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Jaimes Betancourt, Carla; Ballestero, Diego
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The Absence of 13 000 Years of Amazonian Cultural History in European Museums

A ausência de 13.000 anos de história cultural amazônica nos museus europeus

Carla Jaimes Betancourt
Universität Bonn, Abteilung für Altamerikanistik, Germany
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5734-1373
cjaimes@uni-bonn.de

Diego Ballestero
Universität Bonn, Abteilung für Altamerikanistik, Germany
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4147-5737
dballest@uni-bonn.de

Abstract: In recent decades, archaeological research has revealed Amazonia to be one of the most important centers of plant domestication in the Americas. Its pre-Columbian cultures have been transforming their environment for thousands of years. However, the deep cultural history of Amazonian peoples is mostly absent in the museums of the European capitals, in spite of their claims to be 'World Museums'. On the other hand, they do hold a large number of ethnographic objects of the Amazon in their collections, completely disproportionate to the small number of archaeological objects. A look at the museum collections of artifacts from the Andean area reveals the exact opposite situation. Reflecting upon this finding, this article analyzes the influence and persistence of the history and ideas behind the collections by focusing on the dichotomy culture/nature, and by investigating the deliberate pre-eminence of certain material and immaterial objects over others. Given that one of the main roles of museums should be the transmission of information and the fact that Amazonia is currently threatened by developmental policies, it is crucially important to visualize the 13 000 years of cultural history of this large area, presenting the ethnographic collections together with their historical depth.

Keywords: European museums; ethnographic collections; materiality; pre-Columbian cultures; Amazonia.

Resumo: Nas últimas décadas, pesquisas arqueológicas vêm revelando que a Amazônia é um dos mais importantes centros de domesticação de plantas nas Américas. Suas culturas pré-colombianas vêm transformando seu ambiente há milhares de anos. No entanto, a profunda história cultural dos povos amazônicos está quase sempre ausente dos museus nas capitais europeias, apesar destes alegarem ser 'Museus do Mundo'. Por outro lado, eles possuem em suas coleções um grande número de objetos etnográficos da Amazônia, de forma completamente desproporcional ao pequeno número de objetos arqueológicos. Um olhar para as coleções de artefatos andinos destes museus revela uma situação exatamente oposta. Refletindo sobre essa descoberta, este artigo analisa a influência e a persistência da história

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e das ideias por trás das coleções, focalizando a dicotomia cultura/natureza e investigando a preeminência deliberada de certos objetos materiais e imateriais sobre outros. Dado que uma das principais funções dos museus deve ser a transmissão de informações e o fato de a Amazônia estar atualmente ameaçada por políticas desenvolvimentistas, é de fundamental importância visualizar os 13 mil anos de história cultural desta grande área, apresentando os acervos etnográficos em conjunto com sua profundidade histórica.

Palavras-chave: Museus europeus; coleções etnográficas; materialidade; culturas pré-Colombianas; Amazônia.

The discourses underlying materiality

Exhibitions are one of the main defining activities of museums, important spaces of enunciation where the construction of racial otherness materialized. This materialization is the result of the selective and rigorous articulation of objects, scenographies, images and descriptive labels. It is through these elements that we can examine the diverse exhibition modalities of museums over time and deconstruct the underlying discursive strategies. As Noack (2020, 21) pointed out, understanding these turning points or moments is fundamental to "projecting policies and practices of decolonization in museums and university ethnological collections in the 21st century".

As discursive constructions, exhibitions are places where different times and spaces are juxtaposed and are perceptible through the objects (Van Broekhoven 2012). In the case of anthropological exhibitions, the objects were conceptualized, at least until the 1990s, as a tangible manifestation of the racial hierarchies in which human diversity was intended to be organized, acting as perpetual and immutable archives. The staging of this restricted and selected materiality constitutes a closed system where the material products were associated in an indivisible way with the individuals who produced them. Within this system, the objects were considered the only valid interlocutors of a multiplicity of voices that, silenced and marginalized, were reduced to a homogeneous, static and essentialist whole.

In the particular case of the exhibitions on Amazonian cultures, the close connection between individuals, nature and inanimate objects was disregarded to deny the vast cultural diversity that exists. This celebration of the old Cartesian duality allowed museums to naturalize and promote the alleged 'inferiority' of Amazonian cultures in relation to others. The objects on display, emptied of their plurality of meanings and histories, were reduced to their metonymic function, connecting, through their materiality, the visitors to an absent and incomplete world (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991; Robb 2004). As we will see in the following pages, the cleavage between nature and culture, as an argumentative nucleus of the racial hierarchy of the Amazon cultures, is a product of the second stage of modernity launched in the 18th century.

