Abstract:

The article explores the constructions of the past in some Brazilian museums and their relation to the myths and collective memories of the nation. The investigation goes through the constitution of nineteenth-century Brazilian museums, its intersections with the building of modern European museums, and historical elements of Brazilian society. It is argued that one of the main difficulties that Brazilian museums have faced in order to legitimise themselves is the fact that they deal with objects and constructions related to the past, whereas the nation adopts a future-orientated narrative.

Key words: Brazilian museums, national identity building, collective memory, cultural politics

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Introduction

“The creation of a myth of origin is a universal phenomenon, which can be verified not only in political regimes but also in nations, tribes and cities. Frequently disguised as historiography, or maybe completely entangled in it, the myth of origin attempts to establish a version of facts, real or imagined, which will give meaning and legitimacy to the winning situation.” (Carvalho 1990: 13-14)

The building of nineteenth-century museums is a historical phenomenon that is related to more general processes of modernisation and constitution of nation-states. Modern museums are the institutions that have contributed in the most direct way to the consolidation of historical narratives. They intertwine past and present in the construction of myths of descent for each nation (Smith 1999). There have been important studies showing the significance of national museums in the forging of national identities. Yet there has been a lack of studies on the interrelationship between Brazilian museums and the forging of the nation. What are the connections between the collective memories created by Brazilian museums and the imagery of the nation?

Undoubtedly Brazilian museums lack legitimacy amongst the Brazilian population; they have not attracted the attention of a large number of visitors and do not represent important sectors of the population. The highly concentrated level of national wealth and income, the very low level of educational achievements and the fragile pattern of political participation certainly explain why only a minority of the Brazilian population is interested in museums (Dickenson 1994, Santos 2001a, Santos 2001b). But there are other interesting and important aspects to be explored. This article investigates the construction of myths of descent in nineteenth-century Brazilian museums.

This investigation will be conducted in three steps. First, I make some considerations about the constitution of modern European museums. The focus will be on the linear ordering of time through the display of objects, from those exemplifying the golden age of ancient civilisations to those that were representatives of each national territory. In the following two sections, I analyse the narratives about the nation that are present in Brazilian museums. The analysis goes through the constitution of nineteenth-century Brazilian museums, its intersections with the building of modern European museums, and historical elements of Brazilian society. The first Brazilian museum was
created during the Brazilian Empire and it attempted to follow the European pattern. As it will be clear, the Museu Nacional, formerly entitled Royal Museum, failed to put together symbols of the nation and the riches of the world. After the 1870’s, the Museu Nacional together with the Museu Paulista and Museu Goeldi were recognised as important museums of natural history and as authoritative institutions in the academic and scientific life of the country. As a matter of fact, there was a predominance of Brazilian museums of natural history during this period. Yet, how to understand that the most important museums of the country were museums of natural history? Which myths of descent and shared traditions could define the Brazilian nation?

I. The Constitution of Modern Museums

In what follows I will briefly outline some main characteristics present in the consolidation of nineteenth-century museums in nations such as Great Britain and France. These nations have exerted strong economic, cultural and political influence in the constitution of the Brazilian nation and its institutions. Around the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, major European national museums, such as the Louvre and the British Museum, were created and consolidated as public institutions. They can be associated with the building of the nation-state and with a model of knowledge based on a rational and scientific space of representation of reality (Bennet 1995).

In his investigations on the constitution of some European collections, the historian Krzysztof Pomian observed that the activities developed by any collector are those of selecting, preserving, ordering and exhibiting objects according to certain criteria. The objects are removed from the context to which they belong, according to the collector’s taste, desire and intention, and exhibited to a foreign public, which does not have any knowledge about the origin of those objects. It is, therefore, understandable that the collections bestow prestige on their collectors. According to Pomian and to a great number of scholars, it was in the late eighteenth century that museums started to become mostly state-sponsored institutions, producing grand narratives about the nation to a
large public (Pomian 1990, Bennet 1995, Poulot 1997, Duncan 1997). By the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, every Western nation already had its own important public collection.

The British Museum was founded in 1753 by Act of Parliament to house an important collection donated to the nation, made up largely of antiquities from the ancient world, objects of natural history, printed books and drawings. The Great Gallery of the Louvre was officially opened in 1793, housing works of art of the Crown, churches and nobles, which were nationalised after the French Revolution. After the French Revolution, the transformation of the Louvre from the palace of kings to a public institution for the people, represented one of the most dramatic changes in the history of collections. A modern concept of heritage is created when the preservation of art and culture is done for the sake of a nation (Poulot 1997). As the Louvre Museum opened its doors to the general public, it established a powerful way of representing the new French revolutionary state as well as a public arena in which the community involved tested its different concepts.

