

BOOK REVIEW

Filipa Lowndes Vicente and Leonor de Oliveira, ed. *Collections, Exhibitions and Museums in Portugal and its Empire. From the 18th to the 20th Century*. New York and London: Routledge, 2025. 272 pp.

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The past two decades have witnessed a profound reconfiguration in the scholarship concerned with the study of museums and the history of collecting and exhibition practices in imperial and colonial contexts. A growing body of literature across several academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences has highlighted the diverse entanglements between museums, knowledge production, and imperial ideologies, reflecting on the role that memory institutions have historically played in promoting and disseminating a predominantly Eurocentric worldview—one often shaped by colonial ways of thinking, celebratory narratives of conquest and subjugation, and racist stereotypes. In this context, natural history, colonial science, and especially ethnographic collections and museums have taken centre stage. As a result, the pressing need to critically contextualize and historicize the complex processes through which collections were constituted, managed, and displayed has been increasingly acknowledged.

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The edited volume *Collections, Exhibitions and Museums in Portugal and its Empire – From the 18th to the 20th century* draws extensively from this recent wave of postcolonial reflection on the material remnants of empires. However, it diverges from much of the existing literature on the subject through its explicit and predominant focus on artistic practices, while also challenging established ideas and preconceptions that continue to shape the field of art history. The volume presents twelve distinct case studies and an engaging introduction that, collectively, pay homage to the innovative work of Foteini Vlachou, who argued for a “historically inscribed” study of visual culture (Introduction, p. 1). While the book’s ample chronological scope and the relative heterogeneity of materials and approaches might suggest, at first glance, a somewhat scattered outcome, the collection of essays stands out, on the contrary, for its remarkable conceptual coherence. Through a multitude of highly specific and diverse examples, all authors draw attention to the fact that practices of artistic production, commission, collecting, and display are deeply contingent on political and social circumstances and agendas.

Another central feature of this book is the way it demonstrates the multiple ways in which Portugal’s historical and imperial past—as well as fundamental aspects of the rhetoric surrounding the idea of “Portugueseness”—were constructed, negotiated, and appropriated by different political regimes over time. Authored by historians, art historians, and museum curators, some contributions offer rigorous empirical reconstruction through systematic and comprehensive analyses of visual and written sources, while others push further, taking on a deeper analytical and interpretive stance. Yet, all eschew formalist approaches and questions of purely stylistic concern in favour of a more contextualized understating of the political uses and meanings of the materials under study.

Chapters span from the eighteenth century—which saw, in natural history, the emergence of the first museums, and “the first systematic and sustained collecting practice with modern contours” (p. 3)—to the late twentieth century, when the last remnant of the Portuguese imperial past, Macao, returned to Chinese administration. Part one of the volume is dedicated to eighteenth century artistic and natural history collections, with chapters on the socially diverse historical actors involved in natural history knowledge production in Brazil and the diversity that characterised their education, adopted practices, research agendas, and objectives (Lorelai Kury); and on the transnational and transcontinental circulation of objects, the (re)constitution of aristocratic art collections, and what these reveal about the consumption practices and tastes of Portuguese elites (Luís de Moura Sobral; Maria João Ferreira, and Miguel Metelo de Seixas). It also includes a thought-provoking chapter on the specificities of Portuguese history painting from the late eighteenth century, linking its distinctive iconographic programme with the development of a political discourse on

empire that placed aristocratic values and the defence of the monarchy at the core of patriotism (Foteini Vlachou).

Part two gathers contributions on exhibitions and the fashioning, representation, and political affirmation of local and imperial identities. While the analysis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Goan industrial exhibitions, as well as representations of Goa in international exhibitions in Europe, highlights the agency of local colonised subjects (Filipa Vicente), an overview of metropolitan colonial exhibitions promoted by the *Estado Novo* reveals the “colonial gaze” that marked and shaped visual imperial culture designed to galvanize Portuguese audiences in support of colonial efforts (Kathrin Raminger). Leonor de Oliveira’s study of Portugal’s representation in mid-twentieth-century international fairs and biennials shows the state’s political appropriation of modern art and its conflicting combination of ideas associated with internationalism and tradition. Finally, an examination of museological policies of the Portuguese administration in twentieth-century Macao makes clear how they varied across historical contexts and how dependent they were on shifting economic and political conditions.

Part three—the volume’s least thematically cohesive part—includes two chapters on the role played by heritage policies as instruments of the state in defining and promoting an official view of the past in early twentieth-century Portugal (Joana Baião, Alicia Miguélez). And the final two chapters delve into the infiltration of Nazi ideas, and of agents associated to Nazi Germany, into the Portuguese artistic milieu (Raquel Henriques da Silva, Inês Fialho Brandão).

Collections, Exhibitions and Museums in Portugal and its Empire constitutes a valuable contribution that, through multiple examples from the Portuguese context, illuminates how collecting practices have historically been embedded in systems of knowledge, representation, and power. By providing examples from distinct periods and political contexts, it critically situates the Portuguese case within broader reflections on the complex legacies of European empires, inviting readers to reconsider how cultural practices, historiographical discourse, and narratives of national identity have been continuously shaped by ever-changing political agendas. At a moment when crystalized conceptions around European national identities – and their inextricable and often conflicting relationships with imperial pasts—are being challenged and reassessed, this edited volume could not have been more timely.