museum matters

Lost to Fire
The African Collection of the National Museum of Brazil

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In the evening of September 2, 2018, residents of São Cristóvão, a popular neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro’s suburb, spotted smoke in the horizon near the lush municipal park of Quinta da Boa Vista. Later that evening, a stream of text messages, telephone calls, and television reports confirmed their fears: the National Museum was on fire. Upon notification, the city’s fire department rushed to the place only to discover that the neighborhood’s fire-hydrant system did not have enough pressure or water to power their hoses. Some of the museum’s researchers and staff also appeared on the scene and, with local assistance, braved the flames in a risky and desperate attempt to salvage whatever they could before the fire consumed everything. The fire’s intensity, however, grew quickly over the night and turned the museum into an impenetrable raging inferno. Due to social media and other means of communication, Brazilians everywhere stood horrified, watching their oldest and one of their greatest museums burning to the ground. Firefighters eventually managed to control the fire but, by the morning, all that remained were the museum’s walls and a few fire-resistant artifacts, like the Benegó Meteorite, which crashed on the Earth’s surface thousands of years ago.

The National Museum of Brazil was initially conceived as a natural history museum. However, over the years it amassed a huge collection of ethnological artifacts, thanks in part to a series of directors trained or very interested in anthropological studies. The institution itself was created by decree of June 6, 1818, about ten years after the Portuguese royal family landed in Rio de Janeiro, escaping Napoleon Bonaparte’s invasion of Portugal. It was originally named the Royal Museum. After independence in 1822, it changed its name to the Imperial Museum, according to the new form of government adopted in Brazil, headed, ironically, by the heir of the Portuguese crown. In 1889, following the proclamation of the republic, the institution gained its most recent name, the National Museum, and moved from a building in downtown Rio de Janeiro to the Palace of St. Christopher in the Quinta da Boa Vista Park, far from the city’s cultural center. The transfer was, however, a clever and strategic one. The palace had been donated by Elias Antônio Lopes, a wealthy slave trader, to the Portuguese royal family, which used it as its court and primary residence throughout much of the nineteenth century (Soares 2015: 23). The museum’s transfer had thus the dual purpose of providing more space to its collections while at the same time erasing, or at least diminishing, the country’s historical ties to Portugal, the royal family, and the imperial government.

Given its relatively long history, the museum accumulated a small but exquisite collection of African artifacts. Thanks to the diligent work of scholars including Mariza de Carvalho Soares, Michele de Barcelos Agostinho, and Rachel Correa Lima, we have fairly accurate knowledge of the extent, nature, and relative importance of the museum’s African collection. In 2003, the Brazilian federal government issued new legislation enforcing the teaching of African history as well as Afro-Brazilian culture at public and private schools throughout the country (Presidência da República do Brasil 2003). As a result, institutions such as the National Museum, which was administratively subordinated to the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, took the opportunity to review its African collections and reorganize their exhibits. Mariza de Carvalho Soares, then a history professor at Fluminense Federal University, led the process at the National Museum by invitation of its directors and staff. This effort culminated in an entirely new exhibit, launched on May 14, 2014, titled *Kumbukumbu: Africa, Memory, and Patrimony* (Museu Nacional 2014).

The vast majority of the museum’s ethnological collection consisted of artifacts created by the indigenous populations of Brazil. However, out of a total of approximately 40,000 artifacts cataloged, some 700, compiled under the name “National Museum Africana,” were brought from different sub-Saharan African regions between 1810 and 1940 or were made by Africans or their descendants in Brazil between 1880 and 1950. The museum’s permanent exhibit displayed a selection of 185 objects from that collection, organized into six thematic panels in the northern wing of the second floor of the institution’s palace. The most interesting items were no doubt a number of gifts that King Adandozan of Dahomey, in present-day Benin, gave in 1810 to D. João, Prince Regent of Portugal. Brazil was an important market for slaves from Dahomey. In view of Great Britain’s attempt to suppress the traffic in the early nineteenth century, King Adandozan wanted to ensure good commercial relations with Portugal and its colonies. The gifts were originally received by the Count of Arcos, then governor of Bahia, the Brazilian province most directly involved in the slave trade with Dahomey. He probably forwarded the gifts to the Count of Galveias, Secretary of Portugal’s State Department in Rio de Janeiro, along with a letter from King Adandozan himself describing each item in detail. The letter is currently located in the archives of the Brazilian Historical and Geographic Institute of Rio de Janeiro (Araújo 2012: 9–12).

King Adandozan’s gifts constituted the foundational collection of the then Royal Museum and provide a rare look into African art and craftsmanship free from the Western or colonial gaze. Not all objects described in the letter have been located, but some of the items displayed at the museum truly stood out. One

1 Front façade of the Palace of St. Christopher, in the Quinta da Boa Vista Park, where the National Museum of Brazil was located.

