



Research Article

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Brazilian Archeological Heritage: Munduruku Heads in the Work of Jean-Baptiste Debret

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Received Date: December 13, 2022

Published Date: December 21, 2022

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to elucidate the heads of the Munduruku ethnic group that served as a model for the French artist Jean-Baptiste Debret to represent them in his work. These pieces were part of the collection of Brazilian Indigenous Ethnology, a collection of the UFRJ National Museum, which was devastated in a fire in 2018. These pieces that were unfortunately consumed by fire, constitute what we call the Brazilian Archeological Heritage and today we can consult them at Debret's pictorial records published in *Voyage Pittoresque et Historique au Brésil* (1834-1839).

Keywords: Debret, Munduruku, National Museum, Brazil; XIX century, Archeology

Introduction

The Ethnological collection of the National Museum linked to the Anthropology department, belonging to the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), lost indigenous materials during its fire in 2018. There were pieces older than the museum itself, inherited from Emperors D. Pedro I and II. There were more than 40 thousand pieces related to the indigenous peoples of Brazil, being the largest collection on this topic in the Americas. They were memories, the elements of material culture that made it possible to rethink cultures, forms of proximity and cultural changes. Considered as our archaeological heritage, they constituted vestiges, goods and other signs of the evolution of the planet, as well as of life and human beings. Its safeguarding and the study of these components allow us to trace the history of humanity. That said, 206 years ago, with the arrival of a group of foreigners, the arts scene in Brazil would no longer be the same. Later called the "French Artistic Mission", this group had many artists, among them Debret.

Jean-Baptiste Debret was the artist of the "Artistic Mission" who had remained in Brazil the most, dedicating all this time to recording the life and customs of nineteenth-century Brazilian society in his sketches and watercolors. It represented the flora, fauna and the different human types that inhabited the country. Among these types, blacks and Indians were the ones that most attracted the artist's attention. Debret brought to his works the Indians and their tribes, such as the Camacãs; the Crowned; the Caboclos or civilized Indians; the Bororenes; the Botocudos; the Guaianases; the Plows; the Guaicurus; the Guarani; the Mundurukus; the Bugs; between others. The village Indians and the Indians considered savage made up the diversity of indigenous populations present in Portuguese America.

Among the aspects of the Brazilian forest and native vegetation in general, the French artist also includes in his works records of different forms of huts and huts; different types of masks used

by different groups; as well as feather headdresses; inscriptions engraved by wild Indians on rocks; scepters and vestments of the chiefs; weapons; different types of vegetables used in necklaces, tattoos and food (yam, vine, cassava, urucu, genipap, etc.); ceramics; wooden and clay utensils; among others. In the engravings it was possible to observe the indigenous hairstyles, including the details of the heads of different wild tribes.

The artist cast his clinical gaze on these native populations of America, whose exoticism aroused special interest among European and American intellectuals, as well as among the rulers of America, concerned with integrating them into the societies of the new states and nations that were being formed. In the first decades of the 1800s, the indigenous populations were diverse. In Rio de Janeiro, villagers and Indians considered “savage” made up the variety of indigenous populations represented in Debret’s watercolors. In order to understand and explain the reality he observed, the artist accompanied his works with explanatory texts, configuring what he understood by historical work. Debret, who thought he was exiled in a distant and exotic land, is fascinated by the peaceful revolution that prepares the future of Brazil.

His training as a “history painter” is perfectly suited to the position of an attentive observer of these transformations. He observes them with the eyes of a professional, who realizes the importance of significant details and the explanatory power of reliable facts. From the position provided by his proximity to the king and, later, emperor, Debret witnesses the intrigues that affect the Court, of which he will become the memorialist LEENHARDT [1].

His drawings were transposed into elaborate prints, inserted into large albums that artists and typographers edited in Paris. *Voyage Pittoresque et Historique au Brésil* was published in three albums between 1834 and 1839. It took five years to print the entire work, a set that exceeds a hundred beautiful plates in lithograph, and that ensured Debret’s lasting fame.

Indigenous anthropology has objects of study in mummies, bodies, and mummified heads either by time or by art. Our purpose in this article is to seek an understanding of the objects analyzed not only from an anthropological, historiographical, artistic, conservation and safeguard point of view, but also to expand curation practices and make digital information publicly available. This articulation contributes to the construction of a vast multidisciplinary research network, which allows a differentiated look at the object to the extent that it is possible to study it in multiple dimensions.