Whereas collectors in general select objects from a distant territory or time according to subjective and private criteria, the modern museums attributed to their collections a dimension of authenticity and permanency based on scientific criteria. Therefore, a second characteristic of these modern museums is related to the fact that they became recognised as guardians of permanent collections (Pomian 1990). As private collections became public they lost sacred and secret aspects and became identified with an enlightened space of art and knowledge.

The Industrial Revolution, the development of new technologies, the global networks of communication and new information technology are aspects associated with the separation of time and space from sensuous perceptions of the everyday life. A wide range of writers point out the processes in which time becomes an autonomous category (Benjamin 1968, Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983, Koselleck 1985, Samuel 1994). The linear ordering of time that appears in museum collections may be associated with a modern notion of time and history, which, at the turn of the eighteenth century, not only ordered past, present and future, but also merged historical and utopian

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1 For a study of the interrelationship between authenticity, museum narratives and Brazilian national discourses, see Gonçalves 1996.
thought. Besides, the permanent condition of these collections lies in the fact that objects are gathered not only for present but also for future generations, “just as, in the past, other objects were displayed to the gods” (Pomian 1990: 44). Therefore, not only the collections we observe in modern European museums, but also the linear ordering of time seem to have successfully fulfilled the task of legitimating the power of the new national states. These were aspects capable of raising objects to the category of authentic proofs of the evolution of civilizations.

Also the Louvre Museum and the National Gallery, however different their histories and collections may be, stood as monuments to the new bourgeois states, producing and assigning new meanings to the objects they displayed and qualified (Duncan 1997). The Louvre Museum reorganised the collections according to a history of art works in order to show the progress of art from the ancient sculptures of Roman Classicism, to Italian High Renaissance painting, to French works of art. The transformation of objects into something eternal attributed to museums a strong memorialising ritual (Duncan 1997: 72-102). The point to be noticed is that the new way of ordering works of art acknowledged and promoted the growth of state power and the building of a national identity.

In a book written by a former director of the British Museum, Sir David Wilson, we find the statement that the British Museum was founded as a universal museum and has remained true to the ideas of its founder to the present (Wilson 1989: 115). Wilson stresses that the museum achieved the prominent position it maintains to this day from the moment when it incorporated the sculptures of the classic civilizations. In fact, historical studies such as Lord Elgin and the Marbles (St. Clair 1998) make increasingly clear that Great Britain and France completely stripped vast areas, such as Asia Minor, Egypt, Greece and Italy, of their finest works of art and sent them to the British Museum and the Louvre during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Parthenon sculptures, which have been considered the ideal of perfection bequeathed by the ancients to Western civilisation, were removed from the walls of the monumental Acropolis of Athens by the British ambassador Lord Elgin through an agreement with the Ottoman Empire.
It was not unusual to find colonizers and ambassadors who were highly qualified as antiquaries, and embassies staffed with professional artists whose mission was to bring ancient treasures to their national museums. Also, the Pergamon Museum, in Berlin, exhibits entire temples and architectural monuments from Oriental, Greek, Roman, and Islamic antiquity. Although it already possessed major collections of antiquities, the museum initiated excavating activities in Greece and the Ottoman Empire in the 1870’s. According to the catalogue of the museum, most of what was found was exported to the Museum, and this was possible because “neither Turkish authorities nor its people had a historical consciousness of their Greek and Roman past.” (Matthes 1998: 11).

Nations and their symbolic representations were constructed not only within, but also across the borders of the constituted territories. National museums such as the Louvre and the British Museum competed for the right to exhibit their nations as the best inheritors of Western civilization. During the nineteenth century, therefore, European nation-states attempted to differentiate themselves from neighbouring nations as they flaunted their ability to attribute meaning to objects from all over the world. Undoubtedly the museums not only create new names and classifications for the objects, but also change their identity, status and importance according to the arrival of given objects. It is important to observe that the national discourse was not associated merely with the treasures that could be found within the territory of each nation, but rather with objects related to a scientific logic that established the evolution of humankind throughout the centuries.

