‘¿Para qué un museo?’: A reflection from Latin America upon the fragility and necessity of museums

Manuel Burón, Irina Podgorny and Nathalie Richard

Introduction

There are no more contradictory conceptions of what constitutes a museum than those presented in two twenty-first-century films directed by Siberian filmmaker Alexander Nikoleyevich Sokurov (1951–): one, devoted to the Louvre (*Francofonia*, Франкофония, 2014), the other to the Hermitage (*Russian Ark*, Русский ковчег, 2002). Although Sokurov considered these two films as part of a series devoted to museums and human cultural heritage, their contrasting structures could not create a sharper contrast. Whereas *Francofonia* is a collage that combines fragments of fictional representation and archival material, the *Russian Ark* is filmed in a single unedited shot of 96 minutes in which an unnamed narrator wanders through the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg accompanied by ‘the European’. In each room, they encounter various real and fictional people from various periods in the city’s 300-year history, such as Tsar Peter the Great and poet Alexander Pushkin. The museum and the film appear as the material representations of continuity in history, an impression reinforced by the single-shot filming technique.

In contrast, *Francofonia* is the story of two enemies who become collaborators: the Louvre director Jacques Jaujard (1895–1967) and the historian of art and Nazi occupation officer Count Franz von Wolff-Metternich (1893–1978), who was in charge of the Kunstschutz (German art protection office). Their alliance would be the driving force behind the preservation of museum treasures during one of the last century’s bloodiest conflicts. The film begins with a ship in a storm occurring in our times, in no precise place, carrying an important museum collection. In the storm, a person aboard corresponds by Skype to warn of the danger that menaces the containers, a conversation that reappears repeatedly interrupting the historical events from World War II. At the end, it seems that all the containers were lost at sea, a reminder of how the inheritance received by future generations from the past is dispersed by chance and accident and that the continuity suggested by the *Russian Ark*—the film and the museum—is just an artifice.[1]

Sokurov’s metaphor is clear: museums are menaced by human and non-human circumstances: fires, political crises, wars, floods, plagues and changing cultural policies. The unpredictability of museum experience is almost absent from historiography. Studies

1 Irina Podgorny and Miruna Achim, ‘Les musées et les naufrages de l’histoire’, *Communications* 2, no. 113 (2023): 91–9, doi.org/10.3917/commu.113.0091.

have focused on the success of metropolitan institutions and on portraying museums as solid and powerful structures characterised by permanence and stability. One of the few exceptions is the Italian historian Adalgisa Lugli who, in 1983, drew attention to the perishable character of collections and museums:

> Without doubt, there is no more ephemeral vehicle than the collection, to which we can entrust an idea or an image of the world. The work-collection is incredibly perishable, corroded by an almost pathetic fragility, exposed as it is to dispersal, to the continual movement that displaces objects, removes them from one group to deposit them in another, or isolates them definitively … It could be considered as the place of non-existence, similar to the shore of the sea, a very particular and elusive space because it is perpetually disrupted by the coming and going of the wave. In the collection, therefore, repeated contrasting movements continually alter the physiognomy of the whole, preventing it from achieving the stability of identification. Let's say, at the very least, that the definitive moment of the collection lasts a very short time.[2]

While Lugli was describing early modern cabinets of curiosities—such as those analysed by Julius von Schlosser in his seminal work *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens* (1908) or by Paula Findlen in *Possessing Nature* (1994)—we want to emphasise in this article that the perishable nature of collections remains a characteristic of them even today. To think about the museum in terms of its perishable nature, the article presents two Latin American examples. Far from presenting the history and complexity of Latin American museums, this article is a plea for a concept of the museum that acknowledges the idea of impermanence and perishability. For that purpose, we analyse historical circumstances in which the actors asked themselves why this or that museum had been created. We refer to provincial natural history museums in nineteenth-century Argentina and community collections in contemporary Mexico: two different contexts that reflect the importance of the fields of natural history and of anthropology in those countries. These two sections exemplify two historical trends. In the first, museums are understood as places to produce knowledge, linked to the materials needed for a scientific discipline and organised around the objects stored, but not always displayed, in its buildings. The collections analysed in this section as well as in the second, reveal that collecting occurred beyond the metropolis and involved professionals and vocational scientists self-organised around common interests and working in network.

2 Adalgisa Lugli, *Naturalia et Mirabilia. Les cabinets de curiosités en Europe* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1998), 91 (our translation). The fragility of museums has been a subject of reflection in the visual arts and appears in several exhibitions. For example, in 2012, Turin artists Hilario Isola and Matteo Norzi (1976–) presented *A Ballad of the Flooded Museum* in the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Venice. More recently, in 2021, the Danish artist Olafur Eliasson (1967–) flooded the Swiss Beyeler Foundation. In 2011, the Arp Museum/Bahnhof Rolandseck, located on the Rhein, hosted an installation by Swiss artists Gerda Steiner (1967–) and Jörg Lenzlinger (1964–) called *Hochwasser* (Flood), a show featuring the creative power of water in which trunks were put adjacent to stuffed animals and other decontextualised human objects, in what can be seen as another metaphor of what a museum is—the juxtaposition of decontextualised things; cf. Irina Podgorny, *Desubicados* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 2022). Some museums, such as the Ethnographic Museum of Neuchâtel are also working with the idea of impermanence, see 'The Impermanence of Things', accessed 25 November 2023, www.men.ch/en/exhibitions/spotlight/the-impermanence-of-things/.

The second refers to the late twentieth-century trope on the importance of community museums, namely the need to keep things where they belong. What happens when this is imposed over a community that does not care about museums? Why a museum at all?

