

# THE FIRE OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF RIO DE JANEIRO

ANNE BLACK   MARCH 1, 2019   METEORITES IN THE NEWS

During the recent Tucson Show I had the pleasure of a visit by Mary-Elizabeth Zucolotto, curator of the meteorite collection of the Museum of Rio. We had a long chat about the recent fire of the museum and its aftermath; she showed me many pictures on her cell phone, told me about all the efforts to recover so many artifacts lost in the fire. It was all so interesting and amazing that I asked her to put all that in writing, with all her pictures, as soon as she was back in Rio. And she did! And here it is in her own words.

Anne M. Black

On Sunday, September 2, 2018, around 8 pm, the neighbor called to inform me that the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro (MN / UFRJ) was on fire. I turned on the television and while my sons cried for the loss of the mummies, I made the decision to go there, even against their will, as they were afraid that I would die playing the heroin. I left in a hurry without taking anything, just a little water in my backpack. I did not bring a flashlight or a cellphone charger, which would be much needed later at the scene of the incident.

Despite many difficulties, discussions with the police and threats of evictions, I and a group of colleagues, with great effort, managed to get close to the Palace and realized the total lack of organization from the firemen against the fire. The hydrants were without water, the firemen without action and the fire trucks seemed like toys compared to the size of the Palace.



Around 10 pm, we were already a staff and starting to organize. I went to the back side of the museum and realized that the fire was already out of control, reaching the third floor of the back of the Palace, where most of the collections were. So, I felt that now was our last chance to act!

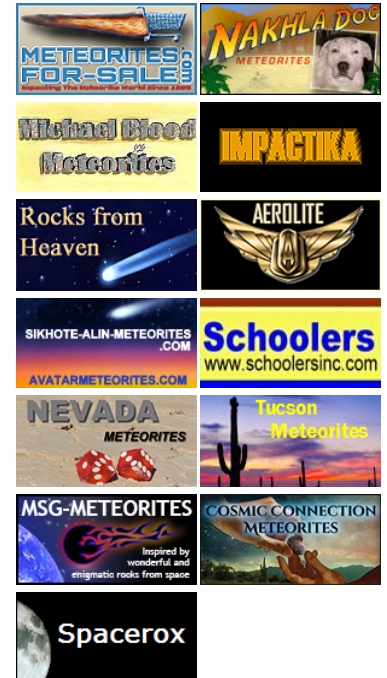
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By Edwin Thompson**



I ran back to the front of the Palace and was able to speak with the firemen chief, who finally authorized and provided help to enter through the outside door of the Chemistry Laboratory, allowing access to our rooms and collections. I had to show how to open the door, almost impossible to break into, and although I was the first to enter the laboratory, I could not enter the building, because the firemen asked me to wait.

Soon after, a group of about ten finally entered, but I was already involved in coordinating the withdrawal of a non-scientific collection, which is used for school loans and which was in pots with alcohol less than 2m from the Palace. I made this decision because it was very important to prevent the fire from spreading to the annex.

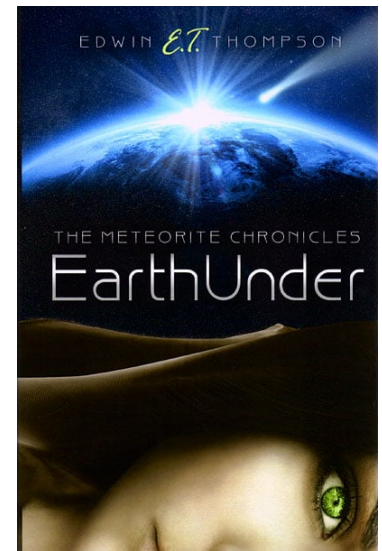
I was helping, but at the same time waiting for a chance to enter my room and save at least the meteorite Angra dos Reis (but how to find the key of the vault drawer in the dark?). At the same time I remembered that, on the upper, and wooden, floors, there were many heavy iron cabinets and everything could fall on top of me because the fire was already there. On the other hand, I was sure that by the next day most of the meteorites would survive and be in the same place.

In a very short time, we heard crackling. Everyone left the Palace in a hurry, except Sergio, the husband of the deputy director, Cristiana Serejo, who, without noticing the danger, entered once again in my room from which he had already saved my MAC computer. Moments later he came out proudly carrying in his arms the puppets of the films "E.T. – The Extraterrestrial" and "Mars Attacks!" Then, everything began to collapse just as we had anticipated.

Everyone was deeply shocked because the time we had to act was so very short, making it possible to save only what we could see in front of us. The employee Claudio was the greatest hero – he managed to save the collection of holotypes from the Malacology Department.

