ICOFOM STUDY SERIES

ICOFOM Study Series

45 | 2017
The predatory Museum

The Predatory Museum

Lynn Maranda and Bruno Brulon Soares

OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/iss/290
DOI: 10.4000/iss.290
ISSN: 2306-4161

Publisher
ICOM - International Council of Museums

Printed version
Date of publication: 17 September 2017
Number of pages: 13-20
ISSN: 2309-1290

Electronic reference
Lynn Maranda and Bruno Brulon Soares, « The Predatory Museum », *ICOFOM Study Series* [Online], 45 | 2017, Online since 06 February 2018, connection on 21 December 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/iss/290 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.290

ICOFOM Study Series

View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by OpenEdition

The Predatory Museum

Lynn Maranda and Bruno Brulon Soares

Museum of Vancouver, Canada and Universidade Federal do
Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The common perception of museum can be found in a series of descriptive positive and uplifting adjectives such as educational, quiet, contemplative, trustworthy, truthful, accurate, authentic, safe, knowledgeable, and etc. Little thought is given to the mechanisms employed by which museums have reached such lofty heights in the eyes of individuals and communities alike. To most, it is perceived as a place of exploration and learning through the display and interpretation of cultural objects or natural specimens and their accompanying didactic materials, a place where visitors can explore not only themselves and their place in the scheme of things, but also the worlds which exist and have meaning for them. Except for fleeting thoughts of how individuals respond to any museum visitation, whether being its entrance fee, the low lights in the exhibition areas, the print size on the labels and texts, the availability (or lack thereof) of a place to rest or eat, or some other visceral reaction whether real or imagined, the public's perception of how the museum gained its near pristine reputation is virtually non-existent. The museum is accepted as a given without any concomitant interest in discovering or questioning its basic, long extant underlying activity.

Have visitors ever wondered how museums acquire the wonderful things they present to the enquiring public? It is certain that some do, but how many would see the museum as a *predator*? Would they ever recognize the museum activity of acquiring the valued collections that are put on display as the result of a predatory undertaking? It is true that museums are discerning but eager recipients of gifts offered by individuals who cross their threshold willing to donate or bequeath their treasured possessions to their local museum. These ongoing acts of charity aside, museums have other avenues of collection-building which they explore and have done so since their inception. One of these is the purchase of objects from individuals, dealers, auction houses, or organizations who have desirable museum quality items for sale. More germane to this discussion, however, is that activity in which museums have always been and still are involved, that being in the assemblage of collections from the field.

Even though visitors "know" the museum through their exhibitions and programmes, the broader and more complex process of *musealization* begins in the field – whether it is in an African village or in a South American rainforest or in the middle of the ocean. Virtually every natural history and archaeological collection in a museum has been built almost entirely through field expeditions mounted by researchers, scientists, scholars or other entrepreneurs either interested or employed in these fields of endeavour, a great many of whom were either working for or were associated with museums.

Without a doubt, the same can be said in respect of most ethnographic collections. Most actively created during the 19th century, ethnographic museums have been, in recent critical approaches to their collecting methods, defined as “cannibals” (Gonseth; Hainard & Kaehr, 2002). Acting under the guise of a “human science”, these museums formed their collections by depriving certain populations of many of their most valued cultural objects, *decontextualizing* such objects from their indigenous symbolic systems and *re-contextualizing* them based on European values. A certain perception of *culture*, as an imagined set of stable indicators, would be disseminated in this process of intensive production of representations of the Other, as interpreted and reinterpreted through European eyes (Jamin, 1984).

In effect, according to Nicholas Thomas (1991, p.7), the moment of colonial trade is the moment from which emerges the evaluation of the entities, persons, groups and relations. The things that were traded or given were never completely alienated from the place or the peoples from which they were taken. Furthermore, value is produced and reproduced in the process of exchange. When something is exchanged or removed from one context to another, it occasionally goes through different “regimes of value” (Appadurai, 2007), which is the same as to say that the degree of value coherence may be highly variable from situation to situation and from object to object. Throughout the colonial period, material culture was constantly removed from situations of utility or ritual to become museum objects, thus gaining a new type of value even if not necessarily losing its meaning in the previous circumstance from which it was removed. The museum, as an organization with its own set of values, *devours* all previous standards attributed to things and establishes a renewed state in which not all connections kept in previous symbolic systems will be remembered.

