
Are Museums Allowed to Keep a Secret?

Secret and Sacred Objects at the Weltmuseum Wien

Anna Bottesi

■ **ABSTRACT:** Today many ethnographic museums are questioning the hierarchical power relationships implicit in the act of representing the cultures of others. In this article I analyze the way that the curator of the South American section of the Weltmuseum Wien chose to deal with the exhibition of sacred and secret objects, that is, those things that only specific categories of individuals are allowed to view. If we exclude storage as a possible solution, what is the proper way to treat artifacts such as these? How should the expectations of an audience attracted to the idea of the exotic, and perhaps forbidden, be satisfied? How can this challenge be transformed into an opportunity to reflect about what we have, or have not, the right to do?

■ **KEYWORDS:** Brazil, cultural property, ethnographic museum, Indigenous people, representation, sacred objects, Weltmuseum Wien

Until the lion learns to speak, the tale of the hunt will glorify the hunter.
—African proverb

Partial Exhibition

On 25 October 2017 the Museum für Völkerkunde of Vienna reopened its doors with a new permanent exhibition (which had been closed for over fifteen years) and a new name: Weltmuseum Wien. With a history deeply rooted in its imperial past and based on broad international relationships, the Weltmuseum Wien today hosts a significant number of collections from all over the world. Among the oldest objects are those inherited from the cabinet of curiosity of the Archduke Ferdinand von Tirol, which were preserved in Ambras Castle (Innsbruck) until the nineteenth century (Feest 1980). This was the period in which collections began to grow in number thanks to the acquisition of objects from other museums and from independent patrons, private donations, and scientific expeditions that were carried out throughout Brazil from 1817 to 1835. The collection, which was acquired on the occasion of the marriage between the Archduchess Leopoldina, daughter of the Austrian Emperor, and Don Pedro, heir to the Portuguese Crown (Augustat 2012), was the most noteworthy. The first official location exclusively dedicated



to preserving ethnographic material, which was previously classified with natural specimens, was the Anthropology and Ethnography Department inside the Museum of Natural History (Naturhistorischesmuseum), founded in 1876 and opened to the public in 1889 (Feest 1980).

Since ethnographic collections significantly increased over time, in 1929 a new independent museum, called Museum für Völkerkunde, replaced the department both as a place to preserve objects and an instrument to “explain” the world and justify the colonial project (Augustat 2019). The fact that the Austrian Empire (Austria-Hungary from 1867 to 1918) did not possess any official colony does not mean the Habsburg Monarchy abstained from participating in the colonial system. The exemption of the Austrian nation from colonial responsibility was a discourse used for most of the twentieth century to promote, among other things, its political neutrality established after World War II. Today, its participation in colonial and imperial politics is fully recognized. Sauer (2012) thoroughly analyzes the reasons that drove the Habsburg Empire to renounce direct colonial domains in favor of more or less informal actions of independent individuals—missionaries, traders, tax administrators, mercenaries, and above all scientific explorers—who collected information useful for exercising military, economic and social power. This choice was partly due to the internal political conflicts of a multi-ethnic empire, and partly to the role that Austria decided to play as “mediator” for the maintenance of the European balance of power in the matter of colonial expansion in overseas territories. However, this never led the government, or its citizens, to assume anti-colonial stances.

During the nineteenth century, the establishment of an anthropological and ethnological school in dialogue with the “human sciences” theories of other European scholars also encouraged active participation in the promotion of scientific research consistent with colonial Eurocentric ideologies. Although the Anthropological Society of Vienna (Anthropologische Gesellschaft in Wien, founded in 1870) distinguished itself by explicit opposition to evolutionism and scientific racism through the adoption of a prehistoric-archeological orientation, it still considered indisputable the existence of a hierarchy of peoples and the tendency of every culture to a linear and progressive social development (Heiner-Geldner 1964; Ranzmeier 2011).

This close relationship with archeology was significant for the museum because it favored the continuation of collecting even after the institutionalization of ethnology as an independent academic discipline, separate from physical anthropology, in 1928. This aspect is not to be taken for granted, since in many European countries the shift to universities led to the total abandonment of museums as spaces for anthropological research. On the contrary, in the Austrian Museum für Völkerkunde, fieldwork methodology became central, promoting the continuous and official gathering of material culture to testify to the acculturation processes experienced by “primitive” societies (Feest 1980). The Museum’s exhibition was organized according to geographic and ethnographic criteria (Augustat 2019) in order to show every culture’s local development, and compare it to the European model.

When, in the 2000s, this type of display was finally recognized as “anachronistic” (Augustat 2021: 284), the museum closed and a complete overhaul began. Between 2005 and 2017 the museum held only temporary exhibitions; meanwhile, from 2012, the refurbishment of the permanent exhibition was carried out. The hiring of a new director was a key aspect in adopting a revised approach consonant with international debates regarding the need to open up museum space to dialogue and collaboration with the “Other” that for decades had been represented through exotic and primitivizing categories. Distancing itself from the previous epistemological structure, the new gallery planned by the curators aims to create connections and reconstruct relations between Vienna and the places represented by the collections, in order to shed light on Austria’s imperial past through critically analyzing how the objects arrived in the capital (Augustat 2019; 2021). This goal was pursued through the alternate arrangement of geographi-

cal and thematic rooms in a circular itinerary that can be walked around either clockwise or anticlockwise.

