

# Paulista Museum at USP: History and challenges

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The museums continue to be models for studying both tension and negotiation in the scientific community, such as those between this and contemporary society, from the standpoint of either the history of the sciences or cultural institutions.

(Michel van Praet, 2009)

**T**HE OBJECTIVE of this paper is to propose some analyses of the current situation of history museums within the spheres of research, production and dissemination of knowledge, taking as reference the Paulista Museum (*Museu Paulista*), integrated to the University of São Paulo for nearly for 50 years. Both the chosen title and the epigraph suggest that the starting point of my considerations is the recognition that museums, throughout their history, have operated in a universe of political forces, played by different actors who share with them an intense debate on science and culture. Subject and object of disputes concerning the past and its uses, the Museum is in continuous motion towards legitimization and reflection, as shown by its very history. In turn, placing the Museum between a place of production of innovative knowledge and a “place of memory” means interpreting it as a place where the preservation of heritage, the study and discussion of specific topics and issues and the social responsibilities which in our time can be met by university museums intertwine.

## **Paulista Museum: marks of a history**

Incorporated into the University of São Paulo in 1963, the Museum today is dedicated to the field of knowledge entitled History of Material Culture, with emphasis on studies of the historical formation of Brazilian society in general, and on the formation of the society of São Paulo in particular.

It is a centenary scientific and cultural institution, whose history dates back to 1893. At that time, and concomitantly with the organization of the republican regime, the Monument - raised by the imperial government in the state capital, near the Ipiranga creek to celebrate the Independence and the foundation of the Empire - was taken over by the authorities of the new regime to house natural history and national history collections, giving rise to the first public museum of São Paulo, officially opened on September 7, 1895.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the museum is located in the Ipiranga Monument, among others, has led it to be popularly known as Ipiranga Museum (*Museu do Ipiranga*).

Over the years, the character initially conferred upon the Museum has become more complex and undergone changes due to a wide array of circumstances, among them the increased specialization of disciplines and areas of knowledge, as well as the emergence of social and political demands linked to history/national memory, many of which were already around in the late nineteenth century. This represented the organization and expansion of collections of objects, iconography and textual records related to politicians from the Empire, the first Republican presidents and aspects of what was known as “Brazilian civilization”, with the gradual predominance of History, as well as archeological and anthropological studies of the so-called science of nature (Bittencourt, 2010). One of the milestones of this transformation was the 1920s, through a revival of the celebratory meaning of both the building and the museum, on the occasion of the celebration of the Centenary of Brazil’s Independence. Add to the internal reforms of the building at that time the “Itu Convention” Republican Museum opened in 1923, also conceived as a national memorial.

Therefore, and under the sponsorship of politicians, intellectuals and entrepreneurs linked to the Republican Party of the state of São Paulo, the memory of two founding events of the nation intertwined - the proclamation of the Independence and the blossoming of the Republican campaign in São Paulo, associated with a meeting of representatives of coffee producers in São Paulo, in April 1873, at the home of the Almeida Prado family in the city of Itu (Souza, 2003). Through the use of fragments of the past, both the present and future of São Paulo were devised. It should be noted that the State was understood by the groups then in power as the original and mythical cradle of the genesis of Brazilian nationality.

The interior decoration of the Paulista Museum, which ultimately consolidated the images by which the institution became popularly known, started in the 1920s but stretched over the following decades. In 1937, most of the decoration had been completed, but the last niches in the wall of the building were filled only in the early 1960s (*Anais do Museu Paulista, 2002-2003, p.10-1*).

The decorative set occupies the space previously defined in the Monument for the establishment of a national pantheon, as proposed in the 1894 bylaws of the institution. In general, it provides a visual and majestic overview of Brazilian history between the sixteenth and early nineteenth centuries, of which the building and collections would be a material and symbolic expression. From the colonization of São Paulo, represented by the portraits of Martim Afonso de Souza, Tibiriçá, D. João III and João Ramalho, displayed in the lobby, we make our way to the period when the formation of the territory would have occurred, represented by the figures of pioneer explorers and amphorae containing crystal waters from Brazilian rivers, and ornaments along the marble staircase leading to the top floor of the building. There, one enters the Monument to the Independence, the ratification of the country’s sovereignty evoked by the monumental sculpture of D. Pedro I, in addition to portraits and bronze plates with



