

# Musealization is an Indigenous Business: Reflections About Objects and Subjects in the Museological Chain of the Indian Museum of Rio de Janeiro

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Over the 1970's, the Czech museologist Zbynek Zbyslav Stránský introduces the discussion about the term “musealization”, which was brought to the center of the theoretical debate in Museology. Recent theories and critical reviews held in international forums, such as the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM), and in Brazil, in the thirteen undergraduate and three postgraduate courses dedicated to the Museology<sup>1</sup> for example.

Still searching for its place in the scientific field, Museology seeks to resolve some metamuseological issues, as defined by Stránský, in a reflexive perspective that involves museum theory and practice. This search also involves the definition of a methodology and a terminology, or yet, the adoption of *epistemic agreements* to solve a lack of consensus caused, in most part, by language differences. We can see those efforts in publications like Key Concepts<sup>2</sup>, the dictionary<sup>3</sup>, in the ICOFOM Study Series (ISS), and before that, in Museological Working Papers (MuWoP). The theoretical Museology discussed in those publications, built a foundation utilizing the specific terms “musealia”, “museality” and “musealization”, introduced by Stránský in the 1960s (Brulon Soares, 2018). Peter van Mensch (apud Cury, 2020) understands these terms as a conceptual triad, the basic structure where museological theory is sustained.

Starting from the theoretical foundation laid by Zbynek Stránský - expanded by Peter Van Mensch (1992) - on the relationship between theory and practice in Museology, we propose to analyze the processes that compose the musealization chain of the Indian Museum of Rio de Janeiro, based on Stránský's theoretical perspective of selection, thesaurization and presentation.

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1. Data retrieved by the Brazilian Federal Council of Museology (COFEM) in: [http://cofem.org.br/legislacao/\\_formacao/](http://cofem.org.br/legislacao/_formacao/)

2. Cf. Desvallés, A. & Mairesse, F. (2010) Key concepts of Museology. Paris: Armand Collin.

3. Cf. Desvallés, A. & Mairesse, F. (2011) Dictionnaire encyclopédique de muséologie. Paris: Armand Collin.

The Indian Museum was founded in 1953 by the anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro and has been attached to the National Foundation of the Indian (FUNAI) since 1967. This museum represents a milestone for anthropology and museology in Brazil, because it is the first ethnographic museum holding a collection entirely dedicated to the indigenous peoples of Brazil.

Created at a time when European ethnographic museums valued the ethnographic object as “testimonials”, the Indian Museum, like the Museum of Man (*Musée de l’Homme*) in Paris, created by Paul Rivet and Georges Henri Rivi  re, shared the same theoretical line. Although inspired by the model of these French researchers, the approach of Darcy Ribeiro differed in his conception of and other particularities about the objects (and subjects) between these two museums, and also in their scientific methodology. For Edgardo Lander (2005), the museums were configured as power instances, part of the Eurocentric political project for the colonization of the “other”, resulting in racialized knowledge production and generic and stereotyped representations of indigenous people in museums. Stuart Hall (2007) reminds us that stereotyping is an evident sign of symbolic violence and occurs where inequalities in power relations persist.