Visiting the museum in October 2020, during a period as a PhD guest researcher into part of the Brazilian collections, I was struck by the room devoted to various aspects of colonial history and impressed by the way it engaged with post-colonial debate. Titled “In the Shadow of Colonialism,” it exhibits four collections of the museum in the light of their entanglement with the imperial past, in order to more closely analyze the consequences of such connections for museum practice. Upon entering the room, one’s attention is captured by a large central wall with a map depicting areas of European influence before independence movements, titled “Independence: The End of European Colonialism?” Opposite it, another panel points out the fact that colonial history is usually recounted by the colonizer. At their feet lies a long multimedia table with ever-shifting colored circles. A click brings up several words related to colonial practice and history. Six thematic panels complete the room, each reporting a question to stimulate visitors to reflect critically (Augustat 2019). Among them: *Plundered, gifted, exchanged, stolen, bought or traded? How are we collecting today? What has Austria to do with colonialism?* This latter section recalled Austrian participation in the colonial system, as mentioned above.

The panel I am most interested in is the one asking: *Are museums allowed to keep a secret?* There is something unusual in this exhibition case. At eye level, the glass supposedly protecting the objects on display is actually opaque, covered internally by a layer of gray material that does not allow the visitor to look through it. In the lower part, behind another glass, there is only a palm leaf wrapper secured with ropes. The curious visitor approaches to read the texts and clarify his/her doubts. However, once the space alongside the panel has been reached, another surprise welcomes him/her: the sweet sound of flutes wafting through the air.

Our collections also include sacred objects to which, based on their original purpose, only a limited group of people had access. Their special status often required secrecy, which in some cases ruled out at any public display of such objects. How was it possible for such important objects to end up in a museum? Colonial violence, the impact of missions, and crises of both traditional belief and value systems may be answers to that question. Some were stolen, some were intentionally given. Regardless of how these objects once became part of our collections, we need to ask ourselves how we want to deal with them today. In what way are they of significance today? What are we allowed to reveal? What do we want or have to respect as forbidden? What are the stories we can tell with them? (Exhibition text, *In the Shadow of Colonialism*, 2017)

Distributed throughout the rest of the space between this text and the “exhibited” objects, other minor captions illustrate what the panel is about and its proper contextualization. As anticipated by the recorded music, what we would like but cannot see are some musical instruments called *Yurupari* flutes from the name of the ritual in which they are played. Being connected with ancestral forces and spirits, they are considered sacred, and women, children, and the uninitiated are not allowed to view them.

The *Yurupari* ritual is of central importance to some ethnic groups living in the Amazonian region in the basin of the Rio Vaupés and its tributaries, on the Colombia-Brazil border. Among them, Tukano-speaking groups are the majority, but there are also many Arawak- and Karib-speaking groups.¹ As for several other South American Indigenous peoples, the existence of these communities has been, and is still, marked by a struggle to maintain control over their lands and keep alive their cultural values, which are threatened by the invasive Western socio-economic model. The European presence dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, when missionaries, soldiers, and slave traders began to travel along the rivers looking for people to

work in the coastal plantations, as well as for the drugs in the hinterland (salsaparrilla, vanilla, chocolate, indigo, rubber), which Western merchants greedily sought. Though contact was initially sporadic, travelers to the region increased between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries with the explosion of the rubber trade, which had been under way for some decades in areas further east. Disease and exploitation caused the decimation of the Indigenous population at least until the 1920s, when rubber-extraction declined. It ceased definitively towards the 1970s when a new trade sprang up lasting until the late 1980s: coca cultivation, in which natives took an active part.

Despite the better working conditions of this industry and the improved prospects of supporting the clan (the basic social unit), new economic dynamics generated new conflicts between families and individuals. After the temporary success of coca, a new invasion impacted the region after the discovery of gold. This process is still going on and it is one of the greatest threats to the cultures of the upper Amazon basin, causing not only the arrival of new pathogens and the creation of new pockets of poverty and violence but also the destruction of the territory through deforestation and, above all, water pollution. In this context, the innumerable attempts carried out by missionaries to evangelize the natives and eradicate practices and beliefs considered demonic should not be underestimated. However, ecclesiastical exponents played a more ambiguous role, sometimes providing protection from much greater dangers, such as military persecution. Unfavorable circumstances have not broken the spirit of local Indigenous societies; on the contrary, they have been showing surprising resistance and resilience: the pressure exerted on them to abandon certain traditions had quite the opposite effect, since they are currently alive and constantly rearticulated thorough contemporary experience (Århem 1998). As the exhibition text explains:

Yurupari: Musical Body of the Universe—The myth and ritual complex of *Yurupari* is characteristic of the Indigenous groups of northwestern Amazonia. Each group has a set of sacred musical instruments: the flutes and trumpets of *Yurupari*, which may only be seen and played by adult men in the group. They represent the group's culture and identity created in the mythical cycles of the primordial world. Their ritual use enables reproduction and, therefore, the preservation of society and the universe. The instruments may not be controlled by outsiders, including women marrying into the group, as this would result in a loss of identity, basically corresponding to an act of ethnocide, which in turn explains the extreme secrecy around the *Yurupari*. (Exhibition text, *In the Shadow of Colonialism*, 2017)

As part of these traditions, the ritual complex of *Yurupari* can be considered the highest expression of the religious life of the clans who practice it. The ritual is extremely complex and its objectives go far beyond the initiation of young males, for which it is periodically performed, since it represents the moment when it is possible to come into contact with their ancestral past and its entities. This dimension, called *He*, is not located exclusively in a finite past but exists as a parallel reality to everyday life; it is possible to encounter it accidentally, with potentially uncontrolled and dangerous consequences. Guided by the shamans, the ritual controls this encounter, making it safe for both initiates and non-initiates. During its development, musical instruments—to which those on display in Vienna also belong—together with other sacred elements (songs, dances, plumed ornaments, etc.) play a key role, since they make contact with the *He* dimension possible.