International trends and temporalities characterise the history of worldwide museums, including those established in the Americas, where historiography has showed the existence of different museum 'waves', such as those museums created in the 1820s just after independence: Buenos Aires (1812–1823), Rio de Janeiro (1818), Santiago de Chile (1822), Bogotá en Colombia (1823), Ciudad de México (1825), Lima (1826) and Montevideo (1837).[3] In those years, museums emerged everywhere with a port that connected cities to the world, bringing and exporting objects, news and novelties. From Whitby in the UK to Charleston in North Carolina, the 1820s witnessed the establishment of untold numbers of museums, showing that what happened in Ibero-America was part of an international trend that perceived museums as something needed for being fashionable. Miruna Achim has characterised the period that started in the 1820s in the Americas as the 'trial years', meaning that museums—sometimes linked to a learned society that promoted the gathering and exchange of data and objects—had fragile existences, menaced by political turmoil and permanent financial crises.[4] Later some of those museums were re-founded, reoriented and renamed. Institutional historiographies have treated them as if they had remained the same all through their history, a problem anchored in the idea of permanence that veils the transformations and losses that marked their survival.

Argentina, 1902: Why a museum at all?

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Eduardo Alejandro Holmberg (1875–1923), a travelling naturalist from the Department of Agriculture and Livestock of the Argentine Ministry of Agriculture, was touring the country visiting the institutions that had been created in the youthful years of his father's generation. Among others, he visited several private and state-run museums founded in the 1880s in the cities of Córdoba, Corrientes and Paraná in the province of Entre Ríos. Paraná, between 1854 and 1861, had been the capital of the Argentine Confederation and the seat of the first national museum, which had had a short and virtual existence; the Museo Nacional vanished in the early 1860s and its collections were dispersed.[5]

Holmberg was dismayed. Not two decades had passed since its creation, but already things had returned to the dust from which, according to him, they should never have emerged. The Polytechnic Museum of Córdoba, a private museum founded by Father Gerolamo Lavagna (1834–1911) occupied an old two-storey house where the fossil mammals were

3 Maria Margaret Lopes and Irina Podgorny, 'The Shaping of Latin American Museums of Natural History, 1850–1890', *Osiris* 15 (2000): 108–18, doi.org/10.1086/649321.

4 Miruna Achim, *From Idols to Antiquity: Forging the National Museum of Mexico* (London: University of Nebraska Press, London, 2017), doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1w6tbhz.

5 On Museo Nacional de Paraná see Irina Podgorny and M. Margaret Lopes, *El Desierto en una vitrina. Museos e historia natural en la Argentina* (Mexico: Limusa, 2008).

protected by cobwebs, the monkeys were moth-eaten and the birds slumped on their shelves. At the Paraná museum, a tilted ostrich covered with debris from the ceiling greeted visitors. It gave 'a disastrous impression, smelling of oblivion and looking like a vizcachera'.[6] The windows were broken and replaced by old newspapers. The one in Corrientes, just as neglected, was 'a pile of dead things'. In the fossil room, made from the leftovers of the museum in Paraná, dirt came in through the windows and boas and caimans hung in pieces. Holmberg continued his chronicle:

> In the courtyard, among the invasive shrubs, there are some meteorological instruments, with broken mercury columns and bent needles, which are wondering what they are for.
>
> *And now I ask myself, in view of the fact that the three institutions, victims of a common sin, are in equal conditions of oblivion; why do they exist, and for what purpose, if they do not respond to any need?* I have visited these museums several times in different periods and I have always found them silent, without visitors, without light. In all three I have asked myself: Who is coming? And in all three I have been told: Nobody; this is forgotten.
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> The Americans give very practical advice. Never try to represent more than what you are.
>
> The museums were founded more out of the need to take initiatives and do something very important than for other reasons. Governors and politicians found in their work a title worthy of honourable mention, as one cannot say to anyone, 'you have done wrong to give us a museum …' But I would like an answer to this single question: In all these years since they have been founded, has there been a single person (just one!) who has made a single consultation (just one!) on the shelves loaded with pieces?—Not one! I would like someone to tell me a lot, so that I can then ask how much these consultations have already cost. And no enquiries are made because they are neither collections nor anything else.[7]

According to Holmberg, Argentina's private and state-run provincial museums faced a sombre horizon. They were just invisible remains of the recent past.

Only recently historians have started reflecting upon the fact that collections and museums are very far from what the International Council of Museums (ICOM) defined in 2007 as a museum:

> A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.[8]

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6 *Vizcachera* refers to the burrow of *Lagostomus maximus*, a rodent from South America that collects branches and heavy objects to cover the burrow entrance. When they live close to human settlements, vizcachas tend to hoard brooms, tables, garden tools, firewood, trinkets, pieces of concrete and many human-made objects to cover the burrow, in fact a very similar image to that presented in a bigger scale in *Flood*, the exhibition at the Arp Museum.

7 Eduardo A. Holmberg, 'Museos provinciales y museos regionales', *Anales de la Sociedad Científica Argentina* 53 (1902): 272 (emphasis added).

8 International Council of Museums, 'Museum Definition', accessed 29 December 2023, icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/.

As this article shows, this is not what the history of museums demonstrates: collections and museums, are subject to the unexpected events of the future, and, as such, are the opposite of permanent.

First, in our Latin American case studies, we reflect on how the optimism that characterised the establishment of a new museum did not prevent its eventual disappearance. We begin by reviewing the history of late nineteenth-century Argentine provincial museums and argue that they are symptomatic of similar processes from other parts of the world. We refer to museums founded by the initiative of a collector who was able to create a space that was not completely private, nor completely public. Linked to the collector's identity, and alliances, when that person disappeared, the museum, without autonomy, was left adrift until, finally, it dispersed or returned to the dust of history.

