

The sacred in the prism of museology

François Mairesse



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/iss/1286>
DOI: 10.4000/iss.1286
ISSN: 2306-4161

Publisher

ICOM - International Council of Museums

Printed version

Date of publication: 12 October 2019
Number of pages: 15-22
ISBN: 978-92-9012-467-2
ISSN: 2309-1290

Electronic reference

François Mairesse, « The sacred in the prism of museology », *ICOFOM Study Series* [Online], 47(1-2) | 2019, Online since 12 October 2019, connection on 23 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/iss/1286> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/iss.1286>

The sacred in the prism of museology

François Mairesse

Sorbonne nouvelle-Paris3, CERLIS, CNRS, ICCA

The articles gathered in this issue around the links between museums, museology and the sacred, were for the most part nourished by the discussions of the 41st symposium organized by ICOFOM around this theme in Tehran, from October 15 to 19, 2018 (Mairesse, 2018). These contributions seek to continue the often-passionate reflections and discussions initiated during these meetings.

The theme of the sacred is of paramount importance for the museum world, both in terms of the objects they present and the very essence of the institution – and the sometimes ambiguous role that the latter plays in this respect: the museum can be both accused of sacralizing secular objects and profaning sacred objects. From an etymological point of view, the term includes the idea of separation (Texier, 1990): the space of the sacred is related to the experience of the meeting of the divine (hierophany). Fear and dread (Otto, 1969), experience of reality or what is most real in this world (Eliade, 1965). If we define museology, as Stránský suggested in the 1980s, as the study of a specific relationship of man to reality (Gregorová, 1980), what is the reality? From the outset, the context in which Stránský wrote allows us to have some idea of his conception of reality, coming from the Enlightenment and Marxist thought. When the Brno museologist considered this specific perspective, it was from a vision based on the active constitution of material collections linked with classical disciplines such as archeology, ethnography, natural sciences or art history (Mairesse, 2019). The role of the museum, according to this perspective, is part of a scientific (and incidentally aesthetic) approach of the world. The sacred appears here essentially as an object of ethnographic or historical study from a largely agnostic or atheistic perspective: any other type of experience than that proposed by science or aesthetics seems somewhat absurd, unless to be observed and analyzed in the same way.

However, the museum world, seeking to get rid of the omnipresent religious dimension in the heritage, seems to have only moved the cursor. Its functioning

also includes, through its practices and its spaces, strong similarities that can be observed within other sacred places: architecture, modes of visit (Duncan and Wallach, 1978), curators' attitudes towards lay visitors etc. (Mairesse, 2014). Alongside these evolutions that can be followed according to museum history, sacred institutions (temples, churches, places of pilgrimage) have also developed exhibition devices which appear surprisingly similar to that of classical museums: visits, selling of catalogs or souvenirs, etc. At the same time, many formerly sacred places (temples, churches, etc.) have become both museums and heritage sites.

What can be said about this close interweaving between two worlds that *a priori* have nothing in common, but whose analysis reveals practices that are sometimes surprisingly similar? The conclusions of the Tehran Symposium, as well as the articles in this issue that continue the discussion, are not intended to circumscribe the subject, but allow us to present some research perspectives to better understand the interrelationship between two areas.

The sacred stage

A first element that has emerged directly from the discussions concerns the nature of the sacred, its presence through certain objects and their resulting implicit hierarchy. A rather general perspective, widely evoked during the symposium, aims indeed to recognize the sacred in a very large number of places or objects: landscapes, forests, fountains, mountains, objects of worship, etc. According to such a vision of things, the sacred inevitably appears both in the museum and as at the bend of a path, in nature. However, in the same way as other hierarchies (aesthetics, financial value), certain places or certain objects, such as the Kaaba or the Shroud of Turin, appear more sacred than others. If we can consider works of art or historical evidence from the angle of a certain sacredness, objects of worship present for the most part a «level of sacredness» different from that which we could find before the Rosetta Stone or even the Mona Lisa, to name but two famous examples. This may appear trivial; it nevertheless allows us to remark that the objects considered at present as the most sacred (all societies combined) are not preserved in museums (at least secular museums, some temples having also created museum spaces). If one can observe closely Tutankhamun's mummy, certainly of a very high level of sacredness during the pharaonic epoch, the objects or the most sacred places of the great current religions (relics, sacred spaces) do not appear in museums but remain attached to worship. The sacred still appears, in this perspective, as withdrawn from layman's places, and although the museum operates largely as a space removed from the everyday life, it does not seem to offer similar characteristics to those prevailing in places directly designed with the traditional relationship to the sacred. The museum seeks to musealise the world through its objects, but some of them still seem to have enough strength to resist it. If we continue this reasoning, we could note that the strength of peoples or societies associated with certain objects determines their place (or

