

MUSEU AFRO BRASIL: DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES OF THE COLLECTION DOCUMENTATION¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss the difficulties and challenges of the documentation of Museu Afro Brasil's collection, a museological institution which is peculiar by the specificity of its curatorial philosophy and also by the historical formation of its collection, strictly related to the trajectory of its founder.

To illustrate some of these difficulties, we will take as a case study a work entitled "Iemanjá", a sculpture in wood from the 19th Century elaborated by an unknown popular artist, that even inserted in a museological context, has continued to incorporate material elements that are extrinsic to the work, but directly connected to a devotional function, which has been given to it already in the musealization context.

Keywords: collection management, curator, collector, musealisation, Iemanjá

INTRODUCTION

Museu Afro Brasil, located in Sao Paulo (Brazil), is a public institution founded in 2004, from the particular collection of the artist, curator and collector Emanoel Araujo (1940). The collection, consisting primarily of works that reveal the contribution of black

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people for the history of Brazil, is quite diverse and includes from historical documents to contemporary art.

This study aims precisely to identify the difficulties that are inherent to the documentation professionals performance in this museological institution, fully linked to the professional and intellectual career of its creator. These difficulties are related both to the specificities of his curatorial philosophy, which is based on the search of intersections of the African reminiscences in the Brazilian culture, as to the composition of his collection.

It is necessary to mention that a significant part of the curatorial proposal of the Museu Afro Brasil was gestated during years of research done by Emanuel Araujo. These researches culminated in the realization of many projects, such as the exhibition and publication “*A mão afro-brasileira*” (The Afro-Brazilian hand), dated 1988, and the curatorship of the exhibition center “*Negro de corpo e alma*” (Black in body and soul), from the “*Mostra do Redescobrimento*” (Rediscovery Show), in 2000.

The exhibition core organized by collector Emanuel Araujo in the *Mostra do Redescobrimento* (Rediscovery Show), sought to contemplate from the African kidnapping process – which was driven by the slavery – until the resumption of self-esteem of the Brazilian society, and especially black populations, through arts, history and memory. The same purpose was put into practice later in Museu Afro Brasil’s long-term exhibition.

MUSEALISATION IN MUSEU AFRO BRASIL

The musealisation can be understood as the process of reframing imposed to the artifacts of the material culture that were previously integrated into society by its functional and utilitarian character and then acquire an exceptional status. This happens because such objects come to represent an idea, a story or something else beyond their primary functional originality, turning into a unique specimen. Thus, through the particular contextualization that each museological institution infers on its items, they become explored in their informative potential in scientific, social, political, economical, cultural, religious, among other fields. Therefore, they become a museum object (DESVALLÉES; MAIRESSE, 2013, p. 56).

In Museu Afro Brasil, this conceptual transposition does not happen in an easy way, because its curatorial dynamic, guided by collectors' practices that are characterized by spontaneity and fragmentation of information, accredits certain freedom in the way the museographical arrangements are created. This approach is problematic to the documentation proceedings in museums as long as the artifact in Museu Afro Brasil undergoes direct interference of its curator, which creates new meanings for the object.

To illustrate these challenges, we will take as example a wood carving called "Iemanjá", owned by the founder of the museum and safeguarded in the long-term exhibition via a loan



Figure 1 - Iemanjá, sculpture in wood from the 19th Century elaborated by an unknown popular artist. 9,64 x 5.11 x 5,19 inches



Figure 2 - Iemanjá on the long-term exhibition

IEMANJÁ

Iemanjá is part of the pantheon of orishas, Yoruba deities related to the nature and worshiped in countries like Nigeria, Benin and Togo. Introduced in Brazil by enslaved people that came from these specific areas of the African continent, Iemanjá is considered in Brazil as the goddess of the seas and oceans, besides that she is seen as a great mother. (which is symbolized by her large breasts).

Restricted before to Candomblé and Umbanda houses of worship, over the years Iemanjá became a symbol of Brazil's national culture and now is revered at festivities

that take place in several Brazilian cities. In the city of Salvador, State of Bahia, for example, the celebration of Iemanjá takes place on February 2nd and has as central point the temple called "*Casa de Iemanjá*" (Iemanjá's house), located in the Rio Vermelho neighborhood. However, this temple receives devotees throughout the year, who offer as tribute to this divinity, "gifts" as perfumes, soaps, food and decoration items such as mirrors and jewelry. In addition to the celebrations in honor of Iemanjá, it is also a common practice in Brazil, during the New Year's celebrations, throwing offerings to the sea in exchange for requests for protection and prosperity to this divinity.

Not by chance, Museu Afro Brasil has in its collection a considerable amount of objects related to the orishas. Emanuel Araujo, as well as he lived part of his life in the Bahia State que also have great interest on the subject, as an initiated in Candomblé religion, which leads us to understand the interferences on the sculpture that will be further analyzed below.

Regarding specifically the orisha Iemanjá, it is possible to say that Museu Afro Brasil currently exhibits around twenty seven objects related to this Yoruba divinity, and most of them are related to the figure of the mermaid, a mythical being that in Brazil was linked to Iemanjá because of their direct relationship with water. Also, due to the intense contact between afro-Brazilian religions established in Brazil and Catholicism, this divinity has also been associated with Christian Marian images, such as different "*Nossas Senhoras*" ("Our Ladies") "*Nossa Senhora da Conceição*", "*Nossa Senhora dos Navegantes*" "*Nossa Senhora do Carmo*" and "*Nossa Senhora das Candeias*"

MUSEOLOGICAL DOCUMENTATION

For the specific methodological procedures of organization and management of information of the artifacts collected in the Museu Afro Brasil, which are carried out by the museological documentation, the agency of the collector/curator interferes in the process of systematization of information of the artifacts, regarding their origin, acquisition, authorship, history of performance in other exhibitions and even the legitimacy of the artifact as a representative of a hegemonic form of religious or cultural practice, as is evidenced in this case with the Iemanjá sculpture. The artifact is decontextualized (MENESES, 1994, p. 30).

