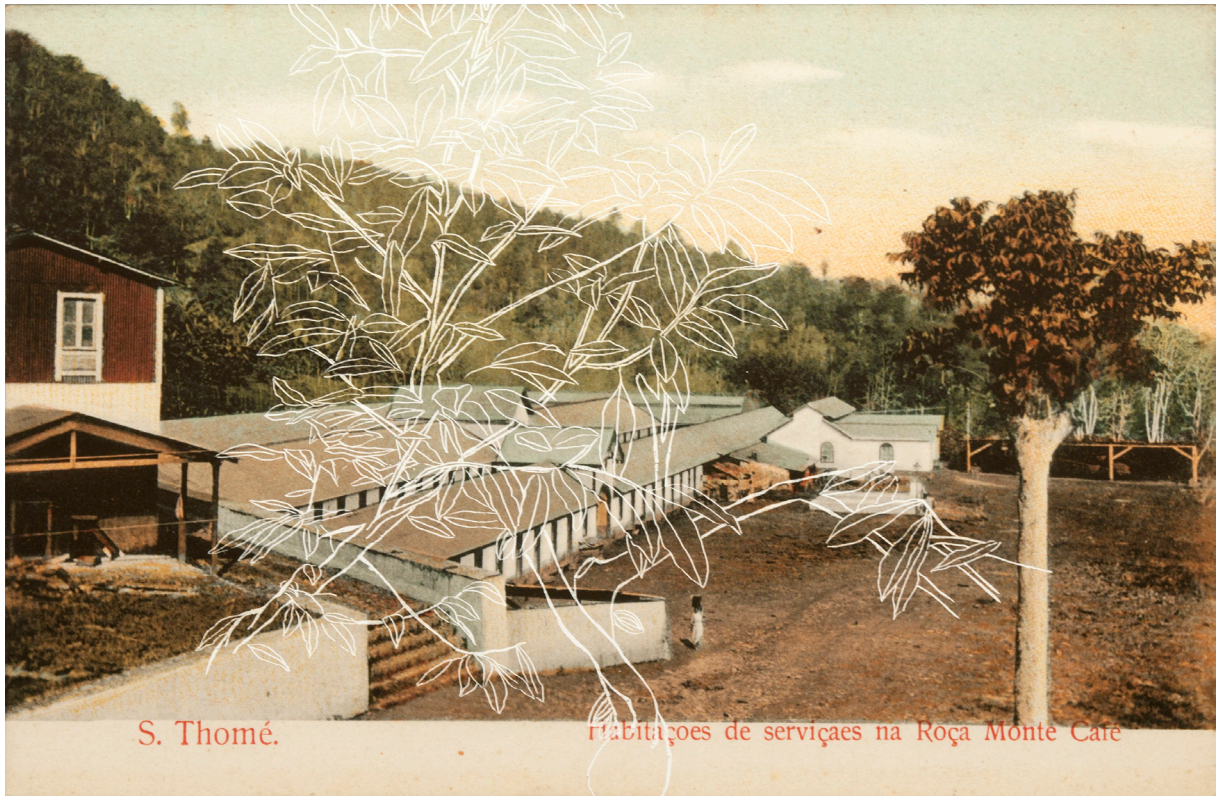




FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS  
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES  
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 5 January 2019



*Habitações serviços* | 2015 | [Carla Cabana](#) (cortesia da artista)

## HUMBOLDT FORUM OR BENIN FORUM?

António Sousa Ribeiro

The delivery of the report by Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr to Emmanuel Macron, followed by the French president's promise to take the advice of these experts concerning the identification and restitution of pieces with a colonial origin unduly kept in French museums, gave a new impulse to a discussion which is undoubtedly far from being concluded. But it is undeniable that the year of 2018 not only witnessed considerable advance in the debate, but also saw unusually clear political statements.



In this particular, the German case is one of the most interesting. On May 14, the minister of Culture of Germany had presented, as a provisional approach to the problem, a “Practical Guide for an approach to collections coming from colonial contexts” (1). On June 1, participating in the Unesco conference “Circulation of cultural property and shared heritage: What new perspectives?” and intervening on the way of dealing with cultural goods coming from colonial contexts, she pronounced a speech in which she placed the question, in a very ambiguous way, in the framework of a common responsibility for world heritage: “it is less about categories as ‘possession’ or ‘property’ than about caring for the cultural goods that were entrusted to us and that should be protected and preserved for future generations” (2). On January 2 2019, however, the German newspapers carried the news that minister Monika Grütters, interviewed by the German news agency DPA, had clearly stated the need for a proactive attitude in the restitution process: “To remain just passively waiting until someone demands the restitution of something is no the correct way of coming to terms with our colonial past” (3).

