brazil in a single night changes, diminishes, and imperils the larger social and cultural ecosystem. Officials at the Museu Nacional are predicting that parts of the palace building will be reconstructed and reopened to the public in 2022, in honor of the bicentenary of Brazilian Independence. Until then, portions of the surviving archives and collections will be exhibited in Rio and Brasília, in part to raise private and public monies and awareness for Museu Nacional’s future. The museum is also collecting donations from around the world in its efforts to rebuild. Even those of us working and teaching in the Global North should not be complacent about the durability of our own institutions, or of our government’s role in supporting them. The financial, cultural, and political ecosystems that sustain museums are fragile and need our immediate attention.

Amy Buono
Chapman University

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Buono is assistant professor of art history at Chapman University. Her interests include Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian artistic practices, material and intangible heritage studies, and colonialism and ethnopolitics. She is authoring *Tupinambá Feathercraft in the Brazilian Atlantic* (University of Pennsylvania Press), and coediting *A Cultural History of Color in the Renaissance* (Bloomsbury Press).

4. Vincent Noce, “Vote on Icom’s New Museum Definition Postponed,” *Art Newspaper*, September 9, 2019, www.theartnewspaper.com/news/icom-kyoto.