
History Unclassified

The Death of Brazil's National Museum

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ON THE EVENING OF SUNDAY, September 2, 2018, a Facebook friend made an alarming post. From the window of her apartment in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, she could see the National Museum (Museu Nacional) on fire. Other posts followed, depicting the catastrophe in progress. A few hours later, the reports left no doubt: the museum had been destroyed. As I watched the news about the fire, all I could think about was the priceless Africana artifacts housed at the museum, which I had the opportunity to study almost a decade ago. The collection reflected the role of Africa in shaping the country's history: Brazil imported the largest number of enslaved Africans during the era of the Atlantic slave trade (nearly 5 million) and did not abolish slavery until 1888, making it the last nation in the Americas to do so.¹ Today, it has the largest black population outside the African continent.

As I mourned the museum's destruction on Twitter, I emphasized the magnitude of its collections, encompassing 20 million items, a number several times larger than those housed in European museums such as France's Quai Branly or the British Museum. Like the fire, the news about the museum's destruction spread rapidly that night. Over the next several days, newspapers all over the world featured photos of the building in flames. Incredulous Brazilian and international academics who had conducted research at the museum gave interviews to news outlets and published articles on websites and in newspapers and magazines.²

The museum was significant not only because of its impressive collections, but also because of its very long history, which was deeply intertwined with the rise of the Brazilian nation. It was located in the São Cristóvão Palace, an important site in the history of Rio de Janeiro, which had been the capital of Brazil since the eighteenth century and was the largest slave port in the Americas. The palace was located at Quinta da Boa Vista, on land first occupied by the Engenho Velho, one of the sugar plantations owned

¹ For estimates of the Brazilian slave trade, see the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates>.

² Probably the most enlightening of these interviews was given by the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. See Alexandra Prado Coelho, "Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: 'Gostaria que o Museu Nacional permanecesse como ruína, memória das coisas mortas,'" *O Público*, September 4, 2018, <https://www.publico.pt/2018/09/04/culturaipilon/entrevista/eduardo-viveiros-de-castro-gostaria-que-o-museu-nacional-permanecesse-como-ruina-memoria-das-coisas-mortas-1843021>.

by the Society of Jesus.³ Following the expulsion of the Jesuits from Brazil in 1759, the property was divided into farms and distributed to private owners, including Elias Antônio Lopes, a wealthy Portuguese slave merchant and politician, who by the early nineteenth century owned four slave ships.⁴

In 1803, Lopes built a villa on his farm. In 1808, in exchange for royal favors, he ceded the farmstead to the Portuguese royal family, who had recently arrived in Rio de Janeiro after fleeing the invasion of Napoléon Bonaparte.⁵ Lopes's villa was renovated and transformed into the São Cristóvão Palace, which served as one of the royal family's residences during their time in the country. When Brazil became independent from Portugal in 1822, the palace continued to be used as a residence by the Brazilian imperial family. (See Figure 1.) Dom Pedro II, crowned as emperor in 1831, when he was only five years old, resided there in his adulthood during the cooler months. A lover of the arts, he hosted European artists in Rio de Janeiro's Imperial Palace, and he invited those same artists to paint portraits of the imperial family in posing sessions held at the São Cristóvão Palace.⁶

When the Portuguese royal family settled in Rio de Janeiro in 1808, the prince regent, Dom João, had ruled Portugal since 1792, having replaced his mother, Queen Maria I, who had dementia. Portuguese royal authorities had started collecting specimens and artifacts from the Brazilian colony in the early colonial period. In 1784, this practice was systematized with the creation of the House of Natural History in Rio de Janeiro, which stored samples of Brazil's fauna and flora.⁷ Although that museum closed with the arrival of the royal family, its collection was incorporated into the new Royal Museum, which was established on June 6, 1818, at Campo de Sant'Ana, in what is now Republic Square, and opened to the public in 1821. Modeled after European natural history museums, it housed artworks and ancient artifacts donated by the Portuguese royal family, a mineralogy collection, and numerous ethnographic items from different parts of Brazil. When Brazil became independent in 1822, the institution was renamed the Imperial Museum; it became the National Museum in 1830. In 1892, three years after the fall of the Brazilian monarchy, it was relocated to the São Cristóvão Palace.