their absence) within the museum: the more one cult weakens (or is linked to a power politically and militarily weak), the more it has the chance to be musealized. This can be observed with the heritage of disappeared, dominated or colonized societies. On the other hand, the restitution requests addressed (and obtained) in recent years by indigenous peoples and formerly colonized societies testify both to new geopolitical power relations and to the revitalization of certain ancestral beliefs.

A second principle of our relation to the sacred is constituted by the link between the place (or object) and the intercessor, the latter recognizing or making the sacred spring forth. A sorcerer, an ecclesiastic or at least an actor recognized by the community and empowered to reunite the two worlds (profane and sacred) is requested to attest to the presence of the sacred or to make it appear through a ritual. Museum practice, in this perspective, differs widely from that found in places of worship. Admittedly, the curator (or a registrar or an educator, according to the principles of the museum hierarchy) attests, as it were, to the museality of an object, that is to say of what conditioned its selection, its preservation and its presentation: a table loses its status in the profane world (subject to its use value) to be presented according to its documentation value to represent reality (its museality). Both Curators and clergy are considered empowered to recognize a certain level of reality beyond the secular world. On the other hand, the power of the curator stops where the priest or the shaman actually begins, as he can bring forth the sacred or enter into communion with transcendence. The plan of the museum, in this perspective, appears out of step with that to which the sacred leads, the role of the museum and that of the church cannot lead, despite some similarities in their approach, the same perspectives on the Real.

If, as already suggested, it is possible to evoke the many similarities between museums and temples (Mairesse, 2014), it is equally possible to seek to understand in what way the preservation and presentation devices used by both institutions differ. The structure of presentation of the sacred, in this sense, constitutes a third axis of reflection. Museums and temples (churches, mosques, etc.) show objects – relics, objects of worship, historical testimonies – according to sometimes similar presentation and interpretation systems. They also store them according to relatively identical methods (in order to ensure their best preservation). The valuation methods of these objects, however, vary considerably between the two institutions. The question of the space lighting seems rather globally to separate the two worlds. The museum light, although constrained (for reasons of preventive conservation), aims to provide the public with optimal conditions for legibility of objects. It is this same principle which guides the presentation of the *musealia*: to give to see, and thus, to present these so that they can be perceived under their best light or observed from all sides. The display principles in temples or places of worship seem to be based on the opposite logic, according to which darkness sometimes reveals better the sacred dimension of objects. The exhibition of the sacred seem to use as well,

if not more, the shadow as the light, the passage to the luminous appearing as a much more limited sequence (such as the opening of an altarpiece) than that which one observe in museums. The museum is not totally opposed to the darkness (which it uses in its reserves), but when using it in its exhibitions, it is either to better highlight objects, or (more recently) to evoke the sacredness of certain specific objects. Finally, the choice of the structure of display reflects, in both cases, very different hierarchies of values. If, for a specific religious tradition, the criteria for exhibiting the objects are linked to a hierarchy that is directly inherent to the cult of its own, the museum is based on criteria that are both standardized and egalitarian (cults and religions are examined at the light of scientific knowledge, all cults being equal in this perspective) and hierarchical according to heritage criteria (the display of objects is related to their aesthetic, historical or their scientific value).

The museum stage

Museology, as Stránský understood it, presupposes the existence of institutions prior to modern museums: thesaurus, cabinets of curiosities, etc. (Mairesse, 2019). The examples given by the latter do not include places of worship, the Brno museologist remaining vague in this respect. For centuries, however, there have been collections (works of art, but also *naturalia*), more or less related to worship, that Lugli (1998) presents as largely associated with the origin of cabinets of curiosities. From a historical point of view, therefore, the joint evolution of museums (or their predecessors) and cult sites, deserves to be observed. A quick glance at the evolution of the two institutions, in Western countries, makes it possible to hypothesize that the evolution of one has occurred in parallel with the decline of the other: the number of museums created seems to be changing proportionally with the number of abandoned churches (Mairesse, 2014).