The unity of the natural and the artificial

The incorporation of the Americas into the Atlantic commercial circuit led to a new economy on a global scale, giving rise to coloniality and the first modernity. The extensive commercial networks of this new world system allowed the transatlantic circulation of flora, fauna and people unknown to Western knowledge regimes. Converging in the European 'centers of calculation', this new universe of elements implied the emergence of a new discursive regime that allowed for its interpretation. This discursive regime became a global scheme or taxonomizing that legitimized Western dominance over the 'new' geographic spaces and served as the locus of enunciation from which a 'modern-us' and 'non-modern-other' were configured. This discursive regime did not strictly establish a border between 'nature' and 'individual', since the observable differences in the new resources and slave labor were insignificant within the global economic scheme (Dussel 1999; Mignolo 2000).

Individuals and institutions belonging to the colonial order collected a wide spectrum of specimens that described nature as pristine, unfathomable and untamed. Plants, animals, peoples and objects from the material culture of the latter began to converge in the European calculation centers, where, in many cases, they formed the basis of the cabinets of curiosities. Endorsed by individuals whose symbolic and material power allowed them to collect elements from spaces beyond the narrow local boundaries, the cabinets of curiosities were a *theatrum mundi* where they sought to reproduce the universe on a more limited scale (Olmi 1985; Pomian 1990).

Despite the fact that the elements were classified into *naturalia* and *artificialia*, this division was not translated into the exhibition spaces, so in the same room works of art, stuffed animals, minerals and objects of material culture (Figure 1) were juxtaposed. This concentration without categorical division between 'nature' and 'culture', in which the elements were grouped by function and material, had the effect of interrelating elements with the objective of presenting a holistic image of the universe in order to discover and interpret the similarities between them (Findlen 1994).

If objects of material culture and objects of nature were able to coexist in the same exhibition space, it was through the geometric rationality discourse that they emerged throughout early modernity. As a result of the findings by the Polish astronomer Copernicus (1473-1543), the Earth was displaced as the axis of celestial cartography and man was given the ambiguous epistemic double role of being the object of knowledge and the subject that investigates it at the same time (Foucault 1966). Far from the ethereal plane of divinity, man became another inhabitant of nature.

Figure 1. Frontispiece of *Museum Wormiani Historia* (Wingendorp 1655, © The Trustees of the British Museum).

The empirical and inductive fragmentation of the world

In the transition between the 17th and 18th centuries, the world was too complex, chaotic and fragmented to be contained in a cabinet of curiosities. From the mechanistic philosophy of Descartes and Bacon, the discursive regime of otherness acquired a new enunciative modality: the *mathesis*. This was presented as an order structure based on measurement, separation, and the establishment of hierarchical distributions. One of the main syntheses was *Systema naturæ* (1735) by Linnaeus, whose model was imported into other fields of knowledge. His proposal of a universal language made it possible to simplify the complexity of the world by establishing simple classification tables that showed precise, defined and controllable limits (Müller-Wille and Charmantier 2012).

The hierarchies imposed a closed and increasingly specific order on the objects, which were separated based on their differences. Standardized in a canon of linear evolution, the objects occupied a specific position revealing their specific relationship with the other elements of the group. This was possible because of a deep ontic rupture within the order of living beings, which separated man from nature. While nature acquired

Figure 2. Joseph Bonnier de La Mosson's Cabinet (1735) at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris. © Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle. https://www.mnhn.fr/fr/visitez/agenda/evenement/annule-nuit-lecture-2020 (20.10.2020).

its three great kingdoms, within the category of man, a series of exclusive and hierarchical binary oppositions was produced defining the conception of the human being. In addition to categories like rationality/affectivity or body/soul, the contradictions man/animal and nature/culture were postulated (Schaeffer 2009).

This new discourse materialized in private and public collections, which began to establish fixed and unchangeable boundaries between the objects of the natural world and those resulting from human manipulation. The quantification derived from the *mathesis* segregated plants, animals, individuals and objects of material culture (Figure 2). These were confined to strict exhibition spaces and ordered by relationships of proximity and distance, which established hierarchies of complexity. In this quantification of identities, humanity also acquired its species identity: *Homo sapiens*.