Established as a colonial institution, the National Museum relied on a European colonialist view of the world's populations. Combining natural history and scientific racism, its holdings embodied the spirit of nineteenth-century cabinets of curiosity. Its rich ethnographic collection was initially amassed through donations, both from European travelers who sojourned in Brazil and from Dom Pedro I and the empress, Dona Leopoldina. Some of these artifacts, however, were of unclear provenance, including the heads of two Maori chiefs from New Zealand, "richly tattooed and in a perfect state of preservation."⁸ The collections also featured other Pacific items. On March 15, 1824,

³ Marcia Amantino, "As origens da terra jesuítica na capitania do Rio de Janeiro e a implementação do engenho Velho no século XVII," *América Latina en la historia económica* 23, no. 3 (2006): 7–36, here 23.

⁴ Jaime Rodrigues, *De costa a costa: Escravos, marinheiros e intermediários do tráfico negreiro de Angola ao Rio de Janeiro, 1780–1860* (São Paulo, 2005), 205.

⁵ Kirsten Schultz, *Tropical Versailles: Empire, Monarchy, and the Portuguese Royal Court in Rio de Janeiro, 1808–1821* (New York, 2001), 81.

⁶ Ana Lucia Araujo, *Brazil through French Eyes: A Nineteenth-Century Artist in the Tropics* (Albuquerque, N.Mex., 2015), 24.

⁷ *O Museu Nacional* (São Paulo, 2007), 9.

⁸ *Archivos do Museu Nacional do Rio de Janeiro*, vol. 6: *Consagrado à Exposição Antropológica Brasileira, realizada no Museu Nacional a 29 de julho de 1882* (Rio de Janeiro, 1885), 491; *O Museu Nacional*, 14.



FIGURE 1: “Améliorations progressives du Palais de St. Christophe (Quinta de Boa Vista), depuis 1808 jusqu’en 1831.” Jean-Baptiste Debret, *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1834–1839), 3: plate 20. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed February 18, 2019.

while en route to England on board the vessel *L'Aigle*, King Kamehameha II and Queen Kamāmalu of the Sandwich Islands, present-day Hawaii, stopped in Rio de Janeiro.⁹ To mark the occasion, the monarchs gave Dom Pedro I a Hawaiian feather cloak and a necklace. Those objects were donated to the National Museum, and they were still listed in its collections two hundred years later.¹⁰

These relationships with non-Western parts of the globe highlight the delusions of grandeur of the Brazilian slavocratic empire. From its inception, the National Museum held a rich Egyptian collection, the largest in Latin America and probably the oldest in the Americas. As records about these items do not indicate how they were collected, looting cannot be excluded. The first objects entered the collection in 1826, when the Italian merchant Nicolau Fiengo brought to Brazil a group of Egyptian antiquities that had been excavated by the explorer and plunderer Giovanni Battista Belzoni in the period following the French campaign in Egypt. After purchasing the artifacts, the emperor donated them to the museum.¹¹ Over time, other Egyptian items were added to the collection. When Dom Pedro II visited Egypt in 1876, the khedive Isma'il Pasha made him a gift of the sarcophagus enclosing the mummy of Sha-Amun-en-su, a priestess and ceremonial singer who lived in Thebes and died circa 750 B.C. It was added to the museum's collection in 1889.

AT THE HEART OF THE National Museum was its unique ethnographic collection, comprising approximately 40,000 artifacts connected to Brazil's indigenous populations. The nineteenth-century French painter Jean-Baptiste Debret largely used the Royal Museum's collections to produce the drawings that inspired the lithographs that later illustrated *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, his account of his sixteen-year stay in Brazil as part of the French Artistic Mission. (See Figures 2 and 3.) According to Debret, indigenous groups who visited Rio de Janeiro in the early nineteenth century with the aim of meeting royal authorities brought with them gifts of clothes and weapons.¹² But as with many ethnographic collections housed in other museums, the acquisition of these artifacts was controversial. Many of the items were obtained during scientific and ethnographic expeditions in contexts that did not allow Native Brazilian communities to give their consent. The National Museum held numerous sacred objects, including Marajoara and Maracá funerary urns and the mummified heads of members of Amazonian indigenous groups. Following its transformation into a research institution in the first decades of the twentieth century, it also developed important geology, paleontology, botany, zoology, and biological anthropology collections. In 1946, the National Museum was incorporated into the University of Brazil (renamed the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro in 1965) and became the home of the university's graduate program in anthropology, which trained domestic as well as international scholars.

