

Interview to Marta Lourenço¹

By Miquel Carandell, April 23, 2023, as part of the research project “**Mailhoc: Museums and Industry: Long Stories of Collaboration**” (PCI2023-143370) coordinated by the Institut d’Història de la Ciència (UAB), the Science Museum (London) and the Université d’Aix-Marseille.

MCB: Thank you very much for accepting this interview. Maybe we should start with a very brief explanation of your background and professional career.

ML: My name is Marta Lourenço, I am based in Lisbon, Portugal and I am the director of the Natural History and Science Museum at the University of Lisbon. Despite my background training is in physics, I've been working in museums all my professional life as I became quickly involved in volunteering for museums just after my degree. Later I also acquired training in museums, I did a master's in museology, and a PhD in history of technology. I was a volunteer in the university of Lisbon Museum of Science before it merged with the Natural History Museum from 1996 and then in a permanent position from 1998. I worked first in the education section and later in curatorship. In 2013, the Museum of Science merged with the natural history museum. Some years later I was deputy director and finally, in 2019, just a little bit before Covid, I became director of the now called National Museum of Natural History and Science, which is a university museum, it depends on the Lisbon University.

MCB: So, this history explains explain why your museum is a natural history and science museum, as usually these museums are separated in many cities (Barcelona, London, Madrid...). Why are these museums together in Lisbon?

ML: Well, at that time, both museums shared the same building, so it was a natural thing to merge. At some point, we realized that we should work together. Probably there were also financial reasons for the junction, but it was mostly a matter of convenience, especially for the public, it made no sense to operate apart.

MCB: Which is approximatively the museum's budget today and where the money comes from?

ML: In large numbers, the museum's budget is around 2 million euros. And that's all coming from the university. So public funds. Most of it, it is a return from our own tickets sales. Last year we had €1.4 million from tickets. Remember we're big, we have the museum, two botanic gardens, we are in a very well-located situation in Lisbon, so

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tourists visit us a lot... And we are a university museum, so students and researchers also visit us... So, it's fleeting, it's vulnerable, but now, we're very good in terms of visitors. Now the main problem is to make sure that the money that we're getting from visitors comes back to us. The money we make from tickets should it be reinvested in the museum, and sometimes it's hard to get it back, specially to be reinvested in buildings, conservation and general maintenance which usually is very expensive.

MCB: And how has this situation changed since 1996, when you started to work in the museum, to now?

ML: Well, it has changed from day to night or rather from night to day. It changed immensely. At the end of the 1990s we had very few visitors. Researchers and students were not interested in us. We had very low visibility in the city and low visibility in the university. And we didn't had money to develop activities. It was a time of crises for museums in Portugal and in Europe in general, many natural history museums closed, particularly small ones. For the past 10 or 15 years everything has changed. Now we have lots of students, we have lots of research projects from the university that look for us as partners to develop exhibitions... We are a kind of a window between the university and society. The reasons of this change are many, but I think that the most relevant could be the increase in the relevance and use of museums, more centrality in social and political questions such as colonialism, the increase in the recognition within universities, and the raise of tourism in the city which also helped a lot.

MCB: Let's talk about exhibitions. How you choose the exhibitions or its' content and shape? It's the aim to get more visitors part of this decision making process?

ML: Well, not really. We're fortunately in a position where we don't really have to seek for more visitors. As I said, our fight now is more on getting money for the buildings, but not so much for our exhibitions. And in general, our cultural program is not very much driven by the appetites of the visitors, by the appetites of tourists in this case, but mostly by our own interests, that follow our strategic objectives. Formally, we cannot have a strategic plan (we are included in the university strategic plan) but we have internal strategic objectives which mainly are sustainability, relevance for the university, decolonization, experimentalism in the cultural programming and inclusion.

MCB: Have you ever done any "blockbuster exhibition", an exhibition designed mostly to attract as many visitors as possible?

ML: Many, many years ago, we had from London, some moving dinosaurs and stuff like that. But it was at that time when we had low visibility, and we were seeking for more visibility and visitors. Now we have reached the point where we don't have to do that. We are privileged. We can decide which exhibitions to make from the things that

come to us. And some of them are great, great proposals of exhibitions from researchers, artists, or activists. They have just to fit in our strategic plan.

MCB: And from the 1990s did the museum actively look for fundraising? For instance, when you had an idea for an exhibition, did the museum look for money to do it?

ML: No, not really. We have developed exhibitions that have been more and more low-cost. Generally, we don't believe anymore in very high tech, sophisticated stuff that costs hundreds of thousands of euros. Progressively, we had less and less of that. That's one thing. The other is most of the fundraising we, me and former directors, have been involved is more related to restoration of the museum's buildings and heritage than to exhibitions. As I said, the museum has a good budget for operational costs, for exhibitions, but is more difficult to find money for restorations. For instance, in the last years we've been engaged in fundraising for restoration of our astronomical observatory. We looked everywhere for money, all sorts of things. But so far it has been unsuccessful. And the observatory is falling apart! It's a disgrace! But no success so far since 2004 or 2005.

In contrast when we had to restore our chemistry lab, it was easy. It took just six months to gather the money to restore it. It was 50% private money, 50% public money. And the private money was mostly the pharmaceutical industry, they were really implicated. Mainly because it was very emotional for the people from the company. The people who decided to give the money, they all were students there, they had lessons in that lab. So, it was amazing to see them in a guided tour in the museum and how they started to be emotional about it. Sometimes you can get money for scientific stuff if there is an emotional connection. Despite we cannot forget that they are very big pharmaceutical companies, like Bayer or similar, so sometimes we must be cautious with their money, but it was easy and clean in the case of the chemistry laboratory. The problem with the astronomical observatory is that the astronomers, mathematicians, geographers... they don't have an industry that's rich enough to support these kinds of things. Whereas the pharmaceutical industry is very strong.

In addition, we also have minor sponsorships, for example, for insurance. You know, museums exchange a lot of objects. And we also have a lot of volunteers that need to be insured to be here. So, we have a sponsorship by an insurance company. But it causes absolutely no problem of dilemmas or whatever. And it was easy to find.

MCB: So, you would say that so far in the time you've been working in the museum, it got much more funds from private sector for heritage than for exhibitions.

ML: Yes, mostly because exhibitions, as I said, we keep them as low-cost as we can. And these more low-cost exhibitions are often already paid by research projects that need an outreach contribution. So, we don't really do big exhibitions. Sometimes we also have other public institutions that want to sponsor an exhibition. For instance, the municipality of Lisbon. Of course, that also causes dilemmas, you know, because every

institution, public or private, has an agenda. And it may not coincide with our own agenda. And sometimes the exhibitions they propose are good and we accept them easily, but sometimes there is also conflict. We tried to have some control on content, mostly so the exhibitions can follow our strategic plan. Our main worry with this kind of exhibitions is that they do not become a descriptive, laudatory, and advertising exhibitions. But there's always a negotiation. So, we have some proposals of exhibitions that are entirely paid, but mostly from public institutions.

MCB: And how do you manage to control the content? How do the negotiations take place in these cases?

ML: In terms of how you negotiate, sometimes you must give in and sometimes you don't. Of course, there's some red lines that you don't want to cross. As I said, for us it's mostly to be descriptive and to glorifying of the idea proponent, even if it is a public institution. For us, is essential to problematize what you are presenting. If you do not problematize, it doesn't make sense for us. In this direction we push the institutions that want to make an exhibition in our museum. We talk to them and say, "look you're glorifying too much, add another perspective...". This is our fight mostly during the negotiations. And sometimes you give in on some issues to get there but you won on other aspects. For instance, if it's a small exhibition, you can have a more descriptive exhibition and then compensate with a good program of debates around it. Each case is different, but you really must fight as a university museum. We have that obligation. And not only as a university museum, but any museum should have the obligation to be space for dialogue and for equidistance, you must really bring different perspectives to everything.

I think that the museum needs to keep some degree of independence. And to be independent, it needs to be equidistant. This doesn't mean that we don't have to take a stand. Sometimes we do, and I do. This applies very much in the colonial stuff in Portugal, you know, because it has really pushed the boundaries and the dilemmas of what we do. In general, I think that the museum should have a set of values. And if those values make us take a stand, take a position, then fine. And the same for women, marginalized communities... In these cases, I think it's totally legitimated in a way not to be independent because you're really going in the direction of your values.

MCB: And this applies also to private companies?

ML: Yes, I remember 1 or 2 occasions when there were dilemmas, issues of conflict of interest with private companies, and the resolution it's the same. I can give you an example. Some years ago, I was not director, a paper production company in Portugal offered to fund for small guide on Portuguese biodiversity that we wanted to distribute around the country. The thing is that paper production is a very, very controversial topic in Portugal, because of how eucalyptus has imposed a monoculture that has affected biodiversity. The guide was sponsored by EU money, and we needed some funds, small

funds to distribute the guide through schools. And it was I think at the time of the last economic crisis, there was no money. And then this company approached us. In fact, somebody at the museum had a friend there and approached them, asking if they would be interested in sponsoring the distribution of this guide. I remember we discussed it and in the end the museum rejected the sponsorship. It was kind of ridiculous. A company who destroys biodiversity in Portugal sponsoring a biodiversity guide! It was totally greenwashing. It was an instrumental use. They wanted to use the museum's social reputation to project themselves to society, and specially to schools, as they were worried about the mess they have done. So, we said no.

MCB: And how it was decided?

ML: We did some meetings of the people who were doing the guide. We discussed it, well there was no discussion really, it was kind of consensual. Everybody agreed that it was like: "how dare they!". But the problem is not these kind of very direct relation between the industry and the proposed sponsored issue. It is much trickier when the relation is not so obvious, so evident. In this case, the decision was easy. But there are things where you really wonder: "are these guys instrumentalized using the museum or not?" And that happens a lot. I never expected to be asking myself that question so much, and not only regarding industry, but also regarding researchers, the university, activists, or the public sector, so it's tricky. With activists is also tricky because even if the proposed exhibition matches your values, not everything is appropriate for a science and natural history museum, so everything must be evaluated. For instance, when the university comes to us with a clear agenda, this could be really, really, tricky. We need to be balanced but we are the university museum, so difficult decisions sometimes.