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of them was a throne or stool made of carved wood, a type of object regarded as a symbol of power and royalty among several West African monarchies of the time. Another included a “flag showing the wars I waged, the people I captured, and the heads I cut, for my Brother to see and to carry in front of him when going outside for a walk” (Araújo 2012: 12). The flag on display was actually an identical copy made by Rachel Lima. The original was in the storage, which burned along with the rest of the museum. It is unlikely, however, that the king made the flag or captured the people depicted there himself. Nevertheless, the gift does convey the message of Dahomey as a strong militarist and slave-trading power. The flag shows an army of black severed heads as well as people tied by their hands on a white rectangular canvas. At the center of the banner is an individual surrounded by three blood-dripping swords, lifting a red basket containing two additional severed heads. Other interesting objects making the gifts that were on display include a pair of royal sandals made of leather cases, walking sticks or canes, and hand fans apparently made of ox tail, another article of clothing beautifully decorated with hand carvings made by the Zulu, came from other collectors in Brazil (Soares 2015: 29). “The Peoples of the Equatorial Forest” displayed a variety of artifacts originally made by Africans who lived in territories also once occupied by German as well as French and Belgium forces in Cameroon, the Republic of the Congo, the and Democratic Republic of the Congo. They included calabash gourds, wooden statuettes, caps made of cloth, and elephant tusks beautifully decorated with hand carvings made by people as different as the Bali, Fang, Vili, and Kongo. It is difficult to ascertain how exactly these objects entered the museum’s collection, but they appear to have been exchanged for other artifacts with museums in Germany and France (Soares, Agostinho, and Lima 2016: 37–43). “Angola After Atlantic Slavery” showed a variety of pieces collected from two peoples in the interior of that country: the Chokwe and Umbundu. The former were well-known wood carvers and the museum had several of the staffs they made decorated with religious motifs (Soares, Agostinho, and Lima 2016: 45–48). The latter are less famous craftsmen but, thanks to a donation made in 1936 by Celenia Pires Ferreira, a Pernambucan teacher and congregational missionary to Angola, the museum had a unique collection of domestic utensils like baskets, sieves, hatchets, and spoons decorated with geometric patterns (Soares, Agostinho, and Lima 2016: 50–51). The remaining two panels contextualized the artifacts displayed in the African collection and introduced visitors to the cultural and artistic legacies of Africans brought to Brazil through the transatlantic slave trade. “Africa, Past and Present” situated the geographic provenance of the several items displayed in the exhibit, arguing that these objects “talk about the past and how this past deeply marks the history of the modern-day countries of Africa” (Soares, Agostinho, and Lima 2016: 27). “Africans in Brazil” showed how Africans on this side of the Atlantic sought to recreate their world in Brazil, particularly in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, from the end of the nineteenth century. The objects displayed in that panel came from apprehensions made by the Police Department of the Imperial Court of Rio de Janeiro, the collection of an anthropologist, Dr. Heloísa Alberto Torres, who was also a former director of the museum, and from reproductions as well as reconstructions made by the museum itself. Most of them were religious artifacts associated with Candomblé, the Brazilian religion of West African origin. They included wood statuettes of orixás (African deities), musical instruments like the agogó, dolls dressed in the fashion of early twentieth-century Bahian women, and a number of stools, among other objects (Soares, Agostinho, and Lima 2016: 59–61). The burning of the National Museum is no doubt among the greatest tragedies of the cultural history of Brazilians. Not only is a significant part of their past forever lost, but future generations will grow up without ever being exposed to the art and culture once made available through the museum. Although originally built as a country house for members of the Brazilian colonial elite, the palace that eventually housed the museum became surrounded over the years by communities of modest means—people representative of the country’s population, who could relate to the objects on display. Giovana Xavier, a professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro’s Pedagogical School, clearly makes this point. “For many people in my family, it was the first and only museum they ever visited,” she noted. “Along with the museum’s collection, which is immeasurable, there is the important loss of building historical awareness in children”
The causes of the fire are still under investigation. A recent report indicates that a short-circuit in the museum's air-conditioning system started the fire, but the police is still working to determine whether that short-circuit was caused by accident or criminal action (Sera-pião 2019). In any case, the museum had long been struggling to keep a balanced budget with decreasing support from the federal government (Canônico 2018). Earlier that year, the museum had celebrated its 200th anniversary with a ceremony organized by the institution's staff. Coincidentally, Brazil was preparing for a highly contested presidential election, but no government officials, figures, or dignitaries cared to attend the event (Andreoni and Londoño 2018). Only two out of the thirteen candidates at that point had plans for the preservation of museums and other similar institutions (BBC 2018: 13).

Since the burning of the National Museum, several sister institutions around the world have sent messages of solidarity to Brazilians and the museum's staff (Verbeke 2018). The Smithsonian Institution, in particular, with the support of the US Diplomatic Mission in Brazil and the Fulbright Commission, offered opportunities for students who were studying the collections of the Brazilian institution to complete their work by studying similar collections at American museums (US Embassy 2018). Several governments also pledged support to help the museum recover from the destruction (Neuendorf 2018). The staff of the National Museum as well as their academic collaborators started a campaign asking the public to send them images of the museum's artifacts to create a digital repository of the objects that were once on display (Phillips 2018). Politicians as well as the public in general have also become better acquainted with the value of having an institution like the National Museum (Barbon 2018).

Yet, however nice or heartwarming these gestures are, the museum's burning raises several challenging questions. Will Brazil ever be able to build another National Museum? What will it look like? Will Brazil be able to sustain it into the future? How will Brazil repair its reputation and approach donors? How will it guarantee the nation's access to its own cultural heritage? While primarily concerning Brazil, these questions have in fact broader implications, now that museums in Africa and elsewhere are increasingly demanding the repatriation of artifacts inappropriately removed from their territories during colonial or earlier times.

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