For a scholar of slavery like me, the most precious ethnographic objects that were lost when the museum burned were the 700 items in its Africana collection, many of which were artifacts brought from the African continent or produced by descendants of

⁹ *O Museu Nacional*, 341.

¹⁰ Fátima Regina Nascimento, "A formação da coleção da indústria humana no Museu Nacional, século XIX" (Ph.D. diss., Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 2009), 51.

¹¹ *O Museu Nacional*, 222.

¹² Jean-Baptiste Debret, *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1834–1839), 1: iii.

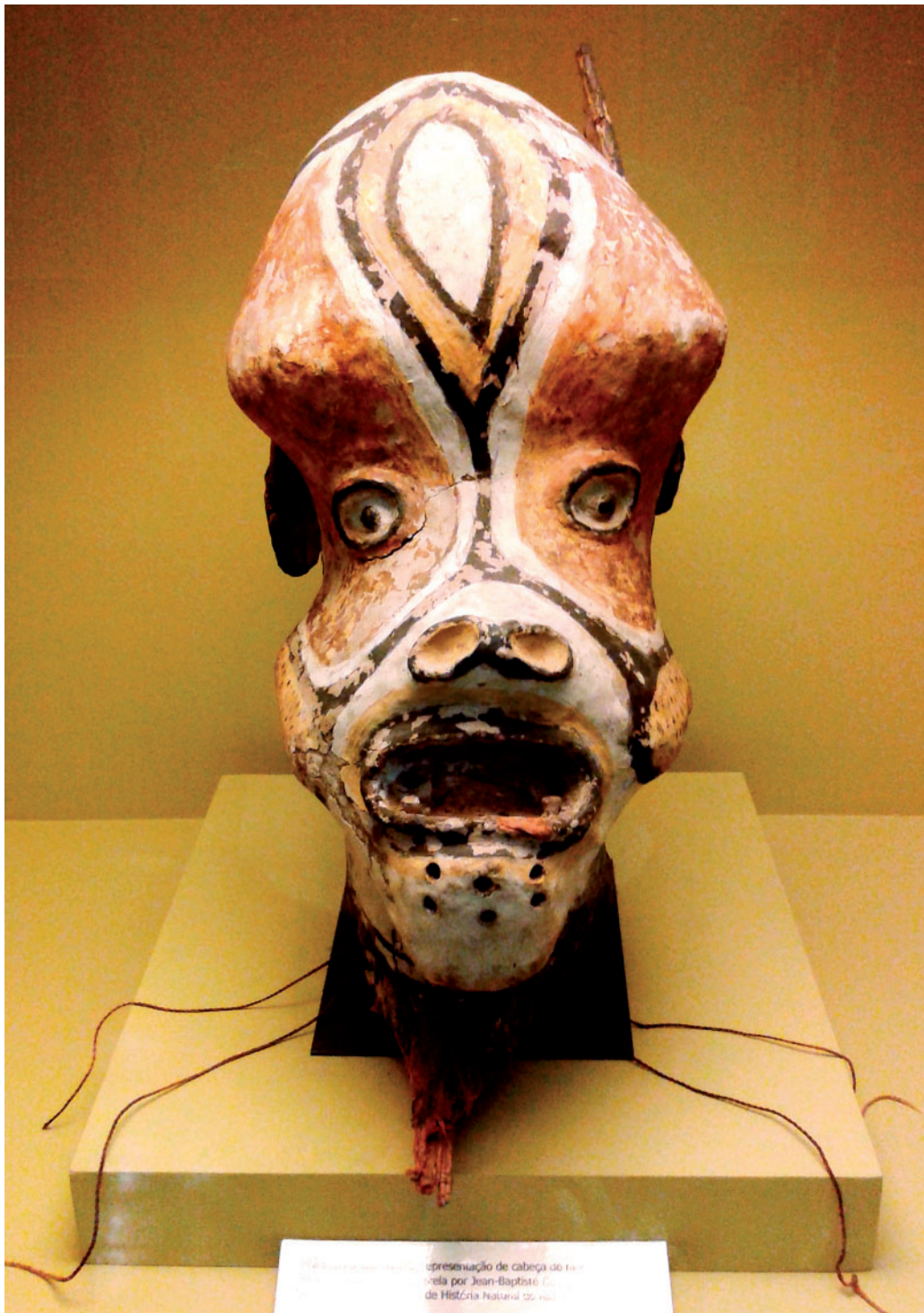


FIGURE 2: Tikuna mask. National Museum, Rio de Janeiro. The image on the cover of this issue shows the mask from a different angle.



