

## Chapter 2 - Museums and the Making of History

The discussion to be introduced in this chapter is about the relevance, for the study of museums, of the subjacent concepts of history and historiography in museological constructions. For the purpose, some basic concepts of history and historiography will have to be analysed.

'Things that happened in the past'... 'important deeds of the past'... 'battles'... 'wars'... 'main political decisions'... 'important people of the past'... or just 'the past': these are the most common ideas, sentences and words usually associated with the concept of history. If the word historiography appears in a normal conversation almost everyone will use it as a synonym of history, with no further thought. Nevertheless, the concepts of history and historiography demand deeper discussion, as the bibliography produced on this matter during this century easily proves.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is not to discuss from scratch the concept of history and historiography, others have already done so. What is thought to be fundamental, when dealing with museums, and in particular with history museums, is to have clearly in mind the main problems raised by the use of basic concepts. In further chapters there will be the need to return to this problem, analysing concepts as 'state' and 'nationalism'; but it is arguable that history and historiography, as far as these terms are used in museum context, are essential concepts and that they must be discussed in order to enable further and correct use.

The ancient or recent uses of the word history will not be discussed, on the contrary, the discussion will be focused on what the word means in the present. 'What is History?' is, in fact, a very old, but still present, question, with very different answers. Nevertheless, even before engaging on the attempt of gathering the most significant definitions on history and historiography and trying to achieve a suitable definition, another concept must be analysed. When we deal with history, when we speak about history, or when we just think about it, the idea of 'time' is ever present in our minds, even if we are not aware of its presence.

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<sup>6</sup> See note 10.

## 2.1 Time

We usually accept that time is divided into three different kinds: past, present and future. The existence of a 'present' is easy to deny from an epistemological point of view. The absolute 'present' is not a scientific fact, it is not measurable, cannot be defined, has no importance whatsoever when dealing either with experimental science or with human science. A further difficulty when we try to define the 'present' is to be able to verify the simultaneous nature of different events. This applies, especially, to experimental science. From an epistemological point of view, we can however generalise the conclusions: if we cannot prove the existence of simultaneous events (and in a strict scientific sense we can not), we cannot accept the existence of 'present'. Therefore it does not exist. The 'future' can be accepted in two main different ways: a spiritual, religious or eschatological way or a statistic one; certain or uncertain, both are a matter of belief (a religious belief or a scientific belief) and both are of poor interest on what concerns this text.

And what about the 'past'? What kind of 'past' do we have? In other words, what kind of 'time' do we, as human beings, conceive? In the western history of man, two opposite conceptions of time are significant: time that cycles, as the Greeks understood it, or time that flows, as Saint Augustine described it. In the first time never reaches an end, and the existence of a very defined beginning is barely accepted; the other is an understanding of time that includes a very obvious and well marked beginning. In this case, 'time' could be described as a path, with several main stations, through which mankind goes before it arrives to the inevitable destination: the end of time. The latter is the understanding of time now commonly used, even not thinking about it. The marxist interpretation of history, as well as the Christian, uses this concept of 'time'. It represents almost all current perceptions of time. It is interesting to notice that time ends in Christian belief with a final judgement, after which there will be no more time as we humans conceive it. Marxian time ends by human social, economic and political evolution in a status where nothing changes anymore. The communist society has no reason to change once the 'motor' of history, the struggle between classes, will have ended. And time, in a situation like that,

makes no sense: if nothing changes, time does not exist. The 'end of history' is, in both cases, similar: a situation in which time is of no importance at all.<sup>7</sup>

Time is, in our way of thinking, linear. Science, as we understand it, describes time this way, it looks for the 'beginning' and tries to predict the 'end', or, at least, the probable evolution of events. We are not only thinking of experimental science such as physics or astronomy; economics, politics, sociology and demography, all use this understanding of 'time'. When historians work they deal with past events and they never imagine those events as repeatable: an historical event is always unique.

What must not be forgotten, when trying to define 'time' or 'past' (or other related concepts) is that how we conceive them is only one of several different, legitimate ways of understanding those realities. We must be aware that scientific thought and common sense are, frequently, incongruous. Everyday life provides evidence for this. Religious ceremonies tend to acknowledge time in a cyclic perspective, ritualising deeds, repeating events in symbolic ceremonies, and by doing so, renewing the act. We constantly hear people saying that 'history repeats itself', when referring to politics or economic trends. Sometimes we have the feeling that we have already lived that particular experience, said that particular sentence, or heard that particular conversation. Perhaps we have some difficulty in accepting that somewhere in the future the end of time will occur. In fear of this, we return to that convenient, safe and reassuring pattern of time that repeats itself: good or bad the future is something we already know because we have already experienced it.<sup>8</sup>

So, when we try to define history, or historiography, we have to use the word 'past'. What understanding of that concept are we referring to? It is almost obvious that authors<sup>9</sup> have in mind the linear kind of time when they mention the past, trying to understand what history is. In this text, that one will be the subjacent conception of time: the present scientific way of understanding

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<sup>7</sup> See GILSON, E. - *Introduction à l'étude de Saint Augustin*, Paris, Etudes de Philosophie Médiévale, 1943; see also two of the main texts of Saint Augustin, the *Confessions*, (section eleven, *Man and Time*) and *De civitate Dei*. See also MARX and ENGLS - *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, London, 1848, section I.

<sup>8</sup> Scientific experiments are example of such events.

