

Defending our true selves: being museums

Along the course of the 20th century, museums created an identity crisis for themselves. One that has deeply influenced the way people perceive them, still today, and, consequently, their relationship with them. A couple of examples might better illustrate the point I am trying to make.

[Slide 2] Korean artist Daesung Lee, talking recently about his project “Futuristic Archaeology”, explained that human action on the environment is one of his concerns and suggested that green landscapes will become scarce and we shall recall them in a space where they will be presented **dead, untouchable and unattainable**: a natural history museum.

[Slide 3] A couple of years ago, when French President François Hollande was questioned about the creation of a French National Museum of History, he spoke against it. Not only because it was an idea of his predecessor and opponent, Nicolas Sarkozy, but also because he believed that history cannot be **locked up, frozen, centralized and controlled**. So, this is the French President’s vision of what museums do: they lock things up, they freeze them, they try to centralize and control them.

[Slide 4] Dead, untouchable, unattainable, locked up, frozen, centralized and controlled: some of the words describing the perceptions of certain people about museums, in this case, an artist and a politician.

I am sure many of us are thinking: “What, today?! With all that incredible work carried out by museums all over the world? With all the education programmes, special events, digital content?”

Yes, today. Museums, many museums, are doing a fantastic job, but not all museums; either because of lack of vision or lack of resources. And perceptions - in this case, less favourable perceptions - take a long time and a lot of collective effort to change. I say ‘collective’, because actually, museums are perfectly aware of those perceptions and some times they actually try to use them to their advantage, by reinforcing them.

[Slides 5, 6, 7] This is a 2009 campaign of The Holocaust Museum of Buenos Aires. It’s motto is “A museum, no art”. When reading the text of the campaign, we find out that the lady on the photo is a holocaust survivor and that she and millions of other people did nothing to be in a museum.... What kind of thing does one need to do to be in a museum? Is it a good or a bad thing to be in a museum? Who deserves to be in it? Are museums only about famous painters or scientists? Are museums only about art? And is art a bad thing? What is the Holocaust Museum trying to warn people about with this campaign?

[Slide 8] In a more subtle way, The Arab Museum of Modern Art in Qatar, mentioned on its homepage a few weeks ago (it’s not there anymore) that it is much more than a

museum. “It is a platform where contemporary artistic production and debate take place, a showcase for new movements in the art world and a creative community where emerging talent can experiment, create and share projects with one another”. Really, aren’t these things supposed to happen in a museum? Do we need to look for a place that is ‘more than a museum’ for these things to occur?

So, going back to my initial statement, we are going through an identity crisis which we brought on ourselves. Museums, in the first place, were not supposed to be dead, untouchable, unattainable, frozen in time. Museums were not supposed to be under the control of a few and exist for their pleasure alone.

[Slide 9] In 1909, John Cotton Dana, the director of Newark Museum, stated that “A good museum attracts, entertains, arouses curiosity, leads to questioning and thus promotes learning. (...) The Museum can help people only if they use it; they will use it only if they know about it and only if attention is given to the interpretation of its possessions in terms they, the people, will understand.”

[Slide 10] And even before Cotton Dana, Edward Forbes, a British naturalist, stated in 1854: “Curators may be prodigies of learning and yet unfit for their posts if they don’t know anything about pedagogy, if they are not equipped to teach people who know nothing.”

And here’s the point: the people. The people who know nothing. The people who are not specialists - the majority of those visiting museums, actually – and who, somewhere on the way, became less important than the study and preservation of museum collections. Along the 20th century, museums - under the directorship of professionals mainly concerned with their subject matters and the collections – have forged the image of the inaccessible, the untouchable and unattainable. An image, which, despite the efforts in the last two decades to refocus our attention on the people, persists. A number of intellectual, social and physical barriers are still raised between museums and the people.

[Slide 11] And if you’re not convinced that this is the case, how would you explain the success of the guided tours organized by Museum Hack, first at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and now at a number of other museums? And that they have also been contacted by museums in other countries and continents, in order to be consulted regarding their methods in audience development? Museum Hack lead tours for people who don’t like museums and they say that the most popular comment by their customers is “I’ve never had so much fun in a museum!”. Museum Hack was founded by Nick Gray, on the left, who admits he used to hate museums, and is defined as “highly interactive, subversive, fun, non-traditional museum tours”.