National museums constructed the myths of origin for their nations on the basis of the power they had to amass and display treasures from all over the world. The way European and North American museums have invented the past and established their nations as lands of the past has been associated with struggles for power within each nation and between nations (Hobsbawm 1983, Kammen 1993). The question that must be answered at this point is: which treasures could Brazilian rulers assemble and which strategies could be deployed by Brazilian national museums in order to legitimise an imagery of the nation to its citizens and to the rest of the world?
II. The Intertwinement of Nature & Culture

“...the influence of civilisation and culture of the old and educated Europe has done so much to eliminate from this site of the colony the traces that are characteristic from the American savagery, and to provide it with an advanced civilisation. Language, customs, architecture and the influx of industrial products from all over the world give downtown Rio de Janeiro a European look. What, however, soon reminds the traveller that he is in a foreign continent of the world, is above all the crowd of blacks and mulattos, the working class he meets everywhere, as soon as he sets foot in it. This aspect was more surprising than satisfying. The inferior and brutal nature of these importunate, half-naked men offends the sensibilities of the European who has just left the delicate costumes and the polite forms of his homeland.” (Spix e Martius, 1817-1820/1972: 41-2)

As we have seen, the great national museums that were already famous in Europe in the beginning of the nineteenth century established meaningful and consistent narratives that involved the merging of universal, scientific and nationalistic constituents. According to Smith, every nationalist movement possessed myths of descent that were, in some respects, unique, and vital for territorial claims and national solidarity (Smith 1999: 57-95). Museums played a central role in these constructions. Brazilian museums were created contemporaneously with the consolidation of modern European museums and, as we will see, they also sought to create myths of descent for the emerging nation.

The first museum created in Brazil was first named the Museu Real (Royal Museum) and soon after the Museu Nacional (National Museum). It was founded in 1818 by the Portuguese monarchs, who had fled from Portugal to Brazil during the Napoleonic wars. The museum is unique in Brazil due to the variety of its collections, which were drawn from every part of the world. Some components of its old collections, such as the Egyptian mummies, exert to this day some fascination among the Brazilian population.

Although the Museu Nacional are in many ways similar to the great European museums of the nineteenth century, the institution was unable to order the riches of humankind. It was created as a museum of natural history and had consolidated itself as such by the end of the nineteenth century. The most important objects of the Museum’s collections have been considered by its directors to be those drawn from nature, such as precious stones, fossils, specimens of plants and
animals (Netto 1870). Yet the first collections of the museum show a museum slightly different from its most widely acknowledged identity. The law that established the Museu Nacional stated that the institution was created to spread the knowledge and the study of natural sciences, which could be used to the benefit of commerce, industry and the arts (Leontsinis undated). Portuguese rulers were certainly interested in the discovery of new natural resources, since large parts of the Brazilian territory were still unexplored and the Museum could fulfil this role.

In comparison with the Spanish colonies in Central and South America, Brazil had a very low level of education, with no universities, since education had never been a priority of Portuguese colonial policy. The printing press and other advances of the Industrial Revolution were established only after the arrival of the Portuguese royal court. The Museu Nacional was created at this moment and remained as the sole Brazilian museum for a long period. At first it displayed samples of the Brazilian flora and fauna, which were formerly gathered in a place called Casa dos Pássaros (Bird House). Since the beginning of the Portuguese colonization, many European expeditions arrived in Brazil in order to explore the natural resources of the colony. Travellers, explorers and scientists were part of the same foreign missions. During the Dutch occupation in the seventeenth century, the governor Mauritz of Nassau also kept in the Northeast an island where samples of Brazilian flora and fauna could be found. Cartographers, geographers, botanists, and zoologists came to Brazil to map out and depict Brazilian nature for their own nations. As some of these travellers and scientists came back to Europe, they published detailed descriptions of Brazilian native people and natural resources. Portuguese monarchs were not interested in those publications since they wanted to preserve the colonial administration of Brazil, which granted to Portugal exclusive rights in exploring Brazilian natural resources. Yet this process was intensified as different European nations became powerful and more interested in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. This was the case of Historiae Naturalis Brasiliae and Theatrum Rerum Naturalium Brasiliae, published in Europe after the researches done by William Piso and Georg Marcgraf, who had been in Brazil during the
Nassau’s government. These two works obtained a large audience in Europe and they are said to have orientated many further explorations in the region.

The association between Brazil and nature was not a novelty in the 19th century. The name “Brazil” resumes this idea, for it was given after one of its natural resources, a tree whose trunk had a red pigment used in the new European textile industries. Since the beginning of colonization, Portuguese administrators and travellers drew a line separating Brazilian native populations from European ones due to two main reasons: a different nature and their lower cultural achievements. These populations were considered to be in the early stages of development and thus unable to appreciate the highest expressions of humankind, that is, the works of art that had been produced in Europe. In either case, the colonisers did not attribute to native peoples values that could be considered worthy of being known. The further destruction of these populations was not unique to Brazil. The Americans became victims of missionary attempts that aimed at either their total conversion or their destruction (Todorov 1982). Therefore, in the eyes of most Europeans, Brazilian people could not share European’s habits and cultural values, for they were incapable of incorporating the most important values of civilization. A series of reports on Brazil by foreigner travellers illustrate well the belief of an incommensurable difference between the inhabitants of Europe and those of America (quoted in Carelli 1993).

The collections gathered by the Museu Nacional, however, followed in many ways the orientation of the European national museums of the same period. The museum also received donations including a variety of furniture, objects of art and paintings from the most prestigious families of the Empire living in Brazil. In the first half of the century the main collections from Ancient Egypt and Ancient Middle Eastern cultures were incorporated. The early exhibitions also displayed models of industrial machines. And throughout the nineteenth century the museum amassed important worldwide collections of natural history, which were originated from foreign ethnographical missions in Brazil and abroad. Thus the narratives within the first museum created
in Brazil were made up of different components, which had different meanings and were appropriated differently.

The construction of nationalism can be understood as a process that is historically produced and unfinished, and always evolves as a result of disputes between different sections of the population. If what gives nationalism its power is the reinterpretation of a popular living past (Smith 1999: 9), then we definitely cannot speak of a strong feeling of nationalism among the Brazilian population during the first half of the nineteenth century. Therefore, the absence of a large public, which could either influence or be influenced by the first museums created in Brazil, is not surprising. The Brazilian Empire maintained a high degree of continuity with the cultural patterns followed by the Portuguese monarchy. Black people arrived in Brazil as slaves without access to political, economic and social rights. They soon amounted to the majority of the population (Merrick 1979: 29), with no representation amongst the symbols constituted during the Empire.

The myths created by the Empire merged an idyllic and romantic version of the Brazilian native people with some emblems of European culture. Romanticism was not associated with the attempt to rescue communitarian values that were shared by peasants and rural populations, as in some parts of Europe. Rather, it represented an attempt to build the nation on the basis of the triumph of the nature and emotions of the indigenous population. The Brazilian native population began to be represented as passionate beings, with a close affinity with nature. This attempt was not devoid of conflicts. The characterization of native people as noble savages did not entail their recognition as legitimate cultural partners. Moreover, Brazilian native people had been described by foreigners first as barbaric, naked and cannibal groups, which were unable to respect the laws of the Christian religion. Later these reports were replaced by those based on the scientific explanation of the difference between the inhabitants of the two continents. Nature in its immutable character was responsible for the building of a specific Brazilian culture. To the rich nature of the tropics corresponded the character of native peoples: laziness and lack of ambition. The tension between these two interpretative poles was to remain throughout the nineteenth century.
Therefore, it is not surprising that the assemblage of the ancient collections of the museum should be seen mainly as a result of the initiative of the Brazilian Empire. In 1826, the Emperor Pedro I bought the Fiengo Collection to the Museum. This collection was comprised of Egyptian mummies and several objects from ancient civilizations. The Museum also has an important collection of items originated from excavations on ancient Roman archaeological sites, such as Herculaneum and Pompeii. These objects were brought to Brazil by Tereza Cristina, who belonged to the Italian Bourbon dynasty and came to Brazil to marry the Brazilian Emperor Pedro II (AAMN 1995). According to a recent catalogue written by an English curator, the Museu Nacional’s Egyptian collections are among the first to arrive in America. As they were acquired before 1844, from well-known sources, they can be considered as respectable as most collections on display in European museums (Kitchen 1990).

The point at issue here is that, in contrast with the idea of a “new world”, the image forged by the Museu Nacional during the Brazilian Empire aimed at continuity with the European past. To foreign travellers Brazil, like America as a whole, represented the New World, that is to say, the cradle of a new civilisation, which did not have any links with ancient European culture. In contrast, the Brazilian national museum attempted to reproduce a narrative strategy that was present within many European museums. It associated emblems of the Brazilian nation with those of ancient civilisations of humankind. Its collections represented the attempt to build the nation as one more legitimate inheritor of European civilisation.

Undoubtedly the attempt to intertwine symbols of European monarchies, such as crown, robe, mantle and sceptre, with Brazilian images, such as the coffee bush and the plumage of the Brazilian birds, was not free of conflicts. European travellers, ambassadors and authorities in general gave ample proof of their discontentment with the Brazilian way of imitating European habits and customs. Many reports claimed that Brazilian people were capable only of crude reproductions of European practices. To them, European practices had been corrupted rather than assimilated. From the monarchic emblems to the more vulgar ways of dressing, the reproductions of
European symbols were denounced as grotesque and out of place. The criticisms came down to little details of the Brazilian everyday life (quoted in Carelli 1993: 86). In addition, the new myths of descent did not achieve widespread acceptance amongst the Brazilian population either.

