

Collecting with(in) the city

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Collecting with(in) the city

**CAMOC & COMCOL
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09–11 October 2024**

Collecting with(in) the city
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Decolonial practices

De-, Post- and Anticolonizing Practices for Museum Collections

Ayla Amon

Biography

Ayla Amon (she/her) is Curator of Collections at the Greensboro History Museum and a lecturer in the History Department at University North Carolina Greensboro. She has previously held curatorial positions at the North Carolina Museum of History, National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Walters Art Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Tangier American Legation in Morocco. Her research focuses on African Islam and its Diasporas, especially in the United States, and how cultural traditions are retained, adapted and passed down among generations.

Introduction

In October 2023 while searching for an object in collections storage, I found a small, unlabeled box. When I opened it and looked inside, I had an immediate reaction – these objects did not belong at the museum: I was looking at a group of Japanese military identification tags and a plastic bag full of Indigenous ancestral human remains. As a relatively new curator at the Greensboro History Museum (GHM), the discovery of this box began a collections assessment project that sent me on a journey back in time hundreds of years and demanded I look through thousands of records. It will also, hopefully, end with a museum that exemplifies methods of collection, storage, display and interpretation that are de-, post- and anticolonized. Speaking to my efforts to develop and implement community- and culturally-informed collections care policies and practices, and of conducting both voluntary (ethical) repatriations as well as those required by law, this paper will look to three types of materials in the collections of GHM – looted, Indigenous, and religious – as representative case studies of how to develop and maintain the collection in non-colonizing ways.

The Greensboro History Museum, a small city history museum opened to the public in 1925, is about to celebrate its centennial – one hundred years of acting as a space that explores the roots of the city and the people who call it home. However, the collections have not always represented the diverse urban histories of the communities living in the city, nor has the museum always been a collaborative partner with all its constituents. In an institution that has been collecting for a century, there are (unfortunately) bound to be objects that speak to historical imbalances in power, that represent communities through one-sided lenses (if they are represented at all) and that disavow the humanity of people or peoples. This state is far from a rarity, especially in Western museums that were constructed physically and ideologically as part of colonial systems.

As Masum Momaya (2018:15) has argued, the very act of collecting and displaying artifacts within museums advances the colonizing scientific, cultural and political projects of empires. Like many early 20th century museums, GHM built its foundational collection in this vein, including natural science objects, as well as extensive ethnographic collections. GHM also gathered interpretations of foreign cultures brought back by missionaries and tourists and artifacts looted by American soldiers during foreign military campaigns. These collections, and their subsequent displays and interpretations, influenced the social imagination of the public and meant that the museum not only legitimized colonization, but as Momaya (2018: 15) stated, ‘through the very act of collecting itself, became [an] agent of colonization’ wherein ‘communities have long found themselves and their cultures pillaged, exoticized, stereotyped, and maligned.’ However, rather than obscuring these past methods of collecting and representation, this moment is an opportunity to actively bring these issues to light as a restorative practice for the museum and its communities.

Rachel Hartzipanagos of the *Washington Post* defines decolonizing museums as ‘a process that institutions undergo to expand the perspectives they portray beyond those of the dominant cultural group, particularly white colonizers.’ (2018) Museums Association further denotes that the practice ‘can create museum spaces that welcome, engage and empower everyone.’¹ However, most sources and institutions do not articulate the actionable side of these desires – i.e., *how* to decolonize a space and what it will look like for staff, visitors, communities and objects. While the methods, practices and engagements with decolonization differ across museums and are in many cases dependent on finances, storage space and staff time resources, below I detail some of the ways GHM is examining its collection for items furthering colonial practice, and how staff are attempting to remediate the museum’s holdings.

Decolonizing the collection

In addition to creating multivocal public spaces that speak to a plethora of audiences, decolonizing museums should also include deaccessioning as an acknowledgement that objects could either be better valued and contextualized elsewhere (after Momaya 2018: 18) or need returned to their peoples and countries of origin. That is not to say that this inherent disavowal and attempted reversal of colonial collecting is not difficult, – it is – even when mandated by federal or international law.² It is additionally difficult when items exist outside of legal sanctions (which should be viewed as a minimum standard), and fall instead into an ‘ethical’ or ‘voluntary’ restitution and repatriation status, especially given that for many of these objects, as Momaya (2018: 13) points out, ‘transactional records, especially at the first point of exchange, are sparse’ – if they exist at all.

