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EUROPEAN INTERDISCIPLINARY MASTER AFRICAN STUDIES (EIMAS)

**Decolonizing museums:
African Cultural Heritage in European Museums,
a diasporic perspective of contact**

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Master's thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master in European Interdisciplinary Master African Studies (EIMAS), supervised by Professor Dr. Hugo Ribeiro da Silva.

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To my mother, Luz María

To my father, Martín

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Resumo

Os artefactos culturais africanos alojados em museus europeus têm suscitado diálogos internacionais, incluindo o debate sobre a restituição, e têm sido um elemento crucial das lutas descoloniais. Historicamente, desde as suas origens modernas nos séculos 18th e 19th, a lógica colonial que rege os museus ocidentais tem vindo a estabelecer progressivamente narrativas únicas sobre os objectos africanos, limitando a amplitude das suas nuances históricas. Esta dissertação gira em torno de uma questão crucial: Que ferramentas podem contribuir para a descolonização dos museus? Poderão os museus europeus adotar uma lógica polifónica que permita a multiplicidade de narrativas contidas nos artefactos africanos, abrindo novas possibilidades de entendimento e interpretação? Examinamos momentos-chave para a compreensão do debate sobre a restituição e, em seguida, exploramos a relação entre o desenvolvimento do museu e o período colonial. Posteriormente, partindo dos conceitos teóricos de “zona de contacto” de Mary Pratt e James Clifford e de “objectos como diáspora” de John Pepper, analisamos o Centro Internacional das Artes José de Guimarães (CIAJG), na cidade de Guimarães, no norte de Portugal, como um caso de um museu que trabalha numa lógica descolonial. Por fim, reflectimos sobre as possibilidades e limitações da perspetiva diaspórica de contacto como um caminho prático e eficaz para a descolonização dos museus europeus.

Palavras-chave: Descolonização dos museus, zona de contacto, objectos como diáspora, CIAJG, património cultural africano.

Abstract

African cultural artefacts housed in European museums have sparked international dialogues, including the restitution debate, and have been a crucial element of decolonial struggles. Historically, since its modern origins in the 18th and 19th centuries, the colonial logic that governs Western museums has progressively established single narratives on African objects, limiting the amplitude of their historical nuances. This dissertation revolves around a crucial question: What tools could contribute to the decolonization of museums? Could European museums adopt a polyphonic logic that allows for the multitude of narratives embedded in African artefacts, opening up new possibilities for understanding and interpretation? We examine key moments in understanding the restitution debate and then explore the relationship between the museum's development and the colonial period. Afterward, building on the theoretical concepts of "contact zone" by Mary Pratt and James Clifford and "objects as diaspora" by John Pepper, we analysed the José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts (CIAJG) in the northern Portuguese city of Guimarães as a case of a museum working towards a decolonial logic. Finally, we ponder on the possibilities and shortcomings of the diasporic perspective of contact as a practical and effective path for decolonizing European Museums.

Keywords: Decolonizing museums, contact zone, objects as diaspora, CIAJG, African cultural heritage.

List of Abbreviations

CIAJG	José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts
ECOC	European Capitals of Culture
ICOM	International Council of Museums
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Introduction

On September 22, 2021, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst were inaugurated as part of the Humboldt Forum project in Berlin. Central to the collection on display were many pieces belonging to the famous Benin Bronzes and artefacts from other parts of Africa, Asia, and America. As the opening ceremony unfolded inside where once stood Berlin's Royal Palace, protests took place outside against a museum that many saw filled with looted art. Present were the "Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Minister of State for Culture Monika Grütters and author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie."¹ The renowned Nigerian writer took the stage to deliver a speech that would transcend the museum's walls. The audience, at first glance of a European majority, listened to Adichie's nearly twenty-minute speech where she questioned the mechanisms of power that institutions such as museums perpetuate and that ultimately allow for the validation of specific, Eurocentric, selective narratives:

We must confront the issue of power. Who tells the story? Who is the teller and who is told about? Who decided that African art should be labelled "ethnological"? Who has the right to exhibit the other?²

Adichie's remarks provide an opportunity to examine the museums' role as custodians of narratives and histories. Indeed, museums are not merely repositories of artefacts but also exercise immense power in shaping and disseminating cultural narratives. This significant moment in the inauguration of the Humboldt Forum emphasizes the urgent need to critically reassess the storylines perpetuated by European museums and encourage pluralistic discourses. The museum is a space that guards the stories of individuals and collectives. It is one of the institutions where History materializes; therefore, none of its comprising elements are randomly selected. So, we will always have to ask ourselves: What

¹ This information was extracted from the Humboldt Forum official website:

<https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/digitales-angebot/digital-en/keynote-speech-by-chimamanda-adichie-32892/> [Consulted on 12 March 2024]

²Ibid.

stories are being told in European museums? Moreover, which stories are being silenced, by intention or omission?

Such an idea is not novel and echoes around the globe in the minds of various modern thinkers who feed on voices from past centuries. As Alice Procter stated: “A museum is a place we can go to find and tell stories about ourselves and others.” (2021, p.9) The galleries’ objects, artefacts, and installations are never isolated pieces born out of emptiness but integral components of interconnected narratives. All the elements displayed in the museum rooms are designed to mean, communicate, and intertwine in a logical and discursive way.

Homo narrans, is what the American scholar Walter Fisher called our species back in the 80s: “Human beings are essentially storytellers,” (1985, p.7) he said. We are creatures that tell and understand reality and our journey through stories; establish our past, affirm our present, and visualize our future based on personal narratives, communal legends, and foundational myths. History is a collectively accepted story. Considering that narratives are a central part of who we are as a species, it would be imprudent of us to limit ourselves to listening to only a few. The act seems almost unnatural.

As Adichie cautioned in her 2009 talk on “The danger of a single story,” the perpetuation of singular narratives risks silencing diverse perspectives, and it “make[s] one story [to] become the only story.” As human as it is, this holds its risks when the versions that endure are always the ones that belong to those who can make their voice heard, that is, the story of those who possess the most power. The modern museum originated as we know it today in the 18th century and the 19th century (Vergès), and it was part of a larger apparatus sustaining the vision of the great Empires whose collections from Asia, Africa, America, and Oceania grew in size. A European narrative also implied the construction of a non-European one. The danger is that “these selective narratives can very easily start to look like the definitive histories.” (Procter, 2021, p.18)

As a child of its time, museums have ingrained in their most essential rationale logics inherited from colonialism. The hierarchies and social structures in which we live today are still the reproduction of those imposed centuries ago. Colonialism ended, but a process that continued colonial inequalities went on; many theorists called this era neocolonialism³, a world order that permitted colonial strategies and logic to adapt. Within the depths of the museum, we can see reflected neocolonial practices, from the little racial variety that makes up the staff of European museum, rooms filled with African, American or Asian pieces acquired in colonial warfare, to curatorial decisions in said art institutions that give priority to Eurocentric perspectives.

Of course, museums cannot display every existing narrative, nor will such agglomerations be productive, but it is necessary to ask ourselves, what part of history is presented to us? Is there a possibility for other voices to join? Or, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie stated at the Humboldt Forum inauguration ceremony: “Who is the teller and who is told about?” Decolonization efforts have emerged as a central discourse as we strive to redefine colonial dynamics in society and the art industry. Processes that aim to challenge and transform the structures of power within museums.

The present dissertation seeks to contribute to this ongoing dialogue, asking the following guiding questions: What tools could contribute to the decolonization of museums? Could European museums adopt a polyphonic logic that manages to open up to the multiple narratives that African artefacts contain? The pursuit of multivocal approaches must be one of the guiding arrows of decolonization efforts within the museum, distancing it from the perpetuation of single stories. As previously stated, this is a practical and theoretical search of curators, art historians, scholars, politicians, and artists from around the globe. This dissertation endeavours to chart a course toward a more inclusive and

³ According to Nagesh Rao, neocolonialism occurs when “Control and power over the states and economies of the ex-colonies has been retained by the former colonizing power.” (Rao, 2000, p.168)

equitable future by centring on this shared idea. For this purpose, this dissertation will be divided into three chapters.

Chapter one, “African Objects: The Restitution Debate,” will overview the restitution debate at the heart of the decolonization claims and unravel the main preoccupations and ideological tensions behind it. The analysis will cover some events that we considered essential from 1960, known as the Year Zero of the restitution debate, to the beginning of the 21st century, reflecting on some of the moments mentioned by Bénédicte Savoy in its book *Africa’s Struggle for its Art. History of a postcolonial defeat*.

Chapter two, “European museums: Decolonial process,” will take a historical look at the formation of the modern Western Museum and its relationship to the colonial system; we will see how the museum changed due to historical movements related to the Age of Exploration and the colonial situation. This will allow us to understand what we mean when referring to the colonial logic permeating the museum’s structure and how it got there. Finally, this chapter will set out the theoretical basis of the dissertation, developing Mary Pratt’s and James Clifford’s concept of “contact zones” and John Pepper’s “objects as diaspora.”

Finally, chapter three: “Living Together: José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts,” will focus on analysing the Centro Internacional das Artes José de Guimarães (CIAJG) as a case to study the application of the museum as a “contact zone” and African objects as “diasporas”, in what we will call a diasporic perspective of contact. For this, we will establish the Portuguese context concerning decolonial politics and delve into some parts of the personal history of the artist José de Guimarães, which are crucial to understanding the mechanisms of the CIAJG. This chapter will allow us to establish the possibilities and impediments of a diasporic perspective of contact as a decolonizing tool within European museums.

1. African objects: The Restitution Debate

The exact number of objects taken from Africa to Europe and America during colonial times is unclear. Their geographic dispersion allows us to locate them in countries such as Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Belgium, and France, all of which are well-known worldwide for having African material heritage among their museum holdings:

The British Museum alone has sixty-nine thousand objects in its inventory from African countries south of the Sahara. The Weltmuseum in Vienna has thirty-seven thousand. The Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, has one hundred and eighty thousand. The Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen in the Netherlands holds sixty-six thousand, the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin seventy-five thousand, and the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris almost seventy thousand. The major public museums in Paris, Berlin, London, Brussels, Vienna, Amsterdam and Leiden together hold more than a half million African objects. (Savoy, 2022, p. vi)

Also, in places like Portugal, in museums that do not yet have a complete and open list of the objects within their catalogues, or in others like the Vatican, with collections that have not been studied with great diligence. Most of these pieces reached European art institutions, private collections, and auction houses in the hands of “soldiers, officers, missionaries, explorers, merchants and administrators”⁴ (Vergès, 2023, p.8) during the colonial period. Some pieces have stayed as part of one museum collection through the centuries, and others have travelled from place to place in nomadic movements.

We may appreciate their beauty, craft, and intricacy when encountering them in museums. However, a more thorough analysis shows how these objects represent a series of historical struggles. They are, in fact, at the core of debates surrounding the importance of cultural heritage in decolonial processes. We must consider that while some of these pieces arrived in Europe via legal procedures, others were extracted through violent mechanisms: as war treasures or under exchanges or “sales” mediated by fear. Building and enriching collections of African, American, Asian, or Oceanian cultural objects can be

⁴ “Soldats, officiers, missionnaires, explorateurs, marchands et administrateurs.”

framed within a larger colonial agenda that followed a “heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other.” (Spivak, 1988, p.76) This project aimed to determine racial and civilizing hierarchies by dismantling central identity factors: language, religion, systems of social organization, as well as artistic expressions while at the same time establishing racial superiority.⁵

With the advent of the liberation movements and the independence of African countries, there were also requests to return some important pieces to their homeland. This struggle for the return or repatriation of material heritage has been called “the restitution debate,” which is crucial when analysing decolonial efforts in museums. Both discussions have arisen and evolved in unison, mutually nourishing each other. This is not a debate exclusive to the last few years; it goes back more than half a century, with periods of silence and others of lively discussion. We are currently at a high point kindled by a speech given in 2017 by French President Emmanuel Macron in front of around 800 students at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, where he stated:

Today we have, in a way, lost our shared imagination. We suffer from an imagination that confines us to our conflicts, sometimes to our traumas, an imagination that is no longer either yours or ours; and I want to rebuild this shared and future imagination based on three remedies.

The first remedy is culture. In this area, I cannot accept that a large share of several African countries’ cultural heritage is kept in France. Historical explanations exist, but there is no valid, lasting, and unconditional justification. African heritage cannot solely exist in private collections and European museums. African heritage must be showcased in Paris but also in Dakar, Lagos, and Cotonou; this will be one of my priorities. Within five years, I want the conditions to exist for the temporary or permanent return of African heritage to Africa.⁶

⁵ In chapter two we will unravel the process of establishing colonial values and their relationship to the European museum and the African objects within them.

⁶ *Emmanuel Macron’s speech at the University of Ouagadougou* was consulted on the official website of the French president: <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/emmanuel-macrons-speech-at-the-university-of-ouagadougou> [Consulted on 1 April 2024]

The loss of the imagination Macron is talking about could also be understood as the loss of a fully shared history or, in any case, as its reduction to some episodes that do not do justice neither to France nor to Burkina Faso, in this specific instance. Furthermore, the healing of historical damages concerning cultural heritages is at the heart of the remedial measures and the possibility of imagining a future together (one that includes Europe and Africa). After his visit, Macron wrote on his social media: “Today we are orphans of a common imaginary: African heritage cannot be the prisoner of European museums.”⁷⁸ (Macron, 2017)

Following these events, in 2018, theorists Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr were commissioned to produce a detailed report on the African artefacts on French territory at the time. At the end of their research, they published the famous *Report on the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage*. A couple of years later, in 2021, Savoy published a book titled *Africa’s Struggle for its Art. History of a postcolonial defeat*, which quickly became a theoretical reference for understanding the African art restitution disputes.

This chapter will focus on some key events in the restitution debate. For this purpose, we will rely on some of the events outlined by Savoy in his book, which covers the years 1965 to 1985, as it comes from rigorous research. It will not be an exhaustive recapitulation, work done masterfully by theoreticians such as the aforementioned Savoy. Instead, we will select crucial moments that will help us understand the restitution debate as guidance for tracing the past behind African artefacts, considering it a central component in the path towards decolonial theories and tools. It would be erroneous, under our consideration, to ignore the history of the African cultural heritage and to focus directly on their current presence in European museums. Objects matter to the extent that they are

⁷ This translation and all others from the French, were done by the author of this dissertation from the original texts.

