

The cycle is broken: From illegal to public policies for the conservation of cultural heritage



Ana Carolina Delgado Vieira • Conservator • Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology – University of São Paulo (MAE/USP)

ana.carolina.vieira@usp.br



1 Background

In 2005 the Brazilian Court, on suspicion of illegal operations, confiscated from the *Cultural Banco Santos Institute* a private collection of archaeological and ethnographic objects of significant historical and cultural value. Custody of this collection of heritage materials was given to some museums of the University of São Paulo and other public institutions. This presentation focuses on activities at the University of São Paulo.



Storage Area of the Cultural Banco Santos - Vila Leopoldina / Sao Paulo, Brazil

The archaeological and ethnographic objects seized are of great cultural value and therefore this historical and artistic heritage must be provided ongoing maintenance and care; this is connected with Government efforts to promote the dissemination of this heritage.



Storage Area of the Cultural Banco Santos - Vila Leopoldina / Sao Paulo, Brazil

The collection is currently housed, under judicial custody, at *Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology* (MAE/USP). It is composed of about 3800 objects. This large collection can be divided into four major categories:

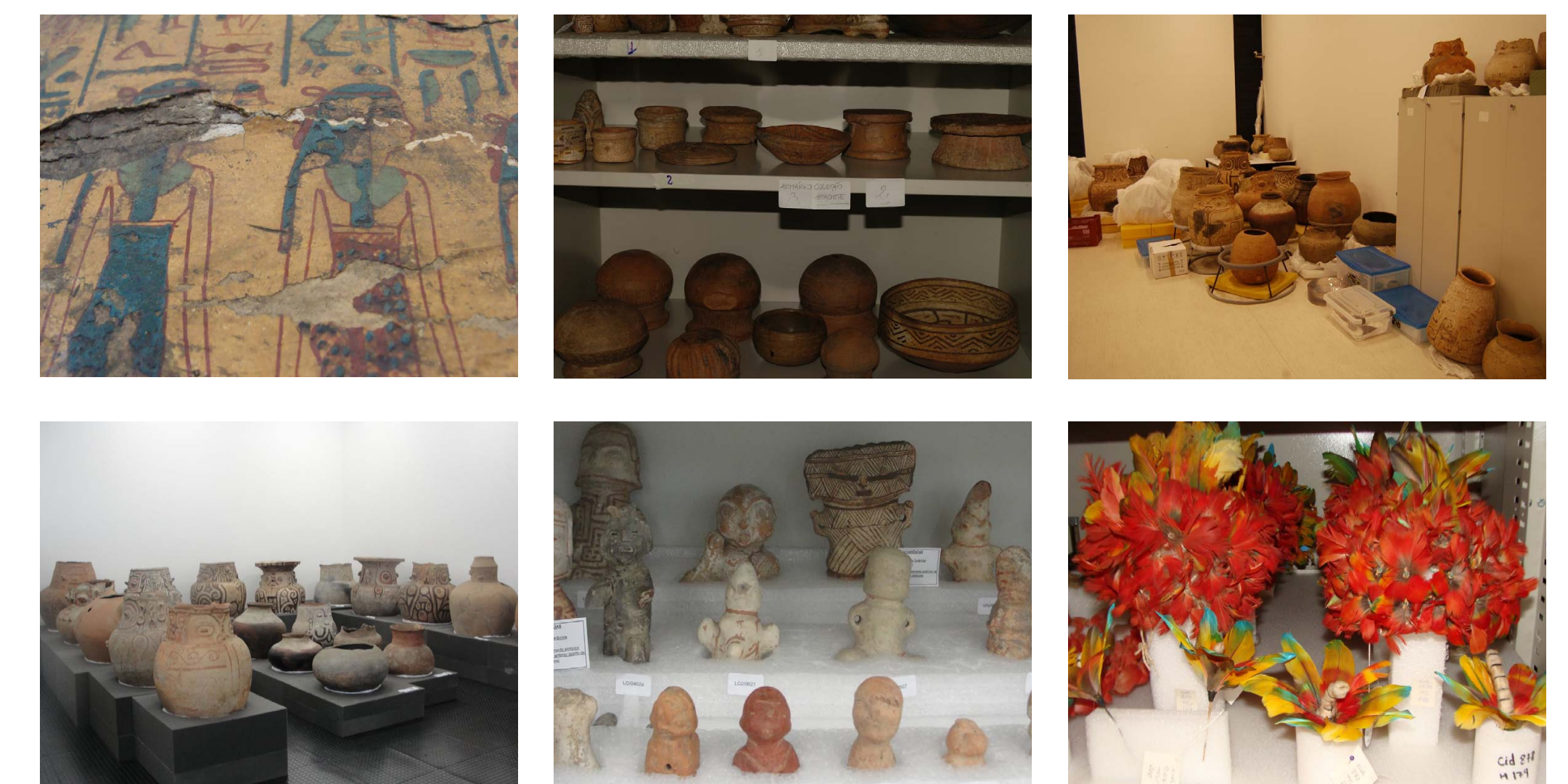
- Brazilian Archaeology;
- Mediterranean and Middle East Archaeology;
- Andean Archaeology and Ethnology;
- Brazilian Ethnology.