The sliding of objects or sacred spaces towards the profane (their profanation), which can be observed throughout the history of humanity – collapses of civilizations, such as Egypt, Rome, etc. but also struggles and schisms, like the waves of iconoclasm during the Reformation in the West – has long resulted in the disappearance (or burial) of these objects and specific places. The development of the museum phenomenon, from the Renaissance, gives rise to the creation of “third places”, halfway between the world of the sacred and that of unnecessary waste, future kingdom of the archaeologist (Mensch, 1992). The natural flow of objects between the two worlds –sacred and profane/waste – is completed by new circulations, but also new improbable meetings between the objects resulting of these different registers. Considered as unique testimonies of a certain type of reality, some sacred objects are suddenly presented as witnesses, not of a reality, but of a civilization and its way of conceiving the sacred. The relativistic point of view of the museum, by displaying in the same space artifacts from all religions and beliefs, has the merit of presenting a similar discourse, built on a double scientific and aesthetic register, but lacks

specific explanations related to the registers of the sacred proper to each cult. This led objects to cohabit together, from a unifying but reductive discourse. Nevertheless, museums have also preserved (in a ghostly or comatose state) living elements of heritage – often organic and perishable – that otherwise would have largely risked disappearing.

It is such a mode of appropriation of reality that would gradually be challenged soon after the Second World War, according to requests for restitution and, more recently, more critical analysis of the colonial and predatory logic of the museum. To the «predatory museum» that was analyzed by ICOFOM during the General Conference in Milan in 2016 (ICOFOM, 2017), some new, more critical approaches to the institution were constituted, resulting from new visions of the museums, such as adopted by the French *Nouvelle muséologie* and the British New museology (Desvallées, 1992 & 1994; Vergo, 1989). The proselytizing and hegemonic character of monotheistic religions seems to have rubbed off on the museum world that comes from it. An institutional critique might be useful, but under what kind of new values? Conversely, it is interesting to note the logic of cohabitation that prevailed in other contexts, for example within the Roman Empire, where the cults in Mithra or Isis could coexist with the Roman religion (Scheid, 2008). Will the overthrow of «museological supremacism», as evoked by Bruno Brulon Soares in this issue, give way to peaceful coexistence between several registers of interpretation of the sacred, or to the emergence of other equally hegemonic discourses?

Approaches to the sacred at the museum

The authors of this issue of *ICOFOM Study Series* have addressed the sacred in many ways. The theme of the Western colonizer and supremacist museum is an analytical grid underlying several articles: the notion of the sacred, as it is presented in Western museums, reflects much more the vision of museums themselves than it bears witness to the many aspects and dimensions of the sacred as it is experienced in other parts of the world. Bruno Brulon Soares, evoking museology as the expression of a certain faith, underlines the largely hegemonic character of the latter, at least in Western countries. Based on the analysis of two exhibitions related to the musée du Quai Branly, he highlights the limits of the «scientific» and aesthetic view of Francophone museology. Matías Cornejo González, drawing on the analysis of the Moai Hoa Hakananai'a from Easter Island and presented in the British Museum, questions in turn the supremacist Western view of the cultures represented, too largely artistic, and the weakness of explanation on the ceremonies associated with the objects, making Rapa nui a living culture. In such conditions, how could the essence of these collectibles be understood through this type of display? The presentation by Marion Bertin of the organization of storage rooms and exhibitions in Vanuatu (storage distribution according to prohibitions, staff organization based on custom and respect for knowledge, organization of temporary or permanent exhibitions), testifies to the possibilities of another (Oceanian)

museology, and of considerable differences in the practical organization of museums and the discourse that results from them. Marília Xavier Cury evokes, notably from several examples from Brazil, the possibilities of collaborations between museologists and natives, in order to integrate ancestral knowledge into museum knowledge: different solutions for a possible cohabitation.