The ritual complex of *Yurupari* is made up of two sub-rituals: a shorter and more frequently organized one (once or twice a year), in which a great amount of fruit is carried into the *maloca* (community house); and a longer and more complex one, in which the first constitutes only a part. The latter, organized more rarely and carried out close to the rainy season, lasts three days

and three nights and is accompanied by a series of food and behavioral restrictions (Hugh-Jones, Stephen 1979). Equally, the sacred musical instruments are divided into two typologies: the one played during the former sub-ritual and considered less sacred; and the other played during the full ritual and considered more ancient and sacred (Århem 1998). Their importance resides in the fact that they represent the bones of the mythological ancestors whose death guaranteed the birth of humankind.² The flutes were donated by ancestral beings to each clan, and they cannot be replaced if they are damaged or stolen. When not in use, they are preserved in the river. At the beginning of the ceremony, they are brought to the village and played by different people at various times, all of which is rigorously prearranged and combined with the consumption of specific substances and the performance of songs and dances.

Since, as already mentioned, women, children and the non-initiated are not allowed to view the instruments during the execution of the ritual, these groups have to move constantly from the house to the forest in accordance with the path of the players through the same spaces. This rule is in part clarified in another story, which explains that, in the past, women caused the temporal overthrow of the social order by stealing the flutes, appropriating political power and forcing men into roles intended for females. The meanings of the Yurupari ritual are many, focusing primarily on the creation and continuous re-creation of human society through the (re)establishment of a male-dominated social order.³ The initiation of young men not only represents their entry into adult male society, it also alludes in a deeper way to the process of transformation necessary to maintain the life-death balance. Seen from a cyclical and complementary perspective, the flutes dominate the entire progress of the ceremony because a metaphorical exchange of existential conditions occurs between the living and their ancestors.⁴ Just as the participants in the ritual “die” by entering the dimension of *He*, the sacred objects—musical instruments *in primis*—become the living manifestation of ancestral entities (Hugh-Jones, Catherine 1979).

This process makes the instruments core elements for the institution of a collective identity (Weiner 1985), because they evoke, in the present, a specific ancestral origin, and they become the perfect tool through which the community can establish its diacritical characteristics. Their loss can compromise the feeling of belonging and cohesion of the individuals who compose the group, and can undermine the function of the ritual system as an analytical category for interpreting and organizing reality according to specific social and behavioral norms (Athias and Tomori 2008).

Given these assumptions, how can such valuable objects be geographically so distant from their place of origin? The set of musical instruments preserved in Vienna—two trumpets and two flutes—comes from a Makuna clan. The complex circumstances of their acquisition are not very clear, since there are two slightly different versions of the event. The exhibit text panel explains that the flutes were collected by Fritz Trupp and Wolfgang Ptak, two Austrian ethnologists who were visiting the Amazonian region between December 1971 and October 1972. According to an interview, they obtained permission to attend the ritual and record the music (which can be listened to without any restriction and for this reason is included in the exhibition); afterwards, before part of the ritual objects were destroyed (see Århem 1998; Hugh-Jones, Stephen 1979), they agreed with the community to exchange two pairs of flutes for a rifle.

However, another version is provided by Trupp, who writes that they obtained the instruments from a man recognized as having a bad reputation (1974: 23). In the second case, the explanation for giving away sacred objects is somewhat easier to comprehend today. Of all non-Indigenous objects at that time, rifles were extremely valuable. In a context made up of heterogeneous attitudes towards white people, as well as conditions of poverty and social marginalization caused by colonial encounter, the decision of an individual to set aside cultural norms and look for personal profit should perhaps not be so surprising.

On the contrary, if the first version is accurate, it may be harder to comprehend the reasons that drove a community to exchange its sacred objects for a rifle. We cannot engage in an exhaustive analysis of the matter here since it would require a separate discussion, but we can still consider some aspects of this exchange that might help our understanding. A key point concerns the “value” surrounding objects and the relationship with the categories “sacred” and “exchange.” While in Western systems sacred things are usually inalienable, in Amazonian Indigenous cosmologies the two concepts are not in opposition. Objects are never considered only in their material dimension, but also in their social and symbolic ones: for Amazonian societies, exchange constitutes the basis for a reciprocal network that is crucial to the establishment, and maintenance, of social and political relations through space and time (Viveiros de Castro and Carneiro da Cunha 1993). Besides symbolic value, sacred objects always have an exchange value. Consequently, the circulation of objects is very fluid and frequent, including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous goods. Given the rifle’s high value, Makuna might have considered the exchange equal when the two Austrian ethnologists offered it at the end of the ritual. If these were indeed the circumstances of acquisition, to say that the instruments were “illicitly” collected not only would be simplistic but would also deprive the Makuna of their agency as conscious and active subjects of the relationship with non-Indigenous people. At the same time, we must be careful not to normalize this process, and to contextualize it within colonial relations of power that, throughout the centuries, have influenced (and sometimes still influence) European-Indigenous exchanges. Conscious of the sacred meaning of the flutes, Trupp and Ptak should not have asked for them. By doing it, they took advantage of the exchange dynamic in a way that disregards Makuna cultural norms, especially if we consider their intention of donating them to a museum, thus ignoring the norms governing their view.