A recent project exemplifying a voluntary ethical repatriation undertaken by GHM included the deaccessioning of 160 pieces of Japanese material culture collected by American military enlistees in the Pacific during WWII.³ Rather than representing government-issued militaria, these items – consisting of Yosegaki Hinomaru (a talismanic flag signed with well-wishes that was gifted to Japanese military servicemen before deployment), identification tags, a collection of photographs, an identification document, a sake cup and naval and army uniform insignia – bear the spirit and personal traces of the soldier who once carried them. Within Japanese culture, objects like this hold specific significance: in addition to being looted cultural property, they fall under a category of ‘non-biological human remains,’ a classification that pertains to extremely personal, unique, and individualized materials that carry significant cultural, social, or religious significance and are believed to contain the spirits of the person or people who carried them (OBON Society 2024). (See figure 1)

While the collecting of war souvenirs was an extremely common and accepted practice during WWII, GHM knew that every effort should be made to return these objects to the families of the soldiers they represented. However, given the nature of the initial collection process, there was minimal documentation, if any, surrounding where and from whom the objects were taken. This, combined with a lack of Japanese language skills or understanding how to access foreign

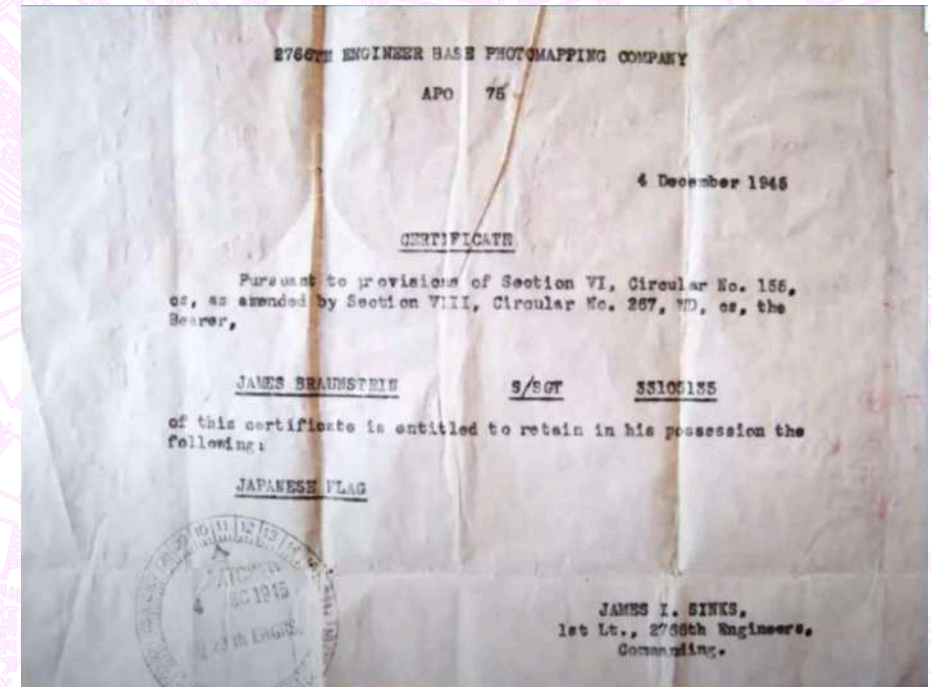


Figure 1: Certificate of approval allowing James Braunstein of the 2766th Engineer Base Photomapping Company to ‘retain in his possession’ a Japanese Flag [Yosegaki Hinomaru], granted on December 4, 1945. Military personnel brought items they collected to company ‘Souvenir Officers’ for approval to keep the item, as noted in this receipt. *Courtesy Rex and Keiko Ziak*

military records, meant that the museum’s ability to directly repatriate to kin was severely limited. Thus, after deaccessioning the items from the collection, GHM sent them to OBON Society, a non-profit in Astoria, Oregon, named after the Japanese festival of honoring the spirits of one’s ancestors. OBON connects with the Japanese Ministry of Culture to research such looted objects, locate living family and repatriate the objects to them. They were able to translate one of the items from GHM – the military identification document of Mr. Etsuji Tohjima – which has been returned to his nephew Toshimitsu Tohjima, allowing the family to have closure and welcome their uncle home. OBON continues to research the other items from GHM’s collection, with the hope of repatriating more in the future. The deaccession and repatriation of these items, which also involved connecting with the local Greensboro Japanese-American community for discussions of object significance to the community, translation, and desired outcome, plays a significant role in the decolonization of the collection and in the positive community relationship and trust-building processes that are central to the GHM mission.