As we have seen, the Empire idealised the indigenous population rather than considered it as a real partner in the building of the nation. By the end of the century, the indigenous population was the object of massive destruction and represented less than 0.05 per cent of the Brazilian population (Merrick 1979: 29). It was also systematically expelled from the urban centres to remote areas of the interior, becoming almost invisible. The Empire was not concerned with the African population either. The collections acquired by the Museu Nacional, mostly before the 1860’s and 1870’s, exhibited objects from Brazilian nature and from Western civilisations.

The Empire was aware of reports from European scientific missions, which mainly focused on the degenerate Latino race and the inferior nature of African populations. From the 1870’s onwards, the movements for the abolition of slavery and for the proclamation of the Republican regime entailed a new political agenda. The presence, visibility and influence of black people on the everyday life of the Brazilian cities were increasingly stronger. Evolutionary theories of human race and cultural development challenged the possibility of equalising the Brazilian nation to the European ones. The attempt to build a nation that could trace its lineage to the ancestry of Western civilisation, a task that was tried during the Empire, seemed to be impossible with the abolition of slavery.

As a matter of fact, the Museu Nacional definitely had a new image after the 1870’s. The museum together with the Museu Paulista and Museu Goeldi were recognised as important museums of natural history and as authoritative institutions in the academic and scientific life of the country (Schwarcz 1993, Lopes 1997). Few museums were created between the 1840’s and the turn of the century and almost all of them assembled objects taken from nature. While European

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2 This was the case of museums such as the Gabinete de História Natural do Maranhão, founded in 1844; the Museu Paraense, in 1866, later renamed Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi; the Museu Paranaense, in 1875; the Museu Botânico do Amazonas, in 1883; and the Museu Paulista in 1894. Most of these museums were established in the second half of the nineteenth century. Few museums did not depart from this pattern. The Museu da Marinha (Naval Museum), which
national museums put on display the merging of cultural achievements of humankind, Brazil’s most important museums exhibited mostly rocks, minerals, plants and stuffed animals. How are we to understand a nation whose treasures displayed by the most important museums in the country were based on nature? How are we to understand the collective roots and genealogies of this nation?

III. The Museums of Natural History

“With sorrow, the Council sees objects of the greatest importance continuously departing from our shores, taken by foreigners who do not leave amongst us the least trace of their existence, so that when the country becomes more conscious of its interests and concerned with the history of its primitive times, it will have to go to the great European capitals to study its precious documents there.” (Serrão, quoted in Netto 1870: 84)

Brazilian museums gave up the treasures that represented cultural achievements of humanity and became interested in items of the natural world. Also in Europe there were many important museums of natural history in the nineteenth century. Although some collections of natural history were housed in specialised museums3, it was usual to find European collections that combined items of ancient civilizations with specimens of natural history. The first collections of the British Museum included not only works of art and objects of classical civilization but also items selected from nature. In the 1880’s the latter were transferred to the British Museum of Natural History. Many museums keep these eclectic collections to this day. The Manchester Museum was started with collections donated by The Manchester Society of Natural History and the Manchester Geological and Mining Society. In the early twentieth century, this museum also received archaeological and Egyptian collections drawn from British excavations and, by the end of the 1920’s, ethnographic collections. Following a similar pattern, the Royal Museum of Scotland, in Edinburgh, also brings together an extraordinary variety of collections. The museum was founded

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3 The French museum of natural history was created in 1793. In the same period the first collections of the Hunterian Museum in London were organised. For an important set of articles about the history of the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle, the debates on the theories of natural history and the spread of these ideas in Europe and North America, see Blanckaert et alii 1997.
in 1854 and included items that came from the University of Edinburgh’s Natural History collection as well as a few machines representing the industrial development of that time.

Thus, side by side with the modern national museums described in the first section, Europe created museums of natural history. The displays covered art, archaeology, history, animals, rocks, fossils and technology, almost all of these sections with objects from every continent. In these museums, the riches of the natural world were classified and exhibited according to the theories concerning the constitution of nature. It is relevant to note that the project of an inventory of specimens of the natural world cannot be dissociated from the attempt displayed by the most powerful nations to control the world (Chartier 1997, 451-455). Only powerful nations could provide access to millions of items from every corner of the earth. Ownership of a wide-ranging collection amounted to a show of power. Some Brazilian museums struggled to join this exclusive group. The Museu Nacional assembled eclectic and worldwide collections. Yet, Latin America, like other distant territories, became only the field for European and also North American researches. Each new species that was discovered was classified and named after those who were in control of the main paradigms of the scientific knowledge.