As these areas of exclusion between the natural and the artificial became more profound, studies such as those of Buffon and Blumenbach stabilized the differences observable within the human species based on the notion of 'race', individualizing subjects into historical-biological units whose characteristics were plausible to be inherited (Doron 2012). At the same time, these spaces of racial exclusion were interwoven with the characteristics of the geographical spaces they inhabited. In his return to the realm of nature, man subordinated his evolution to the physical singularities of the ecosystems he inhabited.

The Western geopolitical powers' expansion processes reduced the spatial and temporal distances between European and non-European societies (Noack 2020). New 'natural' and 'artificial' worlds, fundamental in the circuits of the colonial market, were mapped, classified and hierarchized. Within this economic scheme, Amazonia occupied a transcendental geopolitical position due to its territorial immensity, its rich biodiversity and the abundance of its natural resources. The successive expeditions destined

to unravel the mysteries of this vast geographical space were not guided by the strict separation between the natural and cultural dimensions of the world, since this was not relevant within the global economy.

Beyond the economic potential of these elements and their significance for the populations' quality of life, Amazonia holds a unique position that was specified by the investigations of Humboldt and Bonpland, which was conceived as the predestined space to restore the original union of nature and culture. For Humboldt there was an intrinsic connection between natural and social entities, shaping a cosmic harmony from which life and its cultural manifestations were structured (Humboldt 1826). This Humboldtian ideal guided the research of Spix and Martius, who, between 1817 and 1820, travelled through Amazonia and laid the foundation for further research into its nature and the material culture of its indigenous peoples.[1]

A wedding in the equatorial regions of the 'New World'

Spix and Martius carried out an exhaustive study of Amazonia in order to give an account of its complex natural-cultural network. Covering more than 10 000 kilometers (Figure 3), they formed a vast botanical, zoological, mineralogical, paleontological and ethnological collection (Spix and Martius 1823). This last collection was made up of more than 500 items from some forty indigenous peoples,[2] musical, mythological/ritual and linguistic records as well as four living indigenous individuals, two of whom died on the return journey to Europe and the remaining two in Munich due to the climate (Spix and Martius 1823; Zerries 1980).

The ethnological collection was provisionally housed in a side wing of the *Naturalien-kabinett der Akademie der Wissenschaften* and was later moved to the *KöniglicherHof-garten*. There, part of it was exhibited in 13 cabinets together with some elements from the large zoological and botanical collection. The exhibition of these elements together was intended to give a total picture of the profusion of the cultural history of Amazonia, which was possible only in the conjunction of the 'natural' and 'cultural' dimensions. With regard to the latter, it should be mentioned that, owing to the limitations of the technology and the media techniques of the time, the complex immaterial dimension contained in the considerable collection of rites, myths, dances and languages, was impossible to exhibit and, therefore, to objectify as an essential cultural component and representative of a certain people before the eyes of scholars and the public.

1 Both scholars were commissioned by the *Königlich-Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften* as members of the Austrian exploratory commission that was part of the delegation of the Austrian Grand Duchess Maria Leopoldine von Habsburg-Lothringen, who had travelled to the 'New World' to meet her husband, Pedro I of Brazil. Like his Austrian counterparts, the King of Bavaria, Maximilian I, saw the geopolitical potential of such travel, and commissioned Spix and Martius to survey the economic viability of different areas of Brazil (Steinle 2000).

2 The collection included bows, arrows, blowpipes, clothing, domestic utensils, ornaments, painted pottery, painted gourds, masks, feather art, medicinal and rituals plants (Spix and Martius 1823).