<sup>9</sup> See note 10.

time as linear. Nevertheless some of the ideas above are not despicable: the awareness of definitional difficulties is the only way acceptable, if we want to reach an objective use of words. As we will see in a few paragraphs, dealing with history is, inevitably, dealing with men: and those men, gone long ago, about whom we say things and dig out information from documents and archaeological evidence, they too had their conception of time, not necessarily equal to ours. The only possibility of having a chance to understand those men is to be aware of their conceptions, time included.

Museums use this linear kind of time too. History museums are often organised in a chronological manner. Others, that could use different criteria in their displays, tend also to be chronological: art museums presenting objects organised by epochs or styles; natural history museums presenting specimens organised in the chronological order of appearance in natural history; ethnographic museums presenting collections 'from the oldest known up to the present one'; regional museums reporting the history of their region beginning with the most remote known trace of human life in the area and proceeding chronologically until reaching the present. Most museums are 'addicted' to time and to chronological order. Being an institution that often deals with the past, museums frequently use this linear time as the most important criteria to impose on the organisation of objects. In this sense, among others, museums are a picture, an image, produced and presented as the truth, not being more than one possible truth between lots of others.

## 2.2 History

Let us now go back to a central point of this chapter: 'What is History?'. Many authors<sup>10</sup> already tried to answer this 'simple' question, but it is hard to find a concise, satisfactory,

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<sup>10</sup> Main references are: BENSON, S. P. et al. (eds) - *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Temple University Press, 1986; BLOCH, Marc - *The Historians Craft*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1954; BRAUDEL, Fernand - *On History*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980; BURKE, Peter - *History and Social Theory*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992; CARR, E. H. - *What is History?*, London, MacMillan and Co. Ltd, 1962; CONNERTON, Paul - *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995; EVANS, Richard J. - *In Defense of History*, London, Granta Books, 1997; FEBVRE, Lucien - *Combats pour l'Histoire*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2<sup>th</sup> ed., 1965; GARDINER, Patrick - *Theories of History*, The free press of the Glencoe, Oxford University, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1963; JENKINS, Keith - *On "What is History?"*, London, Routledge, 1995; JENKINS, Keith - *Re-Thinking History*, London, Routledge, 1995; SALMON, Pierre - *História e Crítica*, Coimbra, Liv. Almedina, 1979; URRY, John - "How Societies remember the past" in

complete and understandable definition. It is easier to say what history is not, to dispute about who makes history and to argue about purpose or meaning, than it is to produce a clear definition. Nevertheless, all this may contribute to our understanding of the concept.

In the first instance, it is important to understand that 'the past' and 'history' are not the same thing.<sup>11</sup> The past is something we can never absolutely know, as extensive and as deep our analyses goes into the documents and remains. We can be absolutely sure that the past, as a complete entity, cannot be reached by our knowledge. This idea is present in the sentence of Jenkins when he says "[...] using the term 'the past' for all that has gone before everywhere, whilst using the word 'historiography' for history, historiography referring here to the writings of historians".<sup>12</sup> That the past is a different thing to history is not just an issue of acquiring knowledge: we cannot lessen the gap between the past and what we can know about the past. Quoting Jenkins once again "[...] history is composed of epistemology, methodology and ideology. Epistemology shows we can never really know the past; that the gap between the past and history (historiography) is an ontological one [...]".<sup>13</sup> If we accept this as true, what is the point of producing a necessarily incomplete result? Our research will never be able to consider all past events; the story will always be an incomplete one, so, why bother?

This leads to another question: "What is the use of History?". This is the question that underpins Marc Bloch's book, *The Historians Craft*. A young boy asks his father, an historian, this question, and his immediate answer is a very simple one: history entertains. This history that entertains is conceived as the "[...] science of man in time [...]".<sup>14</sup> Perhaps this kind of answer does not include all that historians mean when they work. We can find a different answer in the introduction to Daniel Thelen's book *Memory and American History*: "The challenge of history is to recover the past and introduce it to the present."<sup>15</sup> This sentence brings to the discussion the

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MACDONALD, Sharon and FYFE, Gordon (ed.) - *Theorizing Museums*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, p. 45-65, VEYNE, Paul - *Como se escreve a História*, Lisboa, Ed. 70, 1983.

<sup>11</sup> JENKINS, Keith - *Re-Thinking History*, London, Routledge, 1995, p.5.

<sup>12</sup> JENKINS, *op.cit.*, p.6.

<sup>13</sup> JENKINS, *op.cit.*, p.19.

<sup>14</sup> BLOCH, Marc - *The Historians Craft*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1954, p.3.

<sup>15</sup> THELEN, David (ed.) - *Memory and American History*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990, p.vii.

meaning, the purpose, and the responsibilities of the act of making history. Bringing to the present traces of facts of the past, things long ago forgotten or shadows of events that still remain in social memory may appear dangerous or even pernicious. Connerton considers history as an indispensable activity<sup>16</sup>. He argues that history is a way of remembering, a way of creating knowledge about the past. Answering the question above, history is about getting to know about the past.

Words like 'produce', 'make' or 'construct' are being used when referring to the acts of the historian.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Jenkins goes as far as to say that "History is produced by a group of labourers called historians when they go to work"<sup>18</sup>. History is a product, something we make. History is not the past, the whole past, the complete and ultimate truth. We could admit that history, once it is impossible to know all the past, could be, at least, a small part of that past, the truthful account of that piece of past. But we are confronted with a different definition. History is a construction, a picture, an image, something historians make.