⁸ “Aujourd’hui nous sommes orphelins d’un imaginaire commun: le patrimoine africain ne peut pas être prisonnier de musées européens”.

relevant to society or individuals. African cultural artefacts and the struggle for their repatriation will show us the social perspectives and ideological tensions behind them.

We omitted many communications and transactions between museum officials and foreign affairs bureaucrats during the restitution dialogues because, as crucial as they were, objects were often seen as commodities and valued by their market price, which is a topic for a different investigation. For now, we will focus on artists, poets, diplomats, institutions, and festivals that embody the defence of the African identity and the seek for historical justice. This is relevant if we want to decentralize the needs to which the pieces respond within European museums and, instead, look for a shared history and imagination that has the power to rescue some lost narratives while reformulating others.

1.1. In search for National identities

The 1950s and 1960s saw a series of liberation movements and political changes that led to the independence of most African countries. 1960 was known as the Year of Africa, in which 17 nations became independent, more than half belonging to the French empire. With the declaration of freedom for African people, quests for national identities expanded and became vocal. Artists and thinkers of the time, often also deeply involved in the national reconstruction, had a question that resonated across the continent: What is our cultural identity?

The return of African cultural heritage extracted from the colonies was one of the many movements driven by the spirit of a shared quest. This was not limited to one field of art or politics but crossed them, manifesting itself in different concerns and preoccupations that were ultimately part of a process of identity and cultural revitalization of the newly independent nations: “The Négritude movement was part of the broader search for identity within a context of dismemberment.” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ndlovu, 2021, p.37)

The *Négritude* was a cultural, ideological, and literary movement that began in the first half of the 20th century. Developed by French-speaking intellectuals, theorists, and writers, including Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, it was “An early expression of an ‘Afri-centred’ conception of the human, one that was consistently critical of a Western universalisation of the human that excluded those with black pigmentation.” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni & Ndlovu, 2021, p.36) This was a concern that had been simmering for decades, as is possible to see in the speech Césaire gave 25 years earlier, in 1958, at the *Congress of Black Writers and Artists* in Paris:

The situation, therefore, in the colonial countries, is tragic. Wherever colonization is a fact the indigenous culture begins to rot and, among these ruins, something begins to be born which is not a culture but a kind of subculture, a subculture which is condemned to exist on the margin allowed it by European culture. [...] We find ourselves today in a cultural chaos. [...] We are here to proclaim the right of our people to speak, to let our people, black people, make their entrance on the great history.⁹ (James Baldwin, 1985, p.53)

The cultural ruins of which Césaire speaks are the product of an imperial drive for expansion and power. Walter Benjamin, in his famous *Illuminations*, writes about the Angel of History, always looking to the past, contemplating the destruction, the ruins caused by an endless storm which, Benjamin says “we call progress.” (1968, *Illuminations*, thesis IX, p.258) Progress, at least in its Western version, leaves not only a landscape of cultural and ideological wrecks but, as Césaire points out, a need to demand the right to speak, to articulate oneself in history.

The ideas exemplified by Césaire’s speech spread throughout the continent; cultural congresses and projects, such as magazines, were spaces where they matured. Like *Bingo*, “a monthly magazine produced in Paris and Dakar,” (Savoy, 2022, p.6) with Paulin Joachim as one of its editors. Joachim was a poet born in 1931, at the rise of the French colonies, in Benin (at the time called Dahomey), who, at the height of the search for a post-colonial

⁹ This passage from Césaire’s speech is documented in the essay “Princes and Powers” by James Baldwin, which discusses his experience attending the *Congress of Black Writers and Artists*.

cultural identity, made the first public plea for the return of the Benin Bronzes to their native country. The article he wrote in 1965 was titled “Give us Back Negro¹⁰ Art;” it was a declaration of principles, a call for unity, and also a demand to European museums. The poet declared that he, among others, was in “the battle for the recovery of our works of art scattered around the world,”¹¹ (Joachim, 1965, p.7) Joachim’s text sheds light on the mindset of a whole generation who, after independence, found that there was still a long path to achieve intellectual and cultural freedom in their countries: “They killed the spirituality of black people,”¹² (Joachim, 1965, p.7) a spirituality that lived very much in cultural expressions, the manifestations of the soul.

He showed that European rhetoric to justify plunder did not go unnoticed: “We plundered to preserve the artistic productions of the black world from worms and termites, from the smoke of the huts.”¹³ (1965, p.7) And that these discourses were filled with preconceptions and visions of Africa as a continent that could not maintain and safeguard its own cultural productions. The article had great relevance at the international level; some theorists like the Senegalese Souleymane Bachir describe it as follows: “One word sums up the impact of this editorial: «panic».”¹⁴ (Bachir, Le point sur, p.74)

For Joachim, the return of the cultural heritage was not to heal their wounds but as a base to build a new regional narrative. As Savoy wrote, “Joachim did not pose the question of returning the cultural property in terms of reckoning with the past but rather as an investment into the future.” (2022, p.7) Part of the spirit of African people was taken away by the removal of cultural, religious, and ritual objects that could have been an anchor to

¹⁰ We are aware of the pejorative sense in which terms such as “negro” or “négre” are currently used. We will use them in this work always taking into account the context and will not override them in order not to commit anachronistic censorship. The translation of this title is taken from the one made in the book *Africa’s Struggle for its art* by Savoy.

¹¹ “La bataille de la récupération de nos œuvres d’art disséminées à travers le monde.”

¹² “Ils ont tué la spiritualité des peuples noirs.”

¹³ “Nous avons pillé pour préserver les productions artistiques du monde noir contre les vers et les termites, contre la fumée des cases.”

¹⁴ “Un mot pour résumer l’impact qu’eut cet éditorial: «panique».”

the past and also an opportunity to rebuild a future. It is no coincidence that national identity struggles, of which Paulin Joachim was part, took as one of the pillars the quest for the return of African heritage in Europe. It symbolised their right to own the material representations of their past.

Hand in hand with the work done in magazines and the literary sphere, art festivals played a central role in post-independence identity searches. They were a cultural showcase for the outside world as much as a self-affirmation statement that allowed cultural expressions of the African nations to become more visible and known. Some of these festivals had gigantic dimensions, such as one of the most notorious Pan-African events of the time: *Festac'77, The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture*, in Lagos, Nigeria. This event was a significant moment for several reasons. One is that, unlike the *Négritude*, the title referred to “black and Africans,” broadening the identity spectrum beyond the racial motif:

As Wole Soyinka (the first black or African to win the Nobel Prize in literature) indicated during the Festac'77 debates, Africa is not coined in Africa; and that, in addition to “blacks”, there are brown and white races in Africa, people that inhabited the continent for generations. (Okediji, 2015, p.128)

The black and African communities also included the diaspora, represented at the festival by guests from around the world, like Brazil, the United States, and the Caribbean islands. African culture's stories started to appear broader, more complex, and threaded by multiple voices united by similar historical and personal experiences, voices looking for spaces like *Festac'77* to manifest. Openness to the future was accompanied by a movement towards the past, with a search for the source, for a symbol that would represent Nigeria's past and its origin. The Queen Idia mask was chosen as the official emblem of the festival, appearing on posters and flyers as the official face of *Festac'77*. At the time, this particular pedant mask was on display in the British Museum, institution that still houses it. Despite multiple official requests, its permanent or temporary return to Nigeria has been impossible.

The Queen Idia mask is an ivory piece from the Benin Empire that dates back to the 16th century. It was taken to Europe, with the rest of the Benin Bronzes, in 1897 when “it fell into the hands of the Consul-General of the Niger Coast Protectorate, Sir Ralph Moor.” (Savoy, 2022, p.61) This information, as well as a more detailed story of the mask, its uses and its former royal African owners, was specified in the *Festac’77* pamphlet, accompanied by the image of the Queen Idia mask. This was not a casual decision but, as Savoy points out, it “was a conscious act of political iconography that had been planned long in advance.” (2022, p.60) Even if, in this case, the request for a return was not explicit, it was clear and loud: the mask that was the image of a festival in celebration of African and black identities was currently in the hands of the British. The key symbol of Nigeria’s cultural past and one of the world’s most famous African art objects was held in London.

Geography matters and the place where main cultural objects are matters as well. The Queen Idia mask was taken, as thousands of other pieces, in a conflict over territory, its natural resources, a conflict over power; but as Said wrote:

Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings. (Said, 1994, p.7)

What diminished during the colonial period was also the future capacity of imagining, of assembling national histories with all of its parts. Queen Idia mask, like many other African artefacts, is an emblem of an abundant pre-colonial time, filled with wealth, socially structured, and copious of artists and artisans. This past is often forgotten and overshadowed by the colonial period’s events but does not entirely go. Queen Idia mask also represents the possibility of re-signifying a symbol associated with a violent extraction of resources and endowing it with elements that revive the pre-colonial past and post-colonial quests for identity.

1.2. Mediating the conflict: international actors

Worldwide, growing concerns about African cultural heritage started to manifest. Massive events like *Festac 77* were powerful platforms for demonstrating these concerns, attracting intellectuals and political personalities from across the globe. These open displays of dissent also led to political friction and diplomatic problems between nations. For these reasons, the intervention and creation of international mediation institutions became necessary. They have played a vital role through the decades in moderating and reaching agreements on the issue of restitution. UNESCO is one of them: its general assemblies and the policies promoted over the decades have slowly moved the discussion forward in a concrete and not only theoretical way. UNESCO has acted as a facilitator between the parts involved, honouring its obligations and faculties which are, as Prott mentions, “both the promotion of cultural interchange and the preservation of the cultural heritage.” (Prott, 1995, p.444)

The restitution debate became of particular interest to UNESCO mainly during the leadership of the Senegalese Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, the organization's president from 1974 until 1987. During his administration, several important events were held on the subject, especially in 1978. We will focus on one of them: the publication of the petition *Return of an irreplaceable cultural heritage to those who created it*, written by M'Bow himself, as we believe that it synthesizes in an enlightened and clear way the maturing of ideas and notions shared by the communities of the Global South at the time.

In June 1978, Amadou Mahtar M'Bow arrived in Paris and gave a speech at UNESCO headquarters that was published one month later in 18 languages at *The Unesco Courier*, along with other articles. The July number of the magazine reads at the cover: “The cultural heritage: return to the homeland,” accompanied by a photograph of a “13th-century statue of the Buddhist goddess Prajnaparamita from East Java which was returned, in April 1978, to the Museum Pusat, in Jakarta, Indonesia, by the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leyden, the Netherlands.” (Unesco, 1978, p.3) The cover can be interpreted as a hopeful glimpse

into what could happen if Mahtar's appeal were to go into practice. It was a window to a possible reality where restitution happens more often than not, but it also pointed to the fact that the restitution struggle is not limited to the African continent and involves places like Asia, in this particular case, and even to some European countries like Greece, in other instances.

The appeal pronounced in Paris by M'Bow is the opening writing. It reads as a statement that will direct all of the other articles in the magazine. This is important because it had international scope and represented the official positioning of an institution as prominent and influential as UNESCO. Below is one part of the two-page plea:

The vicissitudes of history have nevertheless robbed many peoples of a priceless portion of this inheritance in which their enduring identity finds its embodiment.

Architectural features, statues and friezes, monoliths, mosaics, pottery, enamels, masks and objects of jade, ivory, and chased gold in fact everything which has been taken away, from monuments to handicrafts were more than decorations or ornamentation. They bore witness to a history, the history of a culture and of a nation whose spirit they perpetuated and renewed.

The peoples who were victims of this plunder, sometimes for hundreds of years, have not only been despoiled of irreplaceable masterpieces but also robbed of a memory which would doubtless have helped them to greater self-knowledge and would certainly have enabled others to understand them better. (M'Bow, 1978, p.4)

Coloniality robbed both the colonizer and the colonized of tools for understanding each other; its asymmetric dynamics and power plays opened breaches between civilizations and took away keys for comprehension and dialogue.

It is clear from M'Bow's plea that many of the artefacts taken were not originally conceived as museum objects to be seen from a distance or to adorn rooms and, even after their relocation, they are still bearers of memory and meaning, witnesses to the history of their people and simultaneously a testimony to it. Savoy points out that the plea was "mainly about the righting of historical wrongs, about cultural values, about a rebalancing of the international geography of art after centuries of colonial asymmetrical

relations.” (2023, p.74) We may add that this petition was also a call to reconsider the moral practices within art institutions. This point is not the main focus or drive of M’Bow’s text but is nevertheless a reference to the intrinsic relation of the restitution of African artefacts with the practices of decolonization (even if they are not referred as such by M’Bow):

I call on cultural organizations and specialized associations in all continents to help formulate and promote a stricter code of ethics with regard to the acquisition and conservation of cultural property, and to contribute to the gradual revision of codes of professional practice in this connection. (1978, p.5)

M’Bow is very clear with the idea that not every single artwork is to be returned, but those that hold the deepest meaning for the origin cultures. This point is highly relevant because it opens up the need to discuss and establish more ethical practices to honour and display in a dignified way the pieces that will remain in Western museums. ICOM was the institution that came to act as a body to pursue creating and implementing specific standards and values within museums.

ICOM, which stands for International Council for Museums, was created in 1946 to represent museums and museum workers globally. This non-governmental institution has historically had “formal relations with UNESCO.” (ICOM, 2011, p.8) According to the timeline displayed on their official website, ICOM gained international reach after 1977. This year coincides with efforts made by UNESCO on the matter of restitution under the presidency of M’Bow. An example of its bilateral efforts is the creation by ICOM of the Ad Hoc Committee for Restitution in response to Amadou Mahtar M’Bow’s plea, a fact reported in the magazine *Museum* (1979).