Postcolonial collections handling and care

Physical removal from collections is not the only way to alter balances of power in museum spaces. It is important that museums also act in a postcolonial manner, in part by challenging past practices in caring for collections. Specifically with regard to religious and funerary materials, which in many museums exist in a liminal state somewhere between the sacred and the secular, community engagement is paramount when it comes to display, storage and handling. One category of items that is often excluded from these discussions and that we currently hold at GHM are objects related to persons who were mummified in Egypt. These collection materials, including a small mummiform ushabti – a servant figure placed among grave goods – and mummy wrappings from Thebes, were donated to the museum in 1956 and 1948 respectively by missionaries to the ‘Holy Land’, and they connect to a long history of ‘mummy mania’ in Europe and the United States.



Figure 2: Museums across the United States not only hold ushabti figures, but openly photograph, display and publish them online. The digital record for this example from The Walters Art Museum (Baltimore, Maryland) highlights one of many challenges with both collecting and displaying these objects: ‘date and mode of acquisition unknown’. *Ushabti (1567-1085 BCE), Egypt, wood with polychrome, The Walters Art Museum, acquired by Henry Walters, 1930 (22.193), licensed under CC0 1.0 Universal*

The late Victorian period saw the vast collection of objects associated with mummified remains – including the objects placed on the body, the wrappings, and even the body itself – by travelers and museums. Collected as curiosities of a foreign culture, objects with medicinal healing properties, or artifacts associated with Biblical narratives, most museum visitors have seen a mummified human body in a museum (Struck 2021). But these objects are often exempted from discussions surrounding both religion and human remains. As Egyptologist Heba Abd El Gawad (Fennell 2023: 27:40-27:53) notes, ‘They are commodified, they are objects, they are seen as artifacts. They are not seen as human beings. Even the word ‘mummy’ itself makes them an object. They are mummified human remains, and that is something we need to remember.’ The nomenclature shift from ‘mummy’ to ‘mummified human remains,’ should cause an immediate change in care and presentation of these beings and their associated objects in museums (Struck 2021). However, an internet search provides little information about proper handling, housing and care of items like ushabti and wrappings, their acceptability for display and retention in museum collections or if Egypt wants them restituted. At least three ushabti have been returned in higher profile cases,⁴ however, many museums openly hold and display these figurines, leaving an open question whether it is appropriate to display or retain such items in the collection. (See Figure 2)

At GHM, these missionary collections are currently being researched, but we have taken the following steps: 1) separating these items both geographically and within that, by religious tradition. 2) Rehousing the objects in a culturally appropriate manner to the best of our ability (to be updated as we learn more). 3) Reaching out to authorities for each type of material, including scholars, embassies, consulates and community members both within the United States and abroad. And 4) updating all collections records (physical and digital, internal and public) with sensitivity markings. It is our intent to reconstitute and repatriate any requested objects to their spaces of origin, but importantly for the items that remain in our collection that we are instituting culturally-sensitive, -informed and -approved display, storage and handling.

Anticolonizing through collections development

Sara Wajid (2020) of the Museum of London points to another facet that is often left out of the discussion of decolonizing: ‘the museum’s ability to make exhibitions that [fight] against the dominant narrative [is] hampered by what the museum [has] previously collected under [the colonialist] mindset’. This suggests that it is not enough to face the challenges of an existing collection, but we must be *anticolonizing* in our approach to growing collections. In part, this requires a rethinking of the canonical notions of the ‘value’ of objects by moving away from definitions based on European supremacy (Momaya 2018: 18). In her principles for an ‘Anti-Racist, Anti-Orientalist, Activist Approach to Collections’, Momaya (2018:16) notes that this rethinking actively asks for the ‘co-construction of meaning and destabilizing the notion of authority as residing in one party’ – that is, collecting objects important to a people or community *as defined by* that people or community rather than solely based on external curatorial selection.