Nevertheless, what interests us here is rather the presence and the status of such objects in a European ethnographic museum. As Claudia Augustat remarks, separation between Indigenous objects and their places of origin does not imply they have lost their cultural, sacred, and spiritual value (2011). Although in their journey across the Atlantic other meanings, values, and relationships have been layered onto them, they retain their sacred and secret character. They are sensitive objects, and as such they raise questions not only about the trajectories that brought them to Europe but also, and especially, about the proper way to deal with them. What meanings do they assume today? What stories can they tell us? To what extent should we reveal them? (Augustat 2019).

Why Do Museums Have to Keep Secrets?

This kind of exhibition is only one of innumerable museological experiences through which institutions with a colonial legacy attempt appropriate exhibiting solutions for categories of sensitive objects. Recently this particular exhibition has become the center of a heated debate in which historically silenced social and political groups demand respect for the cultural rules required by their traditions. Unfortunately, among museum directors there are still some who do not see the act of showing sacred objects as a problem if this happens far from their places of origin and their producers. However, Claudia Augustat asks: “What are you teaching your visitors when you expose these things? Nothing. You say you can go over the rules of other people but if you want to respect a culture or a person you also have to respect the borders and where people say stop.”⁵ Karp and Lavine (1991) affirm that the positive opinion of visitors towards an exhibition is probably due more to the sharing of a point of view and conceptual references with those who curated it, rather than to its adequacy. More conservative curators might legitimize a disregard

of the rules and relationships that surround specific objects so as not to lose the approval of a public still used to colonial models. On the other hand, the position assumed by the curator of the Austrian South American Collections suggests, rather explicitly, an openness towards the need to reformulate the epistemological and methodological assumptions of the museum.

The transformation of the Weltmuseum Wien should be seen as part of a larger museological and museographical change that starts from the critique of ethnographic museums as spaces for the formulation of values and ideals about the production of modern identities and alterities. From the second half of the twentieth century, the geopolitical transformations linked to processes of decolonization led the anthropological discipline to reflect upon itself, its production, and its relationship with its object of study. When it became clear that populations believed to have disappeared not only were *not* extinct but were demanding their civil and political rights, it was no longer possible for the intellectual class to ignore the responsibility of the West for perpetuating the violence of the colonial system, nor to continue to deny the right to social, political, and cultural diversity. Many groups challenged the pretensions of institutions to represent their cultures, claiming to become once again owners of their past and present, demanding to be included in decisions concerning their lands and to be considered producers of alternative, but equally consistent and legitimate, categories for living their relationship with the world; the main consequence of this was the crisis of ethnographic authority and writing as instruments for producing objective, scientific knowledge (see Clifford 1988).

Challenged by critical debate, protest, and perspectives that had been silenced, researchers realized that their point of view was not neutral, but was imbued with specific rhetorical and interpretative categories (Geertz 1973) that ended up “inventing” the object studied according to arbitrary forms coherent with the Western “world-system.” The perspective from which they represented the “Other” was only one of the possible ways of reading a multiple, conflicting, and polyphonic reality; to be grasped in its complexity, this required an intersubjective discursive model that recognized and re-balanced historically asymmetrical power relations. The gaze on the Other was finally revealed as a gaze directed at oneself and one’s own conceptions, because “[t]hough it portrays other selves as culturally constituted, it also fashions an identity authorized to represent, to interpret, even to believe ... the truths of discrepant worlds” (Clifford 1988: 94). With a new awareness about the ways in which ethnographic discourse works, who, then, was entitled to speak on behalf of a group’s identity or authenticity? In other words, *who* had the right to represent *whom*?

This aspect is the one that most closely affects ethnographic museums because, as Pacheco de Oliveira states, they hold the power par excellence of representation: “A museum is a city of objects, images, messages. There people and collectivities are represented ... [t]hrough its galleries and rooms, a museum makes absent collectivities present, attributing to them meaning, value and intentions” (2007: 96). According to Stuart Hall (1997), the production of a representation implies the creation of an abstract concept, starting from the system we use to interpret and confer meaning to reality, and from the verbal and visual modalities we adopt to express such concepts. Consequently, things do not have static meanings: it is we who give them meaning and, over time, incorporate them as natural and inevitable. In the epistemological system of the modern West, ethnographic objects functioned as catalysts for representations of the Other, being considered independent entities, eloquent and reliable evidence of a given reality. Their decontextualization and recontextualization into an exhibition involved the creation of an adequate but illusionary representation (Stewart 1984) with which to convey to the public specific ideologies that condemned non-European peoples to playing the role of primitive, ahistorical societies, eternally subjugated and on the verge of extinction due to the inevitable and natural civilizing process.

It comes as no surprise, then, that, if together with the criticism of institutional authority to represent cultures and the reappropriation of the power of self-determination by subaltern groups, the traditional model of ethnographic museums has broken down.⁶ The unraveling of a triangular relationship (Baxandall 1991) between visitors, producers of the objects, and curators of the exhibition, in which visitors did not interact directly with producers—represented, in synecdochic terms, by the exhibited objects—but with what curators thought it was important to communicate about that culture, made it clear that “[t]here is no exhibition without construction and therefore—in an extended sense—appropriation” (Baxandall 1991: 34). In the continuous game of appropriation, visitors did not appropriate the emic or unmediated vision of the people represented, but the culturally- and ideologically-conditioned etic or analytical vision of curators, who in turn had appropriated the culture they aimed to recount. To change the terms of this dynamic meant questioning the assumptions of the museum structure as a neutral place in which to produce objective knowledge, and rethinking it as an open and dialogical space to present new intercultural exhibitions, so that each group in a plural society can feel adequately represented. How could the museum give voice to the multiplicity of stories and meanings layered onto the objects through the study of its collections and their refurbishing? How could it participate in the deconstruction of visions of otherness freeze-framed in colonial stereotypes that the museum itself had contributed to forming? How could it reformulate the concept of otherness so as to distance it from a Eurocentric perspective? Collaboration and shared curatorial practices were the prerequisites of a renewed museum structure, a “contact zone” (Clifford 1997) in which historically-deranged power relations could be rebalanced (Ames 2003).