Through the analysis of evidences on the object and the investigation of the artifact in exhibition catalogs, it is evident that the Iemanjá studied in this presentation has undergone transformations that distort the understanding the artifact.

It is also important to mention that the process of musealisation should not be understood as a pure, romantic, positivist movement, but an action that many times is orchestrated, brokered by specific interests. The museum should not be seen as a holder of absolute truths, but as a space of intermediation between objects that previously integrated the society and had utility and now, in a museum, reflect a possibility of understanding of their role in the society which they belonged to.

It cannot be ignored that the musealisation process is carried out by people who have well-defined perspectives of thinking, which reflect institutional or individual wills. In this way, the museological documentation should serve the problematizing investigation, to the extent that technical professionals cannot shirk from addressing occurrences of this magnitude. This presentation intents to indicate a possibility of acting in related situations, given that the historical documented survey of the artifact will be used to map those “curatorial agencies”.

IEMANJÁ DOCUMENTATION

By the historical research it is possible to realize in advance that this item of the museum’s founder collection does not appear in its originality. The first indication of interference concerns a hole in the top of the head of the female figure. In the left image, it is possible to see that the drilling was held very little skillfully, not respecting the centrality of the head of the sculpture.



Figure 3 - Hole in the top of the head of the female figure

In the work in which it currently stands, the drilling accommodates an adornment object called “resplendor”, which is a characteristic from the production of Christian holy imaginary. This item, which must be positioned on the head of the sculpture, intends to represent a halo and indicates that the object portrays a person canonized by the Catholic Church. Usually, the sculptures of Our Lady also have this circle with sustained rays on their head, as shown below in the sculptures of “*Nossa Senhora da Conceição*” and “*Nossa Senhora das Dores*”, from Museu de Arte Sacra de São Paulo (Sacred Art Museum of São Paulo - Brazil).



Figure 4 - Iemanjá (Museu Afro Brasil), Our Lady of Conception and Our Lady of Sorrows (Museu de Arte Sacra)

Another point to be considered is the girded cord in the neck of the female figure. Observing it, it is possible to notice that it has a crucifix on its end comprises beads throughout its length. These beads are a kind of guide to the prayers. It is an object that remits to a “rosary” of the Catholic worship.

Based on the survey of images of the same work in publications such as exhibition catalogs, it was possible to notice that the sculpture has been already exposed without any adornment. It happened in the exhibition “*A mão afro-brasileira*” (The Afro-Brazilian hand), dated 1988, and also in the show “*Arte e Religiosidade no Brasil*” (Art and Religiosity in Brazil), dated 1997, both held in Sao Paulo, as the image below shows. It seems that Iemanjá has first received adornments when exposed in the “*Mostra do Redescobrimento*” (Rediscovery Show) in 2000. The same adornments have appeared in this work too when it was exposed on the show “*Para Nunca esquecer: negras memórias, memórias de negros*” (For Never Forget: memories black, black’s memories “), held in 2001, in Rio de Janeiro, and later in São Paulo, in 2003.



Figure 5 - On the left, Iemanjá sculpture unadorned exposed in exhibitions of 1988 and 1997. On the right the same sculpture appears adorned in exhibitions held in 2000, 2001 and 2003

However, it was at Museu Afro Brasil that the work has undergone more changes concerning the incorporation of adornments. In the catalog of the collection of the Museu Afro Brasil that was published in 2010, the work presents the same “rosary” in the neck that was already presented in previous versions; however, in this publication, it still appears with two other necklaces, and one of them is crossed by the statuette body. Despite the presentation of a “*resplendor*”, it is possible to notice that it is not the same head adornment previously incorporated to the work.



Figure 6 - Sculpture published in the collection of catalog entitled “*Museu Afro Brasil: um conceito em perspectiva*”, published in 2010 (SP: Banco Safra).

What are the impacts of these interferences for the understanding of museum objects? And what are the issues involved in the documentation process?

CONCLUSION

If the museum object can be understood as a material, symbolic and functional witness of an example of the daily which is temporarily unable to exercise their utility (or feature) and becomes a carrier of a meaning, a “semiophore” (POMIAN, 1996, p. 5). In this perspective, the observer expects the museum object to be “the” example of reality.

When faced with examples of the Iemanjá sculpture, the documentation technical professional must take measures to protect the historical research through records like the ones made in this case study.

In situations like this, in which it is at stake collectors practices, documentation in museums must observe these cases through the historical perspective, that discusses also the trajectory of the people in relation to their objects. What must not be overlooked is the fact that the musealisation infers meanings to the artifact and it is the role of the museum documentation to trace the discursive construction established by the agency determined by particular tastes.

However, some issues prevent this kind of work of being fully and completely done in Museu Afro Brasil. There is a problem regarding the organization of the work procedures which directly affects the dynamics of the museum. There are cases in which the changes in the works at the long-term exhibition are not properly communicated to the technical teams that are responsible for documentation and research. It is possible to notice that the museum’s priority are the short-term exhibitions and the documentation of the long-term items is left as a background task.

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