In 1977, the Ad Hoc Committee wrote a relevant report called *Study on the Principles, Conditions and Means for the Restitution or Return of Cultural Property*. The report states that the “world community considers that Cultural heritage is an essential element of national identity” (1977, p.62) and that even though at the time it was legal to

take African art and artefacts away, the art restitution debate is not only a matter of legality but also a “problem of solidarity” (1977, p.62) between countries. To overcome the distrust and lack of solidarity, it becomes of high importance for countries and museums to have a list of the objects in their possession. This would help to bring transparency to their provenance and the possibility (or not) of returning it to the country of origin. To this day, creating detailed lists open to the public is a complicated subject in the discussion. It seems that there has always been extreme caution when it comes to making information publicly available. Behind this policy of secrecy, we may find what the report calls *psychological difficulties*, barriers that can be encountered when returning art objects and that “are linked to the incriminating aspects of the act of the restitution because this act implies that the possession of the object was up till then illegitimate.” (1977, p.67)

Against this closed spirit of guilt and separation, UNESCO and ICOM, at the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s, started to promote and carry out joint practices between the Global North and the Global South. In May 1979, ICOM organised a meeting in the UNESCO offices in Paris. This event was significant because it exemplifies the joint work that European countries and the ex-colonies needed to do. Some countries in attendance were the United Kingdom, the United States, France, and Germany. It was agreed that said countries would work with representatives and museum directors from places like Mali, Western Samoa, and Bangladesh. In this regard, Savoy tells us that this decision:

Indicated equality as well as a shared responsibility for the consequences of the colonial past and the future of translocated cultural property. In addition, it showed that the actors involved had an acute awareness of the necessity to involve intellectuals from the emerging, newly formed nations in sensitive issues regarding the future of cultural heritage. (Savoy, 2022, p.92)

The development of independent countries needed to include cultural and social aspects, which in turn required equity, openness, and collaboration with the European countries that possessed part of their heritage. Dealing with the consequences of the

colonial past would entail working together, based on shared responsibility, to regenerate the bridges between cultures.

This urgency of alliance took a turn and acquired new meaning at the “UNESCO World Conference on Cultural Policies” in Mexico City in 1982. It was at this event that Melina Mercouri, the Greek minister of culture and science at the time, requested the return of the Elgin Marbles. The statues, originally part of the Parthenon, were removed between 1801 and 1812 by the British diplomat Lord Elgin; from that moment until the present day, the marbles rest at the British Museum. Until the Greek request for restitution, only “Third World” nations utilized the procedures established by the Ad Hoc Committee. This was the first time in history that they were put at the disposal of a European country that had also suffered from the extraction of its cultural material legacy.

The experience of loss is not limited to a geographical region, and being aware of this could help build bridges of empathy that become catalysts for action. Greece, for example, “was the only European state that had always supported efforts by former colonized countries for returns since the mid-1970s.” (Savoy, 2022, p.121) The need for culture, historical memory, and an identity rooted in the past is a shared global experience; the struggle to maintain and pursue it should also be a common goal.

1.3. The turn of the century: decolonial programs, restitutions and reconsiderations

By the first half of the 1980s, the idea of collaboration between countries and the need to rethink moral parameters and practices in museum institutions was already on the table. European museums openly discussed decolonial initiatives within their walls, even in places historically resisting such ideas, like Germany. The Übersee-Museum was one of the cases where official support for decolonizing projects took place. Founded in 1896, when Germany was already deeply involved in the colonial scramble, the museum was initially

named “Städtische Museum für Natur, Völker und Handelskunde.” It was later renamed “Kolonial-und Übersee-Museum.”

Herbert Ganslmayr was the director from 1975 to 1991, which meant that he witnessed, from inside an art institution, the development of the restitution debate and the decolonial movements that began after the independence of the former colonies. Ganslmayr was an active member of ICOM and openly supported the return of cultural heritage to its home, which made him “excluded from all West German committees and strategy meetings.” (Savoy, 2022, p.127) This was evidence of the mood and spirit that Germany and other European countries had towards the dialogue on decolonization and restitution. He was also involved in the conjunct projects led by UNESCO between European representatives and Global South intellectuals. His engagement found its apex in restructuring the Übersee-Museum under a post-colonial logic. Savoy quotes this relevant extract from Ganslmayr: “It also takes the mantle, as far as possible for a museum, for those nations to whom we are grateful for more than decorative crafts and exoticism- not to mention what we own them. The new and uncomfortable honesty of the museum confronts us with a reverse cultural shock.” (Savoy, 2022, p.127) Even after Ganslmayr’s departure as museum director, the institution continues to carry out projects that deconstruct and fight against the colonial logic that was part of its foundation.

The Übersee-Museum proves that it is possible to redefine the imperial nature that pervaded it in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and that its essence possesses a mutability that goes beyond those structures. Today, we can find several funded projects that seek to trace the origin and history of the artefacts that form part of each of its collections. The “Provenance Research and Repatriations” seek to discover “how an object came into the museum” and reconstruct “the ownership succession and relationships, i.e.

with the history of the museum's collection, as completely as possible.”¹⁵ These long-term projects include 125 human skulls from former German New Guinea, the examination of 18 Benin Bronzes, as well as an ongoing investigation to discover which items were confiscated from the Jewish community in violent ways during the National Socialist era.

Decolonial efforts, such as the one carried out by Ganslmayr in the Übersee-Museum, represented a gesture of historical justice and anticipated the focus that the new millennium brought regarding African cultural heritage. The decades-long evolution of the restitution debate, the development of protocols, and institutional and individual efforts resulted in concrete restitution cases, such as the arrival to Ethiopia of the Aksum Obelisk, which is considered “relevant to the current discussion on the return to Africa of artefacts looted during the colonial era, for which they provide precedents.” (Pankhurst, 1999, p.229)

The 24-meter monolith is, until this day, “a symbol of the Ethiopian people's identity,” (Šopova, 2008, p.14) whose construction dates back to the 4th century AD. It was removed from its original location in Aksum and taken to Italy as a war treasure at the end of Mussolini's occupation in 1937. Emperor Haile Selassie referred to this event “as one of the eleven main ‘outrages’ committed against his country.” (Pankhurst, 1999, p.236) Petitions for its return started right after the collapse of the Italian force in Ethiopia. In 1956, a “bilateral treaty between Ethiopia and Italy further detailed the return of cultural items, notably the Obelisk of Axum.” (McLean, 2021) Even if this was the case, the monolith's actual repatriation occurred only decades after the treaty was signed.

In March 2005, UNESCO (the entity in charge of the repatriation project) announced the return of the monolith to the Trigay area. The monumental obelisk was erected again alongside the other six smaller obelisks remaining in the area. According to *The Guardian*, the arrival of the pieces in cargo planes was “greeted by Ethiopians chanting prayers and

¹⁵ This information was extracted from the official website of the Übersee-Museum: <https://www.uebersee-museum.de/en/about-us/projekte-positionen/provenienzforschung-und-rueckfuehrungen/> [Consulted on 6 April 2024]

weeping with joy,” (2005)¹⁶ representing the material proof of the lost Empire Aksum. Its repatriation was considered a successful example of international negotiation led by UNESCO and a “highly symbolic event.” (Šopova, 2008, p.16) We could consider the reassembling of the parts of the Aksum Obelisk in Ethiopia as the restoration of its national history and identity pieces, as the possibility of healing its international relations, and of showing in a dignified way its ancient past.

Although the return of the Aksum Obelisk was a relevant moment in the history of African cultural objects, its case represents the exceptions rather than the rule. The years passed, and a growing need for a spark to ignite the debates surrounding African objects in Europe hung in the air. This moment of impulse came in 2018, as we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, with the publication of the French report *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics*. Written by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr, it was regarded as a “turning point in the history of restitutions.” (Le peuple qui manque, 2020, p.129)

As requested by French President Emmanuel Macron, the document extensively covers the state of the art on the restitution of European African cultural material and the specific French case. This report was a step forward to a more structural and transparent analysis of France’s African cultural heritage and became a reference for the rest of Europe. Savoy and Sarr, two renowned academics, did a scrupulous job of tracing the artefacts scattered around the country. The report showed that the possible return of the objects needs to happen parallel to a systematization of knowledge, the setting of specific tools to be used, and a comprehensive analysis led by specialists. The report not only covers the laborious and, in many cases, the neglected task of identifying the African material heritage

¹⁶ This information was consulted in: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/apr/20/italy.ethiopia>
[Consulted on 9 April, 2024]

in galleries or museums but also proposes the next steps of action, some guidelines to be followed, and criteria to be considered in case of restitution petitions.

Even if the 2018 Savoy and Sarr report focused specifically on the French case, its proposals could be extended to the rest of European countries with African artefacts. Savoy and Sarr establish as parameters for the restitution of African material heritage the following points: restitution must happen “without any supplementary research regarding their provenance or origins, of an object taken by force or presumed to be acquired through inequitable conditions.” (2018, p.61) These conditions cover “military aggressions” (p.61) or scientific expeditions that took place before 1960; objects collected by military or administrative personnel during the French colonial period (1885-1960); objects that were loaned to French museums but never given back.

On the other hand, the scholars propose “complementary research for pieces that entered into the museums after 1960 and those received as gifts or donations to the museum,” but that most likely left the African continent before 1960. The last case is that of “preservation within the French collections of African art objects and cultural heritage” that possess documented proof of an equitable transaction and without any “ethical risks.” (p.62)

All three cases imply subsequent actions to be taken and raise questions that must be addressed. In the present work, and from this point forward, we will focus on African artefacts that fall under the third classification. This means those whose characteristics do not make them viable for restitution or repatriation will remain in European territory. What should be done with the objects that are currently at the museums? How should museums curate them to be truthful to their spirit and nature? Those objects now hold a bipartisan nature: one that shares in its core elements of an African origin and also European layers of meaning. How can this new encounter be put on display?

These questions can be raised thanks to a series of events that we were able to delineate following the restitution debate over the decades. Their evolution reveals how African objects brought to Europe during the colonial situation transformed from emblems of fixed national identity to powerful representations of a more expansive identity, one that integrated the diasporic communities, the different ethnicities that make up the continent, as well as the multiple realities that emanate from the cultural crossroads between Africa and Europe.

The task now lies in searching for lost histories: the individual, communal, and shared narratives. The restitution debate's history is an assembly formed by numerous elements, actors, and events scattered across the decades. When pieced together, this enormous puzzle forms a story not just of material evidence, but of an ongoing search to reclaim erased and forgotten narratives. It becomes a landscape that reveals the enduring human stories embedded within these objects.

By recognizing this broader context, we argue that restitution should be a widely adopted protocol in European museums in all applicable cases because it represents an act of historical compensation and reparative justice. At the same time, it is essential to view restitution not as an isolated action but as part of a broader decolonization program. This will allow us to explore a more extensive range of approaches to address the situation of African artefacts outside Africa on a long-term basis.

Having already made an approximation to the logic that underlies African objects and the fight for restitution, we must now move the focus to European Museums. With this, we will have two of the main elements, with all they symbolise, that come together when thinking about museum decolonization. Franz Fanon wrote that "Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder." (p.36) It is a process of social rearrangement, of restructuring the institutions, the nations and the people of those nations; the European Museum is an essential part of this reordering. But

first, we must ask: What are the origins of the Western Museum? What constitutes the value base on which its logic is built? What changes occurred that can be traced as a response to the colonial period? What ideological heritage is still at work within it?

2. European museums: Decolonial process

2.1. What is a museum?

The human tendency to gather objects, organize the material world into easily understandable categories, and establish connections between things of various natures is not a modern phenomenon. It goes back to an ancient impulse that manifested throughout history in various private practices. This impulse also led to the creation of institutions such as museums and art centres that, because of their public essence, help to build what Benedict Anderson called *imagined communities*, that is, a group of people who share or identify with specific characteristics that form a national or group identity.

Collecting and exhibiting are acts that in themselves bear witness to human curiosity, to the deep need to give meaning to the world, to create decipherable symbols: “Gathering an individual’s or a group’s treasures and history in a museum overlaps with practices such as collecting memorabilia, making a photo album or maintaining an altar.” (Clifford, 1997, p.218) In its most elemental sense, the museum is a tool to showcase a community’s or a person’s relationship with the world, their interests, and the possibility of expanding their knowledge.

The word museum has its roots in the Greek *museion*, “which means the temple of the goddesses called Muses,” (Gunay, 2012, p. 1251) source of artistic inspiration. It was Alexander the Great who carried out, in the 3rd century BC, what would be the most direct antecedent of today’s museums in its classificatory essence: The Great Museum of Alexandria. This museum’s logic did not revolve around canvases, plastic works, or religious and ritual artefacts. Instead, they were books; that is to say: the precinct was dedicated to the creation and absorption of knowledge, research, and education.

The most remembered section is the library, for its monumental size as well as for its terrible end in flames, but the gigantic project also consisted of work areas for writers and philosophers to have a space to make intellectual production. The *museion* was formed both from the objects and books inside and from the ideas that were gestated around and because of them. This museum was born from the conquering and expansive enterprise of Alexander the Great, who sought to become a cultural and power symbol but also a place that gathered a hunger for knowledge, functioning as a crossing place where worldviews were safeguarded: “The Great Museum of Alexandria is the first center for the design of dream, to collect all words and symbols from Hindu, Mesopotamia and Ancient Greek civilizations and maybe from the whole world.” (Gunay, 2012, p. 1252)

The quest of the Greek *museion* to bring about knowledge production and to be a centre of convergence of ideas coming from different corners of the world has remained in essence. It has evolved into the modern concept of a museum which, according to the International Council of Museums, is:

A not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing. (ICOM, 2022) ¹⁷

This definition was established in 2022 and results from an internal and gradual evolution in the museum field, from changes determined by historical movements through which the museum has returned to explore its educational vein and adopted a more inclusive and diverse approach in the 21st century.

Understanding the museum today and visualizing it in the future are exercises that require taking a step back and revisiting the key points that historically have given rise to

¹⁷ This definition was consulted in: <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> [Consulted on 11 April 2024]

the logic by which it is governed today. Just as the Greek *museion* is a response to an expanding civilization, the decolonial processes of the modern museum are also a historical response, a need that post-colonial societies have struggled to meet. The world is not the same as the world of Alexander the Great and neither is it the same as the colonial world, nor should the museum and its institutions be the same or respond to immovable logics.