To facilitate this more inclusive view of collecting, while writing a Collections Development Plan for GHM, I learned from the anticolonizing collecting ideals behind the Greensboro Contemporary Jewish Museum. Part exhibition, part social space and part communal dialogue, the Contemporary Jewish Museum (Kedem 2019: 14) centered on ‘recognizing the vast expressions of Jewish identity in contemporary [...] Greensboro.’ In asking members of the community to ‘Please share a personal object that is imbued with significance to you as a Jew’ (Kedem 2019: 31), the objects – inclusive of everything from a space-themed stamp album to Tupperware to needlepoint pillows to Star of David necklaces – allowed the bearer to speak their own histories, and allowed space for Judaism to exist in plural and outside of a strictly religious context. This approach honors the democratic maxim ‘Nothing about us without us’, works to correct the top-down colonial view of knowledge construction embodied by many museums and allows development of a multivocal collection. (See figure 3)

GHM aims to create similar dialogues during the development and expansion of collections from LGBTQIA2+; immigrant, refugee, and displaced; disability and unhoused communities. One way we have started implementing these new collecting practices is by incorporating them into an existing program. For the last few years, GHM has been hosting Community Voices exhibits where a local group – such as a club, faith group or organization – creates a

small exhibition in the lobby space of the museum for a short time. They choose the objects and images, write labels and even host events surrounding the display. Building on these moments of trust, we have begun working with the people represented to see if they are willing to donate the objects and their stories to the museum. Two recent exhibits – *Southern Mix and Expressions of Pride* – have resulted in an addition of collections items from the Asian American and LGBTQIA2+ communities, respectively, that we otherwise may not have had access to. Both the exhibitions and the collecting also promote the museum as a space where these traditionally underrepresented communities see a place for themselves and their histories.

This approach to collecting is also more holistic in the sense that it includes the records and documents associated with objects (including but not limited to acquisition and accession paperwork, object research, digital records, donor statement of purpose and label work) as part of and informative to the collection. Rather than viewing these documents as purely legal or as a product for display that is then discarded, anticolonial approaches to collecting see them as an additional space for inclusivity and expanding the relationship between donor and museum. They are a space of learning in terms of inclusive language, handling and display practices and in transmitting the knowledge of a person or community in their own words. For example, as we have worked with the Montagnard communities in Greensboro, we have made sure that our records include the name of the item in the language of the maker and donor – Jarai, Rhade, Bunong, Bahnar, or Koho – first, with English second: e.g., ‘Reomnga, gathering basket’.



Figure 3: This installation photograph shows some of the objects, both religious and secular in nature, collected for the Greensboro Contemporary Jewish Museum project in 2019. To the left is a red table that encouraged communal sharing and dialogue, prompting visitors to ‘Please share a personal object imbued with significance to you as a Jew’. Courtesy of Greensboro Contemporary Jewish Museum Archive, 2020

Repairing the past

The de-, post- and anticolonial practices outlined above propose new methods of collecting, caring for and exhibiting objects that go beyond an expansion of perspectives in museums to also include removal of objects from collections (decolonial), propose new methods of care that do not perpetuate colonial ideologies (postcolonial) and grow collections in ways that assure colonial practices are not repeated moving forward (anticolonial). All of these practices bear directly on the human remains discovered in the GHM storage room. While there was no associated paperwork, clues throughout records and within the bones themselves suggested that they represented Indigenous ancestors.⁵ Staff have compiled both a Summary and an Inventory for the National NAGPRA Database and are working to repatriate these ancestors back to their kin. *But that is the legal minimum.* Their presence in the collection has made me think deeply about the concept of decolonization and how it ties in with reparations – a term often used in reference to those whose ancestors were part of the Western system of chattel enslavement.

Expanding the term ‘reparations’ more broadly to represent our ‘collective debt of colonial theft, oppression, and genocide’ (Brooks 2019) of all forms, these ancestors ask how GHM can make a reparation for their presence in the collection that also honors de-, post- and anticolonial collecting practices. Following Elizabeth Merritt (2019), the museum can make a meaningful intervention in three broad ways: ‘culturally, through the narratives [we] tell; economically, through how [we] manage [our] money; and systemically, through how [we] share [our] power.’ GHM can enact this by first, using the museum’s status as a trusted source of information (American Alliance of Museums 2021) to collect and showcase historical *and* contemporary Indigenous narratives and objects. Second, by using organizational funds to support reparative economic practices, including working and partnering with local, minority or women-owned businesses and organizations and investing in community driven programming and collecting. And third, by reversing the flow of social assets by diversifying our board, staff and volunteers and involving the community in decisions surrounding when, where, if, how and for how long artifacts are showcased and stored in the museum. For, as scholars note, we are not actively doing the work without ‘situating collecting in the larger context of activist views/approaches to *all* of museum practice’ (Momaya 2018: 16).