[Slide 12] And if you’re still not convinced that this is the case, let’s be reminded of Michelle Obama’s remarks at the inauguration ceremony of the new Whitney Museum in New York on 30 April:

“There are so many kids in this country who look at places like museums and concert halls and other cultural centers and they think to themselves, well, that’s not a place for me, for someone who looks like me, for someone who comes from my neighborhood. In fact, I guarantee you that right now, there are kids living less than a mile from here who would never in a million years dream that they would be welcome in this museum. And growing up on the South Side of Chicago, I was one of those kids myself. So I know that feeling of not belonging in a place like this.”

The title of this conference is “Changing priorities”. What I propose is a change in direction that would make us look back and think again about what museums are truly for, what museums were always meant to be. Now, more than ever, we need to realize that the foremost priority is “to be museums”. To collect and to study and to preserve, to exhibit and to interpret, for the benefit of society, of the people. All people, those already related to us and those who might have an interest in finding out more about us. Because, everyone has the right to access museums.

I shall try to briefly examine some of the most significant barriers that might apply to a large number of museums.

[Slide 13] The first point I would like to make is that museums are not extensions of universities: we do not study and preserve objects in museum collections in order to share our knowledge with our peers, using academic jargon. And, frankly, no one comes to museums to become an expert on a subject matter. As Gail Dexter Lord said “The good thing about museums is that you don’t have to sit an exam to get in or to come out.”...

In the book “The Manual of Museum Exhibitions”, which she edited together with her husband, Barry Lord, they go on to compare museum exhibitions to TV reports: they aim to inform in a short amount of time a large audience of non-specialists regarding very diverse issues. Journalists, who are not specialists themselves, know how to do that. Do museum professionals know? Do they care to know?

[Slides 14, 15, 16] Imagine a visitor (a non-specialist, since the majority are) who invests time and money to come to a museum, to find things like this:

- KUMU, Tallinn, Estonia
- Convent of Christ, Tomar, Portugal
- Municipal Museum of Aljustrel, Portugal

I am sure that we have very few specialists on these subject matters among us today, so put yourself in the shoes of the common visitor and think:

Does this kind of communication make you feel attracted? Does it make you feel welcome? Do you consider it relevant for your interests, your concerns as a citizen, as a parent, as a teacher? You see, it's not enough for people to come in; we should also care about how they come out and if they'll come back. As these few examples clearly show, it's not only a question of language, but also of content. Are we telling stories that may be of interest to people today or we limit ourselves to sharing the kind of facts that may be understood by and meaningful only to those with specialist knowledge? Who are museums for?

[Slide 17] How do people react to this kind of intellectual barrier? Some continue coming anyway, as it is important for their self-esteem to be able to say that they visited such and such museum or exhibition. A few months ago I heard an older couple's conversation in a temporary exhibition at the Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon:

"I don't understand!", the lady said.

"Don't worry, it's probably one of those exhibitions where one is not supposed to understand..." , answered the gentleman.

Is this what museums are for? To make people feel inadequate? After such an experience, some people might come back anyway, others will not even consider it. They'll go out, talk about their experience and convince other people that museums are untouchable, unattainable, not for them; not worth the time and money, not worth the effort.

But, museums are for people.

I mentioned that museums are not universities. Let me also say that they are neither community centres, day care centres, nursing homes, hospitals, prisons, youth detention centres, etc. etc. They may be partners of those institutions, given some common concerns and objectives, but they are not them, they don't share their mission.

Having said that, museums form part of our society, they are not islands. What happens 'out there' is not irrelevant to what we should be trying to do 'in here'. No matter what type of museum or collection we might be dealing with (art, science, history, social history, transport, communications), there is always a relevance to contemporary society and museums, as institutions, are also affected by what is going on out there.