The expeditions led by the German naturalist Baron Alexander von Humboldt influenced many scientists of his time. His work, *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent During the Years 1799-1804*, became an important reference for natural-history studies. Several European missions came to Brazil and disseminated their scientific findings among the European community. In 1817, the Austrian emperor’s daughter, Princess Leopoldina of Habsburg, arrived in Brazil to marry the future Brazilian emperor. Artists, painters, explorer and scientists arrived in Brazil under her patronage. These foreigner scientists formed a mission that certainly influenced the Portuguese king’s decision to create the Royal Museum. The zoologist Johann Baptist von Spix and the botanist Carl F. Philipp von Martius published descriptions of many new species they found in Brazil on returning to Europe. In 1819, Auguste de Saint-Hilaire, later professor of the prestigious Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, took to his country the
astounding amount of 4,500 botanical species, which were until then unknown by European scientists. Two years later, a huge expedition led by Baron George Heinrich von Langsdorff, general ambassador of Russia to Brazil, carried out the exploration of the interior of the country. Although the expedition resulted in the tragic death of some of its members and in the madness of its leader, more than 60,000 species of Brazilian flora and fauna were sent to the Scientific Academy of Saint Petersburg. The famous Beagle expedition (1831 – 1836) also arrived in Brazil. In 1859, Darwin’s *On The Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection* was published. The investigation of South America’s natural resources became a matter of identification of unknown species, which were used in the debates about the theory of evolution.

Louis Rodolphe Agassiz, a Swiss-born naturalist, was another key figure in the studies on natural history, who was deeply involved with the studies of Brazilian natural resources. He started his academic career with a study of a collection of Brazilian fish, which had been brought to Germany by the zoologist von Spix. Agassiz was a former student of Georges Cuvier and represented one of the most important scientists of his time to oppose Darwin’s theories. He followed Cuvier’s studies on comparative anatomy and his structured and independent models of development. (Appel 1997: 649-671). He founded paleoichthyology and influenced many naturalists of his time. He was also the author of the theory of the ice ages, which held that most of the earth had been covered by glaciers. He got a tenured position as professor of natural history at Harvard University and was the founder and director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, also in Harvard. In 1865, he embarked on the Thayer Expedition to Brazil, with several assistants, in order to give continuity to his former studies of Brazilian fossils and the results of his research were published two years later in another important description of Brazilian natural resources, *A Journey in Brazil*. Most of these naturalists were founders and directors of museums in Europe.

Although the Brazilian Empire did not have as much power as European nations to acquire treasures of former civilizations and order them according to its own discourse, it tried to have control over unknown natural resources, which became crucial to European scientists. The idea of
being the cradle of immense sources of the realm of nature could add prestige to the nation that searched within its territory the founding elements that would be capable of distancing itself from the other nations. Again the Museu Nacional became one of the few institutions in Latin America that followed the European pattern. It attempted to keep worldwide collections and order them according to contemporary theories in natural history. This museum included items from every state of Brazil and from different continents of the globe. The metropolitan narrative, as it is called by Lopes, was preserved even after the Museum became associated primarily with natural history (Lopes 1997).

However, the Museu Nacional, one of the most prestigious natural history museums in the country, did not assemble a representative collection of even Brazilian natural specimens. It could not establish itself as prominent world authority on the subject. The directors of the Museu Nacional were responsible for the increasing commitment of the institution to the expeditions to the interior of the country in search of scientific knowledge. These expeditions were far from being a secure source of natural resources. On the one hand, the directors of the local museums of natural history complained that the concentration of the specimens of the entire country in the Museu Nacional made it difficult for them to assemble representative samples of the minerals, flora and fauna of their regions. On the other hand, the directors of the Museu Nacional blamed the foreign expeditions, which according to them, continuously broke the terms of their agreement with the Brazilian government. This agreement stipulated the exchange of support for travellers within the interior of the country for samples of new specimens they found. Despite the agreement, few samples were kept in the country.