A question arose: If the firemen could not control the fire, why did they stop us from entering the building when the fire had not spread yet to these areas? If we had entered when we arrived, about 08:30 pm, we would have had at least 2 hours to save the collections safely. When we were finally allowed to enter, it was too late and it was a miracle no one was injured.

Around 11:00 pm, the Meteoritic team (Amanda, Diana and Sarah with their respective spouses) had finally managed to get close to the Palace. It was too late and we could do nothing else, so we went to the back of the building to watch desolate and revolted our collections succumb to the flames. There was no media there and no firefighter who could at least try to do something, even if just check if the hydrant on that side had water. My revolt was such that Amanda decided to record a video.



"EarthUnder: The Meteorite Chronicles" is available at Inkwater Press in paperback, hard binding and ebook formats.

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I went back to my house at about 3 o'clock in the morning. I cannot say that I slept because I only had short spells of sleep and nightmares because of the anger at not having been able to do what I thought was right. I could have gone better prepared, or gone straight to the back, scaled the wall and saved the collection, but I was not properly equipped and I was afraid to die in the burning debris.

Monday, September 3, I woke up early with the news reporting that the Bendegó meteorite had survived intact as a phoenix, rising in the midst of ashes in the museum entrance hall. The chief of security assured me that no one would be allowed to enter the hall of the Meteorite Exhibition but, after several arguments, I did convince him to get a permit from the fire chief for me so I could access it.

While everybody stayed behind the security barrier being interviewed and assessing guilt, I went to rescue the meteorites that were in the exhibition inaugurated by Dr. Klaus Keil, exactly 3 years earlier (photos), according to Facebook's memories. I rescued 24 of the 36 meteorites that were exposed, but four of them I had no way to remove and I could not locate some small ones in the rush. As the plaster of the ceiling was falling, I stayed only a few minutes inside the building and the fireman would not let me to stay any longer. This scene was filmed in the news and repeated several times.



I, inside the museum looking for the meteorites on the day after the fire.





I, getting out the building with some meteorites

I tried to enter my office, where the collection was located, but the path was completely obstructed by twisted iron cabinets, which had fallen from the upper floors, and debris from the collapsed roof. There were still plenty of smoke and hot spots and I was wearing sneakers with rubber soles.



During the afternoon, some officials were already authorized to try to rescue anything from the aftermath of the fire, especially some minerals and frescoes. A firefighter led by the former director burned his hands to save a supposedly skull of Luzia (the fossil of the oldest human being in the Americas and that was now blackened).

On Tuesday, September 4, as numerous “unknown” people appeared and a bunch of opportunists tried to grab whatever remained in the National Museum, the Federal Police forbade the entrance into the building until the investigation of the cause of the fire was concluded.

Amanda, my doctoral student and microprobe operator, remembered then that there were many meteorites and thin sections stored in the LABSONDA (Electron Microprobe and Microscopy Laboratory at UFRJ). So we were comforted to know that our research had helped to save much material, including some bibliographies.

In the following days, the Museum director, Alexander Kellner, was able to release an emergency grant to hire a firm (Concrejato) that would anchor the Palace’s walls and lay a roof, within six months.

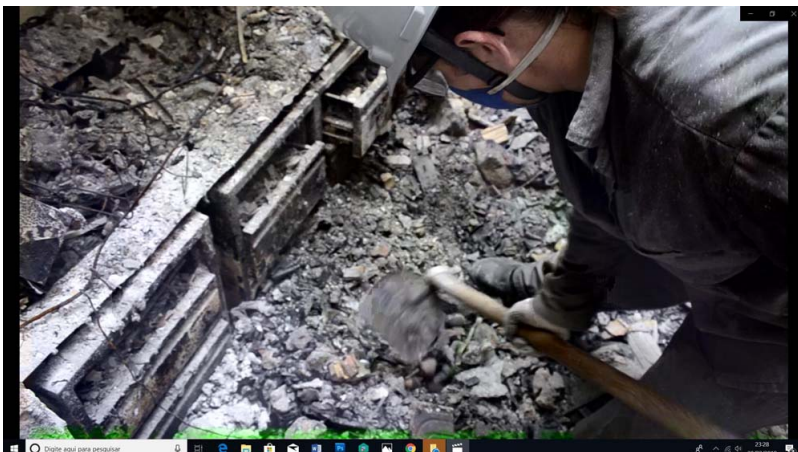
They appointed a Rescue Committee with some museum staff, led by the former director, in order to be able to act without the intervention of UNESCO. Although I was the first to begin the rescue, I was not accepted into the “highly qualified” group for various motives (lack of ability, possibility of accident, or other reasons not justifiable, in fact). Unlike

others that were excluded, I continued to frequent the Palace annex. Sometimes I was asked to solve problems like neutralizing acids in the laboratory.