In this chapter, we will analyse how the modern world was founded on values and structures established during the colonial era that impregnated in a structural way current institutions such as the museum, which carries a colonial heritage that runs through it. At the same time, we will see the shifts in the conception of the museum to discern how its changes directly responded to what was happening in the colonial situation. Subsequently, we will address the idea of decolonization with a theoretical approach. For this, we will explain the concept of “contact zone” by Mary Pratt and used by James Clifford in the museum context, as well as the idea of African cultural heritage as objects in diaspora by John Pepper.

By intertwining these two ideas, we propose them as a dual tool for the decolonization of museums. This process is not just about opening channels of meaning and interpretation but about uncovering hidden histories that colonial mechanisms and the passage of time have overshadowed. We view the museum as a contact zone and African objects as diasporic contact zones, allowing us to perceive them as spaces of multiple voices with the potential to reveal historical nuances. This approach moves us away from the traditional view of objects tied to their origin. Instead, we see them as artefacts that movements and journeys have transformed into multivocal cultural channels. We believe that the conjunction of these two concepts is a potent tool for the restitution of stories, for the opening of lines of History diminished by colonial mechanisms and tinged by time.

2.2. Heritage of Colonialism

The core ideology of modern museums stems from a particular model that shaped the world's understanding of modernity. At the end of the 15th century and the dawn of the 16th century, the Age of Discovery inaugurated a series of changes in how the world would be conceived from that moment on. The encounter of European sailors with Indigenous populations in America, Asia and Africa raised a series of questions about what it was to be human and the values, behaviours and ideas that the West considered to be ideal, vital to belonging to a civilized global community. The physical, ethnic and cultural differences made them inquire to what extent the others could be objects of exploitation and enslavement. As Omi and Winant point out:

The representation and interpretation of the meaning of the indigenous peoples' existence became a crucial matter, one that would affect not only the outcome of conquest but the future of the empire and thus the development of the modern world. For the "discovery" raised disturbing questions as to whether *all* could be considered part of the same "family of man," and more practically, the extent to which native peoples could be exploited and enslaved. (2014, p.113)

The use of the term "interpretation" in the above quote accurately summarizes the process of encounter and clash of cultures that took place during the discoveries and later during the colonization period. The *others* who were not ruled by the same social constructs and that ultimately did not look like the Europeans were codes to be deciphered and interpreted under the parameters they knew best. They were objects of scrutiny whose fate could be shaped and sealed by those who arrived at their lands. The process of racialization began to regulate these encounters and produced a hierarchization.

This scrutiny possessed a tinge of curiosity and fascination and, at the same time, a hierarchical and racialising gaze. This attitude can be traced to the 16th and 17th centuries' Cabinets of Curiosities, "privately-owned collections of extraordinary objects," (Bowry, 2015, p.8) and considered the predecessor of the modern museum in the Age of Discovery. These are the antecedents of what we know as Natural History Museums. They displayed

objects of various kinds that were brought to Europe from the farthest corners of the newly explored continents: “living and non-living things, natural and artificial materials, dried plants, stuffed birds, unicorns, and embryos in short all mysterious objects collected together.” (Gunay, 2012, p.1257) The Cabinet of Curiosities functioned as a peephole to a portion of reality on other continents; it exemplifies the representational practices of the time. The collectors’ connection with the pieces was an extension of their relation to the world where they came from: “This physical space and the objects it contained enabled the collector to commune with other spaces, exotic and far-flung.” (Bowry, 2015, p.235) These “exotic and far-flung” places represented a way of existing fundamentally different from the European way. This contrast began to define Western artistic and identitarian parameters.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon wrote: “not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.” (1986, p.110) The black man became aware of his blackness when faced with the white man. They *became* black. Furthermore, the white could only be so in relation and contraposition to the man of colour. It was a matter of recognition of the self in the other or of lack of it and the posterior placement of predefined values and virtues. Just as European men [and women] defined their race and their relationship with the world in contrast to the indigenous or the black, they also shaped an identity through those elements that fled from their direct reality and ended up on display at the Cabinets.

Oceanic exploration and the encounters with non-European communities translated into collecting practices like the Cabinets of Curiosities and, overseas, to the creation of people’s classificatory systems: “The tension between the explosion of varieties of peoples encountered as a result of oceanic exploration and the arbitrary definition of their different types was visible as early as the sixteenth century.” (Bethencourt, 2013, p.157) The classificatory variety established in parts of Asia and Africa was smaller than the number of categories in the Amerindian caste system, as Francisco Bethencourt mentions: “European

colonialism in Africa and Asia did not produce as wide a variety of inter-ethnic and racial taxonomies as in America.” (2013, p.349)

There was a clear hierarchical and categorising inclination based on ethnic and customary parameters that manifested in the relation between Europeans and men and women from other regions of the world. The 16th century was also a time when the idea of modernity, which matured over the centuries, started to be shaped:

The West was created somewhere at the beginning of the sixteenth century in the midst of a global wave of material and symbolic transformations. The definitive expulsion of the Muslims from Europe, the so-called voyages of exploration, the first developments of merchant colonialism, and the maturation of the absolutist state set the stage for the rulers and merchants of Western Christendom to conquer Europe and the rest of the world. (Trouillot, 1995, p.74)

The ideas germinated in the voyages of exploration and transcontinental encounters would grow and become an essential part of the colonial agenda. The schemes with “degrees of humanity” (Trouillot, 1995, p.76) resulted in a presupposed European superiority over the other races, which allowed them to exploit the land and use the natives “as ‘natural resources’ - bodies and earth for war, bodies and earth for chattel,” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p.4) but also allowed them to justify the extraction of its commodities. Colonial extraction encompassed natural resources such as minerals, diamonds, foodstuffs, religious artefacts, ritual objects, and totems (what we now call cultural material heritage), as well as animal and human bodies. Colonial exploitation manifested on physical, ideological, geographic, spiritual, and cultural levels.

The hierarchization of races during the colonial period justified the unequal distribution of power and wealth. The “inferior” races became an efficient and perishable work tool, bodies killed or treated as merchandise and commodities to be extracted from their land, as we said before. There was:

No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. (Césaire, 2000, p.42)

The colonies funded the colonial quest and the success of European empires relied on centralizing the global market in Europe. The channels of wealth were pointed to Europe and the colonies became satellites orbiting and feeding the main hungry creature that was ready to devour it all. The art pieces were, of course, part of the configuration of this Euro-focalized global market. In addition to their monetary value, possessing these cultural objects signified a display of power in the relationship of “domination and submission,” of which Césaire speaks. At the end of the 17th century, museums began to “store and exhibit items of cultural heritage instead of collections themselves.” (Onur, 2012, p.20)

An example of this manifestation of wealth and power is the so-called Palace museums (Procter). The Louvre is the most representative example of this type of museum that emerged in the 18th century. Inaugurated in 1793, it is commonly considered as the museum that led the transformation and systematization of said institutions. The Age of Enlightenment turned the “culture of collections to the memory rooms.” (Gunay, 2012, p.1257) The museum became an emblem of royalty and national communities. The Louvre, for instance, was initially built to safeguard the art that the French empire collected in its conquering enterprises, these artefacts “enrich the galleries, ensuring the institution an essential status.”¹⁸ (Vergès, 2023, p.8)

It was not until after the French Revolution that the Louvre considered itself a public museum. Even with its new character and inherited freedom, the Louvre, as well as other Palace museums such as the Prado in Madrid, carried the weight of their origin: “the first museums are essentially trophy cabinets, rooms of prized things.” (Procter, 2021, p.25) They were spaces that demonstrated national power, a glorious past that fed on exposing the difference of a periphery invented by Europe and that gave strength to its imagined

¹⁸ “Enrichissent les galeries, ce qui assure à l'institution un statut incontournable.”

community. During the 18th century, European empires grew exponentially richer thanks to this economic centralization:

The slave plantation was at the heart of a globalized economy that supplied the inhabitants of Europe with sugar, coffee, tobacco, spices and other marvels; all these goods radically transformed tastes as well as social status, ways of living, receiving and representing. This was also the century in which the ideal of whiteness was consolidated, as a concentration of beauty, reason and the principles of freedom.¹⁹ (Vergès, 2023, p.8)

While the colonies suffered from constant extractions and the slave plantations were booming in production, the Western Museum reached its golden age in the 19th century. Museums in America and Europe went through what anthropologist William Sturtevant called the first “museum age,” from 1840 to 1920, “during which time the public museum became a normative institution of Western modernity.” (Phillips, 2005, p.83) It was in this century that the museum returned to its initial impetus of education and research: “The mandate of these museums was encyclopedic, universalist, and democratic. They were expected to conduct advanced research on human and natural history and to expose that research to broad audiences through the creation of public exhibitions.” (Phillips, 2005, p.84)

The creation of this knowledge must always be thought of within its historical context given that this search was centred, as Alice Procter writes, “on White men as the makers, explorers, collectors and authors, the creators of knowledge that it celebrated.” (p.75) By this point and as a result of historical movements, the main narrators of modern history were white men. Knowledge was, and still is, a colonized territory, with dynamics that are being replicated and that lie at the very core of our system of production and exchange.

¹⁹ “La plantation esclavagiste est alors au coeur d’une économie mondialisée qui pourvoit les habitantes de l’Europe en sucre, café, tabac, épices et autres merveilles; toutes ces marchandises transforment radicalement les goûts ainsi que le statu social, les manieres de vivre, de recevoir et de se représenter. C’est aussi le siècle où se consolide l’idéal de la blancheur censée concentrer beauté, raison et principes de liberté.”

The colonies were driven by racial hierarchization and ideological colonisation, by the invention and imposition of modern values. These were defining factors for the present, also manifesting in the structure of our current economic system and the capital flows. As Anibal Quijano points out:

Capital's specific social configuration was geographically and socially concentrated in Europe and, above all, among Europeans in the whole world of capitalism. Through these measures, Europe and the European constituted themselves as the center of the capitalist world economy. (2000, p.539)

Colonialism ended but capitalism remained with all of its colonial influx and configurations. This process of continuation of colonial inequalities in the capitalist era is called by many theorists as Neocolonialism, considered the ultimate stage of colonialism where "control and power over the states and economies of the ex-colonies has been retained by the former colonizing power." (Rao, 2000, p.168) Control and power mean a position of superiority, a superiority that is only possible because of the racial division and hegemony established during the colonial period. Hidden behind economic movements and political strategies, the logic remains the same.

The threads with which the colonial logic was woven are part of the fundamental structure that sustains the present at an economic, ideological, and cultural level. This assembly is mirrored and shares the fabric with the institutions that form it, serving as microcosms, ecosystems that emulate the social, economic, and racial inequalities that frame them. The museum has not been able to escape from this legacy and is not, wrote Vergès: "a neutral space but a battleground for ideological, political and economic battles." (2023, p.11)

Considering the above, we can assume that the decolonial processes within art institutions are far from being untainted and are, in reality, a series of actions towards future social and personal reconfigurations. This ongoing process engages us all, reminding us that no institution, society, or individual is immune to historical forces. As Boast wrote:

“Good intentions have little force against the power of this institutionalized assemblage.” (2011, p.67) In the following section, we will look at theoretical approaches that emerged with the post-colonial movements that can shed light on this issue.

2.3. Decolonial processes: the museum as a “contact zone” and African objects as diaspora

A paradigm shift in art institutions occurred after the First and Second World Wars and the subsequent independence of colonized countries. In the last decades of the 20th century, museums turned to deciphering new ways of functioning in the post-colonial world, with a dynamic that is best known as decolonization process of the museum. Its reconfigurations included “inclusionist programs in exhibitions, shared curatorship and use of collections. Particularly in archaeological and anthropological museums.” (Boast, 2011, p.56) Gail Anderson calls this endeavour “the reinvention of the museum.” (2004, ix)

Driven by social changes, academic discourse, and post-colonial critiques, museums underwent a process of reinvention. All of these elements gave birth to a “new museology” (Labrum & McCarthy, 2005) or “second wave” of the museum. In this new wave, the exploration of mechanisms of exhibition and reception that were more dialogical and representative of different communities began. Museums stopped thinking of themselves only as spaces to house collections and continued to follow their educational engine.

One of the most relevant theorists during this period was James Clifford, a multidisciplinary scholar who in 1997 used the term “contact zones” in the field of museums when he published his essay: “Museums as Contact Zones”. Thereafter, and “especially in Europe, the contact zone is now more or less synonymous with these inclusionist, collaborative programs.” (Boast, 2011, p.57) In this investigation, we will take the contact zone as one of two concepts that we consider essential in decolonization projects, as they may be used to reach a discursive openness, allowing the museum to be a polyphonic chamber. As Ruth Phillips pointed out, “considered in terms of newer constructs of colonial

contact zones and transculturation, there are other ways in which these objects are part of the same historical world.” (2005, p.93)

The concept of “contact zones” originally emerged in the area of literary studies. Mary Louise Pratt, in her 1991 lecture for the Modern Language Association of America “The Arts of the Contact Zone,” describes it as a

Term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. (1991, p.34)

One of the fundamental elements in Pratt’s “contact zone” is *transculturation*. This concept, originally used by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz in 1940, was conceived as an alternative “to replace overly reductive concepts of acculturation and assimilation used to characterize culture under conquest.” (Pratt, 1991, p.36) Pratt goes on to describe it as follows:

Ethnographers have used the term transculturation to describe processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture. [...] While subordinate people do not usually control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for. Transculturation [...] is a phenomenon of the contact zone. (Pratt, 1991, p.36)

Pratt uses two cases to exemplify the “contact zone.” One is a text from an Andean man called Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala. Dated back to 1673 and written in a mixture of Quechua and “ungrammatical, expressive Spanish,” (Pratt, 1991, p.35) it is a 200-page letter addressed to King Philip III of Spain called *The First New Chronicle and Good Government*. Pratt highlights two main points in this text: the notable fact that it is written both in Quechua, the language of Guaman Poma de Ayala, and in Spanish, the language of the Spanish conquerors with whom he had contact. The outstanding characteristics that this letter adopted are the chronicle format and title. This is an important fact if we consider that the chronicle was the main literary genre used by the Spanish to portray and record the colonial

conquests. Pratt points out that “in writing a *new chronicle*, Guaman Poma took over the official Spanish genre for his own ends. Those ends were, roughly, to construct a new picture of the world, a picture of a Christian world with Andean rather than European peoples at the center of it.” (Pratt, 1991, p.35) Guaman Poma de Ayala adopted not only an originally European literary genre but also “pieces of the representational repertoire of the invaders” (Pratt, 1991, p.36) to express local worries and interests.

