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Museum and historicity: The representation of time in Brazilian museums

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Museology and historicity

Museums are institutions that are involved in the representation of an order of time. It does not matter which typologies they fit into - historical, the arts, natural history - museums always produce narratives that project an idea of space and time. According to Preziosi (2006, p. 50):

Walking (through) a museum appears to resemble walking through history: we move in and among a succession of objects, pantomiming not only the passage of time but also appearing to exemplify evolutionary changes or even the progressive development in form, style, invention, value, or mentality.

The reflections that follow are part of an effort to understand the narratives of time in the museal⁷³ institutions, from the perspective of the category of regime of historicity, as it has been proposed by Hartog (2013). This category allows an approach to the intrinsic relations between museums and temporality, pointing out fruitful intersections between Museology and History, to go beyond the analysis of the history of museums and the collections in time. Under the light of the category of historiography, the article analyses three Brazilian museums - Museu Histórico Nacional (MHN, The National Historical Museum), Museu de Artes e Ofícios (MAO, Arts and Crafts Museum), and Memorial Minas Gerais Vale (MMGV, Memorial Minas Vale) - being understood as expository entities that show different ways of articulating past, present, and future.

The academic discipline of Museology is recent. Only in the last few decades has this field received relevance at universities. Gathered around ICOFOM, specialists from all over the world put a great deal of effort into outlining the theoretical and methodological boundaries of Museology in the late 1970s. This way, they were able to gain Museology's autonomy as a subject, without losing sight of the long-established tradition of a historically consolidated practice (Cerávolo, 2004).

Museology is fundamentally interdisciplinary, and it has formulated its scientific and academic requirements in the intersection with philosophy, anthropology, communication, information science and history, among others. It consists of a process in which the articulation of several disciplines, and moreover the geographical and

⁷³ The term 'museal' as used in this article is defined by the authors of "Key Concepts of Museology", meaning "to qualify a field covering more than the notion of 'museum'. (...) The museal field covers not only the creation, development and operation of museum institutions but also reflects on its foundations and issues. The museal field of reference is characterised by a specific approach, which establishes a viewpoint on reality with regard to the world of heritage (to consider something from the museal angle, for example, means to ask oneself whether it is possible to preserve it for exhibition to the public)" (Desvallées, André et Mairesse, François, 2010, pp.48-49). Even though the authors say the term 'museal' is rarely used in English, it is used in this article due to the different sense it has from 'museum'.

cultural diversity of the theoretical contributions, have certainly proven decisive in revealing distinct museal experiences, which are projected and embodied in the field's internationally acclaimed set of principles and concepts.

In Brazil, Waldisa Rússio's contribution in the 1980s and early 1990s, specifically her conceptual formulations around the notion of the museal fact, stood out in the international debate at that time. Following her intellectual legacy, considerable progress around the museological discussion in Brazil was observed in the next decades, as a result of the acknowledgement of Museology as an academic subject, followed by consolidation of the academic debate and publications in the field.⁷⁴

An evaluation of the academic perspective from an historical point of view shows that, until very recently, the academy resented any systematic research on museums. As a field of knowledge, such research had an uncertain position among historians. However, the museum became a recurring subject of historical studies in the late 1990s, certainly due to the increase of cultural history in Brazilian historiographical domains. A critical and reflective approach currently nurtured by challenges interposed in the field of museums also contributed to this. With the changes that took place both in the conceptual aspect as well as in museological practices, history was called on, more and more, to learn about their past and their respective collections, as well as the role that these institutions played or play in society.

It is necessary to take into account the fact that History's approach to museums is recent everywhere and not only in Brazil. The History, Pomian (2003) points out, has been dominated over the XIX century by the dogma that only through written sources would it be possible to get to know the past. Lacking these material sources, history refrained from taking an interest in museums, leaving art history with the almost exclusive task of establishing itself as the subject most closely related to these institutions. In fact, history only took an interest in museums, as well as in material objects, in the beginning of the XX century (Pomian, 2003), as opposed to what happened in anthropology and the natural sciences, for instance, where observation has always been associated with building up knowledge. For this reason, museums and their collections - cultural modalities focused on visualisation - took a distinct place in the history of those subjects (Gonçalves, 2007).