Second, we analyse an entirely different case: twentieth-century Mexico, a country that managed to establish strong national institutions in a period of political stability, in particular, the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH). The INAH centralised a large part of the efforts for creating, cataloguing and preserving Mexican heritage through archaeology, anthropology, and the creation of national and regional museums. By examining a small museum located in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, we will show how the idea of a museum permeated the most remote corners of the country. We argue that the history of such regional museums provides a good way to think about the future of museums created in the present. Each section responds in a different way to the overarching question of the fragility of museums in the modern era, the first with a myriad of cases that reflects the sheer number of individuals that sustained the existence of those 'perishable' collections. We ask the reader to look at the names, sites and facts not as relevant per se but as an indicator of the dense and complex networks upon which the museums were reliant.

Birth, life and decline

Eduardo Alejandro, our travelling naturalist, was born into a family linked to museums and natural history collections. Brother-in-law of Juan B. Ambrosetti (1865–1917), the future director of the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Buenos Aires (established in 1904), he was one of the sons of the physician, botanist and zoologist Eduardo Ladislao Holmberg (1852–1937) who, by 1902, was director of the Zoological Garden (1888–1904) and a professor at the university and high schools of Buenos Aires. In 1879, E. Ladislao had expressed a similar discontent after visiting the Public Museum of Buenos Aires, at that time the capital of the province of the same name: from his point of view, its existence seemed to respond only to the interests, idleness and obsessions of its director, the Prussian zoologist Hermann Burmeister (1807–1892), in charge of it since the early 1860s.[9] The Museo Público (founded in 1823) was a general museum with an emphasis on natural history and, above all, zoology. It was one of the two museums supported by the provincial

9 Podgorny and Lopes, *El Desierto*.

government's budget: the second, the Museo Antropológico, had been created in 1878 thanks to the collections of Francisco Pascasio Moreno (1852–1919), who donated them to the province on the condition that he be appointed its perpetual director with a salary and staff. These were not the only museums in the city or in Argentina: they were joined by the museum of the Sociedad Científica, also in Buenos Aires, and less than a dozen private collections gathered in different parts of the country and dedicated, above all, to palaeontology, archaeology and anthropology, such as the one established in the Colegio Nacional de Tucumán (north-west Argentina) as a result of the archaeological excavations of a pre-Columbian site run by the college's Italian faculty members.[10]

Whereas the location and number of Argentine museums changed in the following decade, the dependence on the owner or their directors would not be modified: the will of the latter—as in the case of Burmeister—continued to determine the destiny and the rules that would govern the future of the collections. In this context, the nationalisation of the Public Museum in 1884 was followed by the disappearance of the Museo Antropológico de Buenos Aires, whose collections—following Moreno's alliances—were used to found the General Museum of La Plata, 60 kilometres south of Buenos Aires. La Plata, established in 1882, was the new provincial capital. Moreno would move with them into the monumental building specially designed to house them.

The National University of Cordoba, for its part, managed the establishment of collections for the science courses taught there, while the members of the Argentine Geographical Institute, established in Buenos Aires in 1879, promoted the installation of museums in several of its branches in the interior of the country. In addition, the work of palaeontologist Florentino Ameghino (1853–1911) on the fossil mammals of Argentina triggered enthusiasm for the country's extinct fauna, resulting in the proliferation of several museums, both private and/or administered by the provinces: among them were those of Córdoba, Paraná and Corrientes, the museums that Eduardo Alejandro Holmberg visited in 1900. Others emerged that were linked to primary and secondary schools: promoted by teachers, professors and the Ministry of Public Instruction, they consisted of collections bought in Buenos Aires or Europe, or resulting from the pupils' field study.[11]

At the University of Cordoba, after the attempt to establish an archaeological and anthropological museum, the National Congress approved a not very large sum for the conservation and promotion of a museum of anthropology and palaeontology. Due to financial difficulties, the minister of public instruction reduced the sum to a third.

10 *El sendero del tiempo y de las causas accidentales. Los espacios de la prehistoria en la Argentina* (Rosario: Prohistoria, 2009).
11 Irina Podgorny, *Florentino Ameghino y Hermanos. Empresa Argentinas de Paleontología ilimitada* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2021). On school and regional museums in Argentina, see Susana V. García, 'Museos escolares, colecciones y la enseñanza elemental de las ciencias naturales en la Argentina de fines del siglo XIX', História, Ciências, Saúde–Manguinhos 14, no. 1 (2007): 173–96, doi.org/10.1590/S0104-59702007000100009; 'Museos provinciales y redes de intercambio en la Argentina', in *Colecionismos, práticas de campo e representações*, ed. M. M. Lopes and A. Heizer (Paraíba; EDUEPB, 2011), 75–91, doi.org/10.7476/9788578791179.0007; 'La industria didáctica y las colecciones escolares en perspectiva histórica', in *Patrimonio histórico educativo. Investigaciones y experiencias en América Latina y Península Ibérica*, ed. M. Pelada (Buenos Aires; Huellas de la Escuela, 2015), 119–34.

The conservation of the museum was entrusted to the professor of zoology, who was also to oversee the zoological museum without receiving any additional payment. By 1885, it was considered that:

> Natural history museums in general, and in particular those of anthropology, palaeontology and mineralogy, do not have as their sole or main purpose the assembling of collections, but to allow the execution of methodical research that yields positive results, whose material is provided both by direct observations of site conditions and by the collections, which in this case serve as supporting documents.[12]

The collections were to be subordinated to this end and to a plan of regional explorations. The mineralogical museum of the university, under the professor of geology, was on a similar level to the most important museums in South America, compared with the one in Santiago de Chile, and abundant in a variety of metals and precious stones. The accumulation of materials led to their invisibility: the lack of cabinets and the lack of space in the rooms denied the possibility of exhibiting them. Despite this, by 1900, the museums of the University of Cordoba were, according to Eduardo A. Holmberg, well kept: the herbaria, the minerals and the stuffed animals were well cared for by the professors in charge. This situation reveals that the state of the collections depended on an individual, a fact that represented the root of the problem: more than an institutional will, the conservation of the collection was the work of a specific person. The museum could vanish with his death, resignation or retirement, which was what had happened in Paraná, Corrientes and at the Politécnico de Córdoba as well as in many other university collections in the world.[13] Holmberg in 1902 pointed out that these museums were under the responsibility of people with good intentions but with no training, a shortcoming linked to the fact that the museums had emerged with enthusiasm but no real vision of their future. Institutional weakness and dependence on the collector's life and will were the components of the constellations that lead to the situation Holmberg observed, in clear opposition with the optimism that characterised their founding moments.