The quotation appearing as epigraph in this section is a poignant statement by Friar Custódio Alves Serrão, director of the Museu Nacional between 1828 and 1847, about the difficulties of controlling Brazilian natural resources. Frequently, Brazilian scientists had no knowledge about the new specimens found by the foreign missions in the Brazilian territory. The directors of the Museu Nacional complained that many new specimens were taken to Vienna, Paris,
Munich, Saint Petersburg, London and also to the United States but not a single sample was left in the Museum. The reports show that Brazilian naturalists were not in a position to compete with their foreign colleagues in the classification of the natural world, not even when the new specimens were drawn from sites within their national territory. The comment that had been made by the famous naturalist Agassiz also corroborated the outrageous situation endured by the Brazilian museums. According to Agassiz, better collections of Brazilian fish could be found in a local market than in a Brazilian museum of natural history (Lopes 1997: 100).

In contrast, foreign expeditionary campaigns were always classifying new species and sending them to their countries. For foreign nations, Brazilian museums were important only as providers of support to incursions into Brazilian territory and resources. None of the three most important Brazilian museums at the turn of the century succeeded in their mission of gathering a representative collection of the natural items of the Brazilian nation.

Furthermore, Brazilian museums were far from competing with the European and North American museums in their attempt to build a theory about the development or evolution of the species. There was the constitution of a new scientific discourse about nature. By the end of the century Darwin’s theory about the evolution of the species was already largely known causing a profound impact on theories of social development. European museums ordered not only the natural world into evolutionary schemes, but also used the founding logic of the evolution of species to explain the nature and development of human beings and cultural formations. Scientific discourses about the evolution of the species and theories about cultural and social development became intertwined and exerted a considerable impact on the worldwide processes of national building.

The collections acquired by the Museu Nacional, particularly after the 1870’s, were drawn not only from nature but also from humankind. Ethnographers and anthropologists became the new providers of a huge variety of items, from objects used by “primitive” people to human skeletons. The Museu Nacional’s documents include skeletons and skulls catalogued under the categories

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4 For a rich description of the debates on the structured or evolutionary development of specimens of the natural world amongst the scientists who worked in the European and North American museums of natural history, see Blanckaert 1997.
“animals”, “human beings”, “Brazilian natives”, “blacks”, “African blacks”, “mixed”, “foreigners”, and “non-identified”. As we see, besides animals, black and native populations were also classified as a category different from that of human beings. Skulls and artefacts belonging to different people were compared and ordered. This classification makes “blacks” different from “African blacks” and points out the category of “mixed,” which would be predominant after the 1930’s to indicate the racial miscegenation of the Brazilian population. The category “foreigners” certainly implied skeletons of black and native people from other areas or continents, which certainly were the result of exchange practices between Brazilian museums and European scientific missions in the country.

These classifications express the development of racial theories. The translation of Darwin’s theory of the origin of species into the evolutionary theory of human races and cultures undoubtedly posed major dilemmas to those political leaders who were concerned with the building of the Republican regime. According to historians, by the end of the nineteenth century even the Emperor Pedro II seemed to acknowledge that Brazil was not prepared to become the nation the Empire deeply hoped to be. The Emperor was increasingly attracted to the new scientific discoveries of the century, abandoning the majestic rituals of the European monarchies and detaching himself from political affairs (Schwarcz 1998). It was necessary a new myth of descent for the Brazilian nation, one that could consider the widespread patterns of miscegenation that prevail in the country, and offer an alternative to major scientific views that referred to Portuguese, African and Native peoples as a cluster of degenerate races and cultures.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Brazilian museums of natural history entered into decline during the first decades of the twentieth century. If Egyptian mummies hold some meaning in the British Museum, the Louvre, or even in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as they represent the immemorial past of these powerful nations, in Brazil, they only provide some surprise and fascination. They were an integral part of a project of the national identity built by the Empire, which had lost its legitimacy by the end of the nineteenth century. To this day, the Museu Nacional assembles the same collections of the past and, to this day, it endures a severe scarcity of financial
support. Although it is part of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, the Museum did not succeed in relating the research that has been done on the collections with the research that has been developed by academic institutions. There is also a gap between the research on the collections and what is exhibited, since the show-cases have hardly been touched in the last fifty years.

Although the Museu Paulista attracts a large public today, it does that as a museum of History. The natural-history pieces were transferred to the Museum of Zoology and ethnographic items to the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography, both belonging to the University of São Paulo. The Museum holds only the items related to the history of the State of São Paulo. Due to the intellectual and financial support of one of the richest universities of the country, the University of São Paulo, the museum has enlarged its collections with items associated with the everyday life of the city. Besides, the museum holds its attractiveness due to its link with the Brazilian Independence Day. It is widely known as Museu do Ipiranga, the name of the river on the banks of which Brazilian independence was proclaimed. The building was created as a monument in order to celebrate the independence of Brazil from Portugal and visitors usually go there on the Independence Day, thinking that the building was the residence of the first Brazilian Emperor. The Museu Goeldi has kept its international prestige in the field of natural history. The Amazon Forest includes vast tracts of unexplored territory representing to this day a challenge for foreign and national research. Although the museum still provides access to the Amazon region, it continues to suffer from a scarcity of financial support.