FIGURE 3: “Différentes formes de masques (coëffures [coiffures]).” Debret, *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, 1: plate 27. The Tikuna mask in Figure 2 appears in the third row. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed February 18, 2019.

Africans in Brazil.¹³ Although the number of items in the museum's Africana collection was not large in comparison to the thousands of African artifacts housed in U.S. and European institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum and the Brooklyn Museum in New York City or the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, it was the oldest and among the largest Brazilian collections of its kind.¹⁴ Several objects entered the collection as gifts from an African ruler. But it also incorporated items from different parts of the African continent (including regions that did not maintain trading and diplomatic relations with Brazil) purchased from private collectors in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵

Nearly fifteen years ago, I started researching the relationship between Brazil and the ancient kingdom of Dahomey, a topic studied extensively by previous scholars such as Pierre Verger, Gilberto Freyre, Isaac Adeagbo Akinjogbin, Alberto da Costa e Silva, and Robin Law. While researching how slavery and the Atlantic slave trade were memorialized in these two regions, I became fascinated with the history of King Adandozan, who ruled Dahomey from 1797 to 1818.¹⁶ During the era of the Atlantic slave trade, the Dahomean king clashed with the Brazilian-born slave merchant Francisco Félix de Souza, a story that was richly depicted in Werner Herzog's movie *Cobra Verde* (1987). Souza later supported a coup d'état that removed Adandozan from power and made his half-brother Gezo the new king of Dahomey. Popular memory has depicted Adandozan as the cruelest Dahomean king, and his name and emblems have been erased from the kingdom's official history. Yet my own work has shown that this erasure had deeper motivations. In 2009 I made a research trip to Brazil to conduct research in museum and archives in both Salvador and Rio de Janeiro. Because of Pierre Verger's masterful work, I knew that archives in the two cities held letters exchanged between Dahomean monarchs and Portuguese rulers as part of diplomatic missions sent to Dahomey, Portugal, and Brazil to negotiate the terms of the Atlantic slave trade.¹⁷ On my trip to Salvador, I examined the existing correspondence at the Bahia State Public Archives and explored the archives of the Pierre Verger Foundation.

Weeks later, I traveled to Rio de Janeiro to look at another set of letters exchanged between the Dahomean monarch and Portuguese authorities held by the National Library. I also had an additional lead. Two years earlier, historian John K. Thornton had told me that the collections of the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute included a set of

¹³ See Mariza de Carvalho Soares, Michele de Barcelos Agostinho, and Rachel Correa Lima, *Conhecendo a exposição Kumbukumbu do Museu Nacional* (Rio de Janeiro, 2016), 17.

¹⁴ The various Brazilian collections include African-produced objects as well as artifacts created by Africans and their descendants in Brazil. The Museum Afro Brazil currently holds nearly 4,000 items, the country's largest collection of African and Afro-Brazilian artifacts and artworks, but it covers primarily the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The second-largest collection is at the University of São Paulo Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, which houses nearly 1,000 African and Afro-Brazilian artifacts. The lost collection of the National Museum comprised 700 African and Afro-Brazilian objects. Likewise, the Emílio Goeldi Museum in Belém, Pará, houses a collection of nearly 490 African artifacts.

¹⁵ Mariza de Carvalho Soares, "Collectionism and Colonialism: The Africana Collection at Brazil's National Museum (Rio de Janeiro)," in Ana Lucia Araujo, ed., *African Heritage and Memories of Slavery in Brazil and the South Atlantic World* (Amherst, N.Y., 2015), 17–44, here 25.

¹⁶ See Ana Lucia Araujo, *Public Memory of Slavery: Victims and Perpetrators in the South Atlantic* (Amherst, N.Y., 2010).