For example, when Florentino Ameghino visited Paraná in October 1884, he was impressed by the palaeontological collections of the museum directed and founded by the Italian teacher Pedro Scalabrini (1848–1916). There he found 60 new species of fossil mammals, thousands of specimens of fossil reptiles, and an incomparable number of fish and mollusca. Excursions by museum employees and donations, such as those from the governor of Entre Ríos, General Eduardo Racedo (1843–1918), and the young Entre Ríos native Juan Bautista Ambrosetti, increased the provincial museum's holdings. Racedo's collections included 34 minerals; fossil and living plants; radiolaria and mollusca, as well

12 Florentino Ameghino, 'Informe sobre el Museo Antropológico y Paleontológico de la Universidad Nacional de Córdoba durante el año 1885', *Boletín de la Academia Nacional de Ciencias* 8 (1885): 347–60.

13 This was, for example the case of Canberra's Institute of Anatomy, a fate to be found in several American and British colleges, where lost museums and collections are uncountable. It includes, among others, small colleges such as Wofford's Geological Museum and Collection (South Carolina) but also institutions, such as Oxford University. On this subject, see Boris Jardine, Emma Kowal and Jenny Bangham, 'How Collections End: Objects, Meaning and Loss in Laboratories and Museums', BJHS Themes, no. 4 (2019): 1–27, doi.org/10.1017/bjt.2019.8; Steven Lubar, Lukas Rieppel, Ann Daly and Kathrinne Duffy, 'Lost Museums', *Museum History Journal* 10, no. 1 (2017): 1–14, doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2016.1259330.

as objects and pieces of indigenous pottery. A large part of the collection was described by Scalabrini in articles published in the newspaper *El Constitucional de Paraná* and reproduced in the *Anales de la Sociedad Científica Argentina* in 1886. In each of these notes, Scalabrini pontificated about his positivist credo and the importance of each of the disciplines housed in his museum, illustrated with pieces from Racedo's collection.

Juan Bautista was the son of Tomás Ambrosetti (1834–1926), a Lombard merchant based in Gualeguay (Entre Ríos) since 1855, owner of a business in the Chaco dedicated to the import of textiles that had branches throughout the republic. Like Moreno's father, Tomás Ambrosetti was also linked to insurance companies and local banking. The fortune of the Moreno and Ambrosetti families would give their sons a social base, political and social alliances as well as training in the arts of commerce. At the same time, Ameghino would resort to the links woven in the museum of Paraná to insert himself into this network of teachers and naturalists of the Argentine provinces.

Juan Bautista donated all his zoological and ethnographical private collections to the Museum of Paraná.[14] Governor Racedo accepted them in April 1886, appointing him as director of the museum's zoological section. Toribio Ortiz, a relative of Scalabrini, would be the director of palaeontology. Each one was granted a salary and a stipend for scientific excursions, to be practised whenever Scalabrini considered it convenient. Ortiz and Ambrosetti were also to serve as secretaries to the director and travelling naturalists. Ambrosetti resided in Paraná until 1891; from 1888 he combined his work at the museum with that of secretary of the Paraná police. With Scalabrini, he curated the General Exhibition of Paraná in 1887 and the Entre Ríos Commission for the Universal Exhibition of Paris in 1889. At the latter exhibition, private collections not donated to the provincial museum were presented: O. Durand-Savoyat from Paraná exhibited his 3,294 geological and palaeontological specimens, and the young José Sors presented all his collections to the museum, including a series of ceramic fragments collected in the vicinity.[15]

From 1882 onwards, Ambrosetti began to take an interest in the archaeological remains of the ancient native peoples who had been decimated by the Spaniards and of whom there seemed to be no evidence. Ambrosetti commissioned various correspondents to send him archaeological artefacts. After settling in Paraná, Ambrosetti made excursions to different parts of the province, receiving pottery sherds from his commissioners or from Ortiz's explorations. From Goya, in the province of Corrientes, he collaborated with Tomás Mazzanti, a Tuscan expatriate, collector and editor of the local newspaper *La Patria*. Mazzanti had begun collecting in the 1860s, but his collections were dispersed due to requests from Buenos Aires, donations he made to museums, and after being presented by the province of Corrientes in numerous exhibitions in the country and abroad. All these donations show that the museum in Paraná, for a short period, acted as a provincial centre

14 Facundo Arce and F. Ibáñez, *En el Centenario de Juan B. Ambrosetti* (Paraná: Nueva Impresora, Paraná, 1966); Julián Cáceres Freyre, *Juan B. Ambrosetti* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1967).

15 Juan Bautista Ambrosetti, 'El Museo de Entre Ríos. Datos sobre su fundación y desarrollo', *Boletín Instituto Geográfico Argentino (BIGA)* 14 (1893): 131–41.

for collecting objects thanks to this network of suppliers structured by Scalabrini, Ortiz and Ambrosetti, who, for their part, acted as collectors of data and objects on a national and provincial level.