There are a number of social barriers that exclude people from taking part in society, including culture and including museums. I would like to concentrate on two:

[Slide 18] First of all, our relationship with schools. In countries hit by austerity measures, schools have seen their capacity to take their students to field trips significantly diminish, due to the lack of both financial and human resources, not to

mention the increasing bureaucracy (at least, in the case of Portugal). What I believe should concern us is the fact that for some children the only chance of going to a museum is through the school. There are parents who haven't got the habit or money or time to visit museums with their children. But the school would take all students to the field trip, the school was a democratizing factor. I am among colleagues, I don't need to tell you of the importance of museum visits in the lives of many people, coming from all social backgrounds. Portugal and many other countries lack this kind of studies, but the periodic surveys of the National Endowment for the Arts in the US (to mention one example) couldn't be clearer about it. So, what is going to happen with these generations of young people who haven't got the chance nowadays to visit a museum? What will this mean for them and what will this mean for museums, in the near future?

[Slide 19] The other issue I would like to bring up is that of immigration. There are colleagues among us today who live in societies which have been dealing with multiculturalism for quite a long time, where the mere presence of 'different people', of 'other people', is not ignored, to say the least. This is not the case of Portugal yet, much less the case of Greece (my home country) and of a number of other countries, dealing intensely with immigration and not always with a spirit of solidarity. I can clearly see a role for museums here, at multiple levels: taking part in the debate, promoting it and helping include the newcomers – opening up as a space where they can get to know better the country they've arrived to and where those already here can get to know them.

[Slide 20] The director of Harlem Studio Museum, Thelma Golden, recently gave an interview, where she referred to the museum's founders back in 1968, some still alive today: "They say they saw themselves as creating not only a museum that would collect and present art, but an institution that would have a singular role in the development of a community."

This is what it's all about. It's not simple and it's political. **But, museums are political; and museums are places of encounter.**

I left the physical barriers for the end. We are more used to discussing them, probably, but the truth is that this is not a solved issue and it involves much more than ramps and adapted bathrooms. It involves much more than people with disabilities. It involves all of us.

So yes, ramps, adapted bathrooms, information in braille and large print, audiodescription, videoguides, tours in sign language are some of the issues that should consider in order to become accessible to all citizens who wish to exercise their right to have access to museums.

[Slides 21 - 27] But the height and inclination of objects and labels should concern us too; the contrast between letters and background; the lighting; the size and type of

the letters; and all this applies to all promotional materials; and our websites too, the first point of entry to the museum, which also have to have updated and accessible information, including each country's sign language.

[Slide 28] So to sum up, museums need to solve this identity crisis. We don't need to look for different words. Museums are not community centres, they are museums. We don't even need to look for adjectives. We don't need to say "a live museum". Could it be anything else? Would a dead museum be fulfilling its purpose?

Museums are... museums. They are spaces of wonder and questioning, spaces of learning, spaces of encounter and socializing, they can tell sad and funny stories, they can comfort and they can (and should) disturb us. Museums are about life. They do all this and much more through objects in their collections. And they do it for the people. Museums are for people. Not just for our peers, our family, our friends and the people who usually come, but also for everyone else who might be interested and has the right to have access. We need to give people the chance to get to know us. Because... they just might love us.

Maria Vlachou



Defending our true selves: being museums

Maria Vlachou

IATM Conference, Porto, 30 June 2015



Daesung Lee, Futuristic Archeaology series

... les chambres civiles et
... dernière étant destinée à juger
... ent de Vichy.

de la guerre, elles n'en consi-
e essentielle pour appréhender
notamment par les documents
au cours de saisies et de perqui-
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French President François Hollande

dead

untouchable

unattainable

locked up

frozen

centralised

controlled

Raia Pickerska de Kalb
es sobreviviente
del Holocausto.

Ella y millones de
personas más
no hicieron NADA
para estar en
un Museo.



Raia Pickerska
de Kalb
3/8/2014

3/8/2014
Raia Pickerska de Kalb

MUSEO
DEL HOLOCAUSTO
BUENOS AIRES

UN MUSEO, NADA DE ARTE.