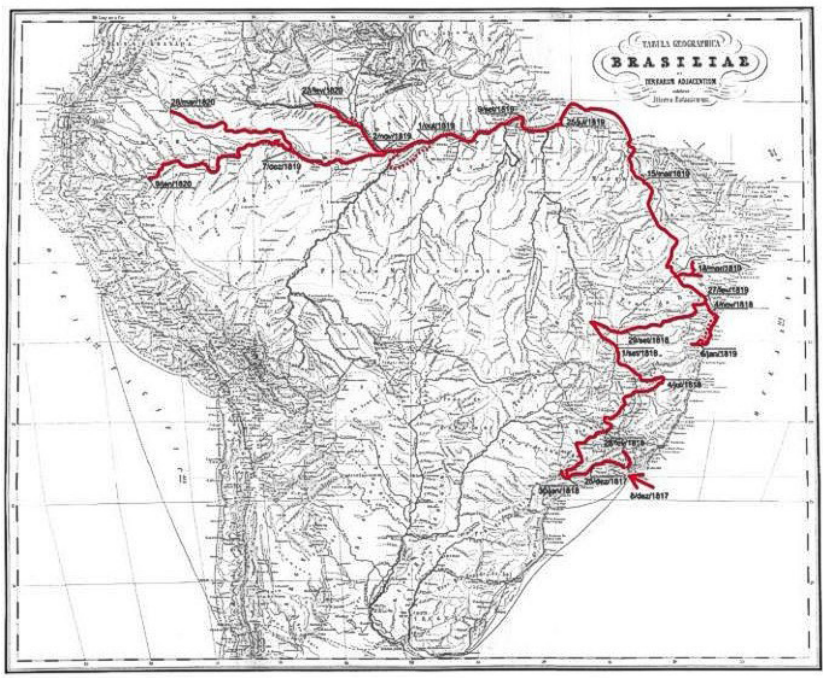

Figure 3. Map of Spix' and Martius' expedition (1817-1820) (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b1/Martius_and_Spix_route_in_Brazil_1817-1820.jpg).

Itineraries in the nature and culture of the Upper Xingu

The importance of the immaterial dimension in the constitution of the cultural history of Amazonia was especially detailed in the works of von Martius, which were described as the foundation of Brazilian ethnology by the German ethnologist Karl von den Steinen. He initiated the series of German explorations of the Upper Xingu region, which were aimed at initiating an articulated and continuous series of systematic studies in still 'unknown' regions from an anthropological point of view (Hermannstädter 1996; Kraus 2004). On the basis of von Martius' philological works, they sought to understand the depth of the cultural and natural history of Amazonia, indivisible from each other according to von den Steinen and the German ethnologist Paul Ehrenreich.

Von den Steinen participated together with his cousin, the painter Wilhelm von den Steinen, and the geographer Otto Clauss in the first expedition to the Xingu in 1884. The second expedition took place three years later, in which von den Steinen's cousin took part together with Ehrenreich and the mathematician Peter Vogel. Between 1896 and 1900, the geographer Herrmann Meyer led two new expeditions, accompanied by

Theodor Koch-Grünberg and the physician Karl Ranke. Around 1901, the lawyer Max Schmidt concluded, alone, the first pioneering phase of German incursions into the Upper Xingu (Kraus 2004).

According to von den Steinen and Ehrenreich, the only way to understand the natural/cultural complex was to investigate simultaneously its material and immaterial dimensions. In this sense, the members of the four expeditions carried out an intensive collection of material culture objects and registered in detail what was beginning to be conceptualized as 'intangible heritage' (language, music, traditions, tales, etc.). The urgency of collecting these elements was determined by epistemological and economic factors. On the one hand, we have study objects that were thought to be on the inevitable path to disappearance, so it became imperative to 'save' them from the passage of time. On the other hand, the transatlantic expeditions implied a significant monetary investment, which meant that, once in the field, the scholars collected as many elements as possible (Kraus 2004; Ballestero 2014).

The first collections of Amazonian material culture owned by the *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde* in Berlin can be traced back to 1818. Until the 1880s, the main supply networks of Amazon material and immaterial culture were those structured through diplomacy and the German bourgeoisie residing in the country and in Brazil, through which more than 750 elements were collected.[3] Inter-institutional exchange as well as travelers and explorers offered other important networks for the provision of objects. All of these collections gave an account of the diversity of materials in which the Amazonian cultural history was materialized: various metals, especially bronze, cowrie shells, wood, calico, leather and vegetable fiber tissues (Hartmann 1975; Fischer and Kraus 2015; Karg 2007; König 2007).

The members of the four German expeditions to the Upper Xingu collected approximately 4700 objects from the material culture of the Amazonian indigenous peoples.[4] These included bows, arrows, harpoons, combs, bracelets, rings, earrings, necklaces, flutes, bells, fishing nets, masks, ornaments, instruments used for the collection of plants, bowls and vessels. This enormous collection showed the complexity of the material culture of the Amazon through the expressive variety used in the decoration and the use of diverse vegetable material supports.

The extensive and systematic collection of materials responded to the requirements of German research projects promoted by the director of the *Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde*, Adolf Bastian. Following the Humboldtian ideal of science, in which the study of nature should be based on solid empirical evidence from which to achieve a

3 For a detailed list see especially Hartmann (1975).

4 For a detailed list see especially Ehrenreich (1890), Meyer (1897), Koch-Grünberg (1909), Schmidt (1942) and von den Steinen (1894).

total and harmonious image of the world, the members of the first four expeditions to the Upper Xingu detailed the multiple uses, the biology and physiology of the existing plants, elaborated a history of cultivated plants and collected botanical and zoological samples (Ehrenreich 1890; von den Steinen 1894; Meyer 1897; Koch-Grünberg 1909; Schmidt 1942).

