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Victor Bandeira and the collections of the National Museum of Ethnology: notes from fieldwork

Victor Bandeira e as coleções do Museu Nacional de Etnologia: notas de trabalho de campo

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Introductory notes

- 1 Decolonisation has become a significant topic in contemporary museum and heritage studies. The research project “Representational Politics of Guinean Heritage in Portuguese Museums in the Transition from Colonial to Postcolonial Period: Histories, Transits and Discourses” discusses the meaning and value of the Guinea-Bissau heritage collected during the colonial era which is part of Portuguese museum collections. This short article focuses on a documentary about Victor Bandeira (1931-), as part of the PhD research project. Bandeira is a collector that established an informal relationship with the National Museum of Ethnology (former Overseas Museum of Ethnology), in Lisbon, from the mid-1960s onwards, collecting a representative part of the museum’s non-European collections. He remains a living witness to this museum’s beginning years and can be considered a vital component of the museum’s history. Bandeira, as a collector and traveller, has been the object of enquiry in previous studies (Botas 2013; Coelho 2014; Veiga 2022), however there was missing an approach from an audio-visual perspective or, as the anthropologist Sarah Pink describes, a visual and sensorial ethnographic approach (Pink 2009).
- 2 This short article explores, from fieldwork observations, the relationship between two interdependent biographies: Victor Bandeira and the National Museum of Ethnography, reflecting on the data gathered and the experience of interviewing Bandeira, contributing to review past collecting practices and the museum’s history.

- 3 The idea of making this filmed interview/documentary (*Victor Bandeira: Look Underfoot*¹) came after meeting Bandeira in the summer of 2021. Sitting on the living room floor of his apartment, on the seafront of Costa da Caparica, I confirmed once again² that he is one the most important collectors of the National Museum of Ethnology (MNE), being responsible for the most significant part of its non-European collections.

Bandeira's early years

- 4 With the dream of becoming an architect, Victor Bandeira took an evening drawing course for a year at the Fine Arts Society (Lisbon) in the early 1950s. Later, between 1955 and 1960, Bandeira becomes an art dealer, starting a business with a bibliophile friend.³
- 5 During the 1950s, Bandeira travelled around European capitals, attending auctions where he bought objects that he sold in Portugal. He was knowledgeable about the international market, receiving Christie's catalogues and other auction houses.
- 6 These were times of dictatorship in Portugal. At the end of the 1950s, he decided to close the shop, bought a jeep, and between 1960 and 1961 made his first trip in the company of his then-wife, Françoise Carrel, and a couple of friends, intending to buy objects, mainly African sculpture. They left Lisbon for Côte d'Ivoire. Along the way, Bandeira crossed the Sahara Desert, Mali, Senegal, Portuguese Guinea (today Guinea-Bissau) and French Guinea (today the Republic of Guinea), ending the trip in Côte d'Ivoire.
- 7 In his travelling he transported the objects in containers facilitated by the Portuguese navy and air force. To integrate himself into the communities, he would settled in the villages with the population, managing to purchase the objects after they had been used in a ritual context.
- 8 The films Bandeira recorded and the photographs he took (today on deposit at the museum) prove that he attended ritual ceremonies. Bandeira claimed that he was not interested in the ethnographic and symbolic dimensions of these objects. Instead, he bought them for the value he knew they could achieve on the international art market. His interest relied mainly upon the aesthetic dimension of the sculptures made by these non-Western communities endowed with their plastic and symbolic grammar.
- 9 On his return to Portugal in 1961, Bandeira stored the different African objects that he had brought from this trip in a basement of a family member's building, where he was visited by the sculptor and friend Lagoa Henriques (1923-2009). Through the sculptor's connection to the architect Carlos Ramos (1897-1969), the director of the Porto School of Fine Arts (now Faculty of Fine Arts of the University of Porto), Bandeira was invited to exhibit his collection of *arte negra* (black art) in a gallery that had just opened at this art school.
- 10 The exhibition *Arte Negra: Coleção Victor Bandeira* (Black Art: Victor Bandeira Collection) opened at the Porto School of Fine Arts in October 1962. The poet Eugénio de Andrade (1923-2005), a friend of Bandeira, also attended the opening. The exhibition drew the attention of Jorge Dias (1907-1973), Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira (1910-1990) and Benjamin Pereira (1928-2020). At that time, this team of ethnographers from Porto were conceiving the project for the future Overseas Museum of Ethnology, which would be officially created by decree-law in 1965, and inaugurated eleven years later, in 1976.

Bandeira and the Overseas Museum of Ethnology

- 11 After presenting his collection – inaugurated a year later in Lisbon with the support of the Portuguese government – Victor Bandeira ended up selling it in 1966 to the *Museu de Etnologia do Ultramar* (Overseas Museum of Ethnology), of which he became a key collector and informal collaborator.
- 12 Meanwhile, between 1964 and 1965, Bandeira travelled to the Amazonia at the request of the museum to collect objects, which happened again between 1970 and 1974, a period he spent in Indonesia.
- 13 From the moment the trips were made at the museum's suggestion to enrich its collections, the institution was responsible for writing letters of support that facilitated Bandeira's request for visas to enter the countries and the transport of objects through customs. From each journey, he essentially collected initiatory or funerary ritual objects, recording many of them in the context of use. Upon arrival, these objects were stored in the museum's storage rooms until they were purchased by the Portuguese State to incorporate the institution's collections formally.

Reviewing collecting practices

- 14 Nowadays, Bandeira's travels may be seen as very questionable exploits. He reported moments passed between wars that sought the geographical, political and ideological liberation of occupied countries.
- 15 As Bandeira explained, every time he would arrive at a new village, he would start by showing photographs of objects he intended to buy to the village chief, and then sculptors would form queues to show him their objects.
- 16 One day, as he told me, he met a sculptor in a village on the Bissago archipelago (Guinea Bissau) that took him to a *baloba* (a sacred place) to show him a sculpture. The sculptor told Bandeira that he had started to make grotesque sculptures on purpose so that the missionaries would not take them – as a form of colonial resistance – so that the population would continue to have objects for worship.
- 17 In other geographies, Bandeira acquired funerary sculptures at funeral moments in Bali (Indonesia) and others that were erected in front of houses. He sawed Dogon sculptures to fit into the shipping containers, bought a Fang sculpture from a Portuguese who, according to Bandeira, had it suspended in the chicken coop of his house, sawed protective gargoyles from houses in Indonesian villages, where he also bought doors to houses and barns, and unearthed funerary urns on the Marajo Islands in Brazil.
- 18 These and other Bandeira recollections raised many questions that made me want to examine more deeply the relationship between Bandeira and the former Portuguese Overseas Museum of Ethnology. For that reason, I contacted the current director of the museum, Paulo Costa, asking him if he would agree to record an interview/documentary on Bandeira in the institution's storage rooms.



Fig. 1 – Victor Bandeira with Koni (Nalu bird) sculpture at the *Museu Nacional de Etnologia* storage rooms, Lisbon, 2022

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In the museum storage – some observations

- 19 Considering the scarcity of time and resources, the documentary recording was scheduled to take place over two consecutive weeks in which I concentrated all my efforts. Currently, the National Museum of Ethnography (MNE) is the depository of all the objects and materials brought by Bandeira from his travels. As he told me, and I could later verify, it was in this museum that he stored, in addition to all the objects he bought, all the film, image and sound records he had captured.
- 20 Bandeira was not used to make an inventory of objects in the field, so when he arrived at the museum from each journey, he would keep track of the objects' inventory by filling in information he remembered.
- 21 He acquired the objects from the populations with his own funds. According to him, he does not remember having exchanged goods.



Fig. 2 – Victor Bandeira with *Caióguná* mask, pelican figure at the *Museu Nacional de Etnologia* storage rooms, 2022

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- 22 The first week at the museum was spent planning the work to be done in the following week. I met with Bandeira and the museum director on April 20, 2022. I went down to the storage rooms in the company of the technician João André, who, having known Bandeira since 1985, patiently opened the display cases and explained how collections were organised. On this first visit to the storage of the collections from Africa, Indonesia and Amazonia, I quickly became aware of Bandeira's predilection for Asian culture, which was, in fact, the longest trip he had made at the request of the museum.
- 23 In the museum storage, Bandeira walked slowly, peering into the display cases and trying to remember the moments of acquisition of objects that he found there again after so many years.
- 24 In the end of our encounter, Bandeira gave me a ride home. It is hard for me to believe that he never let himself be taken by the magical dimension of the rituals and places and objects he had collected. What interested him, as he often said, was the commercial value. As we got into his jeep, Bandeira hurriedly told me: “Don't you ever forget, here in the museum the objects are all dead”, and that confirmed my doubt.
- 25 The next day I returned to the museum. I wanted to see the films recorded by Bandeira in the field, and later edited by Alexandre Raposo, the video technician of the museum. He showed me films captured in the Sahara Desert, dance rituals from Guinea, Mali, recordings of Amazonian Indigenous Peoples and Quimbanda sessions held in Manaus (Brazil). Raposo also told me that the museum was the first public museum in Portugal to be designed from scratch for a set of collections that already existed, belonging to the Ministry of Overseas, whose facilities were located across the street. He also reinforced that, although the museum had opened in 1976, it had remained closed and accessible by appointment, opening to the public definitively only ten years later.
- 26 Regarding Bandeira's past collaboration with the museum, all the MNE staff I encountered, such as Alexandre Raposo and João André, who began working at the museum in 1985, confirmed Bandeira's assiduous presence at MNE. It was noted that Bandeira accompanied research work, exhibition setups and, frequently, ate in the canteen. Manuela Cantinho – current director of the Lisbon Geographical Society

(*Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*) – recounts the first memory she has of the group of founders of the museum:

We used to go to a kind of restaurant, a little bit between a restaurant and a tavern. And I thought it was funny that everyone said: “Let’s go to the Ritz”. So, the image I have is of Jorge Dias’ group at a table with Victor Bandeira and [Fernando] Galhano, and for us that was a prestige. It was the founders’ group. And I consider that Victor Bandeira, given the alliance he will have and the friendship he will establish with that group, is one of the founders for me. Although not in an institutional way, but because those collections will always be made in a certain perspective, which is to enrich that museum.⁴

- 27 In the early days of the museum, in 1986, Ernesto Veiga de Oliveira, one of the museum founders, defined the collector: «Bandeira, thinker, art lover and antiquarian, deeply interested in the variety of natural and human horizons and in particular by the culture, arts and ways of living of the “primitive” peoples» (Oliveira 1986, 40).
- 28 During this period spent at MNE, I also met Iria Simões, who is responsible for the museum’s photographic collections. Together we selected sets of photographic images captured by Bandeira so that his memories could be revived by looking at them again. With Iria, we talked about travel and the importance of keeping alive the adventurous spirit still so present in Bandeira at 91 years of age.
- 29 Finally, on the 26th of April, I returned to Lisbon with a team of two to film at the museum. We started the morning recording with a biographical interview in the African storage room, trying to understand how Bandeira’s relationship with non-Western cultures and with the world of art and culture began.
- 30 Bandeira told me about his childhood, his first trips, his search for adventure, the importance of detachment, his relationship with home, with “being at home”. From there, we went on to the objects’ biography, to the places where Bandeira went, and then – almost as a reflex – to the museum biography. «Bandeira is the museum» (emphasis added), told me later both Manuela Cantinho and Celeste Rogado Quintino⁵ during two different interviews I conducted separately.⁶
- 31 In the afternoon, we walked through the aisles of showcases that are full of objects that Bandeira recognises as his. Everyone refers to these objects gathered by Bandeira as “Bandeira’s collections” or “Bandeira’s objects”.
- 32 Walking around the storage rooms with Bandeira, while listening to his stories, allows me to enter his world, which has a very different temporality. As he poetically told me, «You cannot rush things; you need a lot of time to pay attention to the little things, like when you stare at your own feet to notice, on the very grass you are stepping on, tiny bugs that would normally escape your attention».
- 33 Walking with Bandeira in the storage rooms could not, however, make me forget the problematic dimension that can be found today in the way some of these objects were collected, acquired and brought to Portugal during the colonial period. Although Bandeira openly stated that he was not interested in the symbolic and spiritual meanings of the objects he acquired, the truth is that the objects he acquired have always been the most valued on the international market of African art. Besides, he underlined that he was not interested in everyday objects (such as gourds or cloths), knowing that these were not recognised by international historiography. As he said, in his travels he would be also interested in acquiring sculptures that he felt emotionally

connected to, figures that gazed at him, as he confessed, always and choosing as his favourite those who did so with greater tenderness.

- 34 In the museum storage, Bandeira bent down, bent over, and peered curiously into the glass boxes. When he saw the headdress of *Nimba* (Nalu's female figure celebrating fertility), that he had bought in the Cacine region in 1961, displayed on a plinth at the end of the corridor, he hastened to affirm in the form of correction: «It's too high! The plinth has to be lower. They're supposed to dance it and lurk around here».
- 35 It was with his collaboration in the selection and display of objects that the first exhibition of African objects, *Modernismo e Arte Negro-Africana*, was held at the museum, without using glass boxes in 1976, shortly after the museum's opening.



Fig. 3 – Victor Bandeira with *Nimba* mask at the *Museu Nacional de Etnologia* storage rooms, 2022

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- 36 The day's work quickly came to an end. At five in the afternoon, we had to say goodbye so Bandeira could get home. We, on the other hand, stayed at the museum recording places of passage, transport boxes and other details, always accompanied by João André who, with a key ring in hand, closed all the glass boxes previously opened – and with them, the stories – that we had opened again.
- 37 The second day started early. We arrived at the museum before it opened to the public. As we tried to turn on the camera, the equipment didn't react. Soon João André came to tell us in a joking tone that this was a “thing of the spirits”. He revealed to us that we were some of the few people who, in a carefree way, approached the storage rooms. The former employees of the museum, researchers whom themselves had collected many of the objects that we found there, aware of the spiritual charge of the objects and their use in the context where they were collected, kept away. As they told us, they were even afraid to approach these objects belonging, for example, to cults of devotion to ancestors.
- 38 We spent the morning trying to solve the problem, finding a solution by borrowing other equipment. So, right after lunch and a conversation with Bandeira about the importance of meditation, we finally followed the filming plan. First, we recorded in the Indonesian storage room, and after that, in the Amazonia storage room.

- 39 During this period of filming, the same ritual was repeated: opening glass boxes, talking about the objects, hugging objects close to the chest, choosing the best object in the middle of a set.
- 40 The importance of shadow theatre in Indonesia was also discussed, and the way in which it is integrated into the daily life of the population as a way of solving problems. *Krisses* (protective daggers) were shown between doors, facade adornments and funerary urns.
- 41 In the Amazonian storage room, Bandeira mentioned the importance of plumeria for the Indigenous People: «The rarest feathers are taken from the chests of birds», he said.
- 42 We also saw the urns that Bandeira had excavated in the dry season and which he had collected by boat in the rainy season. Bandeira talked about everything with the calm that seems to characterise him, without questioning the nature of these acts. He told us he found the urns digging in a deserted field, having paid two helpers to remove them from the ground.
- 43 From the Amazonian storage rooms, we moved on to the photographs archive. The images shown on the computer awakened Bandeira's memory. He drew attention to details; we could find objects seen shortly before in the storage rooms, recorded in thin photographs in their original context. We witnessed the gargoyles on the facades of the houses to be sawed by hired helpers and collected on the ground in the villages, the urns to be dug up, and the objects to be wrapped in vegetable fiber on the balconies of the circumscription chiefs, the coffins to be cremated and the *Nimba* to be danced with. As we experienced in this case, through the images we could find substantial information. In that way, images can be considered as documents that represent the past, and can help to reconstruct that past reality.

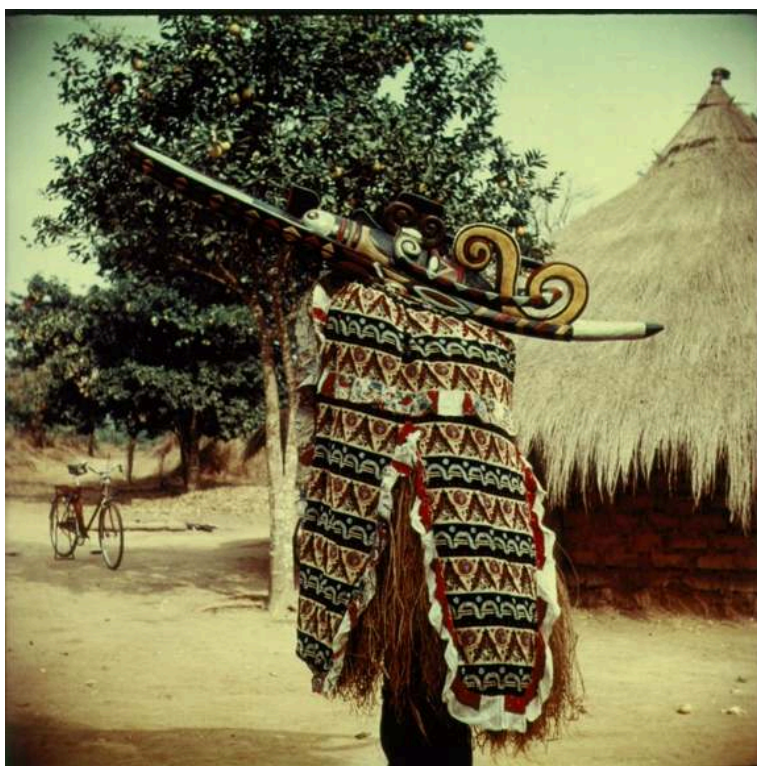


Fig. 4 – Field photographs made by Victor Bandeira, depicting the Ethnic group Nalu, *Banda* mask, 1961

Photographic Archive of the National Museum of Ethnology



Fig. 5 – Field photographs made by Victor Bandeira, depicting the Ethnic group Nalu, *Nimba* mask, 1961

Photographic Archive of the National Museum of Ethnology

- 44 The day ends, and Bandeira returns to Costa da Caparica in his 25-year-old jeep, with many stickers from the Boom Festival.
- 45 On the last day of filming, and in the absence of our protagonist, to whom another day of filming would be very tiring, we took the opportunity to meet Alexandre Raposo to review the films recorded by Bandeira on his travels. We turned off the lights and the sound to maximum, and managed to enter other universes far from stacticity, from the death to which the objects were doomed on their “last trip” to this museum.
- 46 Alexandre Raposo gave his testimony and agreed to be filmed. From there, we went to the museum library and filmed a set of exhibition posters showing objects collected by Bandeira in Africa, Indonesia and Brazil.

The museum, many things

- 47 Finally, we visited the permanent exhibition (inaugurated on January 31, 2013), *O Museu, Muitas Coisas* (*The Museum, Many Things*), comprised by eight sections: the Wayang Kulit Theatre of Bali; the sculptures from Franklim Vilas Boas; the dolls from Southwest Angola; the collection of Portuguese instruments; objects from the Portuguese village of Rio de Onor (Bragança); a collection of pot lids from Cabinda (Angola). At the end, the exhibition space is largely occupied by the masks and puppets from Mali donated in 2004 by the collector Francisco Capelo⁷ (1954-) who, on his 50th birthday, donated 50 objects to MNE.⁸

- 48 In the exhibition room, the objects gain a dramaturgy of their own, reminding me of what Bandeira had told me: that what make him appreciate African sculptures is their aesthetic component. The ethnographic dimension is softened, favouring the appreciation of shapes and colours. In the darkened exhibition hall, like others in Europe, the ethnographic object acquires the dimension of a work of art.
- 49 As we were about to leave, I overheard a security guard discussing issues of value in Guinea-Bissau: «A sign of wealth in Guinea-Bissau is having many children!» – he was saying. The coincidence of ending the day overhearing that conversation prompted me to approach him and ask if I could interview him for the documentary we were making. He nodded, so I immediately asked him how he felt as a security guard for his country's heritage in a museum in the capital of the country that had colonised it. Far from what I expected, he spoke to me of a deep sense of pride he had when he found his culture represented in this museum and other museums in Europe. It was surprising for me to hear a Guinean vindicating the work of collecting by Bandeira that so many others would find problematic. The history and place of ethnographic museums are far from linear, and the presence of plural voices is one way to signify it.

Final notes

- 50 This documentary *Victor Bandeira: Look Underfoot* has tried to capture, in the form of an interview, the emotional dimension of the relationship that I think exists – although Victor Bandeira does not admit it – between the collector and the objects he acquired all over the world, throughout his life.
- 51 At the same time, the title *Look Underfoot* reflects the importance Bandeira attributes to non-European systems of belief in order to draw attention to the beauty that cannot be contained in the materiality of things.
- 52 This project has also been important to reflect on the importance of collecting, and the contribution of first-person testimony of the collectors' life histories in order to review the issues related to colonial heritage discussed in European museums nowadays.

Acknowledgements

- 53 I would like to thank Victor Bandeira for his trust and kindness, the National Museum of Ethnology for allowing me access to the collections, and finally, to Professor Ramon Sarró, and to the editors of MIDAS for their critical comments and insights.

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NOTAS

1. This interview/documentary, *Victor Bandeira: Look Underfoot* (provisional title), was filmed in the spring of 2022 and is currently being edited (December 2022).
2. Bandeira is mentioned in many of the museum catalogues that refer to African collections, such as *Povos e Culturas* (*Peoples and Cultures*), in 1972, *Modernismo e Arte Negro-Africana* (*Modernism and Black African Art*), in 1976, and *Escultura Africana em Portugal* (*African Sculpture in Portugal*), in 1985.
3. Victor Bandeira confirmed, through a phone call made (January 9, 2023) that he is no longer able to set precise dates for this period.
4. Interview with Manuela Cantinho (former employee of the National Museum of Ethnology), Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa, Lisboa, 21-06-22.
5. Interview with Celeste Rogado Quintino, online interview, July 5, 2022.
6. The anthropologists Celeste Rogado Quintino and Manuela Cantinho are both former employees of the National Museum of Ethnology.
7. Francisco Capelo is an economist and art collector. He made donations of non-European collections to the National Museum of Ethnology and the Puppet Museum (Museu da Marioneta) in Lisbon.
8. Interview with Joaquim Pais de Brito, Museu Nacional de Etnologia, Lisbon, December 1, 2022. Joaquim Pais de Brito was director of MNE between 1993 and 2015, being responsible for curating the exhibition *Museu Muitas Coisas*.

RESUMOS

A descolonização tornou-se um tema relevante para a museologia e para os estudos do património. No projeto de investigação “Políticas de Representação do Património Guineense nos Museus Portugueses na Transição do Período Colonial para o Pós-colonial: Histórias, Trânsitos e Discursos” discute-se o significado e o valor do património da Guiné-Bissau recolhido durante a época colonial e que se encontra nas coleções dos museus portugueses. Este breve artigo reflete sobre o documentário realizado sobre Victor Bandeira (1931-), enquanto parte da investigação realizada no âmbito do projeto de doutoramento. Bandeira é um colecionador lisboeta que estabeleceu uma relação informal com o Museu Nacional de Etnologia (antigo Museu de Etnologia do Ultramar) a partir de meados da década de 1960, coletando uma parte muito representativa do acervo não-europeu desta instituição. Bandeira é também a única testemunha dos primórdios deste museu, podendo ser considerado uma peça fundamental da história deste museu. Apesar de estudos anteriores sobre a figura de Bandeira, enquanto colecionador e viajante, estava ausente uma perspetiva audiovisual ou, como descreve a antropóloga Sarah Pink – uma abordagem etnográfica visual e sensorial, que procurámos aplicar neste documentário. Este texto procura, assim, evidenciar algumas observações sobre a relação entre duas histórias de vida interdependentes: a de Victor Bandeira e a do Museu Nacional de Etnologia, contribuindo para melhor compreender as práticas que estão na base da formação de coleções e como se estas se interligam com a história deste museu.

Decolonisation has become a significant topic in contemporary museum and heritage studies. The research project “Representational Politics of Guinean Heritage in Portuguese Museums in the Transition from Colonial to Postcolonial Period: Histories, Transits and Discourses” discusses the meaning and value of the Guinea-Bissau heritage collected during the colonial era that is part of Portuguese museum collections. This essay focus on a documentary about Victor Bandeira (1931-), as part of the PhD research project. Bandeira is a collector that established an informal relationship with the National Museum of Ethnology (former Overseas Museum of Ethnology), in Lisbon, from the mid-1960s onwards, collecting a representative part of the museum’s non-European collections. He remains a living witness to this museum’s beginning years and can be considered a vital component of the museum’s history. Bandeira has been an object of enquiry in previous studies. However, there was missing an audio-visual perspective or, as the anthropologist Sarah Pink describes – a visual and sensorial ethnographic approach. This short article explores, from fieldwork observations, the relationship between two interdependent biographies: Victor Bandeira and the National Museum of Ethnography, reflecting on the data gathered and the experience of interviewing Bandeira, contributing to review past collecting practices and the museum’s history.

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Keywords: postcolonialism, National Museum of Ethnology (Portugal), Victor Bandeira, provenance research, collecting

Palavras-chave: pós-colonialismo, Museu Nacional de Etnologia, Victor Bandeira, pesquisa de procedência de objetos, colecionismo

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