A fundamental issue to be faced was, and still is, the ownership of objects, whose property they are, both in juridical and intellectual terms. The topic is part of a broad debate that opposes the need for preserving a cultural heritage considered universal in favor of the will of minority societies to regain ownership of a past—a material past through objects and an immaterial past through narratives—that was often stolen by Western people by means of looting or exchanges that were part of uneven and violent political relations (Liebmann and Rizvi 2008).

From the 1970s onwards, matters to do with the preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage became central, and the loss of any of its constituent elements, whether material or immaterial, would imply an impoverishment for all humanity. UNESCO supported these policies through the enactment of measures such as the “Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property” (1970) and the “Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage” (1972), which identified part of world heritage as universal (Hodder 2010). However, these definitions and the way they orient the selection of what to protect, and how, are problematic because they are based on categories that are only apparently objective, being instead influenced by a Western tradition that imposes qualities such as aesthetics, rarity, historicity, and diversity as the main valorization criteria (Byrne 1991). They do not consider the ways in which other social and cultural groups interpret the same goods or attribute value to them, according to their ritual meaning, relations with ancestors, and their importance as symbols of identity and social power.

When these issues progressively entered global debate as a result of the increased dissemination of human rights discourses, the adoption by ICOM (the International Council of Museums) of the Code of Ethics for Museums (1986/2004) and the promulgation of the 2007 “UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People” (UNDRIP), conflicts over the right of ownership and the use of certain assets also increased (Hodder 2010; Price 2015). The displacement of certain objects into Western institutional systems continues to be vigorously contested by “living traditions [that] have claims on them,” clearly sanctioning that they “may in fact ‘belong’ somewhere other than in an art or an ethnographic museum” (Clifford 1988: 209). So, how can we reconcile

these two views: restitution of a heritage considered fundamental for the reconstruction and reinforcement of identities shred by colonialism versus accessibility to that heritage that, being universal, should be everyone's prerogative? This is an even more complex issue if we take into account the fact that, for some groups, regaining power over their own past means destroying or limiting access to some of the objects that Westerners made inviolable, such as Makuna flutes.

In the museological field, this dialectic translates into innumerable variables that are hard to standardize, since every situation is independent and distinct from the others. Museums that are more possessive of their collections tend to claim the status of "universal museums" and promote the concept of cultural internationalism as a strategy to ensure greater accessibility to heritage (on the inherent contradictions of this notion, see Kiwara-Wilson 2013). Others embrace the demands of source communities and make themselves available to discuss restitution of the objects or, if that is not possible, the best way to preserve, study, and possibly exhibit them.⁷ It is important to highlight that restitution is not the only way to rebuild a relationship eroded by years of violence and abuse. On the contrary, it is sometimes more a case of museums wanting to show their commitment to, and participation in, contemporary debates. Indigenous people might *not* want their objects back at all, since their return could cause spiritual harm by evoking dead people or inner conflicts, as the Tukano anthropologist João Paulo Tukano made clear during his visit to the Museum Fünf Kontinente (Munich) in 2014 (see Lima Barreto, 2014).

Regarding the exhibition of sensitive objects, many curators decide to leave showcases empty and replace sacred objects or human remains with captions that illustrate the reasons for this choice (see, for example, Gulliford 2000; Pearlstone 2001; Peers 2009; Adams 2020). Others organize exhibitions in collaboration with members of Indigenous communities (see Karp et al. 1992; Peers and Brown 2003; Sleeper-Smith 2009; Pacheco de Oliveira and Santos 2019). On other occasions, the collaboration between major museums and source communities leads to the creation of local museums and cultural centers, sometimes as a compromise for the return of objects to the original communities (see Clifford 1991), sometimes as compensation for the cultural impoverishment caused by the expropriation of objects and the suppression of practices and traditions (see De Palma 2004).

There are many ways in which collaborative practice is gradually making its way into ethnographic museums. New questions often correspond with new solutions. Nevertheless, this development encourages museums to transform themselves into an increasingly inclusive, democratic, and dialogic space where anthropologists and curators are called upon to collaborate with the communities represented in order to produce shared knowledge no longer linked to a single, authoritarian vision but to a plurality of voices; a place to "unpack" (Byrne et al. 2011) objects and collections and deconstruct the ideologies that have imprisoned them so that they are no longer treated as fetishes, but as sets of historical, political, social, and cultural relationships and processes (Lattanzi 2013); where the public has been offered questions instead of definitive answers to aid the reorganization of our intellectual categories in such a way as to adapt them to decolonized perspectives (Karp 1991).