For Pratt, *The First New Chronicle* of Poma works as a “contact zone” and as a prime example of *transculturation*. Guaman Poma absorbed and worked on a conscious and voluntary level with Spanish cultural elements to understand his own reality. By doing so, he overturned the hierarchical status allocated to his relation with elements like language, literary genres, and even the representation of the Andean society in a chronicle.

The other example involves his son Sam and his friend Willie, who collected baseball cards throughout his childhood and early adolescence. Pratt recalls seeing Sam understand a variety of subjects of adulthood during his years as a collector. As a child, Sam learned about phonics while trying to pronounce the players’ names; he developed an aesthetic taste and a sense of order when arranging his cards; he learned about geography and history; about the value of money and its arbitrary character. When Sam got older and his interest in baseball cards expanded to books, movies, and biographies, he

Learned the history of American racism and the struggle against it through baseball; he saw the Depression and two World Wars from behind the home plate. He learned the meaning of commodified labor, what it means for ones body and talents to be owned and dispensed by another. (Pratt, 1991, p.33)

Sam accumulated so much knowledge about American baseball and history that he started to be able to hold interesting conversations about the topic with anyone from any age range and “throughout his preadolescent years, baseball history was Sam’s luminous point of contact with grown-ups.” (Pratt, 1991, p.34)

Sam and the adults, as well as the Guaman Poma de Ayala and the Spanish, were operating in a hierarchical and unequal relationship. But even if an initial power imbalance exists in both cases, even with different characteristics, they also have in common the search and finding of an intersection where two languages meet a common ground, where they are mutually understood: the language of the adult and the child; the Indigenous reality and the European one. Years later, Mary Pratt expanded her idea of the “contact zone” in the book *Imperial eyes: Travel writing and Transculturation*. Here, it was described as an

Attempt to invoke spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. By using the term “contact” I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A “contact” perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. [It stresses] copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (Pratt, 1992, p.7)

The above quote was used a few years later by Clifford in the essay that took the term out of the strictly literary area to think of it as a condition the second-wave museum could adopt. For the American scholar, museologists could implement the idea of a “contact zone as a consultative space within the new museum.” (Boast, 2011, p. 61) The museum would be a favourable field for collaborative and plural work where the exhibitions would be co-curated or assisted by members of the represented communities. The museum would be a physical space where subjects separated by historical contexts and colonial outlooks would enter into dialogue to rethink how “an ongoing contact history” (Clifford, 1997, p. 193) can be represented. These contact narratives extend their meaning to how the elements are displayed in the museum, as well as the previous work of selection and consultation.

In his essay, Clifford recalls one case of collaboration between curatorial staff, anthropologists, art specialists and a group of Tlingit elders. Dan Monroe, who was the director of the Portland Art Institute, wanted to change the museum’s Ramussen Collection

installation in a less “drab, somewhat ethnographic way.” (Clifford, 1997, p.188) For this purpose, he gathered representatives of the native community to participate in the planning of the exhibition:

In the museum basement, objects from the collection were brought out, one by one, and presented to the elders for comment: a raven mask, an abalone-inlaid headdress, a carved rattle... What transpired was a series of complicated moving performances, by turns serious and lighthearted. (Clifford, 1997, p.188)

The objects in the museum basement ignited memories in the elders, who, instead of meticulously describing the use and origin of the artefacts, which they always referred to with “appreciation and respect,” (Clifford, 1997, p. 189) started to sing songs and tell old stories. The conversation around the cultural material heritage of their region led them to address current political or social problems in the area.

Clifford’s example of the contact perspective in the museum terrain contains several contact points. First, the museum opens itself as a contact zone, where a native group collaborates with a Western Museum and its staff members. This cross-cultural encounter actively works to destabilize the colonial dynamics that rest in its foundations, as we previously discussed.

Just as the museum is a cross-cultural area, the objects displayed function also as intersections, as spaces where the relationship between disparate elements that belong to the same universe of meaning become evident: the personal stories and the communal history; the past, including memories from a pre-colonial and colonial era, and the present with the worries that the current state of the world puts on the communities. It is important to note that the objects displayed within the museum will respond to complex narratives that include, but are not limited to, colonial encounters:

Moreover, although one cannot separate a history of loss, displacement, and reconnection from the meanings these masks, drums, and garments hold for clan elders, it would be wrong to reduce the object’s traditional meanings, the deep feelings they evoke, to “contact responses”. If a mask recalls a grandfather or an old story, this

must include feelings of loss and struggle; but also include access to powerful continuity and connection. To say that (given a destructive colonial experience) all Indigenous memories must be affected by contact histories is not to say that such histories determine or exhaust them. The “tribal” present is a fabric some of whose strands extend before (and after) the encounter with white societies- an encounter that may appear endless but is actually discontinuous and, in some respects, terminable. (Clifford, 1997, p.194)

It would be reductionist, Clifford observes, to limit the objects to what he calls *contact response*, that is, to the meanings that directly emanate from the encounter between the European and the colonized communities. To do so would even be historically narrowing, whereby the colonial situation determines the past and the future of the people from the Global South. This is, in itself, a neocolonial rhetoric that would sustain racial and power hierarchies. Opening the objects to a larger spectrum of memory gives space for historical agency and a possibility of remembrance in which events both past and beyond colonization would come into play. This, rather than attempting to silence the levels of violence, destruction, and generational trauma that the colonial period caused, would be a tool to subvert and re-signify it, whether through the inclusion of other narratives, through processes of transculturation, or by having museums and communities in the Globe North rethink ways of representing the Other.

However, we must not disregard the fact that the “contact zone” is not a neutral area, it is not devoid of flaws, and it is a concept trapped in a bigger neocolonial web, as Boast points out: “It is not so much that the contact zone is inherently asymmetric but that the contact zone is a site in and for the center.” (2011, p.67) Although the “contact zone” is an area embedded in this neocolonial power dynamics, we believe it is a space where imbalances can be put into question; where narratives and dynamics of centres and peripheries can reach a possible level of subversion. A contact perspective is the possibility of other forms of interaction between cultures in physical spaces and through the artefacts in those spaces.

Objects within museums are not only opportunities to stimulate certain ideas but are themselves “contact zones.” Laura Peers and Alison Brown wrote that: “Artefacts in museums embody both the local knowledge and histories that produced them, and the global histories of Western expansion which have resulted in their collection, transfer to museums, and function as sources of new academic and popular knowledge” [...] “Artefacts function as *contact zones*.” (Peers & Brown, 2003, p.4) This embodiment of local knowledge, as well as histories of expansion, occurs in what John Pepper considers an “object as diaspora.” (2005, p.340) This is, with “contact zones”, the second concept that we will take as central within our analysis.

The term diaspora is used among academics to “shed light on different processes of (violent) dispersal and resettlement of groups, often caused by a collective traumatic event that continues to haunt later generations.” (Nehl, 2016, p.39) Other theorists, such as Robin Cohen, provide different nuances to the concept depending on the community in which it is studied, some of the definitions given by the author are: “an idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety and prosperity,” (1997, p.26) and: “a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long time and based on a sense of distinctiveness.” (1997, p.26) All this range of meaning exists within the concept of “objects as diaspora.”

The geographical dispersal movement of African communities was also performed by African cultural artefacts, in fluxes within the continent and, beyond Africa’s oceanic borders, around the world through the centuries, which is why Pepper aims to consider them “as objects in motion, and as objects that articulate between and across disparate cultural histories and the cultural zones of others.” (Pepper, 2005, p. 339) His proposal includes those artefacts whose destiny has led them to arrive at museums, art institutions, and private collections in Europe and America.

Peffer's diasporic perspective also allows us to consider African objects as mutable contact zones, opting for cultural hybridity that moves away from the "colonial categories based on a false sense of fixed ethnicities and static geographies." (Peffer, 2005, p.340) Contrary to a fixed and immovable identity, the diasporic approach considers and "explores the origin as a geographically and semantically mobile focal point," (Peffer, 2005, p.342) which enables the artefacts to enter into a process of expansion of meaning and identity reconstitution in response to their journey through the map and through time.

A diasporic perspective considers and highlights the arrival in new territories as much as the departure from a "home." The departure of the objects from their community of origin subjected them to the experience of contact with external cultures in a process of constant recontextualization, thus: "the object can be understood as an encounter at any given moment, and if tracked over time the same object can represent a history of encounters." (Peffer, 2005, p.342) The object represents its past, the place in which it no longer lives, the path it has travelled, its present, and its possible future changes. This, on the one hand, can create a higher level of representation for the various African communities outside of Africa. On the other hand, it allows the articulation of a broader discourse: a story of encounters with different narrators and visions embodied in the pieces.

African cultural heritage, viewed as diaspora and museums as contact zones, allows the material objects to become a palimpsest, not a single text written in stone. This rearticulates them into a polyphonic essence, a powerful tool for the restitution of erased stories. It allows the exploration of origin narratives alongside those of post-colonial cultural mixing, of rootedness as well as transculturation and assimilation, of violence and displacement as well as encounters and expanded identities. This approach reveals a common history made up of layers, juxtapositions, and multiple centres, encompassing both official colonial narratives and the silenced voices of African communities.

3. Living together: José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts

3.1. Decolonial efforts and impediments: Portugal

Along with theoretical approaches relevant to decolonization such as Pratt and Clifford's "contact zone" or Peffer's diasporic perspective, there was a drive for change in the global political and cultural spheres. In Portugal, we find figures such as Joacine Katar Moreira, born in the Portuguese ex-colony of Guinea-Bissau and a former member of the LIVRE party, which has as its guiding principles: Universalism, Freedom, Equality, Solidarity, Socialism, Ecology and Europeism.²⁰ In 2020, as deputy, Katar Moreira raised before the Assembly of the Republic the topics of cultural restitution and historical reparations, which she addressed as "decolonization of knowledge" in Portugal. These elements would come together with a program called by the LIVRE party "decolonizing the culture," a series of policies that would cut across the nation's educational, cultural, and political scope. It was one of the initiatives included in the electoral program 2019 of the LIVRE party, in the eleventh section entitled: "Art and Culture." The proposal reads as follows:

iv. Decolonizing the Culture

We demand the immediate decolonization of European culture. We want all works looted from former colonies to be transferred to their places of origin. In those cases in which the artefacts remain in Europe, we will ensure that they are framed in a way that their colonial heritage is clear. We will defend the curatorial representation of the ex-colonies developing shows that reflect on the history of European colonization. (LIVRE, 2019, p.37) ²¹

²⁰ This information was consulted in LIVRE's party official website:

<https://partidolivre.pt/declaracao-de-principios-2-2> [Consulted on 16 June 2024]

²¹ This translation and others from the Portuguese in this chapter, were done by the author of this dissertation from the original text.

"iv. Descolonizar a Cultura

Joacine Katar Moreira suggested specific measures to be followed, including drawing up a list of the heritage contained in Portuguese museums and artistic institutions, which “would be the responsibility of a working group of museologists, curators and scientific researchers.”²² The elaboration of a list of the national inventory of African cultural material would be accompanied by the creation of a specialized commission in the area:

Joacine Katar Moreira also suggests creating a multidisciplinary commission made up of museologists, curators, scientific researchers (history, art history, post-colonial and decolonial studies) and anti-racist activists. [...]

This commission would aim to “forge didactic guidelines for the recontextualization of the collections of national museums and monuments.”²³ (Lusa, 2020)

The Parliament rejected the project for the decolonization of knowledge in Portugal. The refusal joined a series of adverse reactions from the media and right-wing parties, such as CHEGA, to the LIVRE party’s proposal. Katar Moreira became the target of public attacks; for example, André Ventura, president of CHEGA party, issued statements of this sort reported by national newspapers: “I propose that deputy Ms. Joacine [Katar Moreira] herself be returned to her country of origin. It would be much more peaceful for everyone...including her party! But above all for Portugal”, wrote André Ventura in a Facebook post.”²⁴ (Sampaio, 2020)

Exigimos a descolonização imediata da cultura europeia. Queremos a transferência de todas as obras saqueadas das antigas colónias para os seus locais de origem. Nos casos em que as obras permaneçam na Europa, garantiremos que serão enquadradas de forma que seja clara a sua herança colonial. Defenderemos a representação curatorial das excolónias na preparação de espetáculos que reflitam sobre a história da colonização europeia.”

²² “Estaria a cargo de um grupo de trabalho composto de museólogos, curadores e investigadores científicos.”

²³ “Joacine Katar Moreira sugere também a criação de uma comissão multidisciplinar composta por museólogos, curadores, investigadores científicos (história, história da arte, estudos pós-coloniais e decolonias) e activistas anti-racistas”, escreve. / Esta comissão teria como objectivo forjar directivas didácticas para a recontextualização das coleções dos museus e monumentos nacionais.”

²⁴ “Eu proponho que a própria deputada Joacine [Katar Moreira] seja devolvida ao seu país de origem. Seria muito mais tranquilo para todos...Inclusivamente para o seu partido! Mas sobretudo para Portugal, terá escrito André Ventura, em publicação no Facebook.”

The *decolonization of knowledge* sparked reactions that showed the resistance of part of the Portuguese political sector to enter a relevant international dialogue like the restitution and decolonization debate. A (partial) resistance continued in the following years, with public comments such as those made by former Minister of Culture Pedro Adão e Silva, who referred in 2023 to the restitution of African cultural heritage as an “abstract” discussion: “It’s difficult to do something concrete with an abstract idea,”²⁵ but he agreed that specific measures needed to be taken: “What needs to be done is an inventory, the context of the provenance of the pieces in our museums.”²⁶ However, to this day, the inventory has not yet been completed.