Throughout the 19th century the various German research initiatives sought to account for the depth of Amazonian cultural history through the combined study of nature and culture. This was for von den Steinen a methodological prerogative and an epistemological priority, as he remarked, "I cannot point out these conditions enough from the beginning, because otherwise we would not properly appreciate the material culture of the natives and not understand their spiritual culture at all" (von den Steinen 1894, 245).

According to von den Steinen, the botanical and faunistic diversity of the Amazon offered the indigenous people a heterogeneous "cultural medium" for the expression of their worldview (von den Steinen 1894, 80). Ehrenreich specified that, although nature delimited human action, at the same time it provided the material elements to develop the cultural solutions to dominate it. In this sense, for both scholars to dismiss or directly reject the importance of these elements only served to reinforce the false concept that indigenous Amazonian people were living 'representatives of the Stone Age' (Ehrenreich 1890, 82; von den Steinen 1894, 248).

According to the members of the Xingu expeditions, the high level of cultural development of the Amazonian indigenous peoples was evident in the complex ornamental production,[5] in the balanced exploitation of natural resources,[6] and in the linguistic and cosmological complexity related to plants and animals.[7] The crucial epistemological difficulty in the scientific study of the Amazonian cultural history is that these studies were not based on an understanding of the native ontology, an aspect pointed out more than 100 years ago by von den Steinen, who emphasized the need to consider "Nature as real culture" when investigating the history of the Amazonian peoples (von den Steinen 1886, 306).

5 In this regard, von den Steinen pointed out, "One spends some time in the Berlin Museum of Ethnology in front of the magnificent feather decorations of tropical South America and confidently compares with them the most beautiful and most colorful things that our modern technology, which certainly does not perform inferiorly, is able to conjure up – nature can still bear the comparison, and certainly its feather splendor beats the modest black, white and red, that provides the Indian with coal, clay, and orleans bush" (1894, 229) (all translations made by the authors).

6 Von den Steinen noted "If culture is valued by the extent and thoroughness with which the nature surrounding man is exploited, then our natives were certainly not at a low level" (1894, 252).

7 According to Koch-Grünberg, the interrelatedness between nature and culture made the Amazon region a complex laboratory where the intricate warp of biological and cultural processes can be unraveled (1909).

The staging of Amazonian cultures in European museums

Far from wanting to carry out an analysis of how European museums face their colonial history and try to create dialogues between cultures (Clifford 2007; Marstine 2011; Conklin 2013; Dolz 2020; Noack 2020), this section intends to analyze the museographic discourses that can be read through the scenographies, materialities, and stagings of Amazonian cultures in European museums.

Despite the large number of ethnographic objects from Amazonia in the collections of the major European museums, there are few exhibitions concerning them, which are limited by epistemological, structural and economic factors. There is a restrictive materiality that gives more historical, cultural and ontological value to elements from the Andean area than their counterparts from the Amazon in the historical development of South America. This selectivity is also linked to the political uses of archaeology by South American nationalisms in the second half of the 19th century. Feather ornaments, basketwork or the scarce Amazonian archaeological materials could not compete with the great stone monuments, metallurgy or the Andean mummies that were seen, used and exposed as empirical evidence of the region's illustrious past in the construction of national identity, memory and founding myths. This is also related to the processes of dehistorization suffered by indigenous Amazonian populations, which refer to the Western fantasy of discovering a 'pure society' unaffected by the changes produced by cultural contact, intercultural dynamics and globalization.

The diversity of cultures in the Andean area is made palpable through numerous sets of archaeological objects from different chronologies and regions of the Andes. On the other hand, the Amazonian diversity is static and prevails over time. The deep history of Amazonia is not much discussed, possibly due to the relative lack of Amazonian archaeological objects in collections. As an example, the archaeological collections of Rauschert and Kelm brought to the BASA[8] Museum at the end of the 1950s, from the Brazilian northeast (251 ceramic fragments) and Bolivia (13 ceramic objects) respectively, account for less than 10 % of the collections of those regions, which are dominated by ethnographic objects. This is also evident in Erland Nordenskiöld's collection from the River Guaporé in the Museum of World Culture, in Gothenburg.[9] While there are more than 1200 ethnographic objects, a total of 256 ceramic fragments correspond to archaeological material (Jaimes Betancourt 2011, 315, 318).