Breaking the Rules

The research context I have presented in this article is necessary in order to understand the Viennese case better and to realize that there are as many options for bringing together the parties involved in the relationships surrounding objects as our minds—those of Western and Indigenous curators—allow us to imagine. Because of the great distance from represented groups, the European debate about restitution and the exhibition of contested objects is not

yet as vibrant as in countries where conservation practices and museum displays are directly challenged. Objects that most people are not allowed to view are still part of some installations, clearly visible to everyone or at least “hidden” by drapes or panels that can be moved aside at the discretion of the public. The public is warned that not everyone should see those objects and yet they are free to choose. Most visitors pay no attention to that information and look at what they should not be seeing, probably unaware of the neocolonial character of their actions due to a mentality captured by Western values and arrogance, as well as the incapacity to resist their curiosity about the exotic. Are they to blame for this? Not entirely. Unfortunately, in European countries, paying respect to the rules established by other cultural systems is not yet part of common sense and, as Lavine (1991) states, it should be the curator who accommodates the level of the public, not the other way round.

Considering that not all groups “safeguarded” in museums can count on the presence, in their respective cities, of migrant communities who challenge certain representations and agree to cooperate in the creation of inclusive projects, many of these neocolonial staging projects might never be disputed. However, this cannot be accepted as an excuse to avoid facing up to certain questions only because they might “disappoint” the visitors.

While wondering for forty years where the set of Yurupari flutes might have ended up—as sacred objects their absence would certainly have been questioned—the Makuna may never know that their instruments are currently preserved at the Weltmuseum Wien. This is no reason for curators to have the right to make them visible to *everyone*, ignoring the rules that determine their use; although juridically the instruments are museum property, spiritually and culturally they belong to the Amazonian group.

In a recent contribution, Claudia Augustat (2021) illustrates how sharing the curatorship with source communities is crucial to understanding that objects should be treated differently according to each group’s strategies of handling memory and presenting identity. Especially in the Amazonian region, the preservation of objects that belonged to previous generations can be highly problematic and contradicts Western conservative practice. Because of the unpleasant memories they raise in individuals, objects may have to be destroyed or may no longer be recognized as part of a culture.⁸ Of course, this is not a generalized rule or a static attitude. In some cases, the losses and transformations caused by the colonial system meant that individuals developed the will to remember and recover, rather than forget, people and things, proving Assmann’s (2011) statement that handling the past is important for the maintenance of a specific identity in the present.

As mentioned above, Makuna musical instruments are intrinsically related to the preservation of ancestral memory and perpetuation of social, collective identity; their interpretation and exhibition should then be performed with great care, since a use that seems harmless to Western conceptions can actually be dangerous for the original community, resulting in a process of (neo) “colonization of memory” (Augustat 2021: 301). In the creation of the exhibition panel dedicated to these objects, the ideal would be to discuss directly with the members of the clan in order to reconstruct the circumstances of acquisition and figure out the best way to treat the instruments according to present Makuna needs and desires. Due to a lack of resources, this has not yet been possible. At the same time, leaving them in storage was not considered a valid option. It would have been a pity not to tell their story, both because of the cultural importance they hold and because of the ethical and epistemological issues they raise (Augustat 2011). As I showed earlier in the text, the solution adopted was to exhibit them partially, revealing them insofar as was possible to arouse interest in the subject without breaking the prescriptions imposed by the cultural system of belonging. As the curator explains:

With respect with the cultural prohibition of showing these objects in public in my opinion it is not possible to put them in a normal showcase. Instead they will be put in a showcase made of frosted glass. Thus visitors can experience—first in a sensual way and second in an intellectual way through a text—that restricting visual access to an object creates a border between groups of people. In connection with a sound installation they can also realise that being excluded from seeing an object does not mean that they are excluded in all ways. (Augustat 2011: 367)

The use of a multisensory approach (it is possible to hear the sound of the instruments) was fundamental in creating an experience that did not exclude the visitor, but helped him/her to perceive the objects, and the relationships in which they participate, from a different perspective. Many museums still do not fully create a complete and dynamic visitor experience through the use of the senses. Unlike the static nature of observation, listening is a fluid, processual activity. Consequently, it can endow greater vitality to the ideas that arise in the minds of the audience about the existence of the Makuna people. After all, to paraphrase Hudson (1991), is not life based on five senses? Taking into account the fact that not everyone has the same imaginative abilities, focusing exclusively on the act of *viewing* can be a significant limitation to the communicative potential of an exhibition. Precisely because of the preponderance of the gaze, obstructing the vision of the sacred instruments can be considered a provocative action in which breaking the rules of the traditional expository discourse becomes a pretext to reflect on the power dynamics between those who represent and those who are represented, as well as on the arbitrariness of the construction of the setting.

Objects themselves do not say anything, nor are they interesting. It is we who, in attributing them value and meaning, create for them a voice and create interest in them (Crew and Sims 1991; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1991). If some rules have been established and normalized, it does not mean that they are unchangeable. On the contrary, it implies the possibility of transforming them into new criteria shared by all the parties who participate in the process of representation. The conceptual action of breaking the rules is interesting, since the creation of ruptures inevitably leads to the opening of fissures through which to observe the Other and be observed; it reveals alternative perspectives on the hegemonic narrative in order to demonstrate how social and cultural reality actually resembles several creeks rather than a single river; and it provides a glimpse of new ways of sharing the future, not according to principles of survival but of sustainability (Tapsell 2003).

The decision to display Makuna flutes in the manner described is part of a strategy that aims to spread awareness and ensure accessibility, including to the Makuna themselves. If, in the future, there were to be a dialogue with the clan and a request for restitution were to be made, the museum is willing to comply with it. In that case, the current exhibition showcase would be replaced with another one about repatriation (Augustat 2019). To consider Indigenous people as key interlocutors, alive and vital, means paying respect to the norms imposed by their cultural systems in dealing with certain objects and the knowledge associated with them (Gulliford 2000). To do so, it is sometimes necessary to break the rules of traditional Western exhibition practice and accept as equally logical those organizing principles that are based on different conceptual associations. To respect the positioning of social groups to whom we offer, at least verbally, support and political visibility means, first of all, being willing to take them seriously.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Claudia Augustat, curator of the South American Collections at the Weltmuseum Wien, who kindly gave me her support in writing this article, and professor Renato Athias, for the precious knowledge he shared with me on Amazonian Indigenous peoples.