Human heads are used in funerary rituals or as war trophies, constituting an object of study of great interest for more than a century, both for the symbology of their ritual genesis and for their ethnological importance as for the mummification techniques and conceptions of biology that can be clarified from their study. Headhunting and its cult have notable attributes in the warrior rituals found in different cultures as well as in different periods in South America. In Brazil, the Munduruku practiced this habit until the end of the 19th century.

The Munduruku people are of Amazonian ethnicity and probably their origin is in the Andes. The most warriors live on the left bank at the top of the Tapajós River (Pará) and extend to the Mauhé-assú River (Amazonas). Today they live in the states of Pará, Amazonas and Mato Grosso. They speak the Munduruku language, from the Tupi trunk.

In the collections of major museums, the heads mummified by the Munduruku people are prominent in their collections. The Munduruku or “Mundurucu” peoples, red ants, a name possibly given in reference to the ferocity with which they attacked their enemies in large groups; were called by the naturalists Spix and Martius of Spartans. They set out on their war campaigns, during which they abducted women and children and brought trophies from enemy heads, becoming famous for the habit of hunting and mummifying their heads.

Heads cut off on the battlefield were quickly mummified and displayed in community and public rituals. According to Ihering, after five years the trophy heads lost their symbolic value, and could even be discarded, exchanged or sold. The Munduruku preferred to choose between the Parintintin enemies and the Apicá for head hunting, sparing other peoples. Immediately after mummification, a long string is passed over the top of the head to hang it on the back or is stuck on the end of a spear. The enemy’s head is called paxiuá-á and the spear that carries it is paxiuá-xenã (pau), which is generally taller than the Indian.

According to the naturalist von Martius, when the Indian passes by his house, he often carries his mummified head under his arm. At night the spear with its head stuck in the ground beside the warriors’ net. Nothing can make the warrior part with this trophy before a party.

The Prepared Heads were Dried and Smoked and the Procedure for Mummification was all Detailed:

As for the way these heads were prepared, there are some reports, sometimes somewhat controversial. According to the description by Spix and Martius [2], the deceased’s teeth were initially pulled out, followed by emptying the cranial contents, removing the eyes, tongue and muscle parts. Afterwards, the heads were washed and dried in a smokehouse, smeared with annatto oil (*Bixa orellana* L.) and left in the sun until they were completely mummified, when they were then filled with cotton and adorned. A cotton string and a longer ring cord dangled from the mouth. Convex wax plugs, on which rodent teeth, commonly paca (*Agouti paca*) were placed horizontally, covered the orbits. Although in some heads wax plugs are also seen over the mouth and nose (Aufderheide, 2003), no reference to this preparation detail was found in the literature. The removed teeth were kept for making cotton belts, used in subsequent rituals. Menget (1996) adds that the head taker, called Dajeboishi “mother of the peccary”, or sovereign spirit, enjoyed privileges and received food from the tribe, also having to comply with dietary restrictions, which were only lifted at the end of the last ceremony. when the trophy was discarded, and the warrior could resume a life without dietary and sexual restrictions. The first party held in relation to the heads

concerned the brave victorious warrior and, the second, the making of the cotton belt decorated with the teeth removed from the enemy's head, made in the year following the hunt, distinguishing those who, although winners, had been wounded or died in combat, represented, in this case, by their widows. The bearer of the pariua-á (trophy head) had privileges that lasted five years, that is, the estimated time between the war and the feast of the pariuaran (enemy-girdle). (...) The social importance of warriors was measured by the number of heads hunted, so those with ten heads were able to claim the position of tuxaua (chief) [3].

Still on the Adornments, Through the Predominant Colors it was Possible to Identify the Clan of the Matador:

[...] the introduction of the head in the clan of its matador, in one of the three Munduruku clans: Ariricha or white, whose adornment feathers were predominantly yellow, Iasumpaguatê or black, whose feathers were predominantly blue, and Ipapacate or red, whose feathers were predominantly blue. They were red (Rodrigues, 1882a). Thus, by the predominant color in the adornments, which could not exceed the length of the hair (Menget, 1993), the clan of the matador was identified [4].