This gap between history and the past is an ontological one. We are deemed not to reach the past. Not even a small, insignificant part of the past could be ontologically present. So, what do historians do when they go to work? In Michel de Certeau's words, "What do historians really fabricate when they «make history»?"<sup>19</sup> They produce what they consider an understandable, scientific and critical text using information from the past,<sup>20</sup> but do not reproduce the past or even part of the past. It is simply not possible to bring the past into the present. One way or the other all museums have to face this difficulty when producing their exhibitions. Museums represent the

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<sup>16</sup> CONNERTON, Paul - *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.14: "*Historical reconstruction is thus not dependent on social memory [...] But historical reconstruction is still necessary even when social memory preserves direct testimony of an event.*".

<sup>17</sup> Tony Bennett also uses the word "constructed" referring to Beamish Museum: "costumed museum workers act out their parts in this constructed past"; BENNETT, Tony – "Museums and the People" in LUMLEY, Robert (ed.) - *The Museum Time Machine*, London, Routledge, 1995, p.67.

<sup>18</sup> JENKINS, *op.cit.*, p.21.

<sup>19</sup> CERTEAU, Michel de - *The Writing of History*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1975, p.56.

<sup>20</sup> Issues concerning 'information' will be taken under consideration in some paragraphs.

past but do not make it present, as "the past, as it is materially embodied in museums and heritage sites, is inescapably a product of the present which organizes it".<sup>21</sup>

### 2.3 Producing History

History is a 'production', something historians make. How they make it and whether they can achieve a 'truth' are important issues. Producing history is not a positivist activity because 'facts' do not speak for themselves and historians are not the human link between a tangible past and the present. Bearing this in mind, the use of methodology is the only way out, on what concerns the 'truth' problem. Making history is, in this strict sense, to follow a precise and acknowledged methodology, respecting rules that all scientific community recognises and accepts. The 'truth' that historians achieve this way is no more and no less than other scientific truth: not the absolute and only truth, not a positivist truth or the truth of a believer.

Paul Veyne<sup>22</sup> defines history as a narrative of events; then he includes the word 'truth' in the definition. He argues that history is a narrative of truthful events.<sup>23</sup> We can find almost the same argument in Carr when he claims that history "consists of a corpus of ascertained facts".<sup>24</sup> However, we may challenge this by admitting the difference between historical facts and interpretation of those facts.

These considerations lead us to another difficult point: we must deal with 'things' we call events or facts. What are they and how do historians use, interpret and present them is worth some thought. What is an historical fact? Is it everything and anything that happened in the past? Some are well known, some are almost unknown, about many we do not have information at all. The degree of knowledge about an historical fact depends on the existence of documents. Our understanding will also depend on the depth of the study made into the documents and on the scientific and public dissemination of the research.

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<sup>21</sup> Tony Bennett uses the concept of "model" when he refers to the production of historical sites, arguing that who produces such sites aspires to make them "*coincide as closely as possible (...) with an earlier model*". BENNETT, Tony - *The birth of the Museum. History, theory, politics*, London, Routledge, 1995, p.128-129.

<sup>22</sup> VEYNE, Paul - *Como se escreve a História*, Lisboa, Ed. 70, 1983, p.14.

<sup>23</sup> VEYNE, *op.cit* , p.22.

In addition to the limited nature of the raw material used to make history, we should also be aware of how the historian decides what facts to use. Through what documents should the historian work? In other words, to whom and with which criteria, the choice of what part of the past to study? Carr affirms that "The belief in a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian is a preposterous fallacy, but one which it is very hard to eradicate". He adds "The facts speak only when the historians calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context".<sup>25</sup> Adrienne Kaeppler uses almost the same idea in museum context, when she affirms: "To paraphrase Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, "all museums are stages, and the artifacts are merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, and each artifact in its time plays many parts."<sup>26</sup>

Another problem arises of this way of conceiving history: is it possible, is it legitimate, for an historian to choose some facts and ignore others? Lucien Febvre argues that this need to choose demands criteria; he says that this act of choosing is (or could be interpreted as being) the denial of the scientific construction. He concludes that it is inevitable that all history is a choice.<sup>27</sup> Obviously, as Braudel emphasises,<sup>28</sup> the historian that follows the lessons of Lucien Febvre and Marcel Mauss, will always aspire to understand the whole of the social phenomenon. However, a certain difficulty remains. When historians choose some facts, some documents, and not others, they are not only electing a part of the past to be known, but also excluding other parts of the past. They present their criteria, they justify their choice and attempt to make their work scientifically acceptable; but they can never claim they can present a complete 'truth'.

What historians produce is an image, their own version, of the past. That image is based on historical documents but is also based in personal values and judgements. Choosing the documents (and therefore choosing the facts) and interpreting them, in order to make the material evidence intelligible, produces different results depending on the subjectivity of the person

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<sup>24</sup> CARR, Edward Hallet, *What is History?*, London, MacMillan And Co. Ltd., 1962, p.3.

<sup>25</sup> CARR - *op.cit.*, p.5-6.

<sup>26</sup> KAEPLER, Adrienne L. - "Paradise Regained: The Role of Pacific Museums in Forging National Identity" in KAPLAN, E. S. Flora (ed) - *Museums and the making of "Ourselves"*, London, Leicester University Press, 1996, p.20.

<sup>27</sup> FEBVRE, Lucien - *Combats pour L'Histoire*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2<sup>th</sup> ed., 1965, p.7-8; 116-117.



involved. This is why history can be seen as a 'production' and not as the ultimate truth. Historians must present the result of their work in acceptable forms: the image must make some kind of sense. In order to do this, they adjust facts, fill in the blanks scrupulously and, by using examples from other parts of the past and their own judgement, provide an apparently coherent description of events.