Such a statement, quite distinct from the ambiguity of previous manifestations, is not just relevant because it comes from a member of a conservative government, but also by the clarity with which it adhered to a catalog of measures long suggested by experts, but which are only slowly taking roots in common sense, namely in Portugal, as the recent debate among us reveals: the need for an exhaustive inventory that allows to determine provenance with certainty (in the German language, this desideratum has already led to the already consecrated designation of a new discipline - “Provenienzforschung”, “studies on provenance”); the inversion of the burden of proof - all goods with a colonial provenance are of suspect origin until proof to the contrary; the need to identify in a credible way the partners in the process of restitution; the need to establish processes of horizontal collaboration with experts of the various parties and countries involved.

Against this background, it is particularly instructive to revisit briefly the history of the project of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, since the vectors of the discussion that is under way meet in this project in a particularly clear fashion. The project of the Humboldt Forum, conceived since the beginning of the millennium and concretely initiated with the laying of the first stone in June 2013, is not a project like any other. Not just due to the huge dimension of the projected building, but also due to its location, well in the centre of Berlin, occupying the space of the former imperial palace, whose ruins had given place, in the German Democratic Republic, to the most emblematic building of the pro-Soviet regime, the Palace of the Republic. The demolition of this building, in 2008, provided space, in this



most representative location, for the building of the new Town Palace, now with the cultural vocation of hosting the Humboldt Forum. The main nuclei of this Forum, having as its vocation the hosting of collections coming from extra-European cultures, stem from the Ethnological Museum and the Museum for Asian Art.

The already quoted speech by the minister of Culture of June 1st 2018, already mentioned, expressed the official consensus on the nature and function of the Humboldt Forum: “this unique place of dialogue with the cultures of the world. [...] The Humboldt Forum will be our visitors card for an approach to the objects and the cooperation in the study of collections”. The idea of a “visitor card” allowing to demonstrate the German capacity for a “dialogue between cultures” translates in a nutshell many of the equivocations associated to the project and that have been the object of an ample, long-standing debate which has already produced a mass of documentation that is not easy to master.

Already in 2015 the historian Jürgen Zimmerer, one of the most authorized voices concerning the German colonial past, in an article entitled “Humboldt Forum: colonial forgetting” (4), had drawn attention to the problems in the project which, from his point of view, had not been sufficiently reflected. Essentially, Zimmerer’s criticism was grounded in a fundamental presupposition of postcolonial studies: knowledge produced by the ample ethnographic collections of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is knowledge based on the power no name and catalogue the other as an inferior, leading, in the final analysis, to a discourse justifying European domination over the rest of the world. Scientific curiosity, however genuine, led, in this way, to the construction of a body of knowledge functioning as a mirror in which the European colonizer, in his function as a representative of “Enlightenment”, prides himself in his “naturally” superior role. There is nothing that is innocent in this project of producing knowledge on the other, so that to prolong this project in the 21<sup>st</sup> century without, at the same time, making clear its problematic aspects is equivalent to an unacceptable strategy of forgetting. The question is, thus, not limited to research on provenance with the eventual consequence of restitution; it becomes equally indispensable to rethink a whole museological context grounded in assumptions which perpetuate in other ways a colonial relation and project it into the present.

In the case of the Humboldt Forum, this would imply a thorough revision of the programme underlying the formulation of the project and which, albeit in a more nuanced way, still underlies the conception of a museum ready to open its doors in 2019. This is why, in a recent discussion with the art historian



Horst Bredekamp, a former member of the museum's curators team and one of the most critical voices concerning restitution, the already mentioned Jürgen Zimmerer ends up considering the project as a lost opportunity, starting, in his own words, by the "original sin" of preserving the "separation between European and non-European art" (5). Having in view the prominence, among the collections to install, of a collection of Benin bronzes, originated in the large loot brought to England in 1897 in the framework of a British punishing expedition, Zimmerer proposes, somewhat provocatively, that the museum be renamed as "Benin Forum". This is, however, a fundamentally didactic provocation: may be the option for the suggestion might lead to the deepening of a discussion that has made important steps, but has in no way been carried to the level that is urgent and necessary.

- 
- (1) Clara Ervedosa, "O passado colonial: Macron age, Merkel reage", *Público*, 12/6/2018, p. 46.  
(2) Press release 186 by the Department of Press and Information of the German Federal Government.  
(3) *Der Tagesspiegel*, 2/1/2019. The same positions, taken as official positions of the German federal government were expressed in an article published together with the member of Parliament Michelle Müntefering, in the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 15/12/2018, significantly transcribed in the official bulletin of the German Foreign Office.  
(4) Jürgen Zimmerer, "Humboldt Forum: Das koloniale Vergessen", *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 7/2015, 13-16.  
(5) See Andreas Kilb; Stefan Trinks, "Streitgespräch über Beutekunst: War Humboldt Kolonialist?", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3/1/2019.
- 

**António Sousa Ribeiro** is a full professor at the School of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra and a senior researcher at the Centre for Social Studies of same University. He is an associate researcher for the project *MEMOIRS - Children of Empires and European Postmemories* (ERC No. 648624).

MEMOIRS is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (no. 648624) and is hosted at the Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra.