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Masters of Arts Thesis

**The Challenge of Time in Museology:**

**Capturing the Changing Narrative of Historical and Social Events:**

**The Case of the Museo de América in Madrid: A Critical Analysis**

N.M.E. van Trotsenburg

s2199556

[n.m.e.van.trotsenburg@umail.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:n.m.e.van.trotsenburg@umail.leidenuniv.nl)

*Programme:* Arts and Culture

*Specialisation:* Museums and Collections

*First Reader:* Dr. W.J.L.M. van Damme

*Second Reader:* Dr. S. A. Shobeiri

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## **ABSTRACT**

The societal role of museums has changed and is still constantly changing, the Museo de América in Madrid, Spain, is no exception. This research aims to capture the evolving role of museums by taking on the Museo de América as a case study. The Museo de América was chosen due to the limited international scholarly literature on the relationship museums in Spain, a once powerful and important colonial power, have with contemporary museological discourse. The research question is therefore, to what extent is the Museo de América able to create ‘contact zones’ and capture the changing narrative about indigenous communities in the Americas. This thesis uses Anthony Shelton’s methodology underlying critical museology as a set of tools as well as James Clifford’s concept of ‘museums as contact zones’. This research provides a better understanding of how an ethnographic museum in Spain addresses the colonial and authoritative practices in which museums were built on. The analysis of the Museo shows that some of the Museo’s underlying curatorial practices are consistent with Shelton’s methodological interdictions. However it also identifies a few limitations to the Museo’s capacity to navigate the challenges of bridging historical and cultural gaps across centuries. The most significant being the lack of an indigenous voice regarding the conquest itself. By including indigenous voices and presenting them as active participants, museums can play a critical role in providing visitors with the tools to better understand the evolution of modern society’s values.

**Keywords:** critical museology, ‘contact zones’, representation, indigenous people, indigenous communities, colonialism, Spanish Conquest

## Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b>  | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Chapter One ~ Analytical Framework: Critical Museology</b>  | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>Chapter Two ~ Historical Background: The Spanish Colonisation and the Representation of Indigenous People</b>           | <b>18</b> |
| <b>Chapter Three ~ Presentation of the Museo de América</b>  |           |
| 3.1 The Museo's History  | <b>24</b> |
| 3.2 Description of the Museo   | <b>26</b> |
| 3.2a Interior and Exterior Architecture  |           |
| 3.2b The Permanent Exhibition  |           |
| 3.3 Interview with Director Ms. Encarnación Hidalgo-Cámara   | <b>60</b> |
| <b>Chapter Four ~ A Discussion of the Museo's Curatorial Practices</b>   | <b>62</b> |
| <b>Chapter Five ~ An Assessment of the Museo's Representation of Indigenous Communities from Central and South America</b> | <b>69</b> |
| <b>Conclusion</b>  | <b>77</b> |
| <b>Appendices</b>  |           |
| Section 1 Supplementary Photograph   | <b>79</b> |
| Section 2 Transcript of Interview  | <b>80</b> |
| <b>List of Illustrations</b>   | <b>95</b> |
| <b>Bibliography</b>  | <b>99</b> |

## ***Introduction***

The importance of the role of museums in society has significantly evolved since the establishment of the first museums in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a major rethinking of the world's various societal frameworks occurred, ranging from the democratisation of nations and the emancipation of women to the decolonisation of former colonies and institutional setups as well as the critical thinking about how the past was discussed and taught. In this context, since the 1980s an increasing awareness and debate about the ethical and social responsibilities of museums have developed amongst members of the general public, academics, and museum professionals. Considering this significant shift, today many museums are understood as institutions that showcase society's past and/or present underlying societal dynamics. These dynamic processes are especially evident when it comes to historical events that have been subject to major changes in interpretation such as colonisation and the treatment of indigenous populations in the Americas. The issue here lies in the sharp contrast between the representation of indigenous people in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and our current knowledge about these communities and their cultures. How can we best bridge this divide in representation, bring more context, and enable a more informed debate that would better involve the affected populations, and could provide a more balanced approach towards these historical events?