By prioritizing description and vast documentation as substitutes for the contextualization of the ethnographic object, the classic ethnographer replaces the indigenous ‘voice’ and knowledge with the ‘voice’ and knowledge of the ethnographer or of the curator empowered to orchestrate the museum’s convincing performance. In this unequal ‘relationship’, it is the ethnographer who has the final word in the “truth” enacted by the museum. These objects and the documentation attached to them that sustained and authorized the expert point of view over any other were accumulated with the intention to establish a real “archive of the humanity” (Griaule, 1957, p. 81) bounded by the idea that the collected material had no real owners in the first place. In this process, the Other is only a general construction in part needed to justify the ethnographic authority in the field.

Such fieldwork has been witness to the predatory nature of museums, even if museums have not always been directly involved. The fact that the materials so acquired through these means end up in museums is evidence of either work undertaken by museums or supported by these institutions by virtue of their acceptance of collections so assembled. Whether museums have, themselves, built these collections in this manner or aided and abetted the legitimacy of such undertakings by being the final repository, matters not. The predatory face of museums in this arena cannot be ignored.

The dichotomy in which museums find themselves is encapsulated in their dual role, which pit their collection-building activities with those of knowledge acquisition and dissemination made possible through the processes of research. For museums, can there be one without the other? Given that the knowledge base, inherent especially in archaeology and ethnology collections, forms the foundation for interpretation and thus education, it would seem that the two go hand in hand. Consequently, given that the museum is, indeed, a repository of materials acquired by a variety of means which are processed, conserved, researched and offered to the community through exhibitions and other educational avenues, its predatory nature will remain an essential trait so long as it is in existence. This does not mean this is something which is a source of pride, but with its offsite activities normally couched in such "positive" terms as field collecting or excavation, expressions which engender scholarly endeavour, it is easy to understand why any thought of predation has never entered the functional vocabulary of either the museum or its clientele.

By confronting this predatory face of museums here, the intention is to open the path for a reflexive, decolonized museology that can acknowledge its history with a critical perspective. The recognition of the cultural and historical implications of colonization have, in the second half of the 20th century, led anthropology to distance itself from museums by developing a systematic critique of the discipline's role. In the 1970's, when anthropology faced a supposed "crisis" followed by its "reinvention" due to the historical association of the discipline to "western imperialism" (Gough, 1968; Lévi-Strauss, 1966, included in Stocking, 1991), museology was going through a crisis of its own in the attempt to be defined as an autonomous field of knowledge on the one hand, and in the examination of its most central subject of study – the museum – on the other. With the appearance of new forms of museums that questioned the social role of the more traditional institutions and their place in post-colonial societies (Desvallées, 1992), the organized movement of New Museology was defined as an attempt to reflect critically on traditional practices and to reshape museums taking into consideration their place in different societies. Was the predatory museum supposed to be supressed in the process of decolonization? On the contrary, the result was the recognition of its power connecting memory to territory (Bellaigue, 1990) and the initial step in the deconstruction of its own authority.

In its search for objects and specimens to initiate, augment or complement its collection, the museum mounts incursions or forays to forage through territories known to provide it for what it is searching. These territories run the gamut from collecting natural specimens from known habitats, to excavating sites belonging to previous inhabitants, or to trespassing on private lands in search of the objective. Yes, museums have done all of this. How have they built their entomological, paleontological or plant collections? How is it that museums can boast of their archaeological holdings if not in light of a complete record of site excavations? How did museums come into the possession of objects of cultural significance to aboriginal peoples around the world? Surely it cannot be the case that all of these collections were acquired and built through means whereby the museum does not, itself, take the initiative to build orderly, intellectually meaningful, significant assemblages which form the tangible basis required for the research and presentation for which museums are known. Representational collections tend to yield objects of curiosity or admiration, but the truly significant holdings are those which have been systematically built through the process of fieldwork. Not only have museums built collections in such a manner, but also they have appropriated information germane to such collections, which in itself is also a predatory act.

While the term “predator” is a harsh, negative term which conjures up images of animals of prey, it also denotes the exploitation of others for gain. When examining the use of the term “predator” in association with an apparently inanimate entity such as a museum, a consideration of the attributes of and comparison with the natural world might serve as useful. What is it [the predator] called and are there any subspecies? What does it look like, where is it found, and how big is it? When does it hunt and on what does it prey? Does it hunt alone and does it share its kill? Is it clever and does it use ruses in hunting? Is its prey clever enough to escape? Can it change its appearance and does it have any special endowments for making its kill? Does it have any enemies or competition? Is its food source endless? Can it eat any food and will it die if it runs out of food? Such questions can become applicable to the museum circumstance to the extent that the usage of the term “predator” becomes imperative to this discussion. Where the museum is concerned, it does not necessarily encapsulate a positive action, but remains in the realm of those activities which may be perceived as questionable and not in keeping with the commonly held perception of what museums represent. Nevertheless, most actions whereby museums assemble and build collections can be described as always premeditative, often exploitative, and in the long run, entirely self-serving.