The media wanted to know about Angra dos Reis (angrite meteorite). Almost seven weeks later, on October 18, I received the news I could finally enter my room, coincidentally on this day the former director would be busy at a press conference because she had finally rescued the real Luzia.



The way to my room was still full of iron cabinets and rubble. I asked Concejato's staff for help and we quickly cleared the way in a task force. The Rescue Committee of the Paleobotany Department and Luciana Witovisk helped me recover the meteorite and they documented the rescue.







The cabinet with 2 drawers, where the Angra was. Note that there was no microscope anymore.



The meteorite was in great condition, lying in the drawer with other meteorites seized in a Federal Police operation years ago. There were two cameras intact in the same drawer, indicating that the drawer was well insulated from the fire that had destroyed the rest of the office.



I did not show great happiness in finding Angra dos Reis possibly because I knew it was there or because of the sadness at seeing for the first time all the destruction in my office and that the wood cabinet in which most of the collection had been stored no longer existed (Three years earlier, I had won a grant to buy good cabinets for the collection, but these funds never arrived).



In the following days, I continued to remove the rubble by myself (students and colleagues were not allowed to enter the building). I managed to recover most of the whole collection except the very small samples of 2 grams or less. Even using fine sieves, famous meteorites like Kapoeta, Chassigny and others were not recovered. Among them, the biggest losses were the Ibitira and Governador Valadares meteorites.



The specimens were recovered in many different shapes and conditions. Some were almost intact while others, unrecognizable. The Krasnojarsk (Pallas Iron) meteorite was almost discarded as rubble. It looked like iron foam embedded in a cemented material. While many other meteorites were embedded in molten glass.



We are still conducting a survey of the meteorites so we can later identify and restore those found as well as assess the damage they have suffered from the heat. In these stages, where there is no longer need to enter the ruins of the Palace, I have the help of the



students Felipe A. Monteiro and Filipe de Oliveira, who's doctoral and master's projects, respectively, will deal with this theme.

In the fifth month since the fire, with the building almost clean, the press was allowed to enter the Palace in shirt sleeve.

I came back from vacation after this and, before writing this text, I restored the Santa Luzia meteorite, the second largest Brazilian meteorite with 1.89 tons, for an exhibition on the progress of the rescue work in the National Museum, which is taking place at CCBB Rio.



The Santa Luzia at the exhibition and my two doctorate students Felipe A. Monteiro and Amanda Tosi who helped me with the text

The destruction happened 200 years after the completion of the National Museum. It was not only the oldest scientific institution in Brazil, but it housed one of the main scientific collections of the Americas, comparable to the Smithsonian Museum. It is an irreparable loss, not only to the Museum, but to all mankind. More than 20 million items were destroyed by the fire, including impressive collections items such as Egyptian and Greco-Roman artefacts, the sarcophagus of Sha-Amun-em-su, that had never been opened, fossils, historical documents, and anthropological treasures. Fortunately, a lot of archives and collections were stored in another building.

Now, six months after the tragedy, there is still no answer as to what caused it, or even any clue as to where the fire started and whether it was accidental or criminal, only a true Sherlock Holmes could solve that case.

Any place is likely to catch fire, but completely succumbing to it is unforgivable. We can enumerate several problems: former directors had little ability to obtain administrative funds; public negligence; lack of financial resources. Since the palace is a heritage listed



building, it is prevented from performing security modifications, such as emergency exits and sprinkler installation.

The lack of preparation from the firefighters and the diversion of water from the public water company on the day of the fire, besides the lack of organization and training of the public forces for an emergency of this level, led to this immeasurable tragedy that caused the loss of our national and international patrimony.

Mary-Elizabeth Zucolotto.

All pictures provided by and property of M-E Zucolotto.

**About the Author**

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I am a French-native, who moved to the States many years ago. Being in Colorado, I discovered the Denver Mineral Show, and I met Dr Alain Carion, the French expert and I started helping him during the Denver Show. Eventually he got me interested in meteorites but I really learned all about them when he asked me to translate his book "Meteorites" into English.

That led to many new things: translation of his second book on meteorites, of various articles and most of all it lead to the creation of my website: IMPACTIKA.com in 1998. As a full-time meteorite dealer I now attend the shows in Denver, Ensisheim and Tucson where I have my own showroom. Along the way I also participated in the creation of the International Meteorite Collectors Association, where I was elected and re-elected President, and wrote many articles that you will find on Meteorite-Times.com.

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