The field of museology also known as museum studies is the “critical and theoretical examination of the museal field.”<sup>1</sup> It concerns the practices of preservation (object acquisition, conservation, and the management of collections), research, and communication (education and exhibitions).<sup>2</sup> Within the field of museology, various methodologies attempt to capture how to analyse museums practices, one of which is critical museology. It entails thinking critically about all the different narratives, practices, and tasks that departments and institutionalised places of knowledge adopt, create, and practice, as will be detailed in Chapter 1. This thesis will apply some of the analytical tools of critical museology to analyse the narratives and practices of the Museo de América, an ethnographic museum in Madrid, Spain. By assessing the Museo's exhibitions

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<sup>1</sup> François Mairesse and André Dessalées, introduction to *Key Concepts of Museology*, ed. François Mairesse, André Dessalées et al. (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Mairesse and Dessalées, introduction to *Key Concepts of Museology*, 20.

## *Introduction*

through the lens of critical museology, the objective of this thesis is to research the extent to which the Museo is able to create ‘contact zones’, and its ability to capture the changing narrative about indigenous communities in the Americas.

The Museo de América is a national museum in Madrid, Spain; it aims to provide a space where its artistic, archaeological, and ethnographic collections from the Americas, collected during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, can be admired and studied.<sup>3</sup> Although the Museo de América covers all the territories in the American continent, comprising of North, Central, and South America, the Museo’s collections mainly focus on the Spanish speaking regions in Central and South America.

While there is ample research and literature analysing how museums in other former colonial powers, such as France and the United Kingdom, address their colonial pasts, there is limited international academic work about Spanish museums’ reflections on the country’s colonial history. Most literature is predominantly conducted by Spanish speaking scholars in Spanish. Nevertheless, its location in Spain allows museum professionals, and by extension the museum’s visitors, to explore the Spanish perspective on colonialism in the Americas. In this context, this research will also attempt to examine how the Spanish conquest and its impact on native communities in Central and South America is being addressed. It will examine how the museum addresses the historic event of the Spanish Conquest from a Spanish perspective and provide insight about how the museum seems to deal with any moral or philosophical aspects of the Conquest and its repercussions.

In order to answer the main research question, we will assess the narratives and wording used in the text labels, the way the artefacts are displayed, and the use of technology and activities to make the spaces more interactive. A description of the Museo in addition to a summary of my interview with the Director of the Museo de América, Ms. Encarnación Hidalgo-Cámara, will provide context about the Museo’s organisation and its mission. Finally, I will try to demonstrate, that despite the Museo de América’s limitations, its exhibitions are able to create “contact zones”, and to convey a sense of multidimensionality by presenting different perspectives and stories about people. Hence, I will argue that although the Museo de América does not actively use critical museology to pursue its mission, certain aspects of its permanent exhibition are consistent with the recommendations derived from critical museology.

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<sup>3</sup> “Un Poco de Historia,” Museo de America- Gobierno de Espana: Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte, accessed December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018, <http://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/museodeamerica/el-museo/un-poco-de-historia2.html>.

## *Introduction*

The thesis is organised as follows:

*Chapter 1* introduces and discusses the core concepts instrumental to critical museology. It mainly focuses on outlining the epistemological positions and the methodological interdictions Anthony Shelton highlights in his article, “Critical Museology: A Manifesto.”<sup>4</sup> The chapter will also explain the theories and practices regarding: *collaboration, consultation, decolonisation, repatriation*, take form. This discussion provides the background framework to our key concept of ‘contact zones’, as expressed by Mary Louise Pratt, and to Jennifer Kramer’s thoughts on word choice.

*Chapter 2* provides context and background information on the history of Spain’s colonial rule in Central and South America. It will also discuss the history of visual and literary representation in Europe of indigenous people and communities in Central and South America.

*Chapter 3* is dedicated to describing the history of the museum and its collections, the interior and exterior architectural structure and style of the museum, the overall and detailed layout of the permanent exhibition halls, and finally, a summary of my interview with the director of the Museo de América, Ms. Encarnación Hidalgo-Cámara.

*Chapter 4* proceeds with an analysis of the Museo’s curatorial practices with the application of the methodological framework presented in Chapter 1, and the key concept of museums as ‘contact zones’.

Finally, *Chapter 5* analyses the Museo de América’s past and present representation of Central and South American indigenous populations. It looks at how the museum represents the history of the Spanish conquest in relationship to critical museology’s take on decolonisation.

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony Shelton, “Critical Museology: A Manifesto”, *Museum Worlds* 1, no. 1 (2013): 7-20.