

The Anchor of the Santa María: Itinerary of a Museum Object

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Introduction¹

The aim of this essay is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the Santa María anchor, nor to analyse the media attention triggered by news of the discovery of what is presumed to be Christopher Columbus's shipwrecked flagship in 2003.² Instead, it presents an account of the anchor's social life, mapping the different value regimes that it has been subjected to over time and space. In other words, it is a biography of the artefact, beginning in the Great North of Haiti and ending in the anchor's current home at the Haitian National Pantheon Museum (MUPANAH) in Port-au-Prince. The article draws on the conceptual framework proposed by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things*: an object is the product of a lengthy process of changing value regimes within a given spatiotemporal context. Beyond their primary functions, according to Appadurai, objects pass through different environments and acquire different statuses by interacting with either eco-facts or artefacts.³ In this essay, my aim is not only to reveal the anchor's history prior to its incorporation into Haiti's national collection, but also to reveal its existence within the collection.

The Anchor

The Santa María anchor, which was recovered off Caracol Bay towards the end of the 18th century, is four metres high.⁴ Today, it is exhibited in front of a series of engravings depicting the social life of the Taíno people and the genocide they suffered, along with a selection of Iberian military items. It is considered one of the flagship pieces⁵ on display at the MUPANAH, evoking an expansionist worldview and offering an emotional encounter with the Late European Middle Ages.

More than 500 years ago, in August 1492, three ships raised anchor in Spanish waters before arriving by mistake at an unknown destination: the Pinta, the Niña and the Santa María, the latter being the largest and carrying admiral Christopher Columbus (1451-1506). It never returned to Spain. The Santa María was classed as a carrack because of its size; it belonged to cartographer and ship captain Juan de la Cosa (circa 1460-1510) and was used for trade. The exact location where it was built

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2 See the preliminary report of the mission to Cap-Haïtien prepared in September 2014 by experts from UNESCO, the Ministry of Culture, and the National Bureau of Ethnology.

3 An ecofact is defined as a museum object of natural origin.

4 Caracol Bay towards is a commune located in Haiti's North-East department.

5 A neologism coined by museologist Yves Bergeron (2016).

remains unknown; however, multiple sources suggest that it was constructed either in the region of Galicia or the city of Santander in Cantabria. These two regions on Spain's Atlantic coast were renowned for building this type of vessel.

Carracks and caravels could be distinguished from one another by the premise underpinning their construction. Carracks were slower, heavier and less manoeuvrable than caravels. On the other hand, they were also larger, more robust and drew more water. Their larger size meant that they were used to bring large shipments of resources back to Spain.

The Anchor Leaves Spain

On 12 October 1492, two months after the vessel had left the port of Palos, Columbus dropped anchor to explore the Bahamas archipelago. Several days later, he ordered the anchor to be raised before dropping it again off what is now Cuba on the 28th of October. Columbus and his crew returned to sea and continued their explorations, coming across the island of Ayiti⁶ on 5 December. He spent the days after their arrival exploring the island's coasts and interacting with the Taínos. On Christmas Day, at around 11 pm, the Santa María was wrecked on a coral reef, bringing an end to its seafaring adventures.

Christopher Columbus's logbook shows how he ordered a fort named 'La Navidad'⁷ to be built with permission from Cacique Guacanagaric⁸ to honour the birth of Jesus Christ. The small fort was built from the remains of the flagship near the site of the shipwreck. It remains unclear whether the anchor was salvaged and taken back to land by the Spanish sailors. Subsequently, the anchor would experience a new social life as an exhibition object.

The Anchor Enters a New Regime

Despite its fame, the anchor's trajectory before arriving at the MUPANAH has attracted little attention from researchers. Questions remain as to its origin, its movements and the ways in which it has been displayed. The aim of this essay is to explore the anchor's biography and inclusion in Haiti's national collection.

The anchor was discovered in 1781 on the Fournier-Bellevue plantation in the commune of Caracol by some French people who were living there at the time. It was found during dredging work to prevent alluvial deposits that could form swamps. In *La Description Topographique, Physique, Civile, Politique et Historique de la Partie Ouest de l'Isle de Saint-Domingue* (1798), Moreau de Saint Méry describes the exact position of the anchor and analyses the object's physical form once it had been exhumed. Samuel Morrison, meanwhile, corroborates the information on the exact location and date of the discovery in his book *Route of Columbus Along the North Coast of Haiti* (1940).