■ **ANNA BOTTESI** is a PhD student in the Global History programme at the University of Turin, Italy, in association with the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE), Brazil. She graduated with an MA in Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology. Her main interests are Indigenous studies from a museological and heritage perspective. Her current research focuses on the analysis of representations of the Indigenous people of Brazil through the circulation of material culture in the Atlantic space. She collaborates with the *Núcleo de Estudos e Pesquisa sobre Etnicidade* (NEPE) of the UFPE. Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5694-8704>.

NOTES

1. The vast linguistic diversity was one of the main reasons why, on the arrival of the missionaries, the use of the *lingua geral Tupi Nheengatu* was imposed as a means for communicating and trading (Athias and Tomori 2008).
2. According to the myths related to the ritual, a mythical hero named Yurupari (identified with different characters depending on the ethnic group performing the ritual) was burned alive as a punishment for an act of cannibalism. From his ashes would then be born a *paxiuba* palm (*Iriartea exorrhiza*), with which sacred instruments would be made (Hugh-Jones, Stephen 1979).
3. Gender studies have recently underlined how the ritual of Yurupari can also be interpreted as a symbol of male prevarication against the female sex, which is made explicit in the exclusion of women, children, and the non-initiated (the latter not considered real men) from the ritual and from the possibility of accessing shamanic knowledge. Indeed, during the performance of the ritual, acts of sexual violence such as groping, flogging, and the removal of children from mothers are performed and ritualized, normalizing role-differences and a relationship of gender domination (Athias and Tomori 2008).
4. The line between metaphor and reality becomes very thin, because an error in substance use or in observing other rules can easily lead to death. Also, it is important to problematize the term “metaphorical,” since what is considered a metaphor in Western thought often corresponds to “reality” for Indigenous people.
5. Personal communication, Claudia Augustat, 30 October 2020.
6. On the colonial history of ethnographic museums see, among others: Sturtevant 1969; Stocking 1985; Bennet 2018.
7. Weltmuseum Wien itself has been undertaking some inclusive and collaborative projects, such as the RIME project (Réseau International des Musées d’Ethnographie/International Network of Ethnographic Museums, 2008–2013), the SWICH project (Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity and Heritage, 2014–2018) and the TAKING CARE project (2019–2023). Some further details are provided in contributions such as Augustat 2017, 2021, Bernroither 2021, and by visiting the website of the museum: <https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/science-research/>.
8. See the cases of the Yanomami and the Macuxi in Augustat 2021.

REFERENCES

- Adams, Geraldine K. 2020. "Pitt Rivers Museum removes shrunken heads from display after ethical review." *Museum Association (online)*, 18 September. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/09/pitt-rivers-museum-removes-shrunken-heads-from-display-after-ethical-review/#>.
- Ames, Michael. 2003. "Cannibal tours, glass boxes and the politics of interpretations." In *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susanne M. Pearce, 98–106. London: Routledge.
- Århem, Kaj. 1998. *Makuna: Portraits of an Amazonian People*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Assmann, Jan. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Athias, Renato, and Viridiana Tomori. 2008. *El mito de Yurupari: la lucha de genero*. Universidad de Salamanca—Antropología Iberoamericana [unpublished].
- Augustat, Claudia. 2011. "Sacred Musical Instruments in Museums: Are They sacred?" In *Burst of Breath*, ed. Jonathan D. Hill and Jean-Pierre Chaumeil, 357–370. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Augustat, Claudia, ed. 2012. *Beyond Brazil: Exhibition Catalogue*. Vienna: Museum für Völkerkunde.
- Augustat, Claudia. 2017. "Looking Back Ahead: A Short History of Collaborative Work with Indigenous Source Communities at the Weltmuseum Wien." *Boletim do Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi. Ciências Humanas* 12 (3): 749–764. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1981.81222017000300005>.
- Augustat, Claudia. 2019. "Dealing with the Colonial Past at the Weltmuseum Wien: A Curator's Perspective." *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 32: 17–31.
- Augustat, Claudia. 2021. "Colonising Memory: Indigenous Heritage and Community Engagement." In *Mobile Museums: Collections in circulation*, ed. Feliz Driver, Mark Nesbitt, and Caroline Cornish, 283–302. London: UCL Press.
- Baxandall, Michael. 1991. "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects." In *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, 33–41. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Bennet, Tony. 2018. *Museum, Power and Knowledge*. New York: Routledge.
- Bernroitner, Elisabeth. 2021. "Sharing Stories, Speaking Objects." In *Art Practices in the Migration Society*, ed. Ivana Pilic and Anne Wiederhold-Daryanavard, 66–83. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839456200-005>.
- Byrne Sarah, Anne Clarke, Rodney Harrison, and Robin Torrence. 2011. "Network Agents and Objects: Frameworks for Unpacking Museum Collections." In *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum*, ed. Sarah Byrne, Anne Clarke, Rodney Harrison and Robin Torrence, 3–26. New York: Springer.
- Byrne, Denis. 1991. "Western Hegemony in Archaeological Heritage Management." *History and Anthropology* 5: 269–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.1991.9960815>.
- Clifford, James. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clifford, James. 1991. "Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections." In *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, 212–254. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Clifford, James. 1997. "Museums as Contact Zones." In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, ed. James Clifford, 188–219. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Crew, Spencer R., and James E. Sims. 1991. "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue." In *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, 159–175. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- De Palma, Maria Camilla. 2004. "Storia di una mostra." In *Io sono Bororo. Un popolo indigeno del Brasile tra riti e futebol*, ed. Maria Camilla de Palma, 17–27. Milan: Silvana Editoriale.