Among the possible contributions from history, considering the regime of historicity offers an approach to question the museal fact, once it is established as contributing to the production of the order of time in societies.

Inspired by Durkheim's concept of social fact⁷⁵, Waldisa Rússio defines the museal fact as

⁷⁴ In the broad theoretical spectrum of Museology, names like Maria Cristina de Oliveira Bruno, Maria Célia Teixeira Moura Santos, Tereza Sheiner, and Mário Chagas have stood out. The contributions of related subjects were just as important, with studies focused on the representation of culture, study of public, art-education, material culture, history of museums, culture and symbolic policies, among others.

⁷⁵ Carvalho analyses the dialogue between Rússio and Durkheim and concludes that "the museum as a museal fact, has its own existence and a "coersive force", distinguished from the other social phenomenons, built in the interface between the individual and the collective, being the study specific to the Museology field" (2011, p.152).

a deep relation between the Man, as the subject that knows, and the object, part of the reality to which the Man also belongs, and over which the person has the power to act, a relation which takes place in an institutionalized scenery - the museum (Rússio, 2010, p.147).

The notion proposed by Rússio followed the postulates of the School of Brno, especially Ana Grégorová (1990), to whom museology is the science that examines the specific relation of Man with reality, consisting in the collection and conservation of objects that register the development of nature and the society.

This particular relation of the subject with the object/reality, identified by some theorists as museality, actually regards the way human beings behave in relation to their heritage, that is, to the objects preserved in order to communicate themselves to posterity (Desvallées A. & Mairesse, F., 2011).

In the same direction, Cristina Bruno proposes the following formulation:

The essential concern of this subject [Museology] faces two great problems. On the one side, in a field of interlocution, brings out the need to identify and understand the individual and/or collective behaviour of human beings, through time, regarding their heritage; and on the other side, in a field of projection, emerge the processes that enable, from this relation, to transform the heritage into inheritance and this, in turn, contributes to the creation of identities. (2006, p. 15).

Bruno's contribution qualifies the idea of museal fact as the reality in which human beings interact, translating itself through specific means of heritage – a key notion that makes it possible to effectively trace the way that the museal fact and the regime of historicity interact.

It is always relevant to point out that the notion of heritage, although it has become commonplace in the western world from the late XVIII century, in the process of creating national states, is present in the social and mental plan of any human collectivity. Understood as a category of thought, heritage presents distinct meanings in different historical-cultural contexts, corresponding to societies' own ways of cultural self-consciousness (Gonçalves, 2003).

In western societies, heritage originally associates itself with economic aspects of property and its legal status. However, the modern world has given it a dimension of collective memory value. That is, going beyond its original sense of material goods that are transmitted to future generations, the modern idea of heritage evokes the transmission of spiritual values, of the cultural legacy of a certain collectivity, to the future. One supposes then, as Alain Rey recalls,

a growing awareness of historical values established by the society itself, [having the heritage] a power to guide, not only by the transmission of their own esthetic, literary, and poetic values, but also by the potentiality of controlling the real, structured by a vision of a particular world (2001, p.21).

It can be said that heritage is a sign of the relation which the society establishes with its past. Heritage indicates the conscience of a legacy that holds values that demonstrate the existence of a certain collectivity in space and time, which have real strength in the present. It is, therefore, the category that keeps close relations with the notion of regime of historicity. In a strict sense, Hartog (2013) states that the regime of historicity is a concept of the way in which a society treats its past; in a broader sense, it designates the modality of awareness that human society has of itself: how societies react to a degree of their historicity. It is the category that organises experiences of time, making it possible to reveal an order of time.

Therefore, heritage and temporality are closely connected. Heritage translates, expresses, and provides a visualisation of the connection that a society establishes with time. The ways in which a society perceives itself and articulates past, present and future are registered in the heritage. And, in this temporal equation, the past performs an important role because it is a time from which the present does not want to part. The present holds on to the past, in order to celebrate, imitate, remember, get prestige from, or simply to be able to revisit it (Hartog, 2013).