There is strong evidence in regard to this position. For example, through a growing advocacy in response to public condemnation of actions threatening the preservation of natural resources, it is no longer acceptable for museums to hunt live zoological specimens for their collections, but rather rely on animals that have met their demise through road-kill or by natural causes. On the other hand, archaeologists and ethnologists are dealing with past and present cultures the descendants and current demographic of which are becoming more and more vocal in their demand for restitution. This has become a major issue for those museums holding material culture from aboriginal peoples and can be assessed as being in direct response to museums’ predatory excursions into territories over which they have had no rights of trespass and where such trespass is contested.

Much of this which museums are now having to address had its genesis with the early voyages of exploration and the resultant fallout from the subsequent waves of colonialism. The majority of museum objects were *produced* in the period of encounter between the explorer and the colonialist subject of exploration – the non-European peoples. This production of an European heritage invented in a system of knowledge acquisition and political domination, also created the imagined idea of the Other as an extra-European entity responsible for sustaining the dominant cultural identities by contrast. This is a symbolic process that still goes on today. If, in the past, it was with the possibility of travel that Europeans created an imagination of the Other from superficial knowledge and predatory methods, now, even museums have engaged in their own form of neo-colonialism entering in active contest with each other for the acquisition of prime collections, thus causing them to focus on materialism, inequality and exploitation.

Since the last decades of the 20th and more intensely in the beginning of the 21st centuries, with tourism gaining a global dimension and assuming the capitalist role to allow people to see virtually any culture or location with their own eyes, ethnographic research has lost its “monopoly” on the discovery of “other cultures” (Réau & Poupeau, 2007) thus leaving to museums only the ability to create debatable cultural representations through the objects in their collections. The historical re-invention of peoples and places around the world have allowed tourism marketers to create powerful representations through their global re-production and re-creation. According to Noel B. Salazar (2009), as images travel together with tourists, from predominantly tourism-generating regions to tourism destinations and back, the “tourismification”[1] of everyday life is witnessed today. Paradoxically, for the author, tourismification proceeds not from the outside but from within a society, by changing the way its members see themselves (Picard, 1996 included in Salazar, 2009).

In other words, with the popularization of tourism, societies invite the predator to live inside their somehow defined boundaries. Now, not only the museum visitor but also every single person is encouraged to consume someone else’s culture. The constant depredation of one’s material and immaterial cultural heritage is embraced as part of the very notion of a “global culture” in a so-called globalized world. However, what are the ethical boundaries for such a predatory action? Who establishes such boundaries and for whom? The problem is so aggravated in some poorer contexts that in, for example, certain Brazilian *favelas*, where museums and tourism compete for the representation of marginalized Brazilian culture, the local inhabitants are using the term “predatory tourism” to describe their relation with “visitors”.

At present, when access to traditional fieldwork sites now in control of independent “new nations” became problematic (Stocking, 1991, p.3), predatory actions have to assume different forms in the capitalist market of cultural relations. In one possible perspective, the over-explored notion of heritage in its most ambiguous categories of universal heritage or of world heritage ‘sell’ the problematic idea that culture can be consumed regardless of peoples’ singular identities and particular values invested in it. In a world where power relations of the past have not been fully confronted and are yet to be deconstructed and reshaped, the declaration of world heritage, or of “cultural landscapes”, for instance, will lead to the most recurring sets of misunderstandings. Even the more recent celebrated expressions of the notion of museum, such as the ecomuseum or community museums, have not been able to define an agenda isolated from private interests and political intentions. The predatory museum is alive and hungry.

The papers selected to be presented in this issue of ICOFOM Study Series are a testimony to the predatory history of museums in the West and they further emphasize the need for revisiting the topic in relation to museology, even after so many studies and debates in contemporary anthropology. With the advent of the XXI century, there has developed an imperative need to re-evaluate museum practices which took place in preceding years. Museology, as a research based discipline with theoretical concerns, has emerged from the reflections of some museum professionals on their practices. A critical consciousness for this discipline, however, would take some time to be developed. Today, after several studies that express, in anthropology, the *mea culpa* towards the colonial past (see, for instance, Balandier, 1951) and the critique from some ethnographic museums on their past collecting methods (see Gonseth; Hainard & Kaehr, 2002), museology faces a revision of its own paradigms as a field of studies centered in Europe.