Similarly, the databases of European museum collections[10] reflect the relationships of materiality between the Andean and the Amazonian areas. Archaeological objects of pottery, textiles, metal and stone come from the highlands and Pacific coast of South

8 Bonner Amerikas-Sammlung (University of Bonn, Germany).

9 http://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-vkm/web (19.10.2020).

10 http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus (10.10.2020) (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany); http://collections.smvk.se/carlotta-vkm/web (Museum of World Culture, Gothenburg, Sweden).

America, while ethnographic objects of wood, feathers and basketry come from the lowlands. Here, materiality is the focus of the first and foremost difference in the regional accounts. This is why the dynamic pre-Columbian history of the Andean cultures, interrupted by colonization has been constructed, as opposed to the supposedly stagnant cultural history of the Amazonian peoples. The differences lie in the history of archaeological and anthropological research in the two regions. Believing in the imminent and inevitable disappearance of the material vestiges that made the study of the past possible, the Americanists of the second half of the 19th century conceived their task as a mission destined to save and preserve the last witnesses of a past time.

It is true that the exaggerated visibility and manipulation of images of the non-contacted peoples of the Amazon, as well as certain cultural practices, which are a recurrent issue in European museums (e.g. the *tzantzas*[11] or shrunken heads of the Shuar culture) reinforce the stereotypes, not only of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, but of America in general and among the many 'othernesses' that exist in Latin America, none of these feels identified. Even the subjects chosen by region are the antithesis of these. While in some European museums, reference is made to the Andean area under titles such as production and exchange, symbols of power and ritual, the topics chosen for the Amazon are hunting and war. It is possible that these topics are also linked to materiality. For example, the BASA Museum collection includes 135 ethnographic arrows from ten ethnic groups in Brazil, Paraguay and Bolivia (Müller-Nübling 2020), while objects that could be catalogued as weapons from the Andean region are almost non-existent.

In any case, the Amazonian peoples will be associated with two recurrent subjects. On the one hand, the image of the exotic, static and knowledgeable about their environment, and on the other hand, victims of the exploitation of the natural resources of the Amazonia and the loss of their territory (Françozo and Stek 2020).

Such associations deny the historical specificity of the Amazonian peoples, subjugating them to the plural and uniform collective of 'primitiveness.' In addition to these epistemological limitations, museums are currently facing structural and financial problems. This translates into the absence and suppression of subsidies for projects, equipment

11 As Molina points out in his ethnography, "[...] el único que no trata la temática de las cabezas trofeo es el Museo de la Cultura del Mundo de Gotemburgo, los demás lo hacen desde el relativismo como el Tropenmuseum o el mencionado Náprstkově; desde el silencio como el Museo de América o el Museo Antropológico de Madrid donde se encuentran calladas pero omnipresentes y otros como el Etnografiska Museet, desde la justificación de la posesión del objeto, este caso es particularmente interesante porque la tzantza se encuentra en el centro del primer piso, pero visualmente oculta en la escenografía museográfica de un casillero con la puerta cerrada; al abrirla, la cabeza yace sobre un saco blanco con un texto que habla del objeto como souvenir donado al museo, la disposición no es inocente pues el museo pretende generar una máxima impresión ante el macabro descubrimiento, pero es aún más interesante que en su espacio dedicado a la Amazonía, donde podía ir mejor contextualizada, la cultura Shuar no se menciona" (Molina 2015, 96-97, Fig. 53).

and professionals who can study materiality, and examine, translate and communicate the results of archaeological and anthropological research of recent decades. As Andrea Scholz (2020, 212) has pointed out, collaborative projects of European museums with indigenous peoples face epistemological, methodological and ethical dilemmas. Although European museums are intensifying their collaborative practices with indigenous peoples, these practices are not reflected in museography.

Trees are the gold of Amazonia

It can be tacitly declared that the wealth of Amazonia is based on its diversity, product of the creation, and constant recreation of the original populations and their close dialogue with nature. Each language, each culture, each territory is a heritage in itself, with a chronological depth that exceeds the expectations of those who considered Amazonia a pristine garden.

Archaeology in its task of understanding the historical and cultural depth of this region has revealed 13 000 years of history and cultural development (Roosevelt 2013). During those millennia, Amazonian populations gave the world a great number of domesticated plants, technological and artistic developments, world views, and the certainty that culture and nature, far from being antagonistic conceptions, have constantly interacted and created hybrid spaces, in which the borders between the cultural and natural are vanishing.