In sum, staff at GHM can do de-, post- and anticolonizing work: we can return objects to the peoples and spaces from which they were wrongfully removed; we can learn how to properly wrap Jewish tefillin and how to store Muslim prayer rugs; we can make sure we know what artifacts cannot be handled by women or during menstruation; we can ritually feed and offer; we can work with the community to help us collect and write. But we are not *actually* doing the work unless those represented by the artifacts are involved from the beginning, consistently, and their voices are represented in our leadership, records, policies, collection storage and exhibition spaces.

Notes

- 1 Museums Association. (No date). 'Museums as Spaces and Places', Campaigns: Decolonising Museums, <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/supporting-decolonisation-in-museums/museums-as-spaces-and-places/#>>, accessed September 12, 2024.
- 2 In the United States, some of these governing laws include the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA); the Holocaust Era Art Recovery Act (HEAR Act); the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); Standing Rules of Engagement (ROE); the Liber Code; Bill HR1047 for the Emergency Protection for Iraq Cultural Antiquities Act, imposed under the section of the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act (CCIPA); the 1970 UNESCO Convention against Illicit Export under the Act to implement the convention (the Cultural Property Implementation Act); and UNIDROIT (International Institute for the Unification of Private Law) Convention on Stolen or Illicitly Exported Cultural Objects of 1995.
- 3 Official policy with regards to war trophies gave troops a fair amount of latitude as long as they followed key limitations, which can broadly be said to be those in accord with the Geneva Convention and War Department Policy Circulars. With regards to the former, this mainly related to the possessions of POWs, with the policy being that 'all effects and articles of personal use, except arms, horses, military equipment and military documents shall remain in the possession of prisoners of war, likewise their metal helmets and gas masks and like articles issued for personal protection' (Diplomatic Convention 1949). Any money was supposed to be accounted for, with the POW provided a receipt, and no identification documents, medals, insignia, etc. were allowed to be taken from those captured, nor from the dead. These items *could* be bartered for or bought, however, which was considered lawful. Similarly, if found abandoned on the battlefield, such items were also fair game. The general rule to be followed on the battlefield was that 'under no circumstances may war trophies include any item which in itself is evidence of disrespectful treatment of the enemy dead' (AFYB-SJA-AL 2011).
- 4 Many antiquities left Egypt when the country was under colonial rule, making tracing their history and origins difficult at best, and Egypt's Repatriation of Antiquities Department of the Ministry of Culture understandably appears to have focused first on restituting items with exceedingly clear provenance. The three ushtabi that have been returned to Egypt include one found in Mexico and associated with an illegal excavation and smuggling (*Archaeology Magazine* 2016), one located in London that was stolen from an excavation storehouse in Aswan (*Archaeology Magazine* 2017) and one that was stolen from the Egyptian Museum during the January 25, 2011 uprising (El-Aref 2013).
- 5 The sole piece of paper found with the human remains was a list of the different bones included in the bag, which additionally included part of a deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) mandible. Visual inspection of the remains showed wear on the teeth that is consistent with Indigenous people in early and colonial America, and nothing in the inspection was

definitive that these were not Indigenous remains. It was also noted that the remains appeared to have been rearticulated using wires as well as an adhesive made from a dirt/glue mixture at some time in the past. Sincere appreciation to Robert Anemone in the UNCG Department of Anthropology for his assistance in this inspection.

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Decolonial practices

In front of our eyes, yet under the carpet. Reinterpreting the heritage of African slave communities in Lisbon

Joana Sousa Monteiro & Paulo Almeida Fernandes

Biography

Joana Sousa Monteiro has been director of the Museum of Lisbon since 2015. She was a museum adviser to the Lisbon Councillor for Culture (2010-2014) for the reprogramming of the local museums' management model. She was Assistant Coordinator of the Portuguese Museums Network, which established the first national museum accreditation system under the National Institute of Museums (2000-2010). Previously, she worked at the Institute of Contemporary Art (1997-2000) and the National Museum of Contemporary Art (1994) in the making of learning programmes and art exhibitions.

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She serves the International Council of Museums as Co-Chair of the Strategic Plan Committee Working Group. Before that position, she was a member of the Portuguese ICOM National Committee Board (2014-2016), a board member of the International Committee for the Collections and Activities of the Museums of Cities, CAMOC (2013-2015), and Chair of CAMOC between 2016 and 2022.