Holocaust Museum,
Buenos Aires



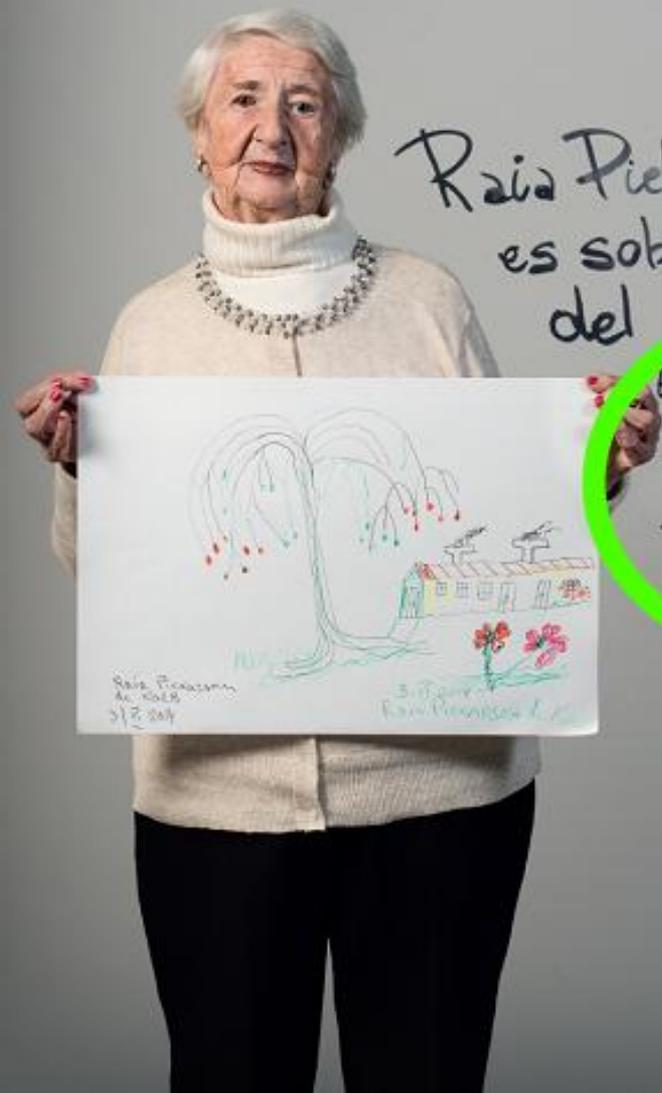
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“A museum, **no art**”

**Holocaust Museum,
Buenos Aires**



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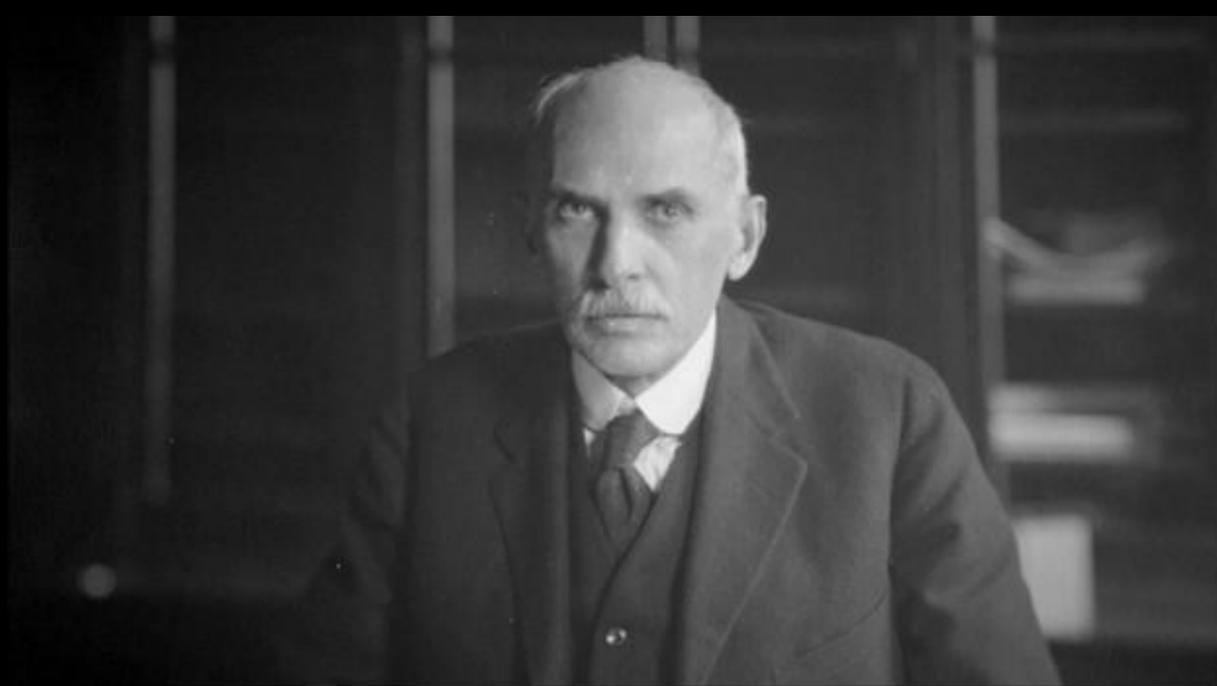
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Every child is born an artist. Children think creatively and by exposing them to arts education and cultural institutions from a young age, it nurtures innate talent.