Pierre Salmon claims that history is a critical reconstruction of the past that was lived by man in society.<sup>29</sup> The word 'critical' reveals his concern with scientific criteria and 'reconstruction' points out the importance of the historian in the process. Peter Burke elaborates this concept and states: "History is better defined as the study of human societies in the plural, placing the emphasis on the differences between them and also on the changes which have taken place in each one over time."<sup>30</sup> The concern here is with the diachronic characteristic of history. Another perspective is presented by Carr. He describes history as "a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past".<sup>31</sup> Lucien Febvre produces a definition of history that includes some major ideas: history, for Febvre, is a research, scientifically controlled, about human past activities and creations.<sup>32</sup> Finally Jenkins also introduces a definition that covers a number of different aspects; they include the consideration of who makes history, how it is made, for whom is history made and how history is used.<sup>33</sup> All these aspects are fundamental to his definition, clearly revealing that the author considers history a very complex activity. The introduction of the idea that history is made for others, and not necessarily for personal satisfaction, is very important specially if considered alongside the idea that history is *used* in some way. If historians make history for other peoples employment, then the act of making history is not only scientific but also becomes political.

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<sup>28</sup> BRAUDEL, Fernand - *On History*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980, p.76.

<sup>29</sup> SALMON, Pierre - *História e Crítica*, Coimbra, Liv. Almedina, 1979, p.20.

<sup>30</sup> BURKE, Peter - *History and Social Theory*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992, p.2.

<sup>31</sup> CARR, *op.cit.*, p.24.

<sup>32</sup> FEBVRE, *op.cit.*, p.20.

<sup>33</sup> JENKINS, *op.cit.*, p.26.

In this sense, making a museum can (and must) also be conceived not as an ingenuous process but as a social active one, where politics, ideology, economy and social differences play an important role.<sup>34</sup> With this in mind, analysing museums becomes a much more complex activity. As this thesis is dedicated to the analysis of Portuguese museums and exhibitions of a particular epoch (the *Estado Novo*), it is very important to remember that during that Portuguese nationalist period, museums were organised as pieces of a propaganda program.<sup>35</sup> This idea is one of the principles underpinning this research and links directly to the notion that history does not exist if historians do not write it. Writing history, that act of making public the work of the historian, demands choices. Museums, as historians, must interpret their material and make it understandable to others.

## 2.4 The presentation of History: interpretations.

The words of Keith Emerick summarise the discussion presented above. Emerick stated that "Today we understand that we create our own past".<sup>36</sup> Indeed we do create it, and this observation raises numerous and pertinent issues. For example, does the accuracy of history only depend upon the historians methodology? If so, is there a generally accepted method or do historians use different methodological and/or ideological tools? What role do the historians' religious consciousness, social and economic background and political beliefs play in making history? When we 'create' our past are the results the truth (or part of the truth) or are they the product of ideology, religion and idiosyncrasy? Or, as Anthony Buckley once said, with regard to museums and exhibitions "Given the pressure to produce histories which serve particular causes,

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<sup>34</sup> As examples it is worth referring the Spanish museums that were used to proclaim the "popular soul" (*alma popular*) during the 1930s, and in particular the "Museum of the Spanish People" (*Museo del Pueblo Español*) and another example is the political use of museums under the regime lead by Franco in Spain; see BOLAÑOS, Maria - *Historia de los museos en España*, Gijón, Ediciones Trea, 1997, p.351-355 and 375.

<sup>35</sup> LIRA, Sérgio - "Portuguese legislation on museums during the *Estado Novo*: from the First Republic inheritance to the changes of the sixties." in *Museological Review*, Leicester, Museum Studies Department, vol. 6, 1999, p.73-87.

<sup>36</sup> EMERICK, Keith - "Sir Charles Peers and After: From Frozen Monuments to Fluid Landscapes" in ARNOLD, John, DAVIS, Kate and DITCHFIELD, Simon (eds.) - *History & Heritage. Consuming the past in Contemporary Culture*, Dorset, Donhead, 1998, p.187.

some hard questions arise. [...] Is the truth even possible? [...] Can one take 'authenticity' seriously? Does truth matter at all?"<sup>37</sup>

The first two questions raised by Buckley, are relatively easy to answer. If historians do not follow an accepted method, a scientifically recognised method,<sup>38</sup> they are not producing history. Whatever it is they are doing (literature, romance, fiction) it cannot be classified as 'history', because it is not the result of 'historiography'. Issues of religious consciousness, social background, economic position and political beliefs are of a very different nature. When historians serve particular causes of any type such as economics, political, religious or social needs, the result will not be neutral. Historians do not exist outside this world and pressure will always be present, and it will take different forms.

Such pressures are also present in museum work. Anthony Buckley has written about the challenges of interpreting and presenting history to the museum visitor . He asked his readers the question: "Is truthful history merely boring, of no interest to the paying customer?"<sup>39</sup> This raises, again, the question of what is historical truth. As discussed above, the answer is to accept the validity of a particular method in a particular time. This implies that historical truth can, therefore, be revised. But if visitors are not interested in historical truth, as Buckley suggests, the work of historians in museums is continually challenged. To resolve this, historians must either please the public by disregarding historical truth, or they must find the right metamorphosis of that scientific and 'boring' truth so that it seems relevant to the public.

The question of what visitors want and of what they get from museums, exhibitions and heritage is critical to the success of museums. This kind of pressure can influence display decisions, application of research budgets, acquisition policy and choices of staff members. Even when institutions do not recognise these kind of influences, the pressure is still present. Sometimes "Visitors are not primarily looking for scientific historical evidence. [...] Visitors to historic sites

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<sup>37</sup> BUCKLEY, Anthony D. - "Why Not Invent the Past We Display in Museums?" in KAVANAGH, Gaynor (ed.) - *Making Histories in Museums*, London, Leicester University Press, 1996, p.43.