Out of the connections of heritage with the regime of historicity, one may acknowledge that temporality constitutes an important dimension and is even intrinsic to the museal fact. Although it may seem obvious, the category of regime of historicity opens analytical perspectives of the museal fact. As this last notion concerns the behaviour of Man toward his heritage, it seems unquestionable that we are before a social fact implied in the ways that a society produces a visualization of an order in time.

One can definitely say that, in the modern and contemporary world, the order of time depends on institutions of memory to be seen and legitimated. In particular, museums work as material complexes committed to forge a perception and narrative of time. They are places that represent temporality; institutionalized sceneries with a huge potential to create visible ways of objectifying time. The exhibition experience in museums always involves some kind of organization of time, because the perceptions of time are visually illustrated making it possible to be understood under a coherent and logic perspective. In some ways, the museal phenomenon contributes so that the goods, selected and integrated to the collective property, called cultural patrimony, can fulfill the role of attesting the temporal existence of a society and its culture.

Having said that, it would not be wrong to state that the notion of the museal fact regards, among other aspects, the social phenomenon of objectifying the culture itself. This particularly takes into account the perception that a society has of its time. It is about the objectifying logic in the sense set by Handler, which allows that

any aspect of human life to be imagined as an object, that is, bounded in time and space, or (amounting to the same thing) associated as property with a particular group, which is imagined as territorially and historically bounded. (1985, p. 195).

The museal phenomenon establishes a relation, mediated by objects, between the visible present and the invisible past and future. It is an experience in which time - an abstract dimension - is projected as a concrete and visible thing, as something that can be

illustrated and driven by the material culture. The collecting practices, the forms of institutionalizing collections, the ways in which the objects are presented to the public, and the process of musealisation brings out clear signs of how a society perceives and translates the experiences of time and attributes meaning to the ordered time articulating past, present, and future. In this perspective, museums are meaningful expressions to enquire about the representations that a society makes of its own historicity, about the historical time that is produced in the tension established between the field of experience and expectations.

The representation of time in Brazilian museums

According to Susan Crane, museums are institutions that bring out many layers of temporal experiences:

With all these simultaneous layers of temporal experience shaping the museum, we need some tools to help us understand how experience over time creates an institution at once essentially familiar and yet capable of challenging and changing both memory and expectations. (2006, p.98)

According to Crane, although connected to the idea of time as movement, change or even progress, paradoxically museums attempt “to fix” the ephemeral, freezing collected objects in the moment in which they present significant emblematic value. Preserved in a sort of temporal immutability, capable of interrupting the decadence of their useful life, so the objects of museums serve as stable references to collective memories.

The observation of exhibitions in three Brazilian museums - Museu Histórico Nacional (MHN), Museu de Artes e Ofícios (MAO) and Memorial Minas Gerais Vale (MMGV) - is useful for understanding how layers of time are tightly connected to the museal fact, and how each exhibition projects distinct representations of time, corresponding to different ways of establishing the relation of the present with past and future.

The Museu Histórico Nacional (MHN), opened in 1922 in Rio de Janeiro, within the context of Centenary celebrations of Brazilian Independence; it was conceived from a hegemonic historiographic perspective in the country in the XIX century, in which the Brazilian nation was understood as the continuation of the Portuguese State, a kind of “extension in the tropics of a white and European civilization” (Guimarães 1988, p. 8). Materialising this historiographic discourse, the creation of the MHN collection favoured the nobility and army (Abreu, 1996), social rankings seen as the pillars of nationality. Following this, the presumptions of the so-called auxiliary sciences of history - archeology, numismatics, epigraphy, genealogy (Guimarães, 2003) - the collections at the MHN consisted of all kinds of objects-relic associated with notable facts and characters of the past, above all the imperial.