Her Excellency Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani
 Chairperson of Qatar Museums

much more than a museum



“A good museum attracts, entertains, arouses curiosity, leads to questioning and thus, promotes learning. (...) The Museum can help people only if they use it; they will use it only if they know about it and only if attention is given to the interpretation of its possessions in terms **they, the people**, will understand.” (John Cotton Dana, 1909)



“Curators may be prodigies of learning and yet unfit for their posts if they don’t know anything about pedagogy, if they are not equipped to teach people who know nothing.”

Edward Forbes, 1854



**MUSEUMS ARE
F***ING AWESOME**

Museum Hack is a highly interactive, subversive, fun, non-traditional museum tour.



Michelle Obama, Whitney Museum inauguration, New York



“The good thing about museums is that you don’t have to sit an exam to get in or to come out.”

Gail Dexter Lord



VILLU JAANISOO
1963

Toolid I-II

2001. Autorehvid. Eesti Kunstimuuseum

Chair I-II

2001. Motor Tyres. Art Museum of Estonia

KUMU, Tallinn



The west facade window of the Convent Church is attributed to Diogo de Arruda and was executed between 1510 and 1513.

It is one of the most singular examples of the late Gothic "Manueline" style, with its emphasis on hyper-realistic, naturalist motifs. Symbolizing the Tree of Life or the Tree of Jesse, according to the themes of the Scriptures, its iconography mirrors the "imperial" programme of King Manuel and the Order of Christ.

The Iberian Pyrite Range is one of the largest metallogenic provinces of volcanogenic massive sulphides in the world.

It extends for about 250 km, with a width of about 60 km, from the north of Grândola, in Portugal, to near Seville in Spain.

It includes giant masses (> 100 Mt) of massive sulphides as those found in Aljustrel, Neves Corvo, Rio Tinto, Aznalcollar - Los Frailes, Sotiel - Migollas, Tharsis, La Zarza.

Closely associated with this type of deposits, there are also identified several other, containing manganese. It is a geological domain consisting of volcanic and volcano-sedimentary formations of Upper Devonian to Carbonic ages (380-290 My).

Many of the masses of sulphides are known since pre-Roman times and form the subject of successive exploration over time. The ores resulting from intense oxidation of sulphides exposed ("gossans"), were explored for gold silver and copper.



Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon



Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



**Posters by artist
Peter Drew in the
streets of Adelaide**

**Shared on Facebook by
Migration Mueum, Adelaide**



Thelma Golden
Harlem Studio Museum
New York



**Left: Museum in the Netherlands
Right: Fine Arts Museum, Budapest**



preparant-nos per viatjar

L'Atlas Català

L'any 1375 Cresques Abraham i el seu fill Jafudà Cresques varen fer, per encàrrec del príncep Joan I -fill de Pere el Cerimoniós-, un atlas que volia comprendre tot el saber del món, en un període en què realitat i fantasia es confonien sovint. L'Atlas Català és un clar exemple de quin coneixement i quina concepció es tenia a la Corona d'Aragó del món durant l'edat mitjana.