In the 19th century, researchers promoted skull hunts from different peoples in Brazil to carry out evolutionary and behavioral

studies. At least 28 of them are still in museum collections in Germany. Most of the heads that make up the museum collections came from an established promising trade, in which these trophies came to play a prominent role in the 19th century. The heads, among other types of exotic materials, were very prestigious, destined for collections, offices, starting to compose collections, among others. However, these pieces (today in museums) have been poorly documented ethnographically and have been little studied.

According to museum records, most of the mummified heads seem to come from the Parintintin, whose language was not well understood by the Munduruku. A copy of these heads made up the ethnographic collection of the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro. According to the publication of the Journal of the Museum of Archeology and Ethnology, the cataloged piece (number 855) from the Munduruku collection of the Museu Nacional do Rio de Janeiro was part of the ethnographic collection of the Department of Anthropology, having entered the collection in the first half of the 19th century, as it was already included in the general survey of 1844. The origin more likely came in the coffins sent in 1830 with ethnographic pieces from the Upper Amazon and Pará; as they may also have gone out with European researchers at the time. The head was adorned with plumage on the earlobes and threads hanging from the lips, one of which resembled a handle (Figure 1) [5].



Figure 1: Head Munduruku ethnicity - which served as a model for Jean-Baptiste Debret to draw. Brazilian Indigenous Ethnology Collection National Museum, UFRJ.

On the Anthropological Exhibition of 1882, at the National Museum, UFRJ, the Following Record was Recorded for this Trophy Head:

"Munduruku Indians - Pariuá (warrior trophy). It is a mummified head by a special process. Shortly after the fight, the victorious Munduruku warrior beheads the dead enemy. He appropriates the head that he prepares by pulling out its teeth, its eyes, extracting its brains and shaving its hair. After being treated like this, she is put her head over the smokehouse to dry. Grease it with Andiroba oil (*Guianensis carapa*) and fill it with tow and cotton balls, cover its mouth with resin; instead of eyes, they put resin balls to which agouti teeth are attached. They then decorate their heads with feather pendants and cotton threads. A thick cord passed through the mouth serves so that the owner of the funereal trophy can carry it when he attaches it to his waist. It is also customary to carry it on a stick [6].

The characteristics recorded with the object of the National Museum were the following: it is a human head of an adult male, with bone structure and soft parts, of indigenous phenotype, with parchment skin and dark color, still maintaining hair with characteristic tonsure, displaying authentic feathered adornments and a style consistent with the well-known adornments worn by the Munduruku. The antiquity and documentation referring to this object confirm its origin and provenance.

That said, we draw a parallel with the Debretian work. Some watercolors later transformed into prints by the French artist Jean-Baptiste Debret also show Munduruku ornaments, which he drew from original pieces at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro. Among them, we can mention feather arts here; feather cap; coif with copper nape and the trophy head, which we will focus our analysis (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Mundurucu trophy head, with ornaments described on the ears, eyes, and mouth. Source: National Museum, UFRJ.

During his stay in the tropics, Debret began a tireless research activity in the future National Museum and in the books of naturalist travelers. It was in the museum that the artist organized an important part of the information and objects used to compose his sketches and engravings [7].

Created by the decree of June 6, 1808, the Royal Museum had the objective of “spreading the knowledge and study of natural sciences in the Kingdom of Brazil, which encompasses thousands of objects worthy of observation and examination that can be useful for commerce, industry and the arts” [...] After independence, in 1822, the Museum began a very fruitful period. The Ministers of the

Empire supported it by asking foreign naturalists who visited Brazil to donate material collected, and so the Museum greatly expanded its collection with donations from Langsdorff, Natterer, Sellow and others [8].

Debret did not have the opportunity to observe the Indians as broadly as the great naturalists who had been in Brazil shortly before him, from the perspective of *Bandeira* and *Lago*, even so, Debret leaves us an interesting and valuable record of indigenous populations, as they could be perceived by an urban foreigner in the early 19th century, when many tribes were already decimated or dispersed (Figure 3).

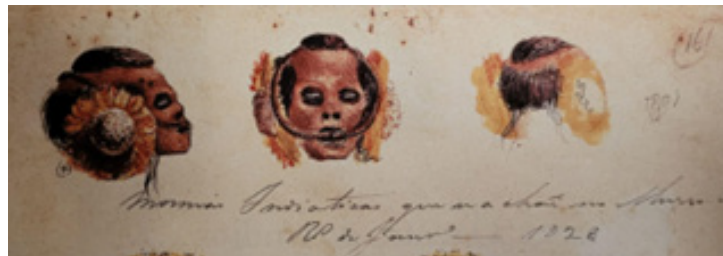


Figure 3: Detail of the work “Mummies and feather caps, with details - study”. Jean-Baptiste Debret. Watercolor; 23.2 x 18.7 cm; 1822. Castro Maya Museums, Rio de Janeiro.

