

ICOM Triennial Congress Milan

CAMOC – day 1

Joint Session CAMOC/ ICOFOM/ MINOM

“The Light of Lisbon – a cultural landscape”

*If I were God I would stop the sun over Lisbon*

(Fernando Assis Pacheco)

Good afternoon friends and colleagues from CAMOC, ICOFOM and MINOM.

I'm very pleased to be here with all of you.

I'll present very shortly a cultural landscape project developed by the Museum of Lisbon.

The natural light of Lisbon, the main intangible city icon, keeps on enchanting Lisbon residents and visitors, Portuguese or foreigners.

For those born in Lisbon or who became Lisboninans, our light, intense, penetrating, colourful (or white?) is part of us; it is also what we miss when we are away; is it what we speak about with nostalgia in the gray winter days.

One of the top 10 values for tourists to choose Lisbon is its light.

And yet, we knew so little about it. Is it true that Lisbon has, as we say, a special and unique light? Is this a tourist myth or a real phenomenon of Lisbon's nature?

The Museum of Lisbon promoted, last year, an unprecedented project of research and exhibition on the light of Lisbon, to be presented in the beautiful premises of the Torreão Poente, one of the Museum of Lisbon sites. It was a daring purpose, to dedicate an exhibition to something that is impossible to show, which cannot be trapped in showcases or panels. The result was a multidisciplinary exhibition, which crossed scientific and artistic languages, questioning the phenomenon of light and presenting artistic expressions of the twentieth century in any way related to the light of this city.

(Video)

Rather than providing definitive answers, we were interested in raising questions. What is light?; why does light change during the day?; is the light of Lisbon really special ?; what makes it different ?; and why does it amaze us continuously? Often happened to ourselves, as we believe to the public as well, to finish a tour ending up with more questions than we had at the beginning, and with more passion by the light itself.

We therefore worked with two curators: Ana Maria Eiró, professor of physics (University of Lisbon), former director of the Museum of Science and Natural History; Acácio de Almeida, director of photography for movies, as "In the White City" (*Dans la Ville Blanche* – about Lisbon) by the Swiss film director Alain Tanner.

The exhibition presented sciences and arts in dialogue.

"Looking at the light" and "feeling the light" – showing complementary languages and museum narratives, including physics, meteorology, cinema, figurative and abstract painting, contemporary art forms, photography, literature and poetry, and advertising.

The Municipal Video Library of Lisbon produced for the exhibition an excellent documentary, "The Arts of the Light of Lisbon", presenting different views of the light in Lisbon, and of other examples of visual art works, photography and film.

We have learned that Lisbon's special light comes from the fact that our city has the highest rate of clear sunshine hours per year in Europe (not highest temperature); it also comes from the unpleasant north/ north-east spring and summer strong winds; from the hilled city topography heading down to the river that acts like a mirror; from the whitish city pavement that reflects the light, instead of absorbing it as it happens with dark pavements; along with the coloured reflexions coming out from the rosy and yellowish façades, as well as the tiles façades.

A cultural landscape creation: the city light results from the interaction between sunlight – electromagnetic radiation in wavelengths -, natural factors like the closeness

to the river, the topography and the winds; but also from cultural factors like the type of materials used in pavements, facades and rooftops, giving back colours, shades and brightness, that transforms, in the human eyes, the natural design of downtown Lisbon.

To look, feel and learn all this in a museum gallery, which windows face the river Tagus and the main downtown square, was a privilege. The premises functioned like a natural landscape extension of the exhibition itself.

Like the visitors, we have all looked, and looked again; learned scientific arguments to love even more the light of our city. Maybe that is why we had two big comments books filled with poems, drawings, emotive exclamations, song lyrics, apart from the usual exhibitions' comments.

Many comments were about turning the temporary exhibition into a permanent one.

A couple of examples more than those I'm showing here said:

"This exhibition is chilling and involves all our senses"

"Here is a magnificent exhibition that does for Lisbon and Portugal than many catalogues, books, exhibitions or films. It should be always open if possible until late in the evening to fulfil its purpose."

Thank you for your attention.

Joana Sousa Monteiro  
Museum of Lisbon, Director  
CAMOC (Chair)