Brazilian indigenous history is full of complex events that cannot be explained here in detail, however, we can point out that it was marked by an unequal and violent relationship between Indians and Europeans. In the beginning, the Indians were turned into slaves, serving the entrepreneurs of the Portuguese Empire and the colony settled in Brazil under the responsibility of the Jesuits. Subsequently, from the 18th century onwards, the focus of this interest shifted to indigenous territories and at least since 1960, to the soil of these territories (Cunha, [1992] 2012). The inexorable march of civilization translated into agricultural, military, pastoral and extractive “expansion fronts” (Ribeiro, [1970] 2017 & Gleizer Ribeiro, [1983] 2009) at different times in the history of contact, created the official and adverse narrative of the indigenous peoples showing them as “violent savages” and “enemies of progress”. In 1910, in the Republic’s early years, the Service for the Protection of Indians and the National Workers Location (SPILTN) was created by and functioned under the responsibility of Marshall C  ndido Rondon, with positivist and assimilationist ideological bases, placing the Brazilian Indians under the tutelage of the State. Modified to Indian Protection Service (SPI) in 1934, the federal agency remains a laic institution with the following purposes (to name a few): allocate the Indians to their territories, guarantee their physical survival and make the Indians gradually adopt “civilized” habits. The SPI lasted until 1967, when the National Indigenous Foundation (FUNAI) was created, changing its statute, but not leaving aside the tutelary role for the Indians by the Brazilian State and the responsibility for the demarcation of their territories. According to the anthropologist Jo  o Pacheco de Oliveira (2014), the tutelage promoted by the Brazilian State was configured as a practice of domination, full of paradoxes; at the same time this mechanism, while guaranteeing protection laws that benefit the indigenous and their traditional territories, also created repression.

In the early 2000's, the Indian Museum adopted a new methodology of "partnership" with anthropologists to develop exhibitions (Couto, 2012), that significantly affects the musealization chain. The first exhibition in this participatory model was "Time and Space in Amazon: The Wajãpi tribe" inaugurated on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2002, curated by anthropologist Dominique Gallois, who had worked with the Wajãpi tribe, from Amapá (state of the north region of Brazil) many years earlier. The musealization chain, as mentioned before, understood here by Stránský's model which contains the steps of selection, hence, the basic theory that would allow the identification of the "museality potential" in objects, removing them from their original situation towards a new reality; thesaurization, that would be the process where the object is identified and inserted into a documentary system; and presentation, the process through which a collection acquires sense, making it accessible and transmitting its values to an audience (Stránský, 1974).

For this exhibition, approximately 300 objects were produced by the Wajãpi, spread across all 13 villages in the state of Amapá. With this practice, new knowledge was produced, and some museum procedures transformed. The selection and acquisition of the objects, for example, are no longer mediated by anthropologists as a result of their fieldwork but made by direct contact with the Wajãpi tribe. Before being stored to be preserved, all items were inserted into a documentation system. The indigenous knowledge about the objects was indispensable for musealization, since the entire collection acquired came qualified with all the information related to the ethnographic objects, such as what materials the objects are made of, techniques, authorship, etc. The objects were classified according to the Dictionary of Indigenous Crafts created by the anthropologist Berta Ribeiro in 1988 and by the institution's thesaurus, created in 2006. In this way, the museum restores to the indigenous people a right to speak on behalf of their own cultural heritage even outside the village. Their knowledge prevailed over the specialist knowledge of the anthropologist and museologist, inverting the specialist's logic (Brulon & Guedes, 2019). In this context, we intend to discuss using post-colonial authors, museologists and anthropologists, who research and debate about indigenous presence and participation in museums, analyzing how indigenous peoples contribute to the value attribution of ethnographic objects.

This experience of indigenous participation in the Indian Museum would be part of a methodological exercise of decolonization inherent in experimental museology and what we called the chain of ethnomusealization. Experimental museology, as a reflective methodology, encourages different actors, from different social or ethnic groups, to combine theory and practice through museological experimentation. The social groups involved are led to think about their own experiences in the construction of musealization, based on their own categories and identities (Brulon, 2019). The ethnomusealization ritual involves shared knowledge, combining theory with museological praxis with indigenous subjects elevated to the role of protagonists in the production of their own meanings and narratives, having their productions recognized by authorship, as produ-

cers of musealia, and consequently attributing their own values of museality to these objects. The museum would become, according to Stránský's theory, a methodological "laboratory" (Dólak, 2017; Brulon, 2017), where the condition of museality of the "musealized thing" lies. The Indian Museum would no longer be perceived as a center for knowledge dissemination, but a "contact zone" (Clifford, 1997), a place where different cultures can meet and something new starts are collectively built to be transmitted.

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