Photo: Courtesy of the Paulista Museum

*Facade of the Paulista Museum*

the names of eminent persons who, at the time, were considered the founders of the nation, alongside the figures of Dona Leopoldina, Maria Quitéria and Sister Angélica (Taunay, 1937). This historiographical construction can be considered the development and confirmation of interpretative implications generated by the panel created by Pedro Américo between 1886 and 1888. Designed especially to decorate the hall of honor of the Monument, over the twentieth century it became an iconic representation of the episode known as “*Grito do Ipiranga*”<sup>TN</sup> (Oliveira & Valladão, 1999).

This orientation with regard to studies of the character of Brazilian society and the discipline of History expressed the creation of the Brazilian nation in patterns different from those that the natural sciences could entail. This outline coincided with the administration of Alfonso d’Escagnolle Taunay, between 1917 and 1945, and was reinforced by the transformation of the Museum into a complementary Institute of the University of São Paulo, in 1934. The decree creating the University clearly states that “the Museum of Archeology, History and Ethnography, which is the Paulista Museum” should contribute, together with other Institutes such as the Butantan Institute and the Agronomic Institute of Campinas, to expand the teaching and actions of the University. However, only between 1939 and 1940 the Natural Sciences collections were removed from the Paulista Museum for the establishment of other institutions, among them the Museum of Zoology. Later on, in the 1980s, when further steps were taken towards adapting the museum to the principles of the University, the areas of study still kept their focus on Archeology, History and Ethnology<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>TN</sup> The declaration of Brazil’s independence from Portugal by the regent Pedro (later Emperor Pedro I) on the banks of the Ipiranga creek, on Sept. 7, 1822.

Starting from the 1990s, the areas of action of the Paulista Museum were redefined through the selection of the field of History of Material Culture as the conceptual and methodological axis of scientific production, teaching and extension activities. At that time, the archeological, ethnological and anthropological collections were transferred to the Museum of Archeology and Ethnology, also subject to profound reorganization<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, further integration to the structure and procedures of the University was pursued with the implementation of the teaching career in the Museums, among other measures. This process was consolidated through the statutory changes approved by the University Council in 2010<sup>4</sup>.

Although only summarized here, it is relevant to follow the most outstanding landmarks in the history of the Paulista Museum, as they reveal institutional ruptures and continuities, which had a decisive influence on the formation, study and extroversion of assets housed by the Museum (and that continue to grow), precisely because of the challenges presented to contemporary museums in general and to university museums in particular. In this sense, the definition of the Museum as a center of innovative research in its area does not mean neglecting the institution's commitments to the massive lay public that has been visiting it for over a century. In turn, it is impossible to forget the links to university education and to the development of more comprehensive cultural and educational activities, just like the role of preserving the assets under their custody is inherent in the museums (Meneses, 1994). It is precisely this desired intertwining of the preservation of cultural assets and production and socialization of knowledge that has called into question historiographical traditions and representations of the past included in that space, opening up the possibility for reflections and experiences referred to in the critical approach to interdisciplinary topics and issues, challenging also the history of the institution and the sometimes erratic ways through which their collections were progressively built.

### **Memory and knowledge of history**

In a first approach, the Paulista Museum could be seen as a “place of memory”, due to the historic circumstances of the building and to the fact that a significant part of its collections is based on national memory. The phrase “Place of Memory,” which has become commonplace among us, was coined by Pierre Nora (1984) in the 1980s, amidst the debate that marked the bicentennial of the French Revolution. It is linked to an extensive evaluation of the political and historiographical principles that underpinned the production of national history in France, and to the investigation of the possibilities of writing another national history on the occasion of those celebrations.

By using it, however, I seek to follow the comments of François Hartog about the work and efforts of Pierre Nora. Hartog (2003) pointed out the links between the concept of “place of memory”, the book *Les lieux de memoires*, and what he dubbed “presentism”, i.e., a specific relationship with time and the past.