⁶ In the language of the Taíno people, who were the island's original inhabitants, the term means high mountains.

⁷ The fort of La Navidad was the first European settlement in the New World.

⁸ This cacique of Marian was considered a xenophile and a peaceable, mild man.

In an 1894 study by Baron Émile Nau, we begin to see the emergence of the anchor's new life. Under President Florvil Hyppolite (1828-1896), the Minister of the Interior, Saint-Martin Dupuy, ordered the transportation of the famous 15th-century anchor to the National Palace in Port-au-Prince by in September 1892 (Nau 1894: 361). For the first time, the anchor had entered a different value regime, to use Appadurai's term. This change of location enabled the government's (?) inclusion of the anchor in the 12 October celebrations marking Columbus's intrusion into the Caribbean.⁹ These celebrations enabled the government to situate Haiti on a global time-scale. In our view, they had a twofold purpose: they addressed a past that no longer existed and at the same time allowed that past to be shared.

The Museum Itinerary

A year later, in 1893, Haiti was invited by the United States government to participate in the Chicago World's Fair, which theme was 'The 400th anniversary of explorer Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World'. The Haitian government sent a collection of literary works and precious artefacts, including the anchor, for the Republic of Haiti pavilion (Dugué 1893: 84). In an article about the Chicago World's Fair, Charles Forsdick identified two main reasons for Haiti's participation (Forsdick 2014: 271). Firstly, the government was attempting to counter the country's negative reputation to attract foreign visitors. Secondly, the aim was to display the only tangible evidence of Christopher Columbus's arrival in America to supplement the exhibition of reconstructed ships. The presence of the artefact pointed to Haiti's central role in the history of the discovery of the Americas, as well as reaffirming its sovereignty in a context of American expansionism. The anchor was displayed vertically at a slant on a rectangular plinth. Other artefacts exhibited alongside it included Haitian newspapers published under Florvil Hyppolite, books by Haitian authors, agricultural specimens, and food products (fig. 1).¹⁰ The literary works on display near the anchor, the artefacts belonging to the heroes of independence and other Haitian objects constituted what could be described as a museography of 'contradiction'. On the one hand, the collection was intended as material evidence of the start of colonialism, genocide, and slavery, and on the other, of Haiti's legitimately acquired sovereignty.

According to Forsdick, the rich wealth of artefacts exhibited and the numerous declarations made at the event, including Frederick Douglass's famous speech at the exhibition opening in January 1893¹¹, presented Haiti in its best light. As a fervent admirer of Haiti, Douglass had been appointed resident minister and United States consul in Haiti from 1889 to 1891. His time in the country led him to be appointed commissioner of the Haitian pavilion. He began his speech by praising the Republic:

My subject is Haiti, the Black Republic; the only self-made Black Republic in the world. I am to speak to you of her character, her history, her importance and her struggle from slavery to freedom and to statehood. I am to speak to you of her progress in the line of civilisation; of her relation with the United States; of her

⁹ According to Célius, 2019, p. 4, the day was dedicated to Columbus.

¹⁰ For more information about the items displayed inside the Haitian pavilion at the exhibition, see Robert Gentil & Henri Chauvet (1893) *Haiti à l'Exposition Colombienne de Chicago*.

¹¹ This self-taught African American man was born in 1818 and died in 1895. He served as special advisor to President Abraham Lincoln and was renowned for his talents as an orator and writer.

past and present; of her probable destiny; and of the bearing of her example as a free and independent Republic, upon what may be the destiny of the African race in our own country and elsewhere.¹²

Despite his flattering speech about Haiti, what prompted Douglass to be selected as commissioner? Why did Hyppolite's government choose him? Was being an abolitionist or an admirer of Haiti sufficient to be appointed exhibition commissioner? These questions will be explored further in my PhD research.