There is no doubt that the MHN started an institutional journey much closer to the antiquarian culture than to historiography. Aline Montenegro Magalhães points out 1930 as the landmark year in which the Museum, initially conceived under the amateur and curious view of its creator Gustavo Barroso, was reorganised on the basis of new assumptions. The “jumble of antiques” was replaced by a historical narrative, ordered chronologically, with some events,

periods and historical characters standing out, in a classical conception of history as the provider of examples to the present. Therefore,

the pedagogical conception of history as the master of life (...) to the antiquarian tradition already reinvented, was brought together with the clear aim of establishing a civic school in the museum (Magalhães, 2003, p. 106).

Successive changes in the MHN's exhibitions in the late 1960s and 1980s (Godoy & Lacerda: 2002) finally dethroned this hybrid discourse between the *historia magistra* and the antiquarian tradition, the mark of Gustavo Barroso's management. From 2000, the Museum went through some substantive restructuring. Another reading was made of its collections, allowing recreation from the narrative of the long-standing exhibition circuit to one based on new historiographic assumptions.

The circuit is made of four exhibitions covering themes, from prehistory to the republican period in the history of Brazil, in a logical sequence of events. The first exhibition - *Oreretama* - is dedicated to the indigenous peoples that had inhabited the Brazilian territory for over 500 years when the Europeans made contact in the XVI century. Covering 1415 to 1822, *The Portuguese Peoples in the World* - is the next exhibition; it is about the Portuguese maritime expansion, the colonial company in 'Portuguese America', and the economic, political and cultural formation of Brazil. The following exhibition, *The Construction of the Nation*, goes from the period of the independence to the Proclamation of the Republic, and approaches the Imperial State, the construction and imaginary unification of the nation, the War of Paraguay, economy, slavery, and the advent of the Republic. The last module in the circuit - *Citizenship under Construction* - covers the Republic period, in the perspective of a history marked by the achievement of citizenship rights in the country.

As suggested by the exhibition names, the MHN circuit was conceived looking to the future. There is an intention in making prevail a representation of time from the perspective of the discourse of historical knowledge; the facts put together in chronological order are concatenated in a coherent manner that points out what is to come and become. That is, the past is ordered in such a way to project the future as a horizon of expectations. The last module of the circuit - *Citizenship under Construction* - throws a promising look at the future under the perspective of a history marked by the achievement of citizenship rights in the country. Naturally, the past, approached through historical criticism's point of view, appears as an experience to be overcome by the promises of a better future.

The exhibition of the Museu Histórico Nacional adopted a new narrative that gives it an academic perspective, clearly opposing the focus on the past that gave origin to the Museum in the 1920s. This new narrative can be said to be fixed within a modern regime of historicity: the idea of exemplification was abandoned, based on the assumption of repetition of facts, to establish the existence of a history, in the singular and understood as a process, in which events do not repeat themselves once they have a unique character. In the articulation of dimensions in time, the future is evoked to explain the past (Hartog, 2013). In this case, it is the expectation of full citizenship in the country that provides the reason of being for the experience in the past. The idea of change underlies this conception,

even constituting a value of importance to the self-comprehension of society; a sense of modernity “excelled in expressing that movement as positive and forward-inclined” (Crane, 2006, p.100).

Another example is the Museu de Artes e Ofícios (MAO), opened to the public in 2006 in the city of Belo Horizonte, which is the capital of Minas Gerais State. Situated in buildings protected as cultural patrimony of the long-standing Estação Ferroviária Central (Central Railway Station) in the Praça Rui Barbosa (Rui Barbosa Square), or Praça da Estação (Station Square) as it is most commonly known, the Museum is in the city centre, within an enormous area of circulation of people taking the train or many bus lines that pass by the Square and its surroundings. For decades, this area suffered from urban degradation similar to areas in other Brazil cities. At the time of the implementation of MAO, it was considered a strategy in the urban revitalization process, indicating a possible cultural function for the Square, already home to Centro Cultural UFMG (UFMG's Cultural Centre). More recently, the Centro Cultural Centoequatro (Cultural Centre 104), also occupying an old building, has been protected as of interest for the city's patrimony.