---

[1] According to Noel B. Salazar (2009), “tourismification” refers to the specific social phenomenon of transformation in social reality caused by tourism. As the author explains: "I prefer tourismification as a term because it is not the mere presence of tourists that is shaping this phenomenon but, rather, the ensemble of actors and processes that constitute tourism as a whole." (2009, p. 49).

This introduction is written from the point of view of two former colonies – Canada and Brazil – very different one from the other considering the violent processes of colonization that marked their colonial past. The fact that most of the papers presented on the theme and selected to comprise this publication come from European authors cannot be ignored by the guest editors of this issue. This is a testimony not only to the fact that the process of decolonization and the critique towards the colonial past of museums has expressive developments in Europe, but most importantly, to the fact that predatory museums have produced a predatory museology.

The authors, who represent different ages, gender and nationalities, have in common the inescapable truth that their theory and their points of view refer to a single hegemonic center of knowledge dissemination. This is evidenced not only by museology, but also by the most prominent fields of knowledge in the contemporary globalized world. In this sense, the theme proposed was not without intention. To provoke researchers and professionals to think of museums as predators is, in a certain way, to challenge museology in recognizing its own center, facing coloniality[2] as an aspect of this discipline.

The results have been satisfying, as the reader can see in the following pages of the present volume. As in the very current analysis of ecomuseums by Karen Brown, it is revealed how communities involved in different museum experiences – the Skye Ecomuseum in Scotland and the Boruca and Rey Curré *Museos Comunitarios* in Costa Rica – face globalisation and strive with the local processes of valuing identities. As presented by Brown, in these two different contexts of the world, the homogenizing influences of the controlling center of power over knowledge and over musealization are a matter to be addressed both in a practice of resistance and in the theoretical standpoint. In a different sense, Bernard Deloche, in his critique to ethnocentrism in present museology, detects the artifice of predation with the alibi of safeguarding heritage for humanity. The moral and ethical problems presented by this author also configure a break with the dominant center in the presentation of the challenging methods of repatriation and recognition of local authority. The idea of a shared culture ("*culture partagée*") motivated by the appearance of *noosphere* within cyberspace should imply, in Deloche's view, the democratization of museums with the realization of an universal humanism, as predicted by the philosopher Michel Serres. But will this lead to the extinction of the power centers that have enabled museums to be predators in the past? Are museums facing the total disappearance of the identity dimension of heritage or is cultural homogenization just an illusion created to benefit the centrally invisible control over reality?

---

[2] The term refers to a specific field of studies in the South dedicated to the discussion of the legacies of European colonialism in social orders and forms of knowledge. See, for instance, Quijano (2000).

Some of the other papers deal with the subject of predation by discussing the history of ethnographic museums and their recent methods. Camilla Pagani, envisioning reflexive museology, exposes the strategies used by Western institutions to eliminate or neutralize their approach to collections instead of developing a critical reflection on themselves. The author identifies how indigenous demands for repatriation and the cases of political negotiation involving heritage ownership and interpretation are influencing museums to increase multicultural dialogues. As Pagani demonstrates, this new openness to dialogue is not free from political intentions since most institutions negotiate with indigenous groups in order to liberate themselves from the burden of a colonial legacy. The same multicultural approaches to non-European collections is analyzed in Fabien Van Geert's article. The author evinces how ethnographic museums have been under severe criticism based on post-colonial and de-colonial researches and evaluates the revision of these institutions after the year 2000. According to Van Geert, the recent transformation of ethnographic museums, having in their scope the search for a new form of legitimacy, has been accompanied by new acquisition policies. This renewal, then, implicates an axiological revision that is only possible through the transformation of the *social* process of musealization.