MCB: It is difficult to say no.

ML: Yes, this is clear with the industry, because even if you need the money, you can say "it's not our business". We must find money elsewhere. Whereas if somebody comes here with an exhibition that really intersects with my strategic plan, but, at the same time, I feel that the proponent is instrumentalized or using the museum to project themselves or their agenda, which I do not necessarily agree, then is much trickier.

MCB: How do you manage these kinds of conflicts of interest?

ML: In general, we have conflicts of interest every day, and we have ethical dilemmas every day, but regarding money, regarding sponsorship we do not follow any guidelines because we depend on the university, so we follow the university policy. I must discuss anything related to fundraising, especially large fundraising, with the rector, whether it would be toxic or not. Let me give you an example of a conflict in this sense. The museum had an offer from a Portuguese bank to sponsor an exhibition. We had some conversations but when I talked to the university, they said it was not possible. The

university has a bank that sponsors an important money prize every year. And, apparently, there is a condition in the contract with this bank that it could be the only bank that can give money, that can sponsor the university. And that means everything in the university, including the museum. And I didn't know it! And if I didn't coordinate with the university, I could have created a major legal problem! So, the relations with the university are fundamental to establish our sponsorship policy. So, there are many things that depend on the university, that the museum is not autonomous to do. And the fundraising policy is one of those things, is defined by the university.

MCB: Does the museum have any written guidelines, policy, or code of ethics to regulate these sponsorship or patronage cases? Do you know and follow ICOM's code of ethics?

ML: I used to be an active member of ICOM, now not so much. The Museum is an ICOM institutional member, and we consider their code of ethics. In fact, we work on the code of ethics, we have internal workshops to reflect on it. But as I said, sponsorship is more a matter of the university policy, and usually our code of ethics does not play a relevant role here.

MCB: And then, when you have a sponsorship offer, what do you do? what would be the process of decision making?

ML: First, I have to go to the rector, to the university. So, now imagine rector says okay, go ahead, there's no conflict with the university sponsorship policy. Then, we, in the museum, if the sponsorship is for an exhibition, we would have a team meeting, including designers, curators... everyone. And we would discuss it. Generally, everything related to greenwashing, as I said in the paper company example, we probably oppose to it. Likewise, we do not want to be recipients of money that comes tainted from whatever wars, extinction of species, illegal traffic or whatever.... As I said before, if it's something in the middle it is when it's trickier.

MCB: What about the collections? Do you have any policy of lending the collections to a private or public sectors?

ML: Yes, we do this quite a lot, we have a kind of collection for educational and lending purposes, and then a separate one as the scientific collection. We mostly charge if it's commercial purposes, and we don't if it's educational or cultural. It is a thin line. For instance, if it's for a small theater play, we can decide not to charge but if it's for a big enterprise that promotes a theater play in a big theater, then we can decide to charge. In all cases, we ask for an insurance that they pay, and they also must pay all the transportation costs. And in what we consider commercial we ask for a fee too. We have this quite often both for big animals and for scientific artifacts, but anyway, it's not much income for the museum compared to ticket entrance, for instance.

MCB: And do you charge for the use of the spaces of the museum?

ML: Yes, we do that a lot, even more. We have a written policy about that. Mostly no political stuff, no religious stuff, and some other things. We follow the university policy, but we even go further than the university. For example, the university allows for political events. But we do not allow a party gathering or a political congress in the museum. But again, compared with the tickets, it's not a great part of our revenue, it's a bit more than collections lending, maybe it's like 5 % of our total revenue.

MCB: Anything else you would like to add?

ML: Well, one thing that I think is relevant in all this sponsorship controversies is the size of the museum, the situation of the museum and the awareness of the civil society. So, the larger you are, the more exposed you are. But at the same time, the less vulnerable to economic issues. For bigger museums it's easier to say no. But if you need the money and you say yes, you're more exposed. If you're a small museum, it's the other way around. You are less exposed, you can practically do with everything you want, because you're not visible. But, at the same time, you have less money, so you're more vulnerable, you're more dependent on this kind of funds. And sometimes you have to say yes to keep the door open, to keep the museum working. I think we are big enough to be able to say no, usually we do not really need this kind of sponsorship.

And we depend almost entirely in public funds that luckily are still arriving. Most of continental Europe stills lucky. The UK has more struggles. But the UK has a good thing, they have a very, very present, and active civil society, which they also have for example in the Netherlands. So, they struggle but they also have public commentary and critic of what the museums do. In Portugal this does not happen. We are lucky to have public funds but always dependent on the next government. Traditionally the progressive left had actively supported culture, and therefore museums, but not anymore. So, we are lucky but always vulnerable. That's different than for instance in the US. Museums there are mostly non-profit foundations, more autonomous from public subsidies, so maybe less vulnerable to government variations. But they depend a lot on private money, so maybe more vulnerable to toxic sponsorship. For me the ideal would be that museums need to be supported by the community and by governments, and that means adequate funding. If this happen, then it's easier to be strong in front of controversial sponsorship offers.

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