El Atlas Catalán

En 1375, Cresques Abraham y su hijo Jafudá: Cresques elaboraron, por encargo del príncipe Juan I -hijo de Pedro el Ceremonioso-, un atlas que comprendía todo el saber del mundo, en un tiempo en que realidad y fantasía a menudo se confundían. El Atlas Catalán es un claro ejemplo del conocimiento y la concepción del mundo que se tenía en la Corona de Aragón durante la edad media.

The Catalan Atlas

In 1375 Cresques Abraham and his son Jafudá Cresques - on the orders of Prince John I - son of Peter the Ceremonious - prepared an atlas which sought to collect all knowledge of the world, in an age in which fantasy and reality were often confused. The Catalan Atlas is a clear example of the knowledge and the conception of the world the Crown of Aragón had in the Middle Ages.

*„Aranymall’ juppiin,
Sargo jolm’et’ k’uop’oita
Aranymall’ k’uop’oita k’uop’oita,
K’uop’oita k’uop’oita k’uop’oita,
Aranymall’ k’uop’oita k’uop’oita,
Aranymall’ juppiin’!*

—The Song of the Maiden—

*„Then the girls were brought from their room,
the darlings led from their chamber...
Their spangled wreaths shone
and their belts were of braided gold;
silken ribbons by the hundreds
hung at their waists.”*

(Excerpt from Kalevala; Cantos VII.)

1815-2000 Amsterdam Stad Amsterdam City

In de afgelopen 200 jaar heeft Amsterdam zich ontwikkeld tot een bruisende stad met een eigenzinnig karakter. Sinds de tweede helft van de 19de eeuw groeide de stad explosief. Deze afdeling schetst twee eeuwen ontwikkelingen aan de hand van vier perioden: 1815-1875, 1875-1940, 1940-1945 en 1945-2000.

In de zalen 13 en 14 wordt de belangrijkste fase van Amsterdam, de 19de eeuw, behandeld. Het verhaal van stadskinderen in de laatste eeuwen. Aan de hand van persoonlijke verhalen van Amsterdamse kinderen over kinderarbeid, opvoeding en school, komen sociale en culturele ontwikkelingen aan de orde. Op de bovenste verdieping worden de oorlogsjaren en de naoorlogse periode van 1945-2000 behandeld. In de filmzaal tenslotte draait een doorlopend programma over Amsterdam in documentaire en speelfilm.

In the past 200 years Amsterdam has developed into a lively city of great individuality. Since the second half of the 19th century the city has grown rapidly. This section surveys four periods of development spanning two centuries: 1815-1875, 1875-1940, 1940-1945 and 1945-2000.

In the halls 13 and 14 we deal with the most important phase of the city's development: the 19th century. The population, the city's growth, the story of the children of Amsterdam in the last two centuries. Children's personal stories about child labour, their upbringing and schooling, throw light on cultural and social developments. The war years and the postwar period from 1945-2000 are dealt with on the top floor. A compilation of documentaries and films featuring Amsterdam is shown in the film theatre throughout the day.



“DIA APÓS DIA, CRUZAVAMO-NOS COM MÚSICOS, CANTORES E CANTORAS JOVIAIS, UM POUCO POR TODA A CIDAD
 DURANTE UMA SEMANA INTEIRA CHEGARAM-NOS AOS OUVIDOS ECOI DE MÚSICA FRENÉTICA DE BAILE, DAS BANDA
 MERCADO, E QUEM NÃO TENHA OUVIDO OS APREGOADORES DE JORNAL AS SETE HORAS DA MANHÃ, NÃO SABE DO Q
 A VOZ HUMANA É CAPAZ.”
 “DAY AFTER DAY WE WOULD COME ACROSS MUSICIANS, MERRY MALE AND FEMALE SINGERS, ALL THROUGHOUT THE CIT
 FOR A WHOLE WEEK WE HEARD THE ECHOES OF FRANTIC DANCE MUSIC, OF THE BANDS FROM THE MARKET, AND THO
 WHO HAVE NOT HEARD THE NEWSVENDORS CALLING OUT AT SEVEN IN THE MORNING, DO NOT KNOW WHAT THE HUNA
 VOICE IS CAPABLE OF DOING.”