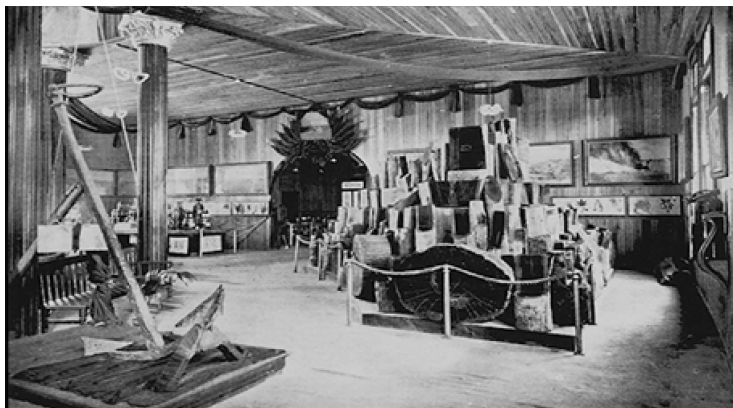


Fig. 1: The Santa María anchor on display in Chicago

After the end of the exhibition, the anchor was returned to the National Palace in Haiti. The anchor received special treatment due in part to the visibility that it had obtained at the Chicago World's Fair, making it a "flagship artefact" during political and diplomatic visits. It was now a part of Haiti's national heritage.

In the early 20th century, the anchor was transported to a new destination. It was taken from the National Palace to the country's first state museum, the Centennial Palace (fig. 2).¹³



Fig. 2: The Centennial Palace

¹² Frederick Douglass's speech in Chicago, <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/haiti/history/1844-1915/douglass.htm>, accessed on 20 May 2022.

¹³ As its name indicates, the Centennial Palace was founded by President Pierre Nord Alexis (1820-1910) to mark the 100th anniversary of Haiti's independence. It opened on January 1, 1904, not in the capital but in Gonaïves, a city located 140 km to the north of Port-au-Prince.

On 8 August 1912, the National Palace was destroyed by an explosion. Many artistic and historic items were lost. Historian Georges Corvington recounts the sad event in his seminal work *Port-au-Prince au Cours des Ans*. He notes that the busts of Dessalines and Toussaint Louverture, as well as the Santa María anchor were damaged (Corvington, 1977: 263). Once it had been repaired by Émile Amédée, an artist and craftsman, the anchor was moved from the Haitian capital to be exhibited in Gonaïves. In its new location, the anchor was presented as part of the first museum display done on Haitian territory. (Corvington 1977: 262).

In 1939, following the demolition of the Centennial Palace, the anchor was transferred from Gonaïves to Port-au-Prince. Several authors, including Pierre Massoni, report that the Palace was in a dilapidated state, plagued by mould and the risk of fire. The anchor was accompanied by numerous artefacts that were all housed in the National Museum recently founded by President Sténio Vincent (1874-1959). In *Haïti, Première République Noire du Nouveau Monde Son Vrai Visage* (1968), Clovis Désinor writes that the new museum presented the anchor in a very simple manner, but that it was showcased like a figure from the history of the "Middle Ages". As in Chicago, the anchor was exhibited vertically on a metal frame. It was surrounded by three pieces: two photographs, which are difficult to discern from the images available today (fig. 3), and a bust to the left. The anchor dominated the room, but the pieces accompanying it bore no relation to Spanish colonisation. The scenography was thus rather incoherent. The anchor remained in this installation until it was transported to Italy in 1948.



Fig.3: The Santa María anchor on display at the National Museum, c. 1939- 1948

The Anchor Returns to Europe

In 1948, Italian culture reopened to the world with a series of exhibitions and biennials. Two years later, an exhibition titled *The Time of Christopher Columbus* was held in Genoa. The aim of the exhibition was to showcase the exploits of the Genoan explorer and to mark the fifth centenary of Columbus's birth (Célius 2019: 4). The Santa María anchor was one of the exhibits displayed.

Having left the continent more than four hundred years earlier, the anchor had finally returned to Europe. Following a triumphant welcome, it began its stay at the Haitian consulate in Genoa before a small audience largely comprised of Italians and the Haitian consul (fig. 4). This is the only image in which the anchor is displayed in a horizontal position, despite its unique, ephemeral historic interest.