In no other regional or temporal context has archaeology succeeded in providing humanity with such positive lessons from the past that can guarantee a better future. Amazonian archaeology provides a historical context not only for the territories and rights of contemporary indigenous communities to be respected, but for the practices of indigenous peoples to be understood as an example of wisdom for the future and for any environmental project. Here, the role of the museum as a space for the promotion of 'other' ways of life is fundamental, offering the visiting public a place where the encounter of the wide universe of indigenous knowledge with anthropological research is integrated into alternative responses to current problems. One of the most fruitful examples is the paleobotanical research that noted the early domestication of certain plants (Watling, Mayle, and Schaan 2018; Lombardo *et al.* 2020), which over time led to a domestication of the landscape (eg. Balée and Erickson 2006; Arroyo-Kalin *et al.* 2017; Walker 2018). 'Domestication' refers to the ability of humans to interfere with the evolution of plants and landscapes to adapt and become more productive. Domestication is a long-term process in which natural selection interacts with human selection, driving changes that enhance human benefits and adaptation to domesticated landscapes (Clement *et al.* 2015). Domestication overcomes selective environmental pressures by creating landscapes for the management and cultivation of useful species that generate ecosystem changes (Levis *et al.* 2017; Maezumi *et al.* 2018). The structure

and composition of the Amazon rainforest are influenced by human manipulation from the past. This practice ensured the production of food (Schmidt *et al.* 2014) and eventually surpluses (Erickson 2006).

The distribution and abundance of plant species are driven by ecological and evolutionary processes. Consequently, domestication depends on the soil, irrigation, and settlement patterns. For hundreds of years, the implemented technologies transformed the landscape to provide solutions to the problems caused by soil-nutrient deficiencies and frequent floods and droughts. In this way, they ensured the success of food production and the proper management of the forest. Archaeology has shown that in many cases, the biodiversity is greater in anthropogenic areas and the result of cultural management by the same Amazon populations (Levis *et al.* 2017). This means that the forest near the archaeological settlements has a greater abundance and richness, because near to these places domesticated species with different geographical and ecological origins are more common.

Amazonia must be understood as the result of a complex mosaic of human-natural systems that have adapted over time. If a population remains in a determined environment for a long period of time, its adaptation to environmental pressure will be greater. The historical depth of the peoples of the Amazon is compelling evidence of that.

The term landscape domestication refers to all non-genetic practices and activities, carried out intentionally and unintentionally by humans that transform local and regional environments into productive cultural landscapes (Erickson 2006). Also valid is the concept of 'anthropogenic landscapes', understood as a conscious process through which human manipulation causes changes in landscape ecology and in the demography of plant and animal populations, leading to the creation of a more productive and enjoyable landscape for humans (Neves 2013).

Archaeology and the implementation of new technologies demonstrated the existence of dense human settlements along the Amazon rivers and even in the hinterland, each one of them with different impacts on the landscape through works linked to the implementation of agricultural technologies (elevated platforms for cultivation or *camellones*), water management (canals and embankments), fortifications (ditches), ritual markers (megalithic constructions), ritual and/or administrative centers (geoglyphs, monumental mounds), among others. These are just a few examples, of several, that already exist, that demonstrate the long and dynamic cultural history of the Amazonian peoples, and the mark that these cultures left on the landscape.

Final considerations

Since their origins in the 'wonder chambers' of the 16th century, the museums of the European metropolises have been cathedrals dedicated to the celebration of a restricted and select materiality. In the particular case of exhibitions on Amazonian cultures, the close connection between individuals, nature and inanimate objects was disregarded, allowing museums to naturalize and promote the alleged 'inferiority' of Amazonian cultures in relation to others. The objects on display, emptied of their plurality of meanings and histories, were reduced to their metonymic function, connecting, through their materiality, the visitors to an absent and incomplete world (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991; Robb 2004).

From the mid-1980s, the so-called 'new' museology challenged the epistemological core of museums. From a more constructivist and transdisciplinary viewpoint, it sought to deconstruct the epistemological and ontological foundations that underpinned the monological modes of exhibition of their collections and the consequent materialization of cultural identities (Appadurai 2000). Despite this deep theoretical turn, the forms of presentation of Amazonian cultural history did not undergo significant changes, continuing to deny or directly suppress its depth.

Today more than ever, Amazonia is being threatened by capitalist extractivism and the extreme social inequalities are becoming more visible. Echoing Gomes (2016), we ask ourselves if it is not time for ethnological museums to assume their role as spaces of criticism and reflection on the social problems affecting indigenous peoples, especially those who are still fighting or returning to fight for their territories and environments, and if in this sense, museums should not make each particular ethnic group visible, destroying the stereotypes of the 'Amazonian' and incorporating into the museography the long pre-Columbian history, the cultural forests, the domesticated landscapes, and all the wealth of knowledge of each indigenous group.