In 2024, Portugal and its political actors have been increasingly open to restitution and decolonization efforts and dialogues. On one hand, the current Minister of Culture, Dalila Rodrigues expressed:

“I don't look at the past as a kind of territory for the remission of sins, but rather as a source of learning so that plurality, diversity and humanist values can be fully affirmed,” Dalila Rodrigues told journalists in Viseu, where she was celebrating the 20th anniversary of the reopening of the Grão Vasco National Museum this Saturday. (Lusa, 2024)

The former director of the Mosteiro de Jerónimos e da Torre de Belém pointed as imperative the need to consider the return of the pieces to the former colonies: “Dalila Rodrigues argued that, *if there is any cultural good that has been misappropriated, from an ethical point of view, the Portuguese should return it to it.*”²⁷(Lusa, 2024) The Minister of Culture’s remarks did not appear in isolation in the Portuguese scene; the President of the Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, also expressed his views on the country’s relationship with formerly colonized countries, as Lusa, National News Agency reported:

²⁵ “É difícil fazer uma coisa em concreto em relação a uma ideia abstrata.”

²⁶ “Aquilo que há de fazer é um trabalho de inventariação, daquilo que são as proveniências, o contexto de proveniência das peças que há nos nossos museus.”

²⁷ “Dalia Rodrigues defendeu que, *se existir algum bem cultural que tenha sido apropriado indevidamente, do ponto de vista ético, os portugueses devem proceder a sua devolução.*”

*“We can't sweep this under the carpet or put it in a drawer. We have an obligation to lead this process because if we don't do it, what happens to countries that, having been colonial powers, after x number of years, lost the capacity for dialogue and understanding with their former colonies will happen to us,” he warned.*²⁸

Rebelo de Sousa is aiming towards a dialogic future, one that could be supported by concrete practices such as those that the Minister of Culture intends to promote and that Rebelo de Sousa himself proclaims as necessary in the national agenda. This hopeful vision of a future built on dialogue and understanding is a powerful motivator for the ongoing decolonization efforts in Portugal:

On the eve of April 25, Marcelo had been conclusive in saying that “we have to pay the costs” of colonialism, leaving two direct questions – “are there actions that have not been punished and those responsible have not been arrested? Are there goods that have been looted and not returned?” – and, “let's see how we can repair this.”²⁹ (Cassiano, 2024)

The statements were followed by an attempt to open a legal process under the parameters of “treason” against Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, led by the CHEGA party. Although the parliamentary majority rejected the initiative, it showed the level of rejection and controversy that this type of proposal can generate: *“The repercussions of the statement show that the past is still taboo in Portugal*, Reuters journalist Catarina Demony told DN.”³⁰ (Lima, 2024)

Joacine Katar Moreira, Dalila Rodrigues and Marcelo de Sousa are some political figures that represent the decolonization and restitution voices in Portugal. It should also be noted that, although public initiatives and support from the Portuguese political

²⁸ “Não podemos meter isto debaixo do tapete ou dentro da gaveta. Temos obrigação de pilotar, de liderar este processo, porque se nós não o lideramos, assumindo, vai acontecer o que aconteceu com países que, tendo sido potências coloniais, ao fim de x anos perderam a capacidade de diálogo e de entendimento com as antigas colónias”, alertou.

²⁹ “Na véspera do 25 de Abril, Marcelo, tinha sido contundente ao dizer que “temos de pagar os custos” do colonialismo, deixando duas perguntas diretas – “há acoes que nao foram punidas e os esponsáveis nao foram presos? Há bens que foram saqueados e nao foram devolvidos?” – e um “vamos ver como podemos reparar isto.”

³⁰ “A repercussão sobre a declaração mostra que o passado continua sendo um tabu em Portugal, afirma ao DN a jornalista da Reuters Catarina Demony.”

community have not been expressed openly by the majority, the country has museums within its territory that for years have been carrying out decolonial practices; institutions that have opted to hold exhibitions that provide spaces of dialogue and challenge certain museum paradigms. For instance, we can mention the Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon, which has been the object of multiple studies. One example is the dissertation carried out at FLUP: *Europa Oxalá: a reflection on the limits and possibilities of the decolonization of museums*³¹ by Amanda Lucilio.

The Gulbenkian Museum has become an institution of reference in Portugal, but it is not a unique case. In this dissertation, we will take as a case study the José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts (CIAJG), less known than the Gulbenkian museum, as we consider that it represents the possibilities of holding exhibitions following a decolonial logic, specifically with a diasporic perspective of contact. As we said in the previous chapter, cultural institutions in the present are framed by a historical network that determines them to a certain extent. Decolonization is an ongoing process of change and reflection. No institution is exempt from flaws; however, we believe that the CIAJG is actively, constantly, and consciously (through curatorial exercises) working towards implementing mechanisms that test the colonial foundations of the European museum.

The present chapter will be divided into four parts. The first two: “José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts” and “José de Guimarães”, will provide a contextual frame for the exhibitions. We will delve into the CIAJG and the artist José de Guimarães, whose vision is a crucial thread in the narrative of the permanent exhibition “José de Guimarães and African, Pre-Columbian, and Ancient Chinese Arts. Heteroclites: 1128 objects.” Understanding his personal history and background is essential in establishing the origin of the museum’s pieces. José de Guimarães is a key element, representing a crucial point of contact within the CIAJG. The last two sections will then analyse the permanent exhibition

³¹ “Europa Oxalá: uma reflexão sobre os limites e as possibilidades da decolonização dos museus.”

and its elements: “José de Guimarães and African, Pre-Columbian, and Ancient Chinese Arts. Heteroclites: 1128 objects,” and its relation with the temporary exhibition: “Troubles with Primitivism- a view from Portugal.”

3.2. José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts

Located in the northern Portuguese city of Guimarães, the José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts was inaugurated on June 24, 2012, the year when the European Union named the city the European Capital of Culture (ECOC). The Portuguese architecture firm Pitagoras Group carried out the project on a vast plot of land of over ten thousand square meters, where the Municipal Market once stood; its creation was part of the “Platform for the Arts and Creativity, an infrastructural project to transform the Old Market of Guimarães into a multifunctional space.”³²

The complex has won multiple architectural awards, including the Detail Prize Award 2012 and the Reddot Design Award “Best of the Best 2013.” It consists of thirteen halls, spread over three floors, housing temporary exhibitions and over eight halls with permanent exhibitions. Its large structure contrasts with its surroundings in the city centre and stands out for its modern style. The CIAJG emerged as a significant cultural reference in the country’s north region for its architecture and its focus on contemporary art.

According to its official website, the base of its cultural project is “underpinned by the collection of the artist, José de Guimarães, that consists of African art, pre-Columbian art, ancient Chinese art and a representative selection of his own works.” The inventory comprises 1128 pieces, including sculptures, ceramics, textiles, paintings, and installations. Despite having many non-European objects, the CIAJG is not an anthropology, ethnographic

³² “Plataforma das Artes e da Criatividade, um projeto infraestrutural de transformação do Antigo Mercado de Guimarães num espaço multifuncional.”

This information was consulted on the official website of the Guimarães Municipality:

https://em.guimaraes.pt/diretorio/geo_artigo/centro-internacional-das-artes-jose-de-guimaraes [Consulted on 20 June 2024]

or scientific museum. Its approach is not to showcase the artefacts under the “immobility of historiographical cataloguing” but instead:

CIAJG aims to explore cross and critical perspectives related to its collection and render visible the broken links between objects and narratives and their respective peoples of origin. One of the CIAJG’s missions is to study the archive in the context of its respective communities and the histories of the collection, placing them more broadly within the history of the overall circulation of ethnographic objects between Europe and Africa, in particular in the 20th and 21st centuries.³³

This cross-perspective, focused on revealing connections and histories lost or forgotten over time, makes the CIAJG an ideal example for our analysis. Its vision and mission statement present this art centre as a dynamic space exploring its possibilities as a contact zone with non-European diasporic objects.

3.3. José de Guimarães

José Maria Fernandes Marques, known as José de Guimarães, is a renowned Portuguese contemporary plastic artist. He was born on November 25, 1939, in Guimarães and moved to the capital to study engineering. In Lisbon, he began to gain artistic skills, alternating his university studies with engraving, art history, and painting classes. José de Guimarães reminds us that, in those years of the 20th century: “Pop Art was the prevailing art movement.”³⁴

In 1967, during the colonial war, he was sent to Angola for military service, where he lived for seven years until the end of the Portuguese occupation. This period was crucial for his artistic development and influenced his subsequent artistic maturity years: “I can say that the most important transformation in my painting occurred after I began to understand African tribal art.” Fascination and curiosity for the artistic and religious expressions of the

³³ This information was consulted in José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts official website: <https://www.ciajg.pt/en/sobre/#anchor=cRldwtGcFofI> [Consulted on 21 June 2024]

³⁴ This information was consulted in José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts official website: <https://www.ciajg.pt/en/sobre/#anchor=cIldzukgBKDL> [Consulted on 21 June 2024]

region followed the initial cultural shock that José de Guimarães records and expresses in the autobiographical text published on the museum's website.³⁵ Guimarães, aware of his lack of knowledge about the forms of expression he was facing and without possessing the necessary tools to decode them, decided to spend some years studying African and (specifically) Angolan ethnography.

From 1970 to 1974, during his last years in Angola, he created artworks that represent the “origin and root” of the art he does nowadays: “I began to create art that was no longer the art of a European painter or an African painter, but rather an art that was miscegenation of two cultures.” A perfect example is his ideographic “African Alphabet,” developed from 1970 to 1974 and now on display on the CIAJG. In this period, he also began a journey as a collector of African objects, making small acquisitions in Angola that he later donated to the Martins Sarmento Archaeological Museum in Guimarães, where they are today. It was only after his return to Europe that his private collection grew in size and variety, with pieces not only from Angola but from all the central African regions scattered in his ateliers in Lisbon and Paris and the José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts.

Visits and explorations of Mexican culture followed the quests in Africa: “its artistic manifestations, tribal art, the practices and rituals; Mexico with Maya and Aztec cultures, its literature, Juan Rulfo, death and eroticism, the *inframundo* (underworld), and the *Mexican Alphabet* from archetypes of the archaeological cultures;” and of Japanese culture: “their traditions, the tattoos, the decorated garments, their animist beliefs and practices and, once again, the production of signs, symbols and ideographic forms.” His interest led him to purchase pre-Columbian and Asian pieces, adding to the catalogue of African objects he had already begun in the 1970s. All these artefacts began to form part of the same

³⁵Guimarães' autobiographical text can be consulted in:
<https://www.ciajg.pt/en/sobre/#anchor=cIldzukgBKDL> [Consulted on 21 June 2024]

network of information and codes, coming together in the vision and curiosity not of an anthropologist but of an artist.

A significant number of the African, pre-Columbian, and Asian pieces from his private collection were donated to the CIAJG, forming the core of its permanent exhibition. His artistic work is not a mere translation of other cultures into European codes but a quest for a new common language, a contact zone between both visions, of which he functions as a vessel. Guimarães' inclination to seek a territory of intersection, symbols, and languages has made the CIAJG a place with a multicultural, transdisciplinary, and contact essence.

3.4. José de Guimarães and African, Pre-Columbian and Ancient Chinese Arts. Heteroclites: 1128 objects.

The first floor of the CIAJG holds its permanent exhibition, “José de Guimarães and African, Pre-Columbian, and Ancient Chinese Arts. Heteroclites: 1128 objects” formed by Central African, pre-Columbian, and Ancient Chinese cultural artefacts and artworks from José de Guimarães. This permanent exhibition has a crucial feature that will help us begin to unravel its core: “Heteroclites: 1128,” as we mentioned previously, formed part of the private collection of José de Guimarães, who, since the 1980s, started to acquire them on the European art market:

The objects of African art, pre-Columbian art and ancient Chinese art were acquired by José de Guimarães between the 1980s and 2000s in the European market that specialises in artistic, archaeological and ethnographic objects. They have been entrusted on loan to the CIAJG and serve as the basis for its artistic programme.

The collecting ethos we found in the Cabinets of Curiosities, the Palace Museum, and even the Great Museum of Alexandria also emerged in the Portuguese artist. Cícero Fonseca de Almeida identifies

Two categories of museum institutions – within a much broader universe – that explicitly demonstrate the function and importance of collecting in establishing

museum institutions. One category refers to museums created from partially or completely incorporating old private collections. Another category relates to what we could call the “State’s” collecting practice.³⁶ (Almeida, 2001, p.133)

The CIAJG falls into the first category. What the José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts houses is not a collection made by the State but by one person; this private process of selecting and forming a heterogeneous collection results in an individual’s tastes, interests, searches, and aesthetic tendencies permeating and dictating the collection. Alice Procter writes, when discussing the “Palace” museums, often born of private collections that became public, that in them, as in the case of “Heteroclites: 1128 objects”: “we will see examples of the ways in which a collector’s personal choices have influenced the experience of looking at and engaging with the art and objects on a much larger scale.” (2021, p.22)

This process through which the object becomes part of multiple semantic networks shared by other artefacts from different cultures and categories under the compilation made by a particular individual reveals what Cícero Fonseca de Almeida calls the “mechanisms of resignification of objects”³⁷ (2001, p.123): “In a collection, objects are *removed* from their original function. Therefore, they are no longer used but rather *possessed*, creating a system with its status, solely surviving to *signify*.”³⁸ (2001, p.123)

Objects in a collection are not only moved from place to place but are also relocated to other fields of meaning determined in the first instance by the collector, in this case, José de Guimarães. Through this resignification, the objects begin to play a specific role within their own system. Peffer points to this movement of adherence of meanings from being removed from their place of origin and to the “processes of cultural decontextualisation

³⁶ “Duas categorias de institucoes museais – em um universo, obviamente, muito mais amplo – que explicitam a funcao e a importancia do colecionismo na formacao das institucoes museais. Uma primeira se refere aos museus criados a partir da incorporacao parcial ou integral de antigas colecoes privadas. Outra categoria se refere ao que poderíamos chamar de prática colecionista de “Estado.”