Conclusion

“… Don’t talk to these new natures about Beethoven’s harmonies, Michael Angelo’s genius, or the severe beauty of lines that statues and architecture can offer: you would not be understood. What they miss are the sounds of copper’ instruments, the obese madones, …” (Adolphe d’Assier, “Le Brésil Contemporain”, 1867, quoted in Carelli 1993).

This article investigated the constitution of nineteenth-century Brazilian museums. As we have seen, the European museums struggled for the right to establish the links between their own
nations and old traditions. The Museu Nacional followed this pattern ignoring the legacy that belonged to the African ancestry and idealising the native people’s culture. It is not surprising that the bridge between the new and old continents collapsed. By the end of the nineteenth century the most important museums of the country, the Museu Nacional included, were museums of natural history. Which representation of a shared past they could offer? The images of the tropical wilderness are still strongly associated with the images of the Brazilian nation to this day and there are still some Brazilian museums that provide new specimens of the wild forest to the world. The nation was praised for its nature rather than for its cultural achievements. Yet the separation between nature and culture was not always done. The nineteenth-century scientific discourse about nature ordered not only the natural world into evolutionary schemes, but also race and cultural achievements. The Brazilian nation had still to create an imagery that could provide an inner consistency to itself.

How are we to understand the importance of these nineteenth-century constructions to the present? At issue here is that one of the difficulties that Brazilian museums have faced in order to legitimise themselves is the fact that they deal with objects and constructions that are associated with the past, whereas for much of Brazilian history past-oriented narratives have been neglected. Although it is not my aim to explore the constitution of twentieth-century Brazilian museums, I would like to remember that the narratives that succeed the discourses about nature were historical narratives strongly influenced by Positivist ideas.

In the 1920s, during the Republican regime, the idea of creating a museum of history to represent the nation became stronger. The director of the Museu Histórico National (Museum of National History) was Gustavo Barroso. He was an important politician who defended positivist ideas and made part of the Brazilian movement that was associated with a fascist ideology. Besides he was responsible for the creation of a school for professionals of museums, which exerted a strong influence upon the other Brazilian museums that were created in the following fifty years. As we know positivist ideas are closely connected with the notion of linear time. The Museu Histórico
National, therefore, created new symbols for the nation, which were associated with the notions of a linear and homogeneous time, that is, with a philosophy of history that expressed the notion of the progress of science. Brazilian history expressed the evolution of knowledge, from theology to metaphysics to science, which meant absolute knowledge (Santos 1992).

Positivist beliefs entailed the building of myths of origin that were strongly future-oriented. The idea defended by most foreigners that the Brazilian nation could not inherit Beethoven’s harmonies or Michael Angelo’s genius was victorious. As future achievements had predominance over past and even present ones, the image of the “new world,” which prevailed during the whole colonial period and which entailed a sharp distinction between American and European cultural values, came into sight again. The Republican regime confined the past of the nation within the limits of a certain origin in time and within the Brazilian territory. Brazilian history started with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1500. Moreover positivist ideas were well adapted to the theories of social evolution. The Brazilian myth of racial democracy goes along with the myth of the progressive whitening of the black population, achievement to be conquered in the future.

Benedict Anderson drew upon the idea of a nation as an imagined community. He emphasised the importance of large cultural systems in the constitution of nationalism (Anderson 1983:12). As the building of identities for a nation must relate to the interests of its members, myths and collective memories besides providing an inner consistency to the new entity that is being forged, need, after all, satisfy the drive for meaning amidst those who share them. In a nation that contains such religious, ethnic and regional diversity as well as huge social and economic inequalities as the Brazilian one, it would not be adequate to minimize the conflicts inherent to these narratives. The myths of descent that were created by the nineteenth-century Brazilian museums excluded large part of the population. Ancient legacies and past traditions of black and native people were ignored. The myths created by the Republican regime satisfied larger sectors of the population, but it devaluated the past. The aim of this article, therefore, was to explore the
meanings within these collective constructions by emphasising the importance of the dialogue between nations, on one hand, and the conflicts within the Brazilian nation, on the other.
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