<sup>38</sup> The next question would be 'who defines the scientifically recognised method?'. The answer is 'the scientific community'; otherwise science would be impossible. This does not mean the method is a static true; it means the method is *the method accepted in a particular period of time by a particular group of scientists*.

<sup>39</sup> BUCKLEY, Anthony D. - *op. cit.*, p.43.

are looking for an experience, a new reality based on the tangible remains of the past".<sup>40</sup> From a financial point of view, the role of the business department of an heritage centre is to make this 'experience' desirable, to create demand. As the economic imperative gains momentum, "Dangers arise because it is relatively easy to invert history and to turn heritage into a marketable product without proper regard for rigour, honesty and factual accuracy".<sup>41</sup> If this is what happens in heritage centres, we must ask if this is also the case of museums and exhibitions. For many the question is undoubtedly awkward: museums have long presented themselves as the paradigm of truth. Except for a few, most museums, prior to the mid 20th century presented themselves as temples of knowledge.<sup>42</sup> Even today museums have the aura of being respectable, solid institutions. Still, the question is asked: "Why should historians and curators spend valuable time and money getting their facts right when the general public doesn't always seem to mind very much what it is told?"<sup>43</sup>

If we consider all the historians' personal difficulties of achieving the truth, even without the pressures of external influences, the task of creating our past is very complex. The truth is subject to so different and distinct pressures that it becomes almost a vain word. That is why we combine truth with other words such as 'scientific', 'statistic', 'historical', thus portraying the idea that the proclaimed truth is only valuable in a very specific context. If this is valid from an epistemological perspective, it is also valid in museums. The 'truth' museums present is a particular one; it is one 'truth', an 'history', a 'story' with a date, a method and a human interpretation attached to it. An important example is given by Maria Avgouli when she affirms that "the founding of the first museums in Greece - those of the 19th century - coincided with the founding and subsequent

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<sup>40</sup> SCHOUTEN, Frans F. J. - " Heritage as Historic Reality" in HERBERT, David (ed.) - *Heritage, Tourism and Society*, London, Pinter, 1997, p.21.

<sup>41</sup> HERBERT, David (ed.) - *Heritage, Tourism and Society*, London, Pinter, 1997, p. xi. West, referring to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum affirms that he "[...] will discuss the Trust in terms of the development of historical tourism, arguing that it is deeply involved in the *history-making business*." WEST, Bob - "The making of the English working past: a critical view of the Ironbridge George Museum" in LUMLEY, Robert (ed.) - *op.cit.*, p.38.

<sup>42</sup> HOOPER-GREENHILL, E. - *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, London, Routledge, 1995, specially p.197-215.

<sup>43</sup> BUCKLEY - *op.cit.*, p.46.

consolidation of the new Greek state." One of the purposes of those museums was "to reinforce the sense of national identity".<sup>44</sup>

One of the pressures which acts upon the construction of history is that of politics<sup>45</sup>. What historians produce, including their work in museums, is always influenced by their political context. The historian is not immune to political discussion, propaganda, and ideology. However, this political pressure can be considered as minor because "History, as we know, has always been political [...]"<sup>46</sup>. In this sense, 'political' is not necessarily synonym of 'false' or 'untruthful' or even 'demagogic'. History is always a political construction because we, humans, are political entities.<sup>47</sup>

Yet, the word 'political', with reference to the work of historians and museums, may also be used in a pejorative sense. This is the case when politics is combined with science, when the historical construction is influenced by the political discourse or when exhibitions in a museum depend on political agendas.<sup>48</sup> Political constraints over historians and museums may come from several sources. In Matelic's words, the bureaucratic machine is influential because: "with growth has come additional bureaucracy and a clear recognition that 'the institution is a political animal'".<sup>49</sup> History makers and museum workers can find themselves surrounded by political intrigues and depending on 'political' money. Despite any struggles to be independent and scientifically honest, the interpretation of history and its presentation in museums is never neutral. 'Interpretation' and 'neutrality' are, indeed, opposite concepts: when we interpret we are not neutral. As Carol

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<sup>44</sup> AVGOULI, Maria - "The First Greek Museums and National Identity" in KAPLAN, E. S. Flora (ed) -*op.cit.*, p.261.

<sup>45</sup> MACDONALD, Sharon (ed.) - *The Politics of Display*, London, Routledge, 1999 is dedicated to prove and explain this assertion in museum context.

<sup>46</sup> PHILIPS, Robert - "Contesting the Past, Constructing the Future, History, Identity and Politics in Schools" in ARNOLD, John, DAVIS, Kate and DITCHFIELD, Simon (eds.) - *op.cit.*, p.224.

<sup>47</sup> Or, as Aristotle said in the Introduction to his *Treaty of Politics*, "political animals".

<sup>48</sup> An interesting example are the issues raised by the exhibition about the *Pithecanthropus* described by BOUQUET, Mary - "Strangers in Paradise. An encounter with fossil man at the Dutch Museum of Natural History" in MACDONALD, Sharon - *op.cit.*, p.159.

<sup>49</sup> MATELIC, Candace Tangorra - "Forging a Balance. A Team Approach to Exhibit Development at the Museum of Florida History" in AMES, Kenneth L., FRANCO, Barbara and FRYE, L. Thomas - *Ideas and Images. Developing Interpretative History Exhibits*, Nashville, American association for State and Local History, 1992, p.189.