The museum was in Scalabrini's private spaces: he divided up rooms in his house to transform them into parts of the museum, which also included a room in Ortiz's house, where a storage area and laboratory were installed. In 1887 it had a total of 14,577 objects, divided into sections: mineralogy (1,751 pieces), botany (231), zoology (2,019), insects (4,103), comparative anatomy and embryology (255), teratology (25), botanical palaeontology (400), geology (12), ethnology and prehistoric archaeology (490), numismatics (960) and miscellaneous (26). Governor Clemente Basavilbaso (1841–1908) moved the collections from Scalabrini's house to their own premises, namely a building accessible to the public in a former army barracks owned by the state:

> It had to be cleaned, whitewashed and repainted; this work would have cost a lot of money had it not been for the efficient help of the Chief of Police who, at my [Ambrosetti's] request, sent a number of correctional convicts sentenced to public work every day to take care of this work. With them, a garden was created in its vast courtyard, which soon, with many donations of plants from private individuals, was transformed into a beautiful recreation area full of cages with birds and live animals that were successively donated to the Museum, among which were a small tiger and a crowned eagle that attracted the attention of the public.[16]

The recycling of a state building for the exhibition of the collections was combined with the use of a captive labour force to lower the public costs. Ambrosetti's description contrasts with E. A. Holmberg's opinions from 1902, when the prosperity of the Paraná museum was already over. Achieved thanks to Scalabrini's good ties with the province's governors and Ambrosetti's with the provincial police, it disappeared when they both left the city. Ambrosetti settled in Buenos Aires and in 1894 Pedro Scalabrini established another museum in the neighbouring province of Corrientes, where he took duplicates and similar elements to those of his Paraná collections. It was not the first museum to be created in Corrientes: in addition to some frustrated initiatives of the 1850s, there was the Natural History Cabinet linked to the National College, which Ambrosetti had visited in 1892 and presented as an example to be discarded:

> Everything that exists there is European. Would it not be possible and more convenient if the specimens that exist for demonstrations were representatives of our fauna, flora and geology?
>
> Isn't it ridiculous to find the European fox when we have our own? The same goes for butterflies, plants and minerals. In short, the pupils will come out knowing everything except what they should know … The idea of imported natural history cabinets reminded me of the good old days when the geography of Europe, Asia and Africa was taught with great effort … and when it came to the Argentine Republic, nothing was known about it.[17]

16 Ambrosetti, 'El Museo', 131.

17 Juan B. Ambrosetti, 'Sobre una colección de alfarerías minuanes reunidas en la provincia de Entre Ríos', *BIGA* 14 (1893): 242–65; 'Segundo viage a Misiones por el Alto Paraná e Iguazú', BIGA 15 (1894): 18–114, 246–304.

Like Eduardo Holmberg senior and junior, his future father- and brother-in-law, Ambrosetti advocated replacing the study of this supposedly transnational nature with the examination of the students' environment. Holmberg junior, questioning these remains from transitory alliances or from acquisitions from foreign suppliers, proposed to transform them into specifically regional museums, applied to the study of the resources of the different provinces. Collectors and teachers, in their eagerness to recreate the world, had put together scientific exhibitions of no use. The dust covering the showcases in Paraná and Corrientes, and the old newspaper covering the windows, testified to how the collections were doomed to extinction. They were the result of certain impulses guided by the prestige of the museum but also of private collectors' negotiations to be sponsored by the government via a salary and a place to house their bulky collections. This need led scholars to dream of a museum in each provincial capital, as, for example, almost happened in 1895 in the city of Santa Fe, another example of a project arising from the desires and circumstantial alliances between researchers and politicians. In this case, Ameghino had offered himself to Governor Luciano Leiva (1849–1935) as a candidate for the local museum's organisation and direction, sending to him the budget and the outlines of the institution. It all came to nothing.

By then science had been concentrated in the Museo de La Plata, the Museo Nacional and the universities of Buenos Aires and Córdoba, which, for Eduardo A. Holmberg, were the places to compile scientific collections for specialists. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the topic of the importance of natural history museums to education was consolidated. In this context, regional museums were redefined as places to exhibit the products of the province, but above all as educational material, whether for schools, for university extension activities or for the training of future Argentine university scientists. Provincial museums would be re-founded on different occasions, weaving continuities where there never were any, maybe a means to deny the extinction of those that preceded them, perhaps to be born with the hope of lasting forever. Or to forget that real, well-established museums, just as they appear, can die, taking their collections to the grave or to another museum.

México

In the previous section, we analysed a historical context in which collections belonged to private individuals and moved freely between the public and private spheres. In this section, we move to Mexico in the years from the 1920s onwards, namely the period that left behind the revolutionary period and when the constitution of the national heritage was confronted with other initiatives that were prior to, and sometimes parallel to, this process. Institutions were created to catalogue and protect what was defined as the enormous cultural and artistic heritage of the Mexican Republic. On the one hand, there was an urgent need to put an end to the illegal trade in objects; on the other, it was the basis for projecting a national discourse that would put an end to the internal conflicts that had dominated the first revolutionary decades of the century. Some of the most significant

cultural institutions in Latin America (and even in the world, in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss) were then created, such as INAH, established under the Organic Law of 3 February 1939—the 'archaeological Leviathan', as it was once defined,[18] and a marked contrast with the Argentine case where cultural institutions were much weaker, or the Peruvian case, which never managed to develop cultural institutions as strong as the Mexican ones. In Mexico, anthropology and archaeology were articulated in and by strong national institutions. Anthropologists would become, in the words of the historian Tomás Pérez Vejo, 'the guardians of memory, the priests in charge of keeping the soul of the nation intact',[19] with museums as the lighthouses of the nation.