³⁷ “Mecanismos de resinificação dos objetos”

³⁸ “Em uma coleção, os objetos são abstraídos de sua função original, portanto, não mais são utilizados e sim possuídos, formando um sistema com estatuto próprio, sobrevivendo unicamente para significar.”

and revaluation” (Peffer, 2005, p.342) as a crucial element for the possibility of a diasporic perspective. Wyatt MacGaffey says that “the African object is given a new context and a new identity.” (MacGaffey, 1998, p.225)

In this specific case, the fact that the objects come from a private collection, the direct spatial and dialogic relationship it maintains with Guimarães’ works of art, together with the curatorial work done by Marta Mestre, makes “Heteroclites: 1128” not an anthropological or ethnographic display. At this point, it is important to understand better the conceptual nuances and the difference between the terms “display” and “exhibit” used by museum experts such as Verhaar and Meeter (1989) and Burcaw (1975). We will take the definition Burcaw gives in his book *Introduction to Museum Work*, where he writes that a *display* is “the showing of objects, depending on the interest of the viewer in the objects themselves” (Burcaw, 1975, p.15), and on the other hand, he presents *exhibit* as

A more serious, important, and professional connotation than display. It is the presentation of ideas with the intent of educating the viewer, or, in the case of an art exhibit, a planned presentation of art objects by an informed person to constitute a unit. As such it might be an identifiable part of an exhibition. (Burcaw, 1975, p.15)

The curatorial approach to the 1128 objects goes beyond a display. *Heteroclites* is conceived and presented as an experimental exhibition-essay. Here, Marta Mestre’s curatorial work joins Guimarães’ guiding hand as a collector:

“Heteroclites” is an exhibition essay that shows the entire collection, highlighting a debate between language, objects, subjects and politics. The exhibition occupies the entire first floor. Its assembly is deliberately experimental - seeking fluidity between the «reserves» and the exhibition rooms, emphasising the «transit» and «time» of objects, as different as those in the collection put together by José de Guimarães.³⁹

The proposal does not abandon the purpose set by the artist when acquiring the pieces from his collection but instead opens up another layer of intentionality. This opening

³⁹ This information was consulted in José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts official website: <https://www.ciajg.pt/en/detail-eventos/20221008-sala-01-08-heteroclitos-1128-objetos/> [Consulted on 25 June 2024]

of mutually nourishing channels responds to Peffer's diasporic perspective; the objects become a "history of encounters," articulating between temporalities and cultures and under multiple gazes that decipher them. To their place of origin, the first owner and user join the collector's view of José de Guimarães, the curatorial perspective of Marta Mestre, and the private intervention of each individual who visits the museum.

The differences in geography, time, uses, and forms between the elements become the common thread and the internal structure of the exhibition. We find this from its name, a term that points to a nature composed of multiplicities. *Heteroclites* refer to something different, it

Means that which is eccentric, irregular, out of the ordinary. A collection is said to be heteroclite when it is built from dissonant elements, but which transforms this sense of disaccord into a space of hospitality. Heteroclite is a watchword for imagining the future. (Mestre, 2023)⁴⁰

The ideological foundations of this exhibition and its curatorial work have an explicit concept of encounter and a contact perspective. The name's selection suggests the creation of joint discourses from voices emanating from dissonant elements that will expand through the rooms. The pieces are in dialogue, but each also keeps a narrative of its own and has particular characteristics, some of which are included in the catalogue, provided on level 0 when purchasing the ticket.

The bilingual Portuguese and English catalogue lists the pieces in the exhibition, dividing them into four categories. The first is "José de Guimarães," which includes 842 works of art by the Portuguese artist, with details of the name of the work, the series to which it belongs (where applicable), the year of creation, the year it was brought to the museum, the technique or materials used and the measurements of the work.

⁴⁰ This information was consulted in the "Exhibition Journal" (09/2023- 04/2024) available in a physical version at the CIAJG.

The second category is “Pre-Columbian Art,” which includes pieces 843 to 875, each with a descriptive title; for example, number 864 is “Men’s Clothing Tied at Waist,” or 875 is “Ornaments of Funeral Mask.” As complementary information, it has the approximate dates of origin and use, place of origin, materials of manufacture, and the object’s dimensions. The third category, “Ancient Chinese Arts,” includes objects 876 to 929. The fourth and biggest category, “African Art,” includes objects 930 to 1128. The latter categories have the same information as the “Pre-Columbian Art.”

This detailed catalogue, freely available to the public, is relevant for several reasons. On the one hand, it makes transparent which and how many non-European artefacts are under its care; this aspect gains relevance by taking into account one of the points that the restitution debate brought up, which was the need to inventory African (and, in this case also Pre-Columbian and Ancient Chinese) cultural artefacts and to make this information public. In the last century, requests for such an inventory started, but the opposition to doing it extends to the present years, as it was possible to point out in the case of Portugal, which, of course, is one of many. Although this list belongs to cultural objects from a private collection and purchased on the European market from the 1980s onwards, it continues to be an exercise in transparency and a tool of knowledge. This type of list helps the spectator have data that translates into possibilities for deciphering the pieces and the dialogues generated in this contact zone.

Eighth rooms hold the 1128 pieces of *Heteroclites*. We will focus on the elements within them that reflect contact and diasporic perspectives. The guiding concepts dividing *Heteroclites* are “African Alphabet,” “Disturbing Art,” “Craniums and Kronos,” “Mask Room. Inversion,” and “Living Together.” In this dissertation, we will focus mainly on the following: “African Alphabet,” “Mask Room. Inversion,” and “Living Together,” as we consider them to be the ones that show the relationship of the African world with the artist and with American and Asian cultures. We made this decision because the present dissertation belongs to the field of African studies, specifically to the cultural heritage in Europe.

“Craniums and Kronos” focus mainly on the cultural osmosis between European and Mexican reality and the importance of the figure of the skull and its relation to death, elements that emerge in Guimarães’ plastic work. However, we consider that the CIAJG and the whole “Heteroclites 1128” exhibition possess a diasporic perspective of contact.

3.4.1. African Alphabet

The “African Alphabet” welcomes the viewer on the first floor. It consists of 127 pieces (numbered from 26 to 153) in ink on paper, produced between 1974 and 1975 when the artist was living in Angola. As described by Marta Mestre in the “Exhibition Journal,” the “African Alphabet” is:

One of the most emblematic works by José de Guimarães. It is a project that fosters osmosis between European and African art, and reinforces the importance of the symbol as an articulating element between art and other dimensions of human existence. (Mestre, 2023)

This osmosis is the contact relation between cultures embodied by the pieces. The intentionality guarded in the “Alphabet” sets the tone that runs through the rest of the rooms constituting *Heteroclites 1128*. The fact that it opens the *Heteroclites* exhibition represents a symbolic gesture and an affirmation of the beginning of a quest for a shared language. The “African Alphabet” is the materialisation of a cultural encounter the artist experienced in colonial Africa that needed a vehicle of communication to be understood.

In its most fundamental sense, an alphabet is the creation of signifying symbols; a writing system articulating reality. Each alphabet responds to specific cultural needs. Guimarães’ “African Alphabet,” which is neither entirely African nor entirely European, also follows these principles. The artist approached and studied the use of symbols and ideographic culture by reading anthropology and ethnography literature. He also had empirical and spiritual experiences during his travels through Angola, absorbing and familiarising himself gradually with the African communities’ beliefs, “especially [...] the tchokwe or kioko peoples.” (Mestre, 2023)

The confluence of knowledge and ways of understanding reality (on the one hand with European patterns and the other with African ones) resulted in the creation of new silhouettes, ideograms, and symbols that make up his “Alphabet.” This piece is an example of an artwork articulated in a contact perspective; it is a gesture of movement towards a new language. Communicating with someone from a different culture often involves opening up spaces of encounter and understanding that were not previously inhabited. José de Guimarães is also a specific case of a subject nourished and changed due to his relationship with others, seeing at work what Pratt pointed out: “A *contact* perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other.” (Pratt, 1992, p.7) José de Guimarães as an individual (and therefore his work and his collection of objects) is a particular case since his condition as an artist enables a tendency towards creation following a cultural encounter. This encounter enters into the process of osmosis, as mentioned by Marta Mestre, finding a way to verbalise itself through art, in this case, through the “African Alphabet.”

Another example is the “Disturbing Art” manifesto referred to as a guiding concept in “Heteroclites: 1128.” This manifesto, written in 1968 by José de Guimarães, is also a product of his approach to African culture, of his interest in “cultural forms situated at the opposite ends of his vision.” (Mestre, 2023) “Disturbing Art” is inspired on African expressions joint with pop art influences. Its allusion establishes another intersection where pop art enters as an element in dialogue with African art.

From this initial point onwards, African, Pre-Columbian, and Ancient Asian artefacts coexist in the same space, as do works by José de Guimarães, where it is possible to progressively see that his art became a crossroads for all the cultural influences in which he immersed himself. We will continue our journey through the sections delimited by the guiding concepts established by the curatorship of “Heteroclites: 1128 Objects.”

3.4.2. Mask Room. Inversion

Masks are among European museums most commonly found African objects and are highly collected in the West. The Queen Idia pendant mask from Benin, mentioned in previous chapters, is one of the most famous examples. However, “Starting in the 1870s, thousands of African sculptures arrived in Europe in the aftermath of colonial conquest and exploratory expeditions.” (Murell, 2008)⁴¹ Later, in the 20th century, they widely influenced avant-garde movements in modern art; the best-known cases are artists such as Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani, and Klee: “In France, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and their School of Paris friends blended the highly stylized treatment of the human figure in African sculptures with painting styles derived from the post-Impressionist works of Cézanne and Gauguin.” (Murell, 2008)

Specifically, the Sub-Saharan masks were the ones that most attracted the attention of artists, who could see them directly in places such as the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris and cities such as Munich, Berlin or London. (Murell, 2008) These masks, going through a process of decontextualisation and revaluation to which Pfeffer refers, became diasporic objects. They ceased to be used for their initial purpose and came to be, first and foremost, exhibited as objects of anthropological curiosity.

One of the rooms that make up “Heteroclites: 1128” is the “Mask Room,” permanently housing 37 Sub-Saharan masks. The masks, seen from a diasporic perspective, followed a path marked by different stages. Their extraction from the African continent led them to enter the European market and museums, where they went from being conceived as anthropological curiosities to being exhibited at a higher level of complexity, as is the case with these pieces. Marta Mestre writes:

⁴¹ Denise Murell’s quotations were extracted from the article “African Influences in Modern Art,” published at the MET Museum website: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/aima/hd_aima.htm [Consulted on 28 June 2024]

Primarily from sub-Saharan Africa, the selection of these masks in the museum does not observe a scientific rationale, as would be appropriate for an anthropology museum. Instead, it reflects José de Guimarães' personal and artistic criteria who, as an artist-collector, acquired these sets of masks in the European market from the 1980s onwards. He explains that: "each artisan who has produced these masks is an artist with whom I'm interested in forging a dialogue." (Mestre, 2023)

The "Mask Room" uses elements external to the masks to open up their narratives. The 37 pieces were placed in an inverted position, exhibited in glass structures that directly reference the "crystal easels" by Italian architect Lina Bo Bardi, made out of glass mounted on concrete blocks. The crystal easels offered a novel approach to displaying artworks, Adriano Pedrosa, the museum's director, told ArchDaily in an interview:

It is a very radical and innovative way of exhibiting paintings that was recently recovered by many people who study the matter. Without a doubt, this is part of the museum's heritage that ought to be brought back, especially if one considers the conventional and conservative techniques, and the bad quality of recent mountings. (2015)

Using a technique that moves away from traditional exhibition methods, the CIAJG's "Mask Room" also allows for a reading of the masks that is different from the usual one and provides an original experience for the visitor. Entering the room, the guest encounters the back of the masks, which turn their faces towards the wall behind. The inverted structure is in a "subtle rotation that profoundly alters the perception of the masks on display," (Mestre, 2023) which leads us to focus first on the information displayed about them: what community they come from, what were they used for, who could wear them, what was the spiritual connection to the object? This gives the visitor tools to ensure its initial use does not go unnoticed.

The usual spatial modification and their placement on glass and concrete support allow the visitor to question their gaze and interact with the masks more intimately. Entering the room and facing the reverse side of the object transforms the visitor from a passive spectator to one who has the perspective of its user. The mask's inverted movement

reminds us that it was once placed on a face and used in rituals involving music, religion, spirituality, art, and a living body from which it became an extension.

However, the pieces do not stay trapped in this single story but instead emanate different narratives. The “Mask Room” is not arranged to refer to a fixed past or an unbreakable essence but rather to highlight the multiple pasts, the encounters that have determined the history of the masks on display. The “original” African past is focused, as mentioned before, through an inversion that distances the spectator from their passive role in front of non-European pieces, questioning the hierarchies of who is the observer and who is the exhibited in a museum and from what perspective is the history of the pieces narrated?

Its diasporic metamorphosis is expressed through the museum as a contact area. The CIAJG, in its non-anthropological essence, enables the masks to cohabit with contemporary art, reminding us that along the way, the masks influenced the development of modern art history and the work of specific artists such as Guimarães. And the structures inspired in Lina Bo Bardi’s “crystal easels” are an element of contact between the present and the past; they suggest how modernity and current structures can also serve to understand in different ways, sometimes better, voices that resonate from the distant past.

The “Mask Room” does not reduce the masks to what they represent within the context of the *colonial contact* that Ruth Phillips spoke of but to their life prior to that contact as well as the movements and meanings that were added to them after it in a diasporic journey of changes and multiplications of voices. The masks are a zone from which emanate both the regional and traditional African knowledge that long determined them and histories of colonial expansion or artistic influences on European artists.

The masks and the “Mask Room” are contact zones activated at different angles, just as the CIAJG is a larger contact area. For example, we find a direct dialogue opening up between the pieces in the “Mask Room” (and the rest of *Heteroclites 1128*) and the

temporary exhibition “Troubles with Primitivism—a view from Portugal.” We will address it below, as we consider it a clear example of how the CIAJG functions as a multivocal contact zone.