The MAO is run by the Fundação Flávio Gutierrez (Flávio Gutierrez Foundation), an institution responsible for the management of an extensive cultural heritage; the foundation's job is to “rescue these popular collections giving them a sense of permanence and of representativeness in the context of memory and identity”. MAO keeps the collections of the XVIII and XIX centuries, “representative of the universe of work, the arts and crafts in Brazil”, “bringing together instruments and utensils of work from the preindustrial period”, and providing “a meeting place of the worker with himself, with his history and with his time (<http://www.mao.org.br/>).

MAO's museological mission was presented in a seminar when the museum was being implemented: to become a centre of reference about Man as a central element in the historical process – taking into account crafts, mechanical devices, contradictions, and inventions; to articulate the contemporary into the historical context to question the conflicting universe of work in Brazil; to recognize work as a transforming axis of society; to promote an urban re-vitalization of the railway station to the area, and to develop educational programs of human recovery and social inclusion (Fundação Cultural Flávio Gutierrez, 2004). Under this light, MAO declared its intention to re-signify its collections according to the social-cultural reality in which the Museum was inserted, in a legitimate and praiseworthy articulation among the past and present, of the work universe in Brazil.

Besides this intention, when one goes through the Museum's exhibition, its narrative seems to conduct us back to an indefinite past time, paced by a logic in which there is no movement toward the present or future, but also providing no way back to that same time. The subject of preindustrial work, approached by the means of crafts such as transport, mining, trade, ceramics, weaving, being presented as tradition seems to hold back time. The exhibition turns to the illusion of timelessness - “the ability to share the past as if had never passed – even as we are drawn to that past because of its differences from our present” (Crane, 2006, p.102). There is no historical time, only memory that replaces itself in a cyclical order of time.

Despite providing historical information in texts, one finds, above all, an idealized narrative once it is emptied of work experience. According to Koselleck, “it is the tension between experience and expectation which, in ever-changing patterns, brings about new resolutions and through this generates historical time” (2006, p. 312). So, it is exactly because the tension was broken and the distance between the experience of what was lived and the prognosis of the future, that the narrative of MAO seems to refer to a mythical time.

Within the urban turmoil and cut by rails that go through its buildings, this Museum dedicated to work seems like a protected island from the conflicts of the urban universe that vibrate in the Square, which is also a recurring stage for social and popular protests. The temporality in MAO is taken away from the correlation between past and future, creator of the historical perspective. Also, “the popular collection”, “the memory and identity of the worker” is made eternal through the idealization of the world of work. Even if many modalities of pre-industrialized work presented in the Museum have disappeared or are about to disappear, the evoked crafts are presented as timeless because they are definitely part of the collective imagination.

The third case, the Memorial Minas Gerais Vale (MMGV), opened in 2010 also in the city of Belo Horizonte, approaches the contemporary perception of time, marked by the hypertrophy of the present. Along with other museums, the MMGV is part of the Circuito Cultural Praça da Liberdade (Liberty Square Cultural Circuit), a cultural project implemented by the government of Minas Gerais State in partnership with the private sector, aiming to restore and give new functions to the public buildings around the Square where the administrative centre of the government once stood. The museums in the Circuit have a common tendency to dematerialization, associated with the heavy use of technologies that emphasize interactivity.

In particular MMGV presents itself as an Experience Museum, which:

brings the soul of the traditions of Minas Gerais State in an original and interactive way. Real and virtual sceneries are put together to provide experiences and sensations that take the visitors back to the XVIII century, and all the way to XXI century.

Far from giving visibility to only one historical frame, the Memorial puts the visitors in direct contact with the present and past providing, with this gesture, other ways of bringing the public closer by addressing questions of our time.

(<http://www.memorialvale.com.br>)

In the text of the curatorial project, entitled “O Museu como Entretenimento” (The Museum as Entertainment), immersion exhibitions are justified by the museum’s need to compete with leisure industries in the urban environment, where multiple attractions based in fiction are on offer. In this setting, the Memorial makes an effort to draw visitors’ attention and time (Memorial Minas Gerais Vale, n.d).