- Feest, Christian. 1980. "Das Museum für Völkerkunde." In *Das Museum für Völkerkunde in Wien* ed. Christian Feest et al., 13–34. Salzburg: Residenz-Verlag.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gulliford, Andrew. 2000. *Sacred Objects and Sacred Places: Preserving Tribal Traditions*. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1997. "The Work of Representation." In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, 13–41. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Heiner-Geldner, Robert. 1964. "One Hundred Years of Ethnological Theory in The German Speaking Countries: Some Milestones." *Current Anthropology* 5 (5): 407–418. <https://doi.org/10.1086/200528>.
- Hodder, Ian. 2010. "Cultural Heritage Rights: From Ownership and Descent to Justice and Well-being." *Anthropological Quarterly*, 83 (4): 861–882. <https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2010.0025>.
- Hudson, Kenneth. 1991. "How Misleading Does an Ethnographical Museum Have to Be?" In *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, 457–464. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Hugh-Jones, Catherine. 1979. *From the Milk River*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hugh-Jones, Stephen. 1979. *The Palm and The Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Karp, Ivan, and Steven Lavine. 1991. "Introduction: Museums and Multiculturalism." In *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, 1–9. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Karp, Ivan, Christine Muller Kreamer, and Steven Levine, ed. 1992. *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Karp, Ivan. 1991. "Culture and Representation." In *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, 11–24. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. 1991. "Objects of Ethnography." In *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, 386–443. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Kiwara-Wilson, Salome. 2013. "Restituting Colonial Plunder: The Case for the Benin Bronzes and Ivories." *DePaul Journal of Art, Technology and Intellectual Property Law*, 23 (2): 375–426. Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/jatip/vol23/iss2/5>.
- Lattanzi, Vito. 2013. "Towards a Museum of Possible Worlds." In *Beyond Modernity: Do Ethnography Museums Need Ethnography?* ed. Sandra Ferracuti, Elisabetta Frasca and Vito Lattanzi, 3–20. Rome: Espera.
- Lavine, Steven D. 1991. "Museum Practices." In *Exhibiting Cultures. The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, 151–158. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Liebmann, Matthew, and Uzva Z. Rizvi. 2008. *Archaeology and the Postcolonial Critique*. Lanham: Altamira Press.
- Lima Barreto, João Paulo. 2014. "Im Palast der Toten." In *Von der Leidenschaft zu finden: Die Amazonien-Sammlung Fittkau*, ed. Gabriele Herzog-Schröder, 51–63. Munich: Museum Fünf Kontinente.
- Pacheco de Oliveira, João. 2007. "O retrato de um menino Bororo: Narrativas sobre o destino dos índios e o horizonte político dos museus, séculos XIX e XXI." *Tempo* 23: 73–99. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1413-77042007000200006>.
- Pacheco de Oliveira, João, and Rita C. M. Santos, ed. 2019. *De acervos coloniais aos museus indígenas: Formas de protagonismo e de construção da ilusão museal*. João Pessoa: Editora UFPB.
- Pearlstone, Zena, ed. 2009. *Katsina: Commodified and Appropriated Images of Hopi Supernaturals*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.
- Peers, Laura, and Alison K. Brown, ed. 2003. *Museums and Source Communities*. New York: Routledge.

- Peers, Laura. 2009. "On the Treatment of Dead Enemies: Indigenous Human Remains in Britain in the Early Twenty-First Century." In *Social Bodies*, ed. Helen Lambert and Maryon McDonald, 77–99. New York: Berghahn.
- Price, Sally. 2015. *I primitivi traditi: L'arte dei "selvaggi" e la presunzione occidentale*. Monza: Johan&Levi.
- Ranzmeier, Irene. 2011. "The Anthropological Society in Vienna and the Academic Establishment of Anthropology in Austria, 1870–1930." *Histories of Anthropology Annual* 7: 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1353/haa.2011.0007>.
- Sauer, Walter. 2012. "Habsburg Colonial: Austria-Hungary's Role in European Overseas Expansion Reconsidered." *Austrian Studies* 20: 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.5699/austrianstudies.20.2012.0005>.
- Sleeper-Smith, Susan, ed. 2009. *Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspective*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Stewart, Susan. 1984. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Stocking, George W. Jr, ed. 1985. *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Sturtevant, William. 1969. "Does Anthropology Need Museums?" *Proceedings of The Biological Society of Washington* 82: 619–649. Available at: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/34550171#page/233/mode/1up>.
- Tapsell, Paul. 2003. "Afterword: Beyond the Frame." In *Museums and Source Communities*, ed. Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown, 242–251. New York: Routledge.
- Trupp, Fritz. 1974. "Beiträge zur Ethnographie und Mythologie der Makuna in SO-Kolumbien". PhD diss., University of Vienna.
- Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo, and Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, ed. 1993. *Amazônia: Etnologia e história indígena*. São Paulo: NHII/Universidade de São Paulo & FAPESP.
- Weiner, Annette B. 1985. "Inalienable Wealth." *American Ethnologist* 12 (2): 210–227. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1985.12.2.02a00020>.