ALFRED DOMIS

1876-1953

FRONTIER ALFONSO ALTON DE SEVEN ALFONSO DE ALATE

LETTERA E INTER-ARTICIA OF BRILLIANT AND PRIZ

IMAGEM
 ARDINA

RETRATADO PERDIDO

HORÁCIO NOVAIS, SEM DATA

NO DATA

FUNDAÇÃO CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN

**A ÚLTIMA
 FRONTEIRA
 LISBOA
 EM TEMPO
 DE GUERRA**

**THE LAST
 FRONTIER
 LISBON
 DURING
 WARTIME**

**TORREÃO POENTE
 PRAÇA DO COMÉRCIO
 19.07.2013 // 15.12.2013
 10H00 // 20H00**

COMISSÁRIOS

MARGARIDA DE MAGALHÃES RAMALHO
 ANTÓNIO MEGA FERREIRA

UMA INICIATIVA DA
 CÂMARA MUNICIPAL DE LISBOA

ORGANIZAÇÃO

DIRECÇÃO MUNICIPAL DE CULTURA
 EGEAC, E.M.

A CONTRIBUIR O MUSEU DE LISBOA
 ROMANUS LUSORUM MUSEUM

**A ÚLTIMA FRONTEIRA –
 LISBOA EM TEMPO DE
 GUERRA**

Uma viagem aos anos 40 do século passado e a memória da cidade e da Europa. Durante a II Guerra Mundial, Lisboa é porto de abrigo e porto de chegada de milhares de refugiados europeus que per aqui ficam, vivem e esperam, e que a partir daqui reconstróem os seus caminhos.

**THE LAST FRONTIER –
 LISBON DURING
 WARTIME**

A journey into Lisbon's 1940s, into the city's and Europe's memories. During World War II, Lisbon was a gateway to the Atlantic for many European refugees, welcoming and hosting them while these were awaiting to escaped and to reconstruct their li

**Exhibition postcard
 Municipality of Lisbon**

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Accessibility

We have just added a lot of BSL videos to our site, both translations of our highlight objects, and a really exciting school project with Frank Barnes. Go to [British Sign Language](#) for more information.

We also have audio recordings of [audio descriptions](#) of objects in our ground floor galleries.

Future developments

We are working on developing options for users to select different default background colours and larger text sizes. We are also going to add a section on orientation information for screen reader users, and as we add more multimedia on the site we will have a further section on playing Flash Movies using different assistive technologies.

Free Wifi: SI-Visitor
NO PASSWORD NECESSARY



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#NEWCOOPERHEWITT

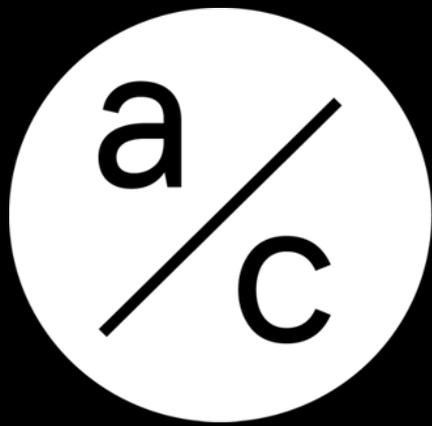
**Photography is
Encouraged**



NO FLASH
NON-COMMERCIAL
NO TRIPOD AND
NO SELFIE-STICKS
BUT SELFIES ARE FINE!
SHARE WITH US!

Please be advised that you may be photographed while in the gallery.
The Smithsonian Institution and its authorized licensee reserve the
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Cooper Hewitt Museum, New York



acesso
cultura
access
culture

Thank you!

acessocultura.org

mariavlachou.pt@gmail.com

Blog: Musing on Culture