This so-called post-colonial museology, envisioning decolonization and the coloniality of power and knowledge, is witnessing, in present day museums, new practices resulting from reflexive theory. This is clear in the works of Gaëlle Crenn and Rime Fetnan. As expressed above, the debate over decolonization is ultimately a debate over authority. In the history of museums of ethnography, the Basel Museum and the Neuchâtel Museum in Switzerland were two of the first institutions to develop a reflexive consciousness of their own practices by criticizing, in their exhibitions, the collectors' authority and the nature of collections assembled through colonization. According to Crenn, discussing these meta-exhibitions in the two museums, the reflexivity that has been imposed on museums, and notably on ethnographic museums, deals with the authority of the museum itself, questioning its legitimacy and stressing its predatory nature. These reformist narratives, in fact, question the very reason why museums should be presenting non-European cultures through the violent lenses of colonization. In some other institutions in the dominant West, the neutral solution to this impasse has been to chose art over history. From the point of view of artistic practice, the role of the artist as that of authority in the West has been systematically questioned since exhibitions such as *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* (New York, 1984) and *Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris, 1989), presented ethnographic objects as contemporary art. In the two cases explored by Fetnan, the resurgence of the *commissaire* or the curator as the ethnographer has led these projects to overcome the classical museum framework. Post-colonial museum practices have, therefore, loosen up the boundaries and questioned the categories of art and ethnology reinventing the way museums deal with collections from the point of view of their presentation in the new *re-valued* social life of musealized objects.

The papers here presented and debated over the 39th Annual Symposium of ICOFOM, as it was intended with the proposed theme, pose more questions than answers. While museums cannot change history, can they, in any way, mitigate their role in this activity by recognizing the consequences and dealing with lingering habits? Is it within their purview to present themselves as "honest broker", or has "too much water passed under the bridge"? Where do museums go from here? It is true that museums have amassed wonderful collections and in so doing, acquired important information – information which would not necessarily have ever come to light if museums had not been involved in this form of research; information which ties material objects to human lifeways[3] and thus fills in an important link in the knowledge based continuum of the species? Can museums ever shake off or disassociate themselves from their predatory past with present and future actions and if so, how? Or will the museum, in order to retain its status, ever remain the predator it has been and still is?

Furthermore, what changes in museology when these questions are posed thus putting under scrutiny the very core of this discipline? In a moment when the scope of research has been opened to critical perspectives on its central object of analysis, taking the museum as an historical product of cultural domination, is museology becoming obsolete? On the contrary, this is the moment it proves itself to be even more relevant to the denunciation of power relations that guide the processes that fabricate cultural heritage and the museum object. Museology, then, is on the verge of abandoning a predatory epistemology to become a reflexive discipline.

References

Appadurai, A. (2007). Introduction: commodities and the politics of value. In: Appadurai, A. (Ed.), *The social life of things.* (pp. 3-63). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Balandier, G. (1951). La situation coloniale: approche théorique. *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie,* 11, 44-79.

Bellaigue, M. (1993). Mémoire, space, temps, pouvoir. *ICOFOM Study Series*, 22, 27-30.

Desvallées, A. (1992). Présentation. In Desvallées, A., De Barry, M. O. & Wasserman, F. (coord.). *Vagues: une antologie de la Nouvelle Muséologie.* (Vol. 1). Collection Museologia, Savigny-le-Temple : Éditions W-M.N.E.S.

Gonseth, M.-O., Hainard, J., & Kaehr, R. (éd.). (2002). *Le musée cannibale.* Neuchâtel, Suisse: GHK Éditeurs, Musée d'Ethnographie.

Griaule, M. (1957). *Méthode de l'ethnographie.* Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.

Jamin, J. (1984). Aux origines du Musée de l'Homme : la mission ethnographique et linguistique Dakar-Djibouti. *Cahiers Ethnologiques,* La Mission Dakar-Djibouti 1931-1933, 5.

Maranda, L. (2008). Museums, Museology and global communications: Whither Cultural Diversity? *ICOFOM Study Series*, 37, 133-138.

Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America. *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1 (3), 533-580.

Réau, B., & Poupeau, F. (2007). L'enchantement du monde touristique. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales,* 170, 4-13.

Salazar, N. B. (2009). Imaged or imagined? Cultural representations and the 'tourismification' of peoples and places. *Cahiers d'Études Africaines,* XLIX (1-2), n.193-194, 49-71.

Stocking, G. W. Jr. (1991). *Colonial Situations, Essays on the contextualization of ethnographic knowledge*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Thomas, N. (1991). *Entangled objects.* Cambridge, Massachusetts / London, England: Harvard University Press.

---

[3] Term indicating a philosophy of how to live and of living lives differently from other peoples; not seen as equivalent to "ways of life" which talks about approaches to living (Maranda, 2008, p. 138).