Duncan said, "[...] a museum is not the neutral and transparent sheltering space that is often claimed to be."<sup>50</sup>

The past is, in this sense, an interpretation of events. When historians present the facts, they are not really just presenting them: they are selecting ones while neglecting others. The process involves interpreting, trying to make sense out of the information provided by documents, artefacts and industrial remains. "So it is really never a matter of the facts *per se* but the weight, position, combination and significance they carry *vis-a-vis* each other in the construction of explanations that is at issue."<sup>51</sup> This is also true if we think in terms of museum objects. It is not conceivable that a museum exhibition (either permanent or temporary) can be neutral. In every moment of the exhibition construction process (such as the selection of the objects or their labelling) choices are made and interpretation is necessary. "It seems axiomatic that it is not possible to exhibit objects without putting a construction upon them. [...] To select and put forward any item for display [...] is a statement not only about the object but the culture it comes from".<sup>52</sup> This process of constructing a new reality, the display reality, gives sometimes the opportunity to gather objects that otherwise would never be found together. As a consequence, the museums 'truth' is a constructed one since "Museums are locus of dislocated fragments [...]".<sup>53</sup> This is why we can agree that "The document value of a museum object is manifested only in the museological context [...]".<sup>54</sup> And, as Bennett argues, that museum objects "become, on the plane of meaning, facsimiles of themselves".<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> DUNCAN, Carol - "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship" in KARP, Ivan and LAVINE, Steven D. (eds) - *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, p.90.

<sup>51</sup> JENKINS, Keith - *Re-Thinking History*, London, Routledge, 1995, p.33.

<sup>52</sup> BAXANDALL, Michael - "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects" in KARP, Ivan and LAVINE, Steven D. (eds) - *op.cit.*, p.34.

<sup>53</sup> BOON, James A. - "Why Museums Make Me Sad" in KARP, Ivan and LAVINE, Steven D. (eds) - *op.cit.*, p.258.

<sup>54</sup> MAROEVIC, Ivo - "The museum message: between the document and information" in HOOPER-GREENHILL, E.(ed.) - *Museum, Media, Message*, London, Routledge, 1995, p.25.

<sup>55</sup> BENNET, Tony . *op.cit.*, p.129.

Opening a history book, or visiting a museum, is not an innocent act. Despite Buckley's suggestions,<sup>56</sup> readers and visitors are not expected to be naive. However, the possibility of someone entering a museum in the expectation of been given the 'absolute truth' remains. The task of the historian and the responsibility of the museum is, therefore, a heavy one. Those presenting history in museums must remember that any presentation of history may be seen as the absolute truth. Many museum visitors will not necessarily be aware of the "museum as a potent force in forging self consciousness, within specific historical contexts".<sup>57</sup> In fact, history books, films, museums and other forms of presenting history are often used to transform a belief, an ideology or a political idea into 'truth'.<sup>58</sup> Exploiting the power of the written word and of the museum display is patent in many societies. Examples of the use of history and museums for nation building can be found world-wide. Wood discusses the Scottish example and concludes: "The use of the past to assert national identity, and the enjoyment of stories from the past that bear little relation to historical truth are not, of course, activities that are peculiar to Scots".<sup>59</sup> In a very different context, Morales-Moreno, discussing nationalism in Mexico, reinforces this idea by quoting Bernard Deloch, affirming that "[...] the Museum [*the National Museum of Mexico*] contributed to an ideological process of sanctifying the history of the fatherland and, above all, providing a new basis for national identity".<sup>60</sup> For the Portuguese case there is preliminary evidence that nationalism had a major influence over museums during the 20th century.

According to Kavanagh, history is written in three main different ways: the narrative, the descriptive and the analytical methods: "The narrative tradition comes closest to story-telling [...] Descriptive concentrates on presenting a visual image or impression of a person, idea or event. [...] Analytical history is the most common form and the most difficult to write. It seeks to lay bare

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<sup>56</sup> BUCKLEY, Anthony D. - "Why Not Invent the Past We Display in Museums?" in KAVANAGH, Gaynor (ed.) - *Making Histories in Museums*, London, Leicester University Press, 1996, p.43.

<sup>57</sup> KAPLAN, E. S. Flora (ed) - *Museums and the making of "Ourselves"*, London, Leicester University Press, 1996, p.1.

<sup>58</sup> Examples can be found in KAEPLER, Adrienne L. - *op.cit.*, p.29-30 on the museum role in the Easter Island under Governor Rapu and in KAPLAN, Flora - "Nigerian Museums: Envisaging Culture as National Identity", in KAPLAN, Flora - *op.cit.*, p.55-58 on the "manifestation of local ethnic pride" performed by the National Museum, Benin in Nigeria.

<sup>59</sup> WOOD, Sydney - "Issues of National Identity and the School Curriculum in Scotland" in ARNOLD, John, DAVIS, Kate and DITCHFIELD, Simon (eds.) - *op.cit.* p.213.

the true nature of an event or episode".<sup>61</sup> These three different perspectives are often used together in history books. In museum exhibitions "History [...] tends to be offered in a descriptive form".<sup>62</sup> In some museums history is a description of past events illustrated with political dates, names of 'important' people and objects presented without any interpretation at all.<sup>63</sup>

Recent changes, such as a new perspective of what a museum should be,<sup>64</sup> more and different public coming to museums and social and educational tasks assigned to museums, have meant that museums have had to alter their way of dealing with communication and public needs. These changes have demanded a different approach to the presentation of history. The 'past' can no longer be that cold and distant thing to be observed in a very secure and innocuous museum room; it is now presented as a part of ourselves, made by us and for us. In this sense "Historians working in museums have possibly the most creative and complex roles of all history-makers".<sup>65</sup> Perhaps, because of this, they "have an extraordinary and compelling task. They have not only to create the record, [...] but also to make meanings from this material".<sup>66</sup>

These ideas are centred on the notion of 'interpretation'. In very simple words, the past does not make any sense if we do not 'interpret' it.<sup>67</sup> It is not enough to have a museum room full of 'objects' from the past. Even if those objects are very precisely identified, dated and described,

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<sup>60</sup> MORALES-MORENO, Luis Geraldo - "History and Patriotism in the National Museum of Mexico" in KAPLAN, E. S. Flora (ed) - *op.cit.*, p.181.

