

# Towards a Post-colonial and a Post-national Museum

## The Transformation of a French Museum Landscape

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Museums belong to what we are used to thinking of as enduring institutions in European national cultures, resistant to change. Or in metaphorical language, as sanctuaries for material and immaterial reminiscences of own or distant cultures. Their status as safe sanctuaries is not so evident any longer. In Paris two renowned and venerable anthropological museums close their doors in 2003, to combine and reinvent themselves in the form of one transformed institution, a museum of art and civilisations. Another metamorphosis is the closing of the national museum for French popular culture (in Paris) and the subsequent birth (in Marseille) of a museum for European and Mediterranean civilisations. A third significant change is the (politically enforced) introduction of primitive art from the Third World in the Louvre, the bulwark of Western art. This article describes these transformations and the associated debates, and discusses the factors behind: paradigmatic changes and intrascientific developments within ethnology and anthropology, new ways of representing the nation, the European and the Other, as well as political power and public taste.

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In most Western countries museum issues are being debated as the 21st century begins, but in few if any places has the discussion been as loud and stormy as in Paris. Several of the biggest national museums are closing, to reappear in new forms, as amalgams, with new contents.

This article is an