“Presentism” would be a regime of historicity<sup>5</sup> marked by “the present’s progressive invasion of the horizon, a present which is increasingly inflated [and] hypertrophied”, which would have become visible from the 1970s/1980s. For Hartog (1996), the driving force was the fast growth and ever-increasing demands of a consumer society, where scientific discoveries, technical innovations and the search for gain make things and men increasingly obsolete. The media, whose remarkable development has followed this movement - which is the very its reason for its existence - derives from the same cycle: producing, consuming and recycling, increasing faster, more words and images.

These circumstances would also express themselves through the enhancement of the memory (volunteer, provoked, reconstructed) of heritage and celebrations. Thus, according to Hartog, the concept of “place of memory” could not be understood only literally, as it seen mainly as an instrument of research and interpretation that refers to specific concerns about how to write national histories today.

Nevertheless, I think that it the pertinence of relating the Paulista Museum to a “place of memory” lies precisely in these aspects. Besides the fact that currently, through various research initiatives, centers of historians seek historiographical ways to write a new history of the nation in Brazil<sup>6</sup>, the term refers to places of a material, functional and symbolic nature, where the past is recovered in the present. It designates expressions of the national tradition, sets of representations and a stronghold of the history/memory certified by politics and historiographical productions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The place is not simply given, as Hartog notes; it is incessantly built and rebuilt, and can be interpreted as a crossroads in which different memory paths meet or discharge. However, both Nora and Hartog consider that a “place of memory” can miss its destination and recognize that, today, the links with these places have become fragile, pointing to two situations: first, the distance between the history taught in schools and the expectations of children and young people motivated by the acceleration of time that the virtual culture can provide; and second, the academic questions about the intentions of and ways in which national histories were written.

In this regard, it is important to remember some of Dominique Poulot’s remarks (2003), to whom contrary to the appearances “the relationship between History museums and historiography or the teaching of History is quite weak.”

The museum of history works with the repertoire of the historian’s sources, seeks out emerging curiosities, and has its own weight in the vicissitudes of scholarly interests by more or less vulgarizing erudition for visitors[...]. It experiences moments of greater intensity or fervor when the national feeling so requires [...] However, it lies at the margin of the writing of history, alongside the compilation and preservation of evidence from the past. Isolated from the intellectual invention of writings and rewritings, the museum is not a cultural

matrix either, like the school [...]. the spectacle of the museum illustrates [...] the discrepancy between the writing of history and a representation of the past capable of evoking, in a way other than that of the memory, the recognition of the past as having been, though it no longer is [...]



Photo: Courtesy of the Paulista Museum

*Area Inside the Paulista Museum*

The author underscores the position assigned to History museums, especially from the second half of the twentieth century, when they lost scientific density and were overwhelmed by the intellectual production driven mainly by public universities. But alongside that, Poulot reinforces two issues raised by Nora and Hartog: first, that the national memory and historiographical traditions that shaped the national history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, told in manuals and visually expressed in the museums, have become the subject of criticism and review by the latest historical research; and second, that ruptures have occurred between the contemporary cultural and social experiences and the representations of time and past expressed in the history museums.

These aspects, however, do not exhaust the diversified nature of institutions such as the Paulista Museum. Reflections by Paul Ricoeur and Fernando Catroga (1999) suggest that the museums can be seen also as places for interactions between memory and imagination. They evoke an “absent object” (or an absent presence). But if the “absent object” may be fictional for the imagina-

tion, for the memory it no longer exists, although it had previously existed. In the case of the National Museum of History, and especially in the path trodden of the Paulista Museum, this feature becomes particularly relevant in relation to the interior decoration of the building, since paintings, sculptures, images and objects have been collected and are displayed there to rewrite the history of Brazil and São Paulo, evoking events and characters, representing the past and giving rise to its “visualization”, as noted by Stefan Bann (1994). In other words, they become spaces of and for the imagination of a diversified public that visits it and does not necessarily share the same concerns of historians or sees the Museum as a mediator of the social context, of the investigative practice and of the writing that, according to Michel de Certeau (2006), characterize the historiographical operation.

Thus, it is not only about saying that the Museum houses an imaginary in the most literal sense of the term, i.e., as a set of visible and symbolic images. It is about reflecting upon the complexity of an environment that, while mediating temporalities, causes tensions between academic designs and the “visualization” of the past, and also gives tangibility to the contradictory and multifaceted universe of the representations through which the historical subjects establish relationships with time and project interpretations of the society to which they belong.