<sup>61</sup> KAVANAGH, Gaynor - *History Curatorship*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1990, p.131.

<sup>62</sup> *Idem, ibidem.*

<sup>63</sup> For instance the museum of the *Abade de Baçal* in Bragança (Portugal). Objects are on display in a chronological order with non-interpretative labels.

<sup>64</sup> All the discussion over the definition of "museum" during the last three decades involving the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and national associations of museums (Museums Association (MA), American Association of Museums (AAM), National Museums of Canada (NMC) for example) is proof enough that this is a relevant issue. On the evolution of the role of interpretation in museums see ROBERTS, C. Lisa - *From Knowledge to Narrative. Educators and the Changing Museum*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, p.60-79.

<sup>65</sup> KAVANAGH, Gaynor (ed.) - *Making Histories in Museums*, London, Leicester University Press, 1996, p.5.

<sup>66</sup> KAVANAGH, - *op.cit.*, p.xi.

<sup>67</sup> An interesting point on the role of interpretation in the exhibition *Food for Thought* (Science Museum London) is made by MACDONALD, Sharon - "Supermarket Science? Consumers and 'the public understanding of science'" in MACDONALD, Sharon - *op.cit.*, p.120: "Although the six women who constituted 'the exhibition team' were experienced curators [...] to work on the exhibition their job title was 'interpreter'".



they are simply objects. As objects they lack the work of the historian in order to establish their relationship to man.<sup>68</sup>

It is important to have a clear idea about what is meant by 'interpretation'. "Interpretation is the act or process of explaining, translating or presenting a personal understanding about a subject or object."<sup>69</sup> The first issue raised by this definition is the idea of 'personal understanding'. Whose understanding are we referring to? It is hard to justify that only historians, or museum curators, are able to interpret. We will necessarily conclude that everyone will have a personal understanding about a subject or object. Therefore, who is in charge of interpreting? Interpretation is both 'official' and 'unofficial'. As noted by Fiona Watson "interpretation of past events are debated, contested and revised in all forums of life, from the family gathering to the academic tome".<sup>70</sup> Nevertheless, as far as history and museums are concerned, interpretation is normally the official one. Produced in a scientific forum, by qualified personnel and with scientific intents, this interpretation is the institutionalised, professionalised, *status quo* interpretation. This kind of interpretation responds not only to the need to understand a subject or object but also to the need to understand it in the accepted scientific way.

On the other hand it could be argued that interpretation should be a question of personal freedom; that no one should have the power to impose a particular interpretation. Yet, this concept will hardly work inside a museum. Someone will have to take the responsibility of making interpretation, because it is not possible to know history without interpretation. "How much of its underlying history or meaning does a painting reveal without interpretation?"<sup>71</sup> Without interpretation we do not have history; it can be argued that without interpretation we do not really

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<sup>68</sup> HOOPER-GREENHILL - *op.cit.*, p.198.

<sup>69</sup> DEAN, David - *Museum Exhibition. Theory and Practice*, London, Routledge, 1996, p.6. Another definition can be found in ALEXANDER, Edward P - *Museums in Motion*, London, Altamira Press, 1996, p.195 quoting TILDEN Freeman - *Interpreting our Heritage*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1967: "An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information".

<sup>70</sup> WATSON, Fiona - "Braveheart: More than just Pulp Fiction?" in ARNOLD, John, DAVIS, Kate and DITCHFIELD, Simon (eds.) - *op.cit.*, p.129.

<sup>71</sup> DEAN - *op.cit.*, p.5.

have 'objects' to present in museums: we just have 'things' that are not museum objects. As Schouten says, "Interpretation is the act that makes history 'real'".<sup>72</sup>

The need for interpretation is an imperative as "Historical reality does not pop out from the remains of the past; it has to be created".<sup>73</sup> This process of creation is a complex one: it responds to scientific demands but is confined to human (in the sense of personal) realities. "Heritage as a historical reality can only exist by virtue of interpretation. But that interpretation is - like the study of history itself - subject to fashion, taste, ideology and, last but not least, personal preferences".<sup>74</sup> This is also true for history, in its written format, and for museums. Therefore, interpretation is no longer an individual act; interpretation must be performed in professional ways, the 'interpreter' being aware of these epistemological difficulties. What historians working in museums do (as well as historians in general) is assuming the role of interpreters. Historians aim to make history understandable. By giving meanings to subjects and objects they want to make knowledge about past events accessible. "Historians are able to reject something explicitly told them in their evidence and substitute their own interpretation of events in its place".<sup>75</sup> 'Interpretation' becomes more valuable than 'evidence'. This may appear to be illogical or even unacceptable but we must have in mind that the historian cannot accept responsibility for evidence. He/She can and should only accept, responsibility for interpretation. As Schouten affirms, "The historical reality is not an independent identity because it is subject to interpretation, both scientifically and psychologically".<sup>76</sup>

However, if all history depends on interpretation, what is the role of past events and of material remains? Jenkins asks this question in a pertinent way: "are these historical facts that we can definitely know or is history 'just interpretation'?"<sup>77</sup> We can accept the ontological existence of past events or objects (as they exist) but we must affirm that that existence does not erase the

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<sup>72</sup> SCHOUTEN - *op.cit.*, p.31.