In the description below, the artist himself quotes the studies of the Brazilian naturalist Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira, as well as the reports contained in the album by the German naturalists and travelers Spix and Martius:

The masks, similar to those collected by Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira at the end of the 18th century, were all part of the Imperial Museum of Natural History in Rio de Janeiro, where I designed them; are attributed to the savages of Pará and, in fact, they have the same characteristics as those seen by the MM. Spix and Martius in wild Tacunas (DEBRET, op. cit.vol. I, pp. 29-30) [9].

Most of the details of this work (Figure 3) were copied from the trophy head previously kept in the National Museum.

As we can see, Debret recreates the same head in watercolor,

representing it from various angles and keeping the colors faithful compared to the original piece. The watercolor painting technique used by the artist is fast drying and allows, through thin transparent and superimposed layers, to quickly capture a detail among other brushstrokes. Debret’s traces lead us to some details concerning the conservation of the Mundurucu head [10].

According to the artist, the victor of the victim had the right to appropriate the head in order to keep it as his property. Right after the first stage of the mummification ritual, to replace the eyes and give the idea of closed eyelids, two small rows of white shell fragments were grouped together, fixed in the center of a large ball of resin, intended to fill the cavity of the orbit. of the removed eye (Figure 4).

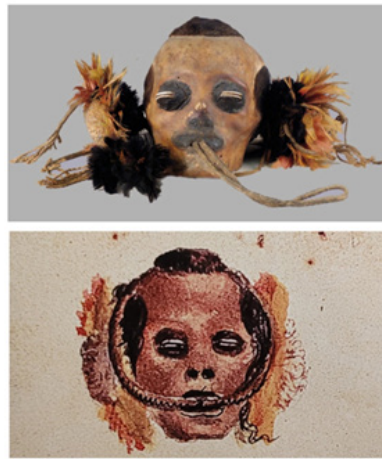


Figure 4: National Museum Trophy Head, UFRJ / Watercolor by Jean-Baptiste Debret¹

¹Photomontage: TUTUI, Mariane, (2022).

In this juxtaposed image, we can see the white coloring used by the artist on the eyelids, indicating the shell fragments used in the mummification. We also pay attention to the same identification of the shaved hair, shapes of the mouth, nose and feather ornaments placed around the head. We highlight the use of yellow and orange for the feathers, which is very close to the original coloring of the trophy head ornament.

Finally, he adds a string of braided cotton to the head, the ends of which are fastened to the cavity of the mouth, which is also filled with resin, which forms a kind of elongated ring that the Indian proudly uses to suspend the mummy from the belt during the warrior festivities. Debret also represents his Munduruku head with the string passed through his mouth, thus forming a handle [12-15].

Unfortunately, much of the National Museum's collection was lost in the fire in 2018, where 85% of the collection of 20 million items between documents, objects, fossils, furniture, art collections and scientific studies, mummies (including the Munduruku trophy head) got lost. Four years after the fire, the National Museum reopens the facade of the historic building and the front garden. The trajectory of the Munduruku clearly demonstrates the protagonism of the same group at different times in history, making use of the political tools that each time requires, which includes the vast heritage, composed of iconographies; accounts of travelers, naturalists and the stereotypes built on them since the 18th century.

The disregard for preservation directly affects those who need to have their ways of life protected as well. Despite this loss, historical sources and reports from travelers and naturalists can collaborate in the identification and knowledge of the existence of these items as well as their permanence in our collective memory. Debret's works continue to be constantly reproduced in schoolbooks and in the media. Its trace is present in the retina of all who are interested in our history. To Debret, we owe the most important visual documentation of the end of the colonial period as well as the period referring to the empire. Her records assume relevant importance to our history, memory, and identity. When we think of the trophy head of the National Museum that no longer exists, we turn to the artist's iconography, which in this case contributes not only to knowledge about the Munduruku indigenous peoples, their culture and memory, but also to research to safeguard archaeological and ethnographic patrimonies of great scientific and historical value.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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