Perhaps one of the reasons of the fascination and interest aroused by the Paulista Museum, since it is one of the most visited in the country<sup>7</sup>, resides on the fact that it gathers objects and symbols that allow us to imagine the life and customs of yesteryears. In addition, the Museum offers something that cannot be overlooked: a new interpretation that facilitates the reconstruction and upgrading of memory fragments, becoming therefore a “place” of the residual feeling of continuity. As noted by EcléaBosi (1994): “remembering is not reviving, but rather redoing, rebuilding, rethinking, with today’s images and ideas, the experiences of the past... memory is not a dream, it is work...”. In this sense, every visit to the Museum suggests a unique experience generated by the circumstances of the moment, which can promote different perceptions about the institution itself and what it offers, as well as other inferences about the past represented therein.

### **Current Challenges**

Compared to the other units of the University of São Paulo, the Paulista Museum distinguishes itself for the curatorial exercise, understood as a set of activities organic and jointly developed around the collections. They are: study and documentation; formation and expansion of collections in tune with the main lines of institutional research<sup>8</sup>; and conservation and restoration. These procedures are associated with educational and cultural programs, which include exhibits, extension courses in their different forms, seminars and other scientific and cultural events, practices aimed at different audiences - from aca-

demics to those who spontaneously visit the Museum. That is, it is research around the collections and the knowledge produced through it that serve as a basis for the different activities carried out by the Museum, which also involve undergraduate and graduate courses as well as undergraduate research and post-doctoral programs.

To that extent, aiming to expand and further the knowledge about the historical formation of Brazilian society and promoting the enrichment of the historiography of Brazil and of São Paulo, the Museum develops research in two complementary dimensions: it formulates and maintains collections of different types in its area of expertise, preparing them for the critical reflection of researchers and research groups from Brazil and abroad while seeking, through its own scientific body, to conduct detailed studies on historical issues to which it can contribute from the theoretical and methodological standpoints, or in terms of the applicability in cultural and educational activities.

However, the integration of the Museum to the University and, particularly, the latest institutional changes has given greater visibility to tensions and ambiguities that are inherent in the institution. The greater autonomy and the recognition of the role of university museums in the promotion of multidisciplinary research that join efforts around the discussion of core issues - such as the qualification of university education, the development of new lines of research and the establishment of graduate programs in strategic areas - have ended up by evidencing some limitations, such as the lack of physical spaces to enable the proper curatorship of the collections and the necessary expansion of human resources, especially educators.

In turn, the academic profile of the institution coexists contradictorily with demands that sometimes require the “translation” of scientific research to new levels of understanding. Beatriz Sarlo (2007) had already pointed out the coexistence, at the same historical moment, of different “pasts” built through records and concerns of varied nature. Alongside the feeling of speeding time and the vertigo caused by the fast pace at which ‘heritization’, remembrance and obsolescence alternate in the contemporary world, the academic history coexists with historical syntheses aimed to cater to the consumer market and with cultural reconstructions of the past that guide the work of memory. This interweaving of different and even incongruous dimensions of historical knowledge is a problem that concerns both the discipline of History, in general, and museum in particular, as these, by operating material collections, combine scientific, documentary, educational and cultural roles, interacting daily with a diverse public seeking or idealizing in or expecting from these spaces visions of and about the past.

Thus, it is possible to suppose that the interest and curiosity aroused by the Paulista Museum can be anchored on the ability of the institution to offer a unique simultaneity between novelty and permanence. The Museum would be

a counterpoint to experiencing the pressing time marked by speed, by the fast succession of events and situations and by the representation of the absence of lasting references.

This perception also involves those who militate in museums. It is made clear in the contradictions between the time required for research - able to add to the cultural universe and to the existing knowledge innovative contributions - and the “short-termist” demand for events and exhibitions aimed at scientific dissemination. It emerges particularly as regards museum and heritage-related practices.