From then until now, Mexico has been one of the countries with the greatest number and quality of museums, beginning with the inauguration of the great National Museum of Anthropology in 1964, and then the Museum of Popular Arts in 1951, the National Museum of Interventions in 1981, the National Museum of Art (MUNAL) in 1982, and the Museum of the Templo Mayor in 1987. The number of museums grew exponentially throughout the twentieth century, from 72 in 1980 to 325 in 1994. It is currently estimated that Mexico has 834 museums of anthropology and history alone (65.5 per cent of the total of 1,273).[20] It is not only remarkable for the number of museums, but also for new museum innovations: in 1954 the Department of Regional Museums was created to involve communities and regions in the articulation of national heritage. Another innovation was the House of the Museum (also called the School of Museums and the National Program of Community Museums), which sought to involve communities (mainly indigenous) in the interpretation and exhibition of their own heritage.[21]

In this sense, Mexico appears as the epitome of a global museological phenomenon manifested in two major changes. First, the expansion of the museum to any place and culture. Today, few cities, regions, towns or even small communities are deprived of a museum or an exhibition hall. Second, this institution has survived the various threats it suffered during the twentieth century: the avant-garde's antipathy to tradition and the replacement of museums with laboratories for scientific study. Despite this, museums are proliferating to such an extent that, if in the past the museum claimed to contain the world, today, in the vein of E. A. Holmberg's questions, we could ask whether the world can sustain so many museums.

18 Luis Vázquez de León, *El Leviatán arqueológico. Antropología de una tradición científica en México* (México: Centro de investigación y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 2003). Carlos Brokmann quoted Lévi-Strauss in Alfonso Caso, el indigenismo y la política cultural del Estado mexicano (México: Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas, 2013), 645–74.

19 Tomás Pérez Vejo, 'Historia, antropología y arte: tres sujetos, dos pasados y una sola nación verdadera', *Revista de Indias* 62, no. 254 (2012): 88, doi.org/10.3989/revindias.2012.004.

20 INEGI, 'Estadística de Museos', 2022, www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/boletines/2023/EstMuseos/EstMuseos2022.pdf.

21 On Mexican museums, see Achim, From Idols; Pérez Castellanos, 'La Casa del Museo (Ciudad de México, 1972–1980): una etnografía multilocal sobre la acción cultural extramuros' (PhD thesis, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2020). About indigenous museums, see Manuel Burón, *El patrimonio recobrado. Museos indígenas en México y Nueva Zelanda* (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2019).

México: Anthropology, museums and indigenous communities

During the first decades of the twentieth century, a multitude of national and foreign anthropologists and archaeologists became associated to a greater or lesser extent with INAH, the institution that would later centralise the study of Mexican heritage. All of them set out to catalogue, study and protect it, resulting in the creation of scientific institutions, the promotion of local crafts and the articulation of regional discourses. Through the collaboration of inspectors in each state of the country, INAH would carry out expeditions aimed at discovering and preserving heritage throughout the nation. Exploration reports abounded in excitement at the discovery of great treasures, as in the case of Danish archaeologist Frans Blom (1893–1963), a representative of the cultural and scientific movement that, in Latin America, would later become the so-called *indigenismo*.[22] Blom discovered, among other things, the archaeological site of La Venta in the state of Tabasco, the main centre of what was considered Mexican mother culture: the Olmecs. And, as exultant as he was about the expedition to some villages in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, he also commented on the local tradition of keeping objects from the past:

> I have known for many years that documents, codices or canvases from antiquity are still kept in remote and indigenous places. I have always been told that the owners never show their treasures to anyone and I have always dreamt of seeing such a treasure. Was my luck smiling on me this time? Was I going to see an ancient document? I thought so. We entered the house that had once been the town hall … Some men … looked at me with suspicion. For centuries they had jealously guarded their documents and few outsiders had ever seen them.[23]

Thus, despite claiming that they were discovering unknown archaeological or colonial gems, that they were going into places where science and the Mexican state had not yet arrived, they could not ignore the fact that in those villages there were already collectors, even museums, long before the arrival of such specialists. This is how Jesús Vargas told of a community in Oaxaca, as early as 1917:

> Teotitlán (place of god) is an important village southwest of the town and five kilometres away, at the top of the hill 'San Bernardino' are the ruins of a temple of the Mixtec-Zapotec civilisation, in which a god was worshipped … Teotitlán at one time was an emporium of commerce between Huautla and Huautla, Huehuetla and Nanahuatipam … Teotitlán at one time was the emporium of trade between the capital and Huautla, Huehuetla and Nanahuatipam … Its unusual character has made it stand out among the other towns … giving notable children, counting

22 By indigenismo can be understood any concern about indigenous peoples, occurring in any time or context. The indigenismo in Mexico reached the rank of official cultural policy of the post-revolutionary regime, especially as a result of the Primer Congreso Indigenista Interamericano (First Inter-American Indigenist Congress) held in Pátzcuaro, Mexico, in 1940. See Luis Villoro, *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México* (México: El Colegio de México y Fondo de Cultura Económica, México,1987), 14. For the Peruvian case, cf. Natalia Majluf, *Inventing Indigenism. Francisco Laso's Image of Modern Peru* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021), doi.org/10.7560/324080.

23 Frans Blom, *El lienzo de Analco, Tomo LXXXIV, Estado de Oaxaca 1917–1950* (Mexico: Archivo Técnico de la Dirección de Monumentos Prehispánicos–INAH, 1945).