<sup>73</sup> SCHOUTEN - *op.cit.*, p.30.

<sup>74</sup> *Idem, ibidem.*

<sup>75</sup> CONNERTON - *op.cit.*, p.13.

<sup>76</sup> SCHOUTEN - *op.cit.*, p.23.

<sup>77</sup> JENKINS - *op.cit.*, p.32.

gap between those events or objects and our capacity for obtaining knowledge about them. The gap between the 'present' and the past is, in fact, an ontological one. The past cannot be transferred into the present in its fullness and therefore our possibility of knowing the past depends upon interpretation. So, in a sense, history is 'just interpretation', even if some material parcels of the past remain. That is why it is defensible that a museum room with objects, material evidence of the past, and nothing else, does not make any sense at all from an historian's point of view. This would only be acceptable from an aesthetic perspective. In this case, we do not understand and we do not want to understand, but we enjoy.

In history museums objects are often presented in chronological order and when something is not in that order (if we find a Roman helmet under a map of the Napoleon conquests) we have an unconscious and immediate negative reaction. The feeling that 'it is out of order' corresponds to the normal chronological order of display that we have come to expect. Perhaps someone wanted to compare the Roman and Napoleon's Empires, or to compare weapons, or battle strategies. But we need some explanation to the fact that an object that we recognise as two thousand years old is placed near a map of something that we know that happened two centuries ago.

Other kinds of 'natural' order include those which are based on geographical, ethnic or religious factors.<sup>78</sup> These arrangements create our expectations of what a museum should be before we enter. These expectations are often fulfilled, otherwise visitors would experience disorientation and would not understand the exhibit. Other museums observe the same kind of order: museums of art do not usually mix Da Vinci with Monet; ethnographic museums do not usually mix hand-made objects with industrial objects; natural history museums do not usually mix dinosaurs with dolphins, and so on. And when museums do mix these things they may have a purpose in mind: the purpose of creating a display that is not natural, obvious and expected. This basic step of interpretation, this 'natural order', is always present although most of the time we do not notice its existence. In Ames' words, neither do some museums: "The place of interpretation

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<sup>78</sup> See comments of BENNETT, Tony - *The birth...*, p.131-133 on this matter.

remains unclear in part because many institutions have only a vague notion of what 'interpreting' means".<sup>79</sup>

Another degree of interpretation is suggested by Ames when he says that "to truly interpret the story, we have to dare to suggest what it means".<sup>80</sup> Museums have to face the challenge of choosing a story to tell and to make a meaning out of it. This is why objects, documents and facts are not enough: a museum display demands ideas, something that makes a coherent link between objects and leads the visitor through the exhibition. Even so, we must be aware that re-creation in museums is always incomplete. Even the most complete scenario will have its mistakes and will lack authenticity. We can add a multi-sensorial environment to the exhibit (with light, images, sounds, smells and hands-on displays) but there will be always something missing. Kath Davies refers an exhibition on Welsh mines: "The result is a re-created workplace which fails to interpret working conditions [...] Such misinterpretations are in part overcome by the use of ex-miners as guides".<sup>81</sup> The failure to interpret working conditions is seen by Davies as a misinterpretation. This kind of difficulty is even more evident when the documentation has gaps, objects are missing or the historical record is scarce. Davies observes that an alien would have a very distorted vision on women and work in Wales by just studying documentation from the National Library, "yet this interpretation might serve to draw attention to past and present shortcomings in documentary and material representations of Welsh history".<sup>82</sup>

Finally, museums interpret primarily those facts, stories, events and objects that are related to the public that visits the museum or to the public that the museum wishes to attract. It is not common, for instance, for a museum in Norway to be particularly interested in interpreting the aboriginal life in Australia, although it is not impossible and is potentially interesting. The process of interpretation depends, at least partially, on the public demand. It is not a selfish exercise that museum workers do just to enjoy themselves or for the sake of science. Interpretation exists for

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<sup>79</sup> AMES, Kenneth L. - "Finding Common Threads" in AMES, Kenneth L., FRANCO, Barbara and FRYE, L. Thomas - *op.cit.*, p.314.

<sup>80</sup> *Idem, ibidem.*

<sup>81</sup> DAVIES, Kath - "Cleaning Up the Coal-Face and Doing Out the Kitchen: The Interpretation of Work and Workers in Wales" in KAVANAGH, Gaynor (ed.) - *op.cit.*, p.109.

<sup>82</sup> DAVIES - *op.cit.*, p.105.

the public. This is why Matelic affirms that "the Museum of Florida History collects, preserves, exhibits and interprets the material record of human culture in Florida. [...] The museum [...] is primarily concerned with interpreting those events and conditions that are unique to Florida's population".<sup>83</sup>

The study of museums and temporary exhibitions during the Portuguese nationalistic period must also include an analysis of political and ideological interpretations. The Portuguese nationalistic regime had ideological and propagandistic interest in museums and temporary exhibitions because history could be interpreted in such a way that it would serve the regime. The *Estado Novo* used museums and temporary exhibitions in many ways, one of the most significant of which was for the presentation of an ideological version or propagandistic interpretation of Portuguese history.

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<sup>83</sup> MATELIC, - *op.cit.*, p.187.