¹⁷ Pierre Verger, "Le culte des vodoun d'Abomey aurait-il été apporté à Saint Louis de Maranhão par la mère du roi Ghèzo?," *Études dahoméennes* 8 (1952): 19–24; Verger, *Flux et reflux de la traite des nègres entre le Golfe de Bénin et Bahia de Todos os Santos, du XVII^e au XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1969); Verger, *Os Libertos: Sete caminhos na liberdade de escravos da Bahia no século XIX* (Salvador, 1992).

letters sent by Adandozan to Portuguese officials. In the archives, I read this correspondence. Surprisingly, these letters had not yet been analyzed in any published work. In one letter sent to the Dahomean embassy in 1810, Adandozan described several gifts he was offering to Dom João. Two of these gifts had previously been identified by Verger, who reported that they were included in the collections of the National Museum. There I was able to see with my own eyes the gifts Adandozan had sent to the prince regent. Displayed on the second floor along with several other Africana artifacts, the Dahomean items included a carved wooden throne and a huge pipe holder. (See Figures 4 and 5.)¹⁸

The Africana collection bore witness to the long-lasting exchanges between Brazil and the African continent, which started during the period of the Atlantic slave trade and remained strong until the end of the nineteenth century. As historian Mariza de Carvalho Soares has emphasized, most of the museum's Africana items were acquired between the nineteenth century and 1936.¹⁹ But despite its importance, the collection remained neglected. Most of the gifts sent by Adandozan, along with several other Africana items, were kept in storage facilities, hidden from visitors. The objects on exhibit were displayed in old-fashioned glass vitrines without detailed descriptions to help visitors understand their history. The outdated displays were largely the result of the lack of financial resources available for promoting research about the Africana collection and for redesigning the exhibition.

OF COURSE, THESE PROBLEMS were not specific to the National Museum. Brazil has a difficult relationship with its past. Elected representatives have historically ignored the need to preserve the country's national heritage. Access to education remains an important problem, and many ordinary citizens still perceive museums as mere repositories of old things that would better have been discarded, whereas others would prefer to see historic buildings razed to make way for new construction. Moreover, because of the lack of public and private investment, the design of most permanent exhibitions dates back to decades ago, reinforcing the public perception of Brazilian museums as warehouses of outdated objects.

But the situation was changing. In 2003, during the first administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2006, 2007–2010), Federal Law no. 10.639 made mandatory the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture in the Brazilian school system, increasing the need to develop initiatives highlighting the country's rich African heritage. In 2009, President Lula enacted Law no. 11.906, creating the Brazilian Museums Institute (IBRAM). Attached to the Ministry of Culture, this new entity was charged with implementing the National Museum Policy, aimed at improving the services of the museum sector by increasing revenues and numbers of visitors, promoting policies for the acquisition and preservation of collections, and coordinating the activities of the country's museums.²⁰ IBRAM's database currently records the existence of 3,792 museums in Brazil.²¹ And since 2014, when the institute began keeping statis-

¹⁸ See Ana Lucia Araujo, "Dahomey, Portugal and Bahia: King Adandozan and the Atlantic Slave Trade," *Slavery and Abolition* 33, no. 1 (2012): 1–19.

¹⁹ Soares, "Collectionism and Colonialism," 18.

²⁰ "O Ibram," Portal do Instituto Brasileiro de Museus, <http://www.museus.gov.br/acessoainformacao/o-ibram/>.

²¹ MuseusBr, <http://museus.cultura.gov.br/>.



FIGURE 4: Dahomean throne sent by King Adandozan to Prince Dom João VI in old vitrine. National Museum, Rio de Janeiro. Photograph by Ana Lucia Araujo, 2009.



FIGURE 5: Old vitrine featuring a wooden pipe holder sent by King Adandozan to Prince Dom João VI. National Museum, Rio de Janeiro. Photograph by Ana Lucia Araujo, 2009.

tics on museum attendance, the number of visitors to Brazilian museums has steadily, although not significantly, increased.²²

As part of this new environment, in 2011 the National Museum mandated historian Mariza de Carvalho Soares to lead new research on the Africana collection for the purpose of creating a new permanent exhibition.²³ Curated by Soares, *Kumbukumbu: Africa, Memory, and Heritage* opened to the public on May 14, 2014.²⁴ (See Figure 6.) The new room featured approximately 154 African and Afro-Brazilian objects from the Africana collection, contextualized with explanatory panels and maps. An accompanying book outlined an array of proposed activities for schoolchildren. Despite these transformations, the museum still struggled to attract visitors. Whereas 289,000 Brazilians visited France's Louvre Museum in Paris in 2017, only 192,000 people went to the National Museum in the same year.²⁵ Indeed, most visitors to the National Museum were low-income individuals, and many of them were black. Disadvantaged students in the public school system could visit the institution for free.

The National Museum meant different things to different people. To Brazilian and international academics, it was a shrine, housing collections they had been investigating for years. Its offices, laboratories, and classrooms were the workplace of scholars and professors from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro's graduate programs in anthropology,

²² "Mais de 32 milhões visitaram museus brasileiros em 2017," <http://www.museus.gov.br/tag/visitantes/>.