> with notable sons and daughters … giving notable sons and daughters, counting intelligent teachers, wise doctors, practical lawyers and patriotic citizens … there are still some indigenous people who have not been able to abjure their ancient religious practices transmitted from generation to generation … On my return to the town I took reports about the people who love to collect archaeological objects; obtaining data, I went to the domains of Mr. Jesús Gomes and Mr. Emilio Alfaro, being able to convince me that they indeed possess and conserve with esteem, some archaeological jewels.[24]

It was a contradiction: on the one hand, the members of the community seemed to continue with their pre-Hispanic atavism, with their 'ancient religious practices handed down from generation to generation', but, on the other, they were also 'lovers of collecting archaeological objects', a paradox that José de la Fuente noted in a 1942 report for the community of Teotitlán del Valle, located in the Zapotec area:

> The village is historic and Burgoa [Dominican historian of Oaxaca in the XVII century] mentions it as the place where the temple of the most important Zapotec priests of the region was located. The large slopes of the hill are terraced, and at the top there is a small mogote or pile of stones, archaeological, according to the locals, on which a cross was placed. There is abundant tepalcatería of various periods on all the terraces … the slopes are intensively cultivated, and the neighbours have found idolillos and vessels. It was not possible, however, to obtain some pieces and many of those found have been sold to American tourists … In the school, the teacher Aurelio López, a native of the place, put together a small collection of little heads and tepalcates, which he still keeps there.[25]

Ethnographers, archaeologists and historians went to the communities and municipalities with the task of collecting, protecting and cataloguing heritage objects, perhaps 'for the first time'. Many of them found that indigenous communities in the Oaxaca area were already doing that work. The first exploration reports of INAH show a variety of situations: many objects continued to have a sacred character and participated in different rituals; others had been completely decontextualised and served as farm implements or were displayed embedded in the walls of churches; still others continued to have the same practical use in the present as they had in the past, such as the colonial *lienzos* that, with their legal value, proved linkage to territory and ownership of land. The trade in '*idolillos*' or '*tepalcates*' (pre-Hispanic archaeological remains) was not uncommon, but neither was collecting prior to the arrival of the commissioners of the cultural institutions—the museum, we might say, before the museum.[26] It is worth asking whether these collecting practices resulted from the colonial instructions of the eighteenth century or those that were made after independence to collect objects to send to Madrid, to the National Museum of Mexico,

24 Jesús Vargas, *Informe de inspección de las zonas arqueológicas del Estado de Oaxaca, 659.2, Tomo LXXIV, 1917–1947*, vol. II (México: Archivo Técnico de la Coordinación de Arqueología–INAH).

25 Julio de la Fuente, *Reporte de los sitios arqueológicos de los distritos de Villa Alta, Choapam, Ixtlán y Tlacolula, Oaxaca,* 681.2, Tomo LXXXVII, 1917–1947, vol. IV (México: Archivo Técnico de la Coordinación Nacional de Arqueología–INAH).

26 Ethelia Ruiz Medrano, *Mexico's Indigenous Communities: Their Land and Histories, 1500–2010* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2011).

to private collections or, as in the case of Argentina, circulated thanks to the public school system, where teachers and pupils were instructed to collect.[27] This possibility would speak not only of the survival of discontinued traditions but also of networks of data and object collection that penetrate to the farthest corners through the state or religious administrations.

The results of a century of heritage construction processes in Mexico are clearly found in the present. A final case will illustrate the degree of influence that state cultural institutions have had in one of the most remote and marginalised territories in the entire Mexican Republic, the Sierra Mixe of Oaxaca. It is located north-west of the city of Oaxaca de Juárez. It is a mountainous country, with large forests and poor communication with the rest of the territories. This region is, at least in comparative terms, the one with the highest density indigenous population in the entire state of Oaxaca, which is the same as in all of Mexico and a good part of Latin America. The vast majority—96.3 per cent—of the population speaks an indigenous language, mainly Mixe. In a remote wasteland, there is the small municipality of San Juan Bosco Chuxnabán, whose indicators are devastating: the degree of monolingualism is close to 50 per cent (49.1 per cent), as is illiteracy (42.4 per cent), the latter being much more accentuated in women. Almost a quarter of the population does not attend school (21.4 per cent); another quarter suffers from severe malnutrition (25 per cent). Agriculture, mainly coffee, represents 96.07 per cent of the population's occupation. More than a third of farmers (35 per cent) do not receive any salary for their work, and of those who do, a little less than half (45 per cent) do not earn the established minimum wage. In total, 80 per cent of the population in Chuxnabán lives on less than 45 pesos (approximately US$2) per day. Conflicts between communities, and with the army, are endemic in the region, with deaths, kidnappings and veritable pitched battles between neighbours being common.[28]

To reach San Juan Bosco Chuxnabán from the city of Oaxaca requires a long journey over a steep and sometimes impassable dirt road. Far from any tourist circuit, even a commercial one, the Sierra Mixe is often avoided even by the inhabitants of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca. The arrival of any tourist or visitor, or the inclusion of the locality in any tourist circuit, is more than improbable. Yet, in San Juan Bosco, there is a museum: in 2011, the Määtsk Mëjy Nëë (Two Rivers, in the Mixe language) Community Museum was inaugurated in the town. The idea arose with the discovery in 2007 of a tomb, excavated by the INAH teams. It was the result of the museological debates that characterise current critical anthropology, post-processual archaeology and new museology, namely that 'heritage should return to its rightful owners': the indigenous communities. This demand was channelled by the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca, which is dependent on INAH. Mexican community museums had emerged in the 1980s, derived from initiatives

27 Irina Podgorny, 'Bureaucracy, Instructions, and Paperwork—The Gathering of Data about the Three Kingdoms of Nature in the Americas, 1770–1815', *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos* (2019), doi.org/10.4000/nuevomundo.75454.
28 Ignacio Laviada, *Los caciques de la sierra* (México: IUS, 1978).

such as Casa del Museo or the Programa de Museos Escolares y Comunitarios. It was one of the results of the 'new museology' that dominated the round table organised by UNESCO in 1972 in Santiago de Chile entitled 'the role of museums in Latin America'.[29]