Paulo Almeida Fernandes Head of research at the Museum of Lisbon, holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Coimbra, a MA in Art, Heritage and Restoration and a degree in History, specialising in Art History, from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon. He is an Invited Assistant Professor of History of Art at NOVA University of Lisbon and an integrated researcher of the Institute of History of Art at the same university. Studying the role of Lisbon as world's leading slave port of the Modern era, co-curated the temporary exhibition Coexistence. Plural Lisbon (2019) and co-wrote the book Testimonies of Slavery. The African memory at the Museum of Lisbon (2017). He is a member of the research project Challenging the past. Patronage and agency of people of African birth or descent in early modern arts and architecture in Portugal during the Transatlantic slave trade (2025-2026).

Introduction

The memory of the presence of over four hundred centuries of enslaved African communities is virtually invisible in present-day Lisbon. Not only did the city's renovation after the 1755 earthquake bury ancient marks, but the end of the slavery system in the Portuguese empire also led to a drastic change in the urban and social landscape.

Between the 15th and 20th centuries, Portugal expanded its empire, focusing primarily on Angola, Mozambique and Guinea, as well as vast regions in Brazil and some in South Asia. Although Brazil gained independence in 1822, Salazar's dictatorship (1933-1974) fought against rebellions and independence movements in Africa and Asia from 1961 to 1974, attempting to maintain the imperial ideal. Nevertheless, the stories of the thousands of enslaved people were forgotten in archives and museum collections. Standard historical narratives, constructed to emphasise the glories of the Portuguese Empire and its colonial past, did not encourage critical approaches to the global situation, thereby undermining important collections and data on the topic.

In recent years, the Museum of Lisbon has contributed to reinterpreting the hidden history of the African enslaved communities in the Portuguese capital. Surprisingly, plenty of relevant information remained in our collections, comprised mostly of ceramics, engravings, paintings, documents and tiles spanning from the 16th to the 19th centuries, with rich iconography related to the multicultural patterns of life in Lisbon.

By reinterpreting the museum's collections and placing them in their proper context in time and space, the Museum of Lisbon is promoting a fresh look at silenced stories that had been waiting for a voice. Research projects, temporary exhibitions, publications, and walking tours have been implemented with the help of local and international institutions and Afro-descent groups, contributing to a broader knowledge of the global scale of the slave trade and the role played by Lisbon and its traders.

Some of our collections depicting enslaved people or Afro-descendent workers in Lisbon were formerly seen as exotic aspects of our past communities. New research continues to unveil stories of forced labour, racism, and exclusion to date. Paintings, ceramic objects, and drawings gain completely new and contrasting meanings, questioning beliefs and assumptions and creating public space to highlight the rightful role of the African population in the history of a plural Lisbon.

A misleading starting point

The theme of historical visibility of enslaved African communities is not new. However, it is only recently that research lines have been consolidated in order to shed light on the previously unknown stories of significant characters spanning more than four centuries. Between the second half of the 19th century and the late 20th century, a considerable part of the historiography produced in Portugal on this matter was based on ideological frameworks that whitewashed national responsibility for the first period of the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans (Fonseca, 2014: 2). Going back to how history was written in the mid-20th century, it is common to find soft views of the so called “human” practises in the Portuguese empire, of the role of slavery as a step towards integration into Christian civilisation, and even of the scarce African cultural and demographic contribution to Portuguese society. At the end of the 20th century, José Ramos Tinhorão still referred to enslaved African communities in Portugal as a ‘quiet presence’ (Tinhorão, 1988). This expression subtly refers to the censorship that occurred under Salazar’s regime, which explicitly condemned any criticism of the supposed wonders of colonialism.

Some (wrong) assumptions can still be found in various historical narratives, such as in textbooks, media reports and even some research papers. The most common misconception is that the Marquis of Pombal abolished slavery in 1761, which would have made Portugal one of the first countries to do so. This idea artificially defends Portuguese history against accusations made since the first half of the 19th century: that Portugal was slow to abolish slavery. What the Marquis of Pombal established on September 19, 1761, was a ban on the entry of more enslaved Africans into mainland Portugal so that labour would not be removed from Brazil (Ramos, 1971: 170-171). Slavery in Portugal was only abolished in 1869.