But the relationship to the sacred appears just as complex for Western objects. Fanny Fouché, through an examination of the Christian altarpiece, «the seat of a possible encounter between immanence and transcendence», examines the devotional character of these works and their role of presenting the invisible through the visible, but also the gradual changeover: from devotion to aesthetic appreciation. «Is the museum institution able to guarantee both the material preservation of this type of objects and the transmission of the heterogeneous network of multiple reasons and meanings that have made their appearance?», asks Fouché. This question summarizes the interrogations of most authors around the complex role of the institution facing the challenges of transmitting knowledge from civilizations and endangered or disappeared societies. In an effort to overcome these difficulties, museum professionals have sought to develop new preservation protocols. Caitlin Spangler-Bickell, in examining how the inventory and conservation categories of altars and mausoleums are used in UCLA's Fowler Museum, shows how museum staff seek to preserve not only material aspects, but also ephemeral elements and the whole «living» character of these still active sacred forms. Violette Loget and Yves Bergeron, from the evolution of the place of religion in Quebec, analyze the situation of the religious heritage in this province, the funding difficulties encountered by ecclesiastical authorities, the role of public authorities and that of museum professionals. Many polemics related to the will of the clergy to dispose a certain number of these goods, yet «out of commerce, non-transferable and imprescriptible» under the law of Lower Canada, make it possible to evoke the fact that clergymen, sometimes not very interested in the preservation of traditions, participate themselves in the dispersion of their heritage, the role of the museum community being then to remind them of their duties. More generally, Helena Wangefelt Ström presents three models for analyzing the diversity of the place of the sacred within the museum, and analyzing their consequences: the models detail a spectrum of possibilities ranging from the destruction of the previous identities of an object for the benefit of its new museum identity, to the possibility of using objects in many ways, allowing them both to preserve their living and inanimate characters.

From a more institutional point of view, Klas Grinell, based on an analysis of UNESCO and its relations with ICOM, examines the soteriological power of museums, considering them according to the doctrine of salvation carried on by their institutional discourse: a salvation brought by economic development and justice on earth, the eradication of violence and poverty, etc. In a parallel way, Crispin Paine, whose investment around the theme of this issue is well known, analyzes the relationship with the sacred from several institutions

more or less directly related to the museum field, evoking church treasures and libraries, as well as museums presenting alternative evolution theories (creationism and Vedic sciences) but also a number of religious theme parks (in Iran, India, the United States, the Netherlands or Japan).

Such a range of analyzes does not necessarily call for definitive conclusions as to the place of the sacred in the museum, and the relationship between museology and the sacred. In a famous phrase, the British museologist Kenneth Hudson summed up the ambivalence of the museum's presentation of «reality»: «a stuffed tiger in a museum is a stuffed tiger in a museum, not a tiger» (Hudson 1977, 7). In the same way, as Jan Dolak also points it out in his brief statement, it must be emphasized that a sacred object in a museum is a sacred object in a museum, and not a sacred object. His musealization will never allow – like tigers elsewhere – to restore the same experience that can be experienced within a cult. On the other hand, the museum, as long as one can mourn the reality that is lived in other places, is a space for questioning, discussion and openings to other realities that the temple does not always allow. But it needs not only to give up the temptation to impose a single global authoritarian vision in the name of science or aesthetics, but also to resist the temptation to disappear in favor of the “others” discourses. This position assumes a precarious equilibrium but may be genuinely conducive to dialogue and reflection.

References

- Desvallées, A. (Ed.). (1992 & 1994). *Vagues, une anthologie de la nouvelle muséologie*, Mâcon : W & MNES.
- Duncan, A. & Wallach, C. (1978). The Museum of Modern art as late capitalist ritual: an iconographic analysis, *Marxist perspectives*, 4, 28-51.
- Eliade, M. (1965). *Le sacré et le profane*. Paris : Gallimard.
- Gregorová, A. (1980). La muséologie, science ou seulement travail pratique du musée ?, *Mu Wop/ Do Tram*, 1, p. 19-21.
- Hudson, k. (1977). *Museums for the 1980s*. Paris: Unesco.
- ICOFOM. (2017). The predatory Museum, *ICOFOM Study Series*, 45.
- Lugli, A. (1998). *Naturalia et Mirabilia, Les cabinets de curiosité en Europe*. Paris : Adam Biro.
- Mairesse, F. (2014). *Le culte des musées*. Bruxelles : Académie royale de Belgique (Académie en poche).
- Mairesse, F. (2018). *Museology and the Sacred. Materials for a Discussion*. Paris: ICOFOM.

Introduction

- Mairesse F. (Ed.) (2019). *Zbyněk Stránský et la muséologie. Une anthologie*. Paris : L'Harmattan.
- Mensch P. van (1992). *Towards a Methodology of Museology*. Zagreb: University of Zagreb, Faculty of Philosophy, Doctor's Thesis.
- Otto, R. (1969). *Le sacré*. Paris : Payot.
- Scheid, J. (2008). *Pouvoir et religion à Rome*. Paris : Larousse.
- Texier, R. (1990). Sacré, in Jacob A. (ss la dir.) *Encyclopédie philosophique universelle, II, Les notions philosophiques* (pp. 2291-2293). Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Vergo, P. (1989). *The New Museology*. London: Reaktion Books.