3.4.2.1. Troubles with Primitivism—a view from Portugal

The temporary exhibition “Troubles with Primitivism—a view from Portugal” was presented at the CIAJG from 18 May to 17 November 2024, curated by Mariana Pinto dos Santos and Marta Mestre. Distributed on floors -1, 0, and 1, it problematises the theme of Primitivism from different angles, focusing on its manifestations in Portugal. Primitivism “has a long history; however, it was only at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century that it was unequivocally expressed.”⁴² (Mestre, 2024) Primitivist aesthetics took its inspiration from cultural artefacts mainly coming from non-European, mostly colonised, territories, encouraging “fascination and fetishisation around cultures considered remote, primordial, primitive, archaic, savage, *primaeval*, among other designations.” (Mestre, 2024) African masks and sculptures were one of the main objects of captivation, as we discussed in the last section, which stylistically modified the work of painters such as Picasso; an example is the painting “*Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J.)*” (1907), where some of the woman’s faces take the explicit shape of African masks. Primitivism was considered an aesthetic innovation, a tool of anti-colonial subversion, but also a “tool to legitimization of the colonial project” (Mestre, 2024), highly exoticising and sustained by the use of stereotypes to represent the “Other.”

“Troubles with Primitivism” offers a critical vision, maintaining a relationship with the museum’s collection, both thematically and physically, as the temporary exhibition shares space on floors where “*Heteroclitus: 1128*” is. It revolves around six key concepts or words: “Civilization,” “Museum,” “Naive,” “Portuguese Sea,” “Jazz-Band,” and “Extraction,”

⁴² This information was consulted in the “Exhibition Journal” (05/2024- 11/2024) available in a physical version at the CIAJG.

exploring the relationship between works of art, historical documents, theoretical texts, images, and African cultural artefacts.

This exhibition's critical approach also points out how the other non-European objects that the CIAJG exhibits have historically been part of larger narratives. The theoretical base that "Troubles with Primitivism" provides is easily transposable for critical reading of *Heteroclites*: "This innovative, research-based and experimental curatorial proposal invites the entire museum to engage in a critical dialogue, amplifying a polyphony of voices from diverse sources, authors and artists." (Mestre, 2024)

Along with this temporary exhibition, the "Mask Room," as well as the rest of the rooms that integrate "Heteroclites: 1128," expand in time and space, opening up to interpretations that can be made using the reading tools that the visitor previously possesses, in addition to the research and curatorial work exhibited in "Troubles with Primitivism." Quotations from authors such as Achille Mbembe, Bénédicte Savoy, Hannah Arendt, Rosa Luxemburg, Amílcar Cabral, and Aimé Césaire, among many others, are depicted at different points in the exhibition.

Another dialogical vein with the CIAJG's permanent exhibition is the use, in "Troubles with Primitivism", of one of the first pieces acquired by José de Guimarães. Its presence there demonstrates how to position African cultural artefacts within exhibitions that are not dictated by an anthropological approach, making it not simply an object of contemplation but one that can function as a diasporic body within a critical fabric.

The collector's viewpoint expands from the permanent to the temporary exhibitions, prolonging the encounter between the museum elements in a non-linear chronology. From pre-colonial times through the birth of Primitivism in modern art, we come to current artworks, with installations by Spanish artists Elo Vega and Rogelio López Cueva, Swedish artist Uriel Orlow, Portuguese artist Ludgero Almeida and African artist Ilídio Candja Candja, in collaborative work. The manifestation of these contemporary voices is a

reminder that the past is a time that continues to be re-signified, echoing in today's art and in the institutions that safeguard it.

In “Troubles with Primitivism,” the contact perspective functions in the collaborative work of artists and in the conjunction of discourses, times, and histories from Africa and Europe. Primitivism is, in the end, a manifestation of a cultural exchange that, seen in retrospect, it is possible to think critically. In the next section, *Living Together*, we will continue considering this cultural contact by returning to the exhibition “Heteroclites: 1128.”

3.4.3. Living Together

“Living Together” is one of *Heteroclites’* guiding concepts that most visibly represents its diasporic perspective of contact. This section exhibits African, Pre-Columbian, Ancient Chinese artefacts and works of art by José de Guimarães.

Linked by invisible threads, the objects seem to talk to each other independently of our presence. An African fetish points towards a pre-Columbian vase, a skull imagined by José de Guimaraes contrast with a bronze object from ancient China, statuettes speak with paintings, without time separating them. (Mestre, 2023)

“Living Together” creates a space in which time does not separate the pieces; that is to say, a shared history wove them, not seeking to erase the differences between the cultures nor to omit how they have arrived at the museum but which does seek the “shared imagination” that Macron mentioned in his famous speech in 2017 and which seemed lost.

In “Living Together,” multiple stories converge and coexist. In this intimate dialogue between the pieces, we can read a story that creates a link between different regions of the Global South. Placed in the same space, one next to the other, we are reminded that all these territories shared a past rich in pre-colonial artistic expressions whose heritage survives. The pieces bear witness to that past and are also proof of the passing of time, of the changing world, and, with it, the way we relate to certain cultural elements. In the

museum, these sculptures, garments, vases, and other artefacts make us think about their entry into the Western art market, about how modernity and its socio-economic system related to them, leading them to exist side by side in combinations that were once difficult to conceive possible.

The vision of José de Guimarães as the individual voice of the European man accompanies African, pre-Columbian, and Ancient Chinese narratives. “Living Together” functions as a heterogeneous map of a new territory, a contact zone that responds to a contrapuntal logic where, as Pratt said, cultures meet and grapple with each other “in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.” (1991, p.34) This asymmetry in “Heteroclites: 1128,” enables narratives and a contact perspective and, on the other hand, it manifests itself as a problematic topic.

As previously mentioned, the “contact zones” theory is not devoid of obstacles. The concept of *Living Together* allows us to observe the convergence of cultures and ideas as well as its choral quality. But in this multiplicity, we find a narrative of power and hierarchy. A question runs through the subtext of “Heteroclites: 1128”: Who can be the collector, and who is collected? Or, as Clifford mentions, when talking about the Museum of Mankind in London and its relationship with the Wahgi community of New Guinea: “Differences of power, control, and design of budgets determined who would be the collectors and who the collected.” (Clifford, 1997, p.195)

This is one issue that falls under what Boast calls the “dark underbelly of the contact zone.” (2011, p.57) In this area, the museum still presents itself with an anatomy “that seems to be persistently neocolonial.” (Boast, 2011, p.57) The centre that sustains the CIAJG is an exhibition that exists thanks to an imminently unequal system that made possible the entry into an art market in which the pieces became commodities and the tradition of communities of the Global South an object of consumption and spectacle; this is what Clifford calls the “postmodern marketing of heritage.” (1997, p.218) This reality confronts

European museums, the CIAJG, and “*Heteroclites*: 1128.” An asymmetrical root that will be impossible to erase underlies the European Museum as an institution, but the processes of decolonization can challenge and question it.

It will be necessary to overcome the weight of the origin to mobilise the pieces towards a zone of encounter, towards pluralistic institutions, since, as Alice Procter said:

I do not believe guilt is inherited, but responsibility is, and there is nobody alive today whose existence has not been shaped by colonialist, racist forces. That is the legacy we all live with, and we should all deal with the consequences. If you have benefitted, then soaking yourself in remorse and guilt does not help anyone. What can you do, though, is ask constantly how you have felt those benefits. At whose expense were they gained? (2021, p.11)

The theoretical and practical work involved in decolonial processes in institutions such as the museum must be a joint endeavour and not a task exclusively for individuals belonging to communities of the Global South. While South-South cooperation is imperative, the active participation of subjects from the Global North is also essential. As Lucy Bell, former head of the Indigenous Collection and Repatriation Department at the Royal BC Museum and part of the Haida Nation in Southern Alaska, said: “Decolonizing museums should not be left to the handful of Indigenous people that work in museums,” (ATPN News, 2021, 0:07:59) but instead must be a work carried out by the whole institution. As a tool for the decolonization of museums, the diasporic perspective of contact points to a configuration where all parties involved come to an agreement, managing to reconstruct a history of shared responsibilities and not of inherited guilt. At the end of the day, as Marta Mestre reminds us in *Heteroclites*: “As the objects gaze at each other, so often independent of their observers, it becomes evident that the associated narratives are infinite. The objects ask: How should we live together?”

Final Considerations

“Welcome to the Decolonized Empty British Museum 2033,”⁴³ reads the art web project “The Empty Museum” homepage by Rotem Cohen-Soaye. The site presents a not-so-distant future where the British Museum is left empty after extensive restitution of cultural artefacts to their countries of origin. In this scenario, the objects are replaced by black spheres, symbolising the void they left in their cultures, which they also leave in the rooms of the institution. What does the future hold for Western Museums? Will they continue perpetuating colonial narratives and exclusionary practices? Will they undergo many repatriations that empty their rooms, as Cohen-Soaye vividly portrays in his project? Or, is it possible to find a point of understanding that acknowledges the past and prioritises decolonial reflections?

Decolonizing is not just a political or historical process but also an imaginative work that requires us to challenge deeply ingrained beliefs and systems of power. At its core, it involves working towards dismantling a colonial socio-political structure as much as reimagining how cultures interact and how museums function. In this imagination exercise, some envision a future of empty galleries. In contrast, others predict art institutions prolonging colonial mechanisms. Yet, the transformative power of decolonization is evident in the many other paths that lie ahead.

The post-colonial world was born with an intrinsic necessity of reconfiguration, manifesting internationally in discussions like the restitution debate, stressing the importance of re-evaluating the rooted inherited colonial values, a legacy that extends beyond the external, tangible manifestations and disrupts the flow of a multitude of stories that compound reality, narrowing History to a particular selection of single stories. The time for said reconfiguration has arrived, and the art industry is one of their focuses.

⁴³ Official website of “The Empty Museum” project” by Rotem Cohen-Soaye: <https://www.theemptymuseum.info> [Consulted on 23 July 2024]

Museums today serve as both centres of experimentation and protest against entrenched colonial politics. Movements like “Decolonize This Place” have actively disrupted museum spaces to confront their politics and exhibitions. Similarly, individuals like Alice Procter have led unauthorized tours to address untold truths behind museum objects. Other examples include the “Rhodes Must Fall” movement in South Africa and the “Museum Detox” collective in the United Kingdom. These acts of resistance demonstrate a growing demand for decolonial discussions and progress within institutional settings.

In the broad possibilities of imagined futures, this dissertation adheres to the idea of a museum that encourages expanded and reconstructed narrations, moving away from the anthropological and fetishist view, which isolates non-European cultural objects as a rudimentary curiosity. “The colonial world is a world cut in two,” (1961, p.38) wrote Frantz Fanon, the colonizers and the colonized. This division also represents the fragmentation of voices and stories, the loss of nuance, and the polarization of ideas. The decolonial museum should not be cut in two, replicating the colonial dynamic of separation, but should merge and support a horizontal dialogue, the cohabitation of views that is necessary to fundamentally reimagine art institutions in a way that honours diversity, equity, and justice, challenging us to ponder beyond the Manichean limits of an empty museum versus a deeply colonial one.

Considering the museum as a “contact zone,” as Mary Pratt and James Clifford call it, and African objects as diaspora, as John Pepper proposes, allows for an alternative reality of encounters, where artefacts embody multiple histories, simultaneously belonging to different times and places. A “contact zone” is an intersection of cultural expressions and a physical gathering space for communities to collaborate and subvert the colonial order and alienations. Just as relationships between people can be modified, understanding African cultural artefacts as diaspora opens them up to time and changes, taking into account their mutable identity. Distancing from a binary solution avoids the danger of reproducing single, narrow stories. A diasporic perspective of contact works in this area of rearrangement and

confrontation. It considers the African objects and the museums as part of a larger, interconnected scheme of signification.

At an institutional level, initiatives such as the José de Guimarães International Centre for the Arts (CIAJG) in Portugal offer promising examples of how museums can implement these decolonial tools. Its permanent exposition, “Heteroclites: 1128 objects,” formed mainly by African, Pre-Columbian and Ancient Chinese cultural artefacts side to side with artworks of José de Guimarães, is an exhibition-essay. *Essay* comes from the French verb *essayer*, which means to try; an essay is an attempt. The CIAJG successfully attempted to find new ways in which objects can interact, reflect on the museum as a dialogic space, and rethink the curatorial possibilities of non-European artefacts within a contemporary art museum.

A diasporic perspective of contact actively seeks out histories suppressed, erased or left behind by colonial logic. It represents a creative act of assembling a shared, multivocal history, presenting them critically without imposing them. However, decolonization work involves more than just art institutions, curators, administrators and artists; the public plays a central role. Visitors have a fundamental responsibility to constantly question how and what the museum presents to them, walk through the rooms with a sharp vision, and engage with exhibits and displays. The post-colonial museum requires a visitor who does not reduce their gaze to passive contemplation but transforms it into active observation. At the same time, the visitor must be open to listening to all the voices that emerge in a museum that functions as a zone of contact with diasporic objects.

The imaginative task of decolonization demands a mission of relearning. For this, it is essential to revisit the past. This involves understanding the importance of the restitution struggles and their relevance as a main decolonial tool within museums. It also requires acknowledging the decades-long ideological tensions and movements behind African material heritage and the struggle for repatriation. A historical responsibility rests on the

present: remembering and reexamining the past to project a future that is not determined by an imposed storyline. Relearning is about acquiring new knowledge and unlearning the colonial narratives that have shaped our understanding of museums.

Decolonization is a process, an evolution, not a single or definite outcome. Art institutions like CIAJG are evidence that decolonial efforts are in motion and that communities around the globe are increasingly worried about making them possible. Decolonization of museums is a joint work, and the responsibility to think and implement tools and conduct self-evaluations falls on every museum member and visitor. Alice Procter wrote: “Museums are not neutral. Nothing about them is natural, but they are laboratories for understanding human society.” (2021, p.258) Museums are a product of their time, as are their internal changes.

A diasporic perspective of contact has the potential to show one of the paths to decolonizing European museums, to transform them gradually into plural spaces. The past cannot be erased, but we can build a shared history that sees the nuances and hears many voices, allowing them to speak to each other. To perpetuate a single story, as Adichie calls it, represents a biased, dangerous route. It is imperative to continue the quest for remedial pathways for tools of reflection and change. Decolonizing the museums will be a long process, but this means that there is more than enough time to question the system, implement individual and institutional changes, and find mechanisms that lead to honouring, respecting and making visible the erased and forgotten stories.

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