One of the purposes of the Museum lies in questioning and discussing how historical knowledge has been and is produced within and outside the institution. This means questioning the statute of documents, the concepts and procedures of knowledge that served as the basis for the selection and survival of sources, and especially the place held by the historian in the “web” that involves the movement of history and the construction of memory, as well as the mediations between events and narratives about events. The issue, as noted Poulot, concerns the tenuous and shifting boundary that separates the historian leaned over heritages collected by generations long before him and the everyday historian - such as those working in museums - in the position of exercising power and establishing criteria and procedures for the selection and preservation of objects, traces or ruins to be converted into heritage in the present and in the future. Tension and ambiguity characterize the links and gaps between reflecting upon the accumulated heritage and being an agent of the heritization process.

However, more than a matter of overcoming these complex situations, whose roots lie in the very origin of the modern museum, it is first and foremost a matter of proposing, at this time of institutional change, that we do not miss the opportunity of making the Paulista Museum the producer of its future, harmonizing the essence of being a museum with the reason of being of the University.

#### Notes

- 1 The first bylaws of the Paulista Museum date back to 1894. It determined that the institution would have collection of South American character and that its goal would be to “study the animal kingdom and its zoological history, as well as the natural and cultural history of men”. As an instrument for public education, it would be the center of scientific research into “the nature in general the nature of State of São Paulo in particular. It also provided that, in addition to Natural Science collections there would be a section “focused on National History, especially dedicated to collecting and filing documents related to the period of our political independence.” In addition, statues, busts and oil paintings of “Brazilian citizens” who had rendered outstanding services to the State and who deserved to have “their memory perpetuated” would be displayed in the building’s galleries and niches. Also emphasized was the special place for the Pedro Américo’s panel “*Independência ou Morte*”(Independence or Death). The-

refore, the interaction between science and history, conceived at that time as national memory dates back to the origin of the Museum. See: Decree n.294 of July 26, 1894, available at: <www.al.sp.gov.br>, accessed on July 2011, access on July 2011.

- 2 Approved in 1982 by the University Council, the Statute of USP Museums sought to define the role of these institutions in the University, particularly from the standpoint of research, culture and extension, as well as in terms of exchanges between them and related Departments and Schools. These precepts led to the drafting of a new Statute for the Paulista Museum, which was approved in 1984.
- 3 Statute of the Paulista Museum, see USP Resolution USP No. 4393 of May 8, 1997.
- 4 USP Resolutions No. 5900 and 5901 of December 23, 2010, amending provisions of the Statute and General Rules of the University, changing the status of the Museums by ensuring them greater administrative and academic autonomy.
- 5 The term “regime of historicity” refers to the reflections developed by François Hartog (2003) on the time and the different ways in which it was appropriated, understood and exercised in the writing of History. It is simultaneously a heuristic instrument and a historical category of thought that, according to the author, allows questioning the ways by which, over time, specific issues between past, present and future have been shaped. Combating any simplification of linear or evolutionary order, what Hartog (2003) investigates are the fundamentals of the relation of contemporary society with the time, which he called “presentism”, and its intertwining with the writing of History.
- 6 I refer, in particular, to the group of researchers from universities in the State of Rio de Janeiro that make up the *Centro de Estudos do Oitocentos* (Center of Studies of the Eight Hundred) led by José Murilo de Carvalho, Gladys Sabina Ribeiro, Lucia Bastos, Lúcia Guimarães and Keila Grinberg among others; and the group of researchers from universities in São Paulo that met between 2004 and 2009 around the Thematic Project “The foundation of the Brazilian State and nation, 1750/1850”, coordinated by IstvánJancsó and based at the University of São Paulo.
- 7 Data compiled in the last ten years show that visits to the Paulista Museum range from 300,000 to 350,000 people/year.
- 8 The three main lines of research established during the institutional reform of the 1990s, were: Daily Life and Society; The Universe of Labor; History of the Imaginary. Currently, these lines have developed into new ones, not only due to the amount of work and the physical organization of the collections but also to the development of conceptual and methodological instruments. Thus, the highlight themes are related to visual culture, political history, gender relations, history of the museums, history of the memory, heritage management, configuration of urban spaces, and urban culture among others.

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*ABSTRACT* – This article emphasizes the goals of the Paulista Museum (*Museu Paulista*) in the centenary of its history, and discusses some of the problems and dilemmas faced nowadays by history museums, pointing out the challenges encountered by university museums.

*KEYWORDS*: Museu Paulista, University museums, Heritage, History, Memory.

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