Despite many years of research, there is still not enough data about the enslaved people who were traded. This includes information on how they arrived in Lisbon, how they lived, whether they married or ran away, and whether they were freed. *Floor of Shadows* (Pimentel, 2010) and *Sounds of Silence* (Marques, 1999) are two books that demonstrate the cloak of invisibility that has fallen over this subject for decades. Much was done to keep the memory of the African enslaved communities duly invisible, which corresponded to a political strategy, namely during the dictatorship (1926 – 1974).

Nonetheless, the amount of information and material left behind by enslaved African communities is remarkable. Studies of these groups have progressed more since the beginning of the 21st century than during the entire 20th century. In-depth research carried out in archives and museum collections has opened new ways of viewing and understanding the topic.

Asking new questions

In 2017, the Municipality of Lisbon and the Ministry of Culture launched the programme *Testimonies of Slavery* programme, as a part of the events of Lisbon - Ibero-American Capital of Culture. Under that project, we searched the Museum of Lisbon’s collections dedicated to the history of Lisbon for information and iconography about enslaved, freed, and free African people. Unlike our expectations, we found several pieces of interest that had never before been seen as conveying information about slavery in Lisbon and the Empire, including some that were on display. Moreover, little was known about these objects, with no indication of provenance prior to their integration in the museum’s collections.

The need for a deeper knowledge of the museum’s collections, including the correction of mistakes of interpretation, meaning, and context, was only the first step in long-term research. The Lisbon Museum, alongside partners from academia and local stakeholders such as associations of people of African descent, moved on to the city itself. They searched for remains of the slave trade and African communities from the 15th to 19th centuries in the physical landscape of Lisbon. The survey revealed surprisingly well-preserved evidence, such as works of art financed by the “black brotherhoods” (as they were called in the documents of the time), housing areas of these communities that can still be identified, and public and private buildings related to merchants in the port of Lisbon who benefited from the slave system.

Guided by the question, ‘What does this have to do with the role of Lisbon as the world’s leading slave port of the Modern era?’, we have carried out extensive research and are developing programmes alongside national and international partners.

The first exhibition by the Lisbon Museum that tackled the subject was *Plural Lisbon*, 2019, in which there was a section dedicated to the history of Lisbon’s enslaved and freed African communities. Since then, we have delivered a programme under the title *Invisible Places of Slavery*, comprising sets of talks and three walking tours in the city: *Destination Lisbon*, *Living Lisbon*, and *Freedom Lisbon*. A fourth tour, *African Lisbon*, has been co-curated with Batoto Yetu (a Cap-Verdean cultural association).

The Museum of Lisbon was a partner in the organisation of the international conference *Reckoning with Racism - The Social Memory of the Slave Trade*, 2023, Lisbon, when we had the opportunity to consolidate the ongoing partnership with the Slave Wrecks Project / the Smithsonian Institution, as well as a Portuguese association of experts on the insurance history, included that of the transatlantic travels



Figure 1: Ex-voto with a black couple praying to Our Lady of the Rosary Unknown author, 17th century, Oil on canvas and woodwork Church of Saint Catherine, Lisbon Photo by José Avelar / Museum of Lisbon

The role of a city museum in the process of changing minds

The Lisbon Museum is researching and conveying the impact of slavery on the history of Lisbon. The following topics and examples illustrate how this work is progressing:

1. **Patrons and agents involved in the arts.** African communities established in Lisbon was also responsible for artistic creation. *The project Challenging the past. Patronage and agency of people of African birth or descent in early modern arts and architecture in Portugal during the Transatlantic slave trade (1486-1836)*, led by the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology and which includes a member of the Lisbon Museum's research team, has revealed information about artistic patronage within Lisbon's African community. Some works are better

known, such as Simoa Godinho's funerary chapel in the old church of Misericórdia de Lisboa. Others remain unclear, such as a representation of Our Lady of the Rosary commissioned by an unknown African couple, who replicated a Western artistic commissioning model. (See figure 1)

2. **Street names uncovered.** The Lisbon Museum has been an active agent in recovering memories of slavery in contemporary Lisbon, by means of conveying untold stories in books, exhibitions and walking tours like the one going past José António Pereira Lane. Pereira (1751-1817) was one of the most successful merchants of the late 18th century and early 19th century. The basis of his commerce was "to extract slaves from African provinces" (as it was stated in 19th century documents referring to his actions and business). He had his own ships and introduced thousands of enslaved people working in Pará and Maranhão (Brazil). Paradoxically, his name was given to this street in Lisbon after slavery was abolished in Portugal.