The objects of indigenous material culture are a potential space for intercultural encounter and dialogue. Beyond their pragmatic, functional and aesthetic properties, the objects are a threshold towards the emotional, symbolic aspects, and the memory of the individuals who created them (Hodder 1986; Barrett 2001). Objects have the underlying capacity to stimulate and foster the encounter between diverse universes of meaning and interpretation: that of the native peoples, the academics, and the curators of the exhibitions, resulting in a multivocal epistemology. In the case of Amazonia, such an epistemology has the potential to broaden our restricted concept of materiality, including deliberately ignored objects of material culture in order to make visible the deep Amazonian cultural history, which has been historically excluded, denied and rendered invisible. This is a crucial step in the processes of deconstruction that must accompany the epistemological decolonization of museums and the recognition of diversity-interculturality.

F. Silva (2016) highlights the multiple meanings that objects have throughout their own history, which cannot be reduced to just the institutional logic of museums and museum classification systems. Her work encourages consideration of the perception of these different levels of meaning of an ethnographic collection, including the multiplicity of views on the objects mentioned above (for example: the collector, the researcher, the producer, the curator, the museum visitors, etc.) in which, the biography of people and 'things' in Amazonia are also entangled (Bezerra 2017, 44-64). Are not the forests also part of these 'things' that cannot necessarily be held or touched? If the archaeological and anthropological investigations of the last decades reveal the wisdom of hundreds of years, by diverse indigenous Amazonian groups, in the use of space and the conservation of biodiversity, it is necessary to expand the understanding of this phenomenon in spaces such as museums, which try to translate and explain the great cultural achievements of the different peoples that inhabit the world, overflowing the sciences and going beyond archaeology. M. Silva (2016) clearly demonstrates how destruction and preservation appear as instances of the same movement: the more Amazonia is destroyed, the more the repositories of local museums are filled with objects. This interesting debate can be extended to the issue of heritage and environmental management. In this sense, the museographies, besides considering the results of archaeological research, should also incorporate oral history, in order to listen to the voices of different actors who were part of processes of deep and rapid transformations of the environment.

Ethnological museums in Europe are the engine for deconstructing the exoticism and fantasy of tropical forests. They are also unique and open spaces for encounters with society. The issues addressed in museums and the messages they convey can have a positive influence on political and economic decisions on central problems affecting the indigenous peoples of Amazonia and humanity in general. This article is not a criticism of European museums, as we recognize the ethically committed work of many curators, who in recent decades have been organizing exhibitions with shared curatorships and are part of a process of community empowerment.[12] Our aim is to encourage European museums to include and transmit the results of recent archaeological research in Amazonia. It is essential to consider the landscapes and the anthropogenic forest of Amazonia in the museology, breaking the dichotomy nature/culture, and translating and explaining the ontological turn with an analytical approach. An excellent experiment in this sense was Andtrea Scholz' curatorship in the Berlin Humboldt Lab, entitled "Human – Object – Jaguar: An Approach to Perspectivism".[13]

12 Brust (2013); Hoffmann and Noack (2017); Kraus, Halbmayer, and Kummels (2018); Hoffmann (2020); Scholz (2020).

13 Description of the project: http://www.humboldt-lab.de/projektarchiv/probebuehne-3/mensch-objekt-jaguar/projektbeschreibung/index.html (19.10.2020).

European museum collections are the result or materialization of the 'history of ideas' of explorers, collectors and scientists, and for a long time these ideas were reflected in museum exhibitions. We believe that now it is appropriate that these collections explain the current academic debates and become intermediaries in the explanation and translation of the hidden meaning of things, in which the objects assume the role of subject with qualities and powers (Santos Granero 2013), the ontological turn of social sciences, which raises alternatives to the dualism between nature and culture (Viveiros de Castro 2012; Descola 2013), human/non-human (Kohn 2013), the domestication of the Amazonia (Clement *et al.* 2015; Levis *et al.* 2017) and many other academic debates that are in some way approaches to understanding Amazonian cultures and knowing that there are still other ways of 'feeling/thinking' realities.

The meanings of 'things' and landscapes embody a certain historical continuity but are also in continuous renovation. The object-subjects are immersed in and are a living and integral part of the tropical forest. Some of these forests are cultural, and if we allow Amazonia to continue to be destroyed and genocides to be committed with impunity against Amazonian peoples, it is as if we allowed several museums to burn down and the legacy of thousands of years to be reduced to ashes.

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