Banco Santos Collection — Credits: Ader Gottardo



2 The Challenge

A legal emergency safeguard action has prevented the continuation of an illicit cycle. The defense of this unique cultural heritage presents a real challenge in a scenario of scarce public resources and limited possibilities. Efforts to protect this heritage are ongoing and urgent; identifying, documenting, and publicizing these new acquisitions means breaking the cycle of illegal activities. Currently the primary mission is to: protect these heritage objects from international trafficking; develop policies for preservation and conservation of these materials; curate and display the objects in a museum context; and make the collections available for scientific research.



Process of transferring the collection to the MAE / USP

3 The Process

The unique and complex nature of the collection requires customized modes of curatorial attention at the institution because the specific conditions of each category demands specific safeguards. To accomplish this great task, all the technical institutional resources were mobilized to ensure the realization of the components of the primary mission. In anticipation of the arrival of the collection, a major operational chain of activities was instituted. A series of curatorial activities was initiated to organize, document, house, and make the collection objects available for both exhibition and research. The methodology chosen for this process involved four main steps:

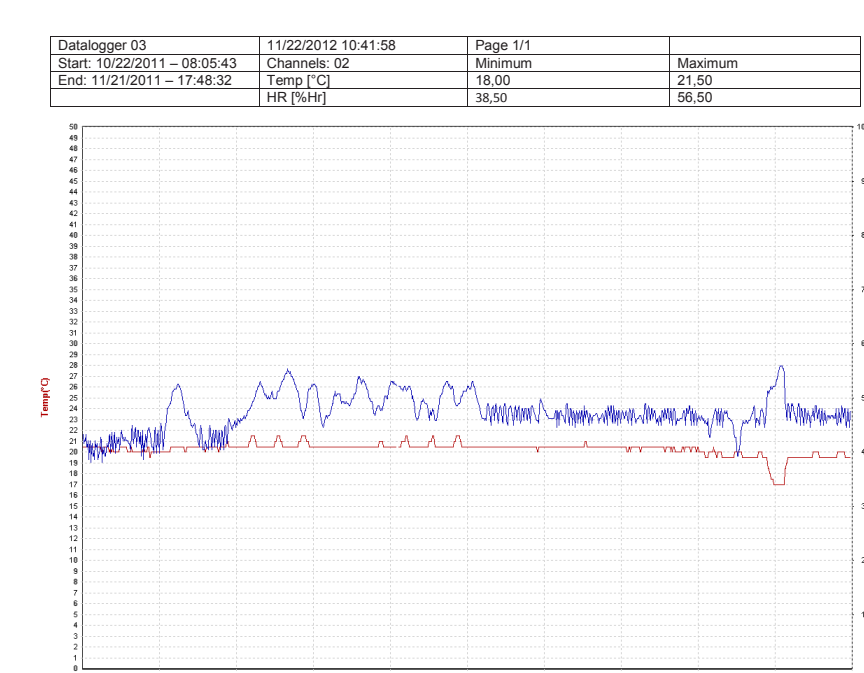
1. Collection objects were documented and recorded in institutional databases to control location in the storage area.

2. Preservation needs were identified and pest mitigation, consolidation and cleaning actions were completed prior to storage.



MAE/USP Conservation team

3. Climate adaptation of the new storage environment; dehumidifiers, mechanical ventilators and data loggers were provided for monitoring the environment 24 hours per day.



Environmental readings of the storage area

4. Packaging using neutral materials such as polyethylene foam, white 100% cotton fabric and white nonwoven fabric. A sliding storage system is used which respects types of materials and distinct cultural groups.



Storage area of ethnographic and archaeological materials from the Brazilian Collection - MAE/USP

4 Conclusions

The cultural and scientific value of the heritage collection confiscated from the *Cultural Banco Santos Institute* is unquestionable. Custody of the collection, even temporary judicial custody, by the University of São Paulo represents a new opportunity to read these records of material culture. It also provides an important addition to existing collections in the museums of the University. The preservation of and access to this collection in a university setting enables a rich debate and is an important contribution to research and scientific studies by motivating students and professors.

Preventive conservation interventions to preserve this collection are on-going; they are part of a continuous cycle of safe-guarding and a demonstration of the public commitment to provide access to these heritage materials. The *Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology* (MAE/USP) has committed to present several exhibitions in order to provide public access to this rich and unique collection. Between the years of 2008 to 2012, the collection was on display to the public in at least six different exhibitions.

This new sphere of activities has only become possible with the judicial custody of this collection in the University of São Paulo. This action, breaks the cycle of illegality in cultural heritage and opens up a new perspective to this collection, unprecedented until now.



Exhibitions: "A Arte da Cerâmica: Aqui e Lá" (2008), "Beleza e Saber: Plumária Indígena" (2009) e "Coleção, Ciência e Arte" (2012).