There are lesser-known cases, such as Nova de Santos Lane, where Pai (Father) Paulino used to live. Little is known about this enslaved man, who was probably of Brazilian origin. He was a hero in the uprisings alongside King Pedro IV (Emperor Pedro I of Brazil), which culminated in the Liberal Revolution in Portugal. He was one of the most influential men in Lisbon, a bagpiper among the "St George Blacks" musicians, and a member of brotherhoods that protected African communities and fought for the rights of African communities and the abolition of slavery. Upon his death, the artist Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro made a bust of him in earthenware. (See figure 2)

3. **Urban myths demystified.** There are ongoing arguments about certain aspects of the city's history with no scientific basis neither archaeological evidence. That is the case of the myth that associates the name of Poço dos Negros (Black Well) Street with the decision of King Manuel I in 1515 to open a deep well to deposit African enslaved corpses. As historian Ana Paula Antunes points out (2017: 14-15), baptism was not only compulsory for enslaved people, but burial was also something that the brotherhoods were responsible for ensuring. Moreover, the toponym was only recorded more than a century after this alleged decision. There is a more plausible explanation: it was a well that belonged to Saint Benedict's Monastery of Health (São Bento da Saúde), whose monks wore a black habit. The well, located near the monastery fence, would ultimately benefit the neighbouring population; thus, being an element of life, not death.



Figure 2: Bust of Father Paulino, Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro (1846-1905), Earthenware Factory of Caldas da Rainha, 1893, Earthenware, Museu Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro, Lisbon, MRBP.CER.0736 Photo by José Avelar / Museum of Lisbon

4. **Voices of resistance to be revealed.** For over four centuries, there were voices of resistance against the slave system in Portugal. One was uttered by around 400 enslaved Africans who, in 1580, in exchange for a promise of freedom, abandoned their masters to join the fight against the Spanish Army. This episode is just one of many revealing the vitality of the enslaved African community who lived in Lisbon and dared to face the colonizers, but whose names remain unknown.
5. **A slow process towards abolition: networks of influence.** The financing of the voyages that fuelled the Middle Passage is just one dimension of the wealth generated in Portugal by the cruel business of slavery. Another dimension was how sluggishly different governments of the Constitutional Monarchy legislated on the progressive reduction of human trafficking and slavery while being unable to implement the law. The full extent of the network of influence that was active in Lisbon during the 19th century is yet to be fully uncovered.

6. **New perspectives on the colonial past.** The ideas and meanings given to Lisbon's history are changing alongside research and public awareness. Although there is widespread knowledge that Lisbon was the world's first port for the transatlantic slave trade, there is still some resistance and misunderstanding. This explains why it took the Batoto Yetu Association four years to label twenty monuments and places to tell the story of African Lisbon, or the also long and conflictual story of the Memorial to Enslaved People, titled *Plantation - Prosperity and Nightmare*, by Kiluanji Kia Henda, presented in 2017 and yet to be built. We have found resistance - sinonimo - in national and local authorities and individuals from the audiences and fellow historians. (See figure 3)

Over the last decades, museums have become accessible and inclusive institutions in their spaces, exhibitions, publications and communication, with the purpose of creating a sense of belonging. As much as this goal seems obvious, the path is not clear nor straightforward, and success still feels far. This project is a part of a wider process of decolonising the interpretation of our museum's collections and the narratives about the history of the city, commonly to many other museums of former imperial countries.



Figure 3: Inauguration of the bust of Father Paulino. By the Mayor of Lisbon, Carlos Moedas, Largo de São Domingos, 2024, January 13 Photo by Américo Simas (Lisbon Municipal Council), Departamento e Marca e Comunicação da Câmara Municipal de Lisboa

According to George Abungu (2019), Western museums rooted in times of conquest and colonialisms of various natures have collections with controversial, sometimes contradictory contexts. Today, it is crucial to demand a more profound knowledge of collections. If we want inclusive museums that serve society, this must be achieved without paternalism or condescension, but through a conscious sense of duty and coherence. One of the major goals is to unveil stories and people that turn out to be as relevant as the traditional glorious episodes of the past—if not more.

The “Survey on the presence of heritage from non-European territories in Portuguese museums”, conducted by ICOM Portugal in 2021 and commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, is worth mentioning as a first gesture on a much-needed area of research in this country. It is expected that more museums, social movements, and countries will endeavour to shed light on the incoherences between museums' missions and their actions. The Lisbon Museum is committed to embracing critical approaches to our local and national history, which we affirm as multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious to this day.

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