The texts in the curatorial project’s site are important indications for considering the meaning of a Museum opened to the public with barely any material objects, whose narrative is mostly based on media, and with its focus on the tradition of Minas Gerais reinforced by a mythical discourse of regional identity. In fact, MMGV is an example of what has been taking place in museums, in a time of

crisis for the relationship of contemporary society with time. Between information and entertainment, the Memorial operates a sort of rewriting of traditions of identity, using media resources that seem to eliminate any distance between past and present, between the public's reality and that reality presented by the Museum. "The Memorial puts the present and the past in direct contact" (Memorial Minas Gerais Vale, n.d): the statement is nothing but a promise of immersion made possible by technology, which seems to shorten the intervals of time and space, turning the past into an object of consumption, a way of experiencing the present.

The historicity shown by the MMGV narrative is shaped by the quick development and growing demands of the consumption society, in which the speed of technological innovations turns everything and everyone quickly obsolete (Hartog, 2013). The preponderance of the present appears in the exhibition, above all through the excessive use of media, which is capable of condensing a significant volume of information and can be accessed by the public in an unpretentious and ephemeral manner. The replacement of material objects with their digital images contributes to the production of a transitory and disposable visualisation. Past, present, and future are not distinguished: they are temporal fragments that lose depth because they are compressed by the speed of change of a time that has become a time of consumption, which seems to promise "the whole world, the whole past, the whole history and tradition from Minas Gerais at everyone's reach".

Some last considerations towards conclusion

The representation of distinct orderings of time in simultaneous exhibitions indicates the coexistence, in the same society, of a differentiated mode of perceiving its own level of historicity. The historical time - of tradition, memory or consumption - presents itself in the exhibitions of these three museums, analysed through exhibition languages that create images to nurture tentative representations between the critical and controllable knowledge of history and the affective narrative of memory. The exhibitions relate the subjects with an order of time, mediating between the objective knowledge produced in relation to society's temporal experience, as well as constructing collective images of those experiences, which are nothing but specific ways through which Man learns the real world so that people can act and communicate (Silva, 2000). Therefore, the museums present the tensions created between the discourse of knowledge and the way in which time projects itself subjectively in the imaginary and in symbolic structures. As Morales Moreno has said, the exhibitions are simultaneous manifestations of meaning and perception. They produce not only sense but also a sensation of history (2006). Perhaps that is the great power of museums: to create the perception and sensation of our historicity.

The ideas presented in this article point to possible future research into the relations between the museal fact and regime of historicity rather than focusing only on conclusive statements. It will definitely be productive to museology to develop research that seeks to understand to which order of time different museal experiences refer. How can time be represented materially, and to what extent do different objects guide us to perceive it distinctly? Perhaps the most important point is to understand what is behind all these questions, that is to look thoroughly at the wishes, frustrations, or expectations

that society nurtures through representations of past and time. These matters have a lot to gain from the increased proximity of dialogue between history and museology.

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Abstract

This article discusses the intersections between History and Museology, taking into account the contributions of concepts from history in order to analyse museal experiences. The category of regime of historicity is particularly fruitful in questioning the museal fact, once it can be established as a phenomenon that, besides containing historicity itself, also provides the production of order of time in societies. An analysis made of three Brazilian museums allows us to verify the key role that historicity plays in the expository discourse, as well as the coexistence of distinct ways of articulating the relations of society with time, especially with the past.

Keywords: Museum, Museology, Regime of Historicity

Résumé

Le but de cet article est d'analyser les intersections entre l'Histoire et la Muséologie, en tenant compte des contributions des concepts de l'histoire pour analyser les expériences muséologiques. La catégorie de régime d'historicité nous semble féconde pour problématiser le fait muséal, étant donné qu'elle nous permet de le comprendre comme un phénomène qui, en plus de clôturer en lui-même l'historicité, contribue à la production de l'ordre du temps dans les sociétés. L'analyse dans trois musées brésiliens a montré le rôle clé de l'historicité dans le discours des expositions ainsi que la coexistence de différentes manières d'articuler la relation de la société avec le temps, en particulier avec le temps passé.

Mots clé : Musée, Muséologie, Régime d'Historicité.