²³ See Soares, "Collectionism and Colonialism," 17–18.

²⁴ See Soares, Agostinho, and Lima, *Conhecendo a exposição Kumbukumbu do Museu Nacional*.

²⁵ Rafael Barifouse, "Em 2017, mais brasileiros foram ao Louvre, em Paris, do que ao Museu Nacional," BBC, September 3, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/brasil-45402234>.



FIGURE 6: The *Kumbukumbu* exhibition. National Museum, Rio de Janeiro. Photograph by Dornicke, January 10, 2015. Wikimedia Commons/CC BY-SA 4.0.

archaeology, biological sciences, linguistics and indigenous languages, zoology, and geosciences. The building held special meaning for Brazil's black population. Giovana Xavier, an Afro-Brazilian historian, public intellectual, and professor at the Federal University, told the *New York Times* that she could still remember visiting the National Museum for the first time, when she was just five years old: "For many people in my family, it was the first and only museum they ever visited . . . Along with the museum's collection, which is immeasurable, there is the important loss of building historical awareness in children."²⁶ Here Xavier certainly had in mind the impact of the museum's destruction on black children. Along with the Museum Afro Brazil in São Paulo, the National Museum was one of the few Brazilian museums to give prominent space to African culture and heritage. In a racist environment marked by deep racial inequalities, where black bodies are persistently devalued, low-income black children who visited the *Kumbukumbu* exhibition were provided with tangible reminders of the long history of the African continent and the rich heritage of their ancestors. By engaging with the National Museum's collections of world heritage artifacts, especially the Luso-Brazilian, African, and indigenous objects, visitors from all walks of life developed a deeper sense of belonging to the complex Brazilian nation that no other institution in the country can offer.

The structural problems faced by the National Museum had mounted over the years. In the last two decades, the museum's staff had warned of the urgent need to modify the

²⁶ Manuela Andreoni, Ernesto Londoño, and Lis Moriconi, "Double Blow to Brazil Museum: Neglect, Then Flames," *New York Times*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/03/world/americas/brazil-museum-fire.html>.

buildings to secure the collections and protect them from environmental agents. At the time of the fire, the main building had a number of problems, including a termite infestation, leaking gutters, and water infiltration. Unlike its counterparts in Europe and North America, the National Museum had no sprinkler system, and the smoke detectors were not working properly when the fire sparked. Because the museum was managed by the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and was not financially autonomous, it had been badly affected since 2014 by federal budget cuts that had steadily decreased the university's subsidy, reducing the museum's funding by 40 percent. This tragic portrait was not unique to the National Museum. All over Brazil, public archives, libraries, and museums housing priceless world history collections are dependent on public funding, and thus are also at risk and in need of financial support to enable them to undertake important renovations. In some cases, Brazilian scholars have personally obtained international financial support to safeguard precious documents.²⁷ Such individual initiatives, however, are not an efficient solution for preserving museum collections and archival documents.

Many weeks after the disaster, the account of what was lost and what may have been salvaged is still in progress. On January 17, 2019, the museum opened a new exhibition, *When Not Everything Was Ice: New Discoveries in the Antarctic Continent*, at the Centro Cultural Casa da Moeda in Rio de Janeiro, featuring six items recovered from the ruins. But the museum's future remains uncertain. In October 2018, the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro won the Brazilian presidential election. After taking office on January 1, 2019, the new president eliminated the Ministry of Culture and transformed it into a secretariat attached to the Ministry of Citizenship. In existence since 1985, when Brazil transitioned from a military regime to a democracy, the Ministry of Culture oversaw Brazilian arts, letters, folklore, and other cultural forms, as well as the country's historical, archaeological, artistic, and cultural legacy. Its elimination clearly suggests that the new government will continue to neglect the national heritage. Despite these blows, the National Museum's administration and staff are prioritizing the reconstruction efforts to ensure the continuation of its academic programs. Google Arts and Culture has made a website available to display some of the museum's lost treasures. However, even though international governments and institutions are supporting the reconstruction of the building and the creation of new collections, as scholars we must accept the reality that the two-hundred-year-old National Museum is gone and can never be replaced.

²⁷ See Digitising Endangered Manuscript Sources: The Notary Books of Bahia, Brazil, 1664–1889 (EAP703), British Library Endangered Archives Programme, <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP703>.

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