The objective of the museum in Chuxnabán was to safeguard and keep the pieces found there, mainly some formidable pre-Hispanic obsidian knives. The discovery of the tomb was, in itself, tragic. Several young people entered the burial mound and died from histoplasmosis due to contact with the foul air and bat droppings. The community notified INAH and numerous institutions participated in the excavation of the site and the construction of the museum: the Benito Juárez Autonomous University, the General Directorate of Popular Cultures and the Ministry of Cultures and Arts of Oaxaca. The community itself participated in its construction and maintenance through collective work. Finally, on 17 September 2011 it was inaugurated and became part of the network of community museums in Oaxaca. However, the museum, as happened in Paraná, Corrientes and Córdoba in 1900, receives no visitors. Holmberg, if alive, would pose the same questions: why build a museum in that place? What is its raison d'être if it does not expect visitors? Why does it exhibit pieces that will never be seen by anyone? How does one justify the enormous effort to erect and maintain a museum that will never be visited? One could argue (as, in fact, INAH–Oaxaca does) that the museum is for the community, to transmit the past and the history of the territory to its inhabitants, but how does one justify the effort and the cost in an area suffering from serious social deficiencies? Why build a museum where many houses still have dirt floors and where schooling is conspicuous by its absence? If among the indigenous communities there were early collectors who were interested in collecting and taking care of these objects, we would see the opposite: places where, strictly speaking, the state has not arrived, but the cultural institutions and tropes have.

In conclusion, with these Mexican case studies we have attempted to show both the propensity for the proliferation of site museums throughout much of the country as well as the fragility and problems faced by many of the collections. Many of the new community museums have been developed with no involvement of the community, even when the community is invoked in their goals. As in the initiatives of the nineteenth century analysed in the previous section, they appear following international trends, left alone when the inaugural speech is pronounced in a destiny marked by abandon and, maybe, a return to dust.

29 Manuel Burón, 'Los museos comunitarios mexicanos en el proceso de renovación museológica', *Revista de Indias*, 62, no. 254 (2012):177–212, doi.org/10.3989/revindias.2012.007; 'Ásperas sierras, agrias gentes. Un museo para la resolución de conflictos en la Sierra Mixe', in *Cultura de paz y guerra: brecha social y conflictos históricos*, ed. C. del Prado (Madrid: Sílex, 2021), 107–28.

Concluding remarks

This article has challenged the classical conception of museum collections as centralised and permanent, as conservation and heritage spaces, to promote the idea of collections as nodes in transitory networks of exchange and circulation. In Argentina our focus on primarily provincial or local places showed that, in the nineteenth century, the network logic of the objects' circulation made each collection a point of exchange and dispersion of equal importance. Smaller, less well-known, 'provincial' collections and local museums were key transitory actors in the mobilisation of natural history/anthropological collections. In Mexico, our focus on a small community museum demonstrated the extent to which the establishment of museums responds to international trends rather than local needs.

We argue that the history of museums and collecting practices, rather that the result of public policies or powerful national building processes, can be just an array of local and individual initiatives, marked by failure and/or success, their existence justified in front of the funding bodies that decide their fate, and by trends that lead to the creation of museums because 'it has to be that way'. In that sense, museums and collections depend more on the international networks of providers in which they are embedded by the art of the collector/naturalist than on their role as state devices to discipline subjects or the request of local communities.[30] In the case of nineteenth-century Argentina, the museum appears as an institution that survives against the indifference of governmental bodies.

Museums, in particular those connected with natural history and human antiquity, emerged as places of knowledge connected with the material organisation of the disciplines that organised around the practices of collecting. It is true that museums, as place of knowledge, are connected to the attempts to order and classify the world, but the history of museums confronts the historian with the futility and transitory nature of those classifications and reference collections.

The literature on museums has emphasised the centralisation and institutionalisation inherent in the process of collecting or, in the history of anthropology and natural sciences, developments that would have run parallel to the process of state building or even of colonialism. Following the dominant trend in museum studies, 'collecting, ordering and governing' seems to have been essential elements of the same process.[31] In this article we suggest that collecting and the history of the museum is far from an exclusive history of domination, centralisation or institutionalisation, but, rather, a history marked by failure, weakness and individuals imposing their obsessions on states and/or patrons.

30 Tony Bennett, 'Exhibition, Difference, and the Logic of Culture', in Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations, ed. Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Gustavo Buntinx, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Ciraj Rassool (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 46–69.

31 Tony Bennett, Fiona Cameron, Nélia Dias, Ben Dibley, Rodney Harrison, Ira Jacknis and Conal Mccarthy, *Collecting, Ordering, Governing: Anthropology, Museums and Liberal Government* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), doi.org/10.1515/9780822373605.

To finish, we paraphrase the words used in a new exhibition in the Ethnographic Museum of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. This article sought to illustrate the theme of impermanence, tapping into museums' own weakness, not only to conjure up their own history and resident phantoms, but also to unveil the stakes at play and enumerate the social practices that have been used throughout their development. Thus, museums can remind us that human beings, and the objects they trade, go through constant transformations; likewise, the views external spectators adopt on the former and the latter, respectively, can be expected to change, too.[32]

Acknowledgements

This article received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101007579. It was written while one of us was a Visiting Fellow at the Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University. We are grateful to the two anonymous referees as well as to David Roe who provided insightful comments on earlier versions.

32 See Musée D'ethnographie De Neuchâtel, 'Reference Exhibition: The Impermanence of Things', 26 November 2017, www.men.ch/fr/expositions/a-laffiche/limpermanence-des-choses.

This text is taken from *Humanities Research: Volume XX, Number 1, 2024*, edited by Kylie Message, Frank Bongiorno and Robert Wellington, published 2024 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/HR.XX.01.2024.09