Fig. 4: The Santa María anchor exhibited at the Haitian consulate in Genoa



The presence of this Haitian heritage object on Genoan soil appears to have functioned as an "attraction". Italians can be seen listening attentively to the explanations given by the Haitian diplomat.

The anchor was then paraded around the streets of the city. It was exhibited on its own on a float, which was surrounded by motorcyclists to protect it (fig. 5). In this parade, the anchor may be viewed as a semiophore, to adopt historian Krzysztof Pomian's term (1987). Semiophores are objects with factual specificity that enable us to understand how material evidence of the past is transformed into heritage and endowed with historicity.

Fig. 5: The Santa María's anchor at a parade in Genoa

The Anchor Returns to Haiti and Joins the MUPANAH Collection

After its stay in Italy, the anchor was returned to the National Museum, which was known as the Sténio Vincent Museum at the time. In 1960, it was removed from the Champ-de-Mars and housed in the former residence of President Paul-Eugène Magloire (1907-2001) at the top of Turgeau, where it remained until Jean-Claude Duvalier fell from power in 1986 (Doucet 2001: 59). Once again, the anchor was moved from one site to another. The fate of the anchor was shaped by another very important historical milestone. When François Duvalier (1907-1971) died, his son came to power and decided to create a mausoleum for his father on the request of his mother, Simone Ovide Duvalier (1913-1997). The idea of a public museum came not long after. This new national museum was to be more inclusive than the previous two versions. On 7 April 1983, the MUPANAH opened its doors. A collection had to be assembled to fill the museum. On October 20, 1982,¹⁴ a decree was passed stipulating that the entire National Museum collection was to be transferred. At that time, the National Museum was leading a rather morose existence; lacking visitors, it found itself stripped of its collection, including the Santa María anchor (fig. 6).

Consequently, the MUPANAH may be viewed as the product of the dismantling of two public museums: the Centennial Palace and the Sténio Vincent National Museum. Carlo Célius observes that the design and content of the MUPANAH renders the progress made since the earlier two museums clearly visible (Célius 2019: 25).



Fig. 6: The Santa María anchor on display at MUPANAH

Since its arrival at the MUPANAH in 1983, the anchor has not been moved again. Its inclusion in the gallery dedicated to the Spanish period represents a new reading of the artefact. The anchor is contextualised by a Spanish armor, a portrait of Columbus, and engravings that are displayed in a linear fashion, illustrating the lives and deaths by genocide of the indigenous population. The display is in keeping with the

¹⁴ See *Le Moniteur*, 21/10/1982.

museography of the museum. That said, no matter what narrative format is chosen, the anchor bears witness to the intrusion of "adversity" in Haiti and across the Caribbean. Finally, the presentation of these exhibits side-by-side reinforces the anchor's status as an icon within the museum collection, or, in the words of museologist Yves Bergeron, as a "flagship object" (Bergeron 2016: 3).

It is interesting to note that there were other exhibitions in which the anchor might have featured but is totally absent. Several contextual observations must be made here. In 1992, two major exhibitions were held to mark the fifth centenary of Columbus's voyage. One was held in Seville from April 20 to October 12, 1992, titled *The Age of Discovery*. Another was organised in Genoa from May 15 to August 15, 1992 and was titled *Christopher Columbus, The Ship and The Sea*. The anchor was conspicuously absent from both exhibitions. Gérald Alexis, custodian of the MUPANAH at the time, explained in an interview conducted on December 20, 2019: "Firstly, Haiti was under international embargo. We could not run the risk of sending the anchor and not having it returned. Secondly, at that time, no insurance company would have agreed to cover its transport from Haiti".

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to retrace the history of the Santa María anchor in anthropological, material, and biographical terms. Since its transfer from Caracol to its current home at the Haitian National Pantheon Museum, the anchor has acquired so to speak an aura, as Walter Benjamin would have put it. By retracing the different phases of its social and material life, it is possible to see how the anchor's uses, values, and meanings have changed. Throughout its history, it has been involved in different international exhibitions, national relocations, and reconfigurations.

The anchor, positioned vertically on a circular base, serves both as material evidence of an ideology and as an instrument used to destroy an entire population. Over the years, the artefact has become a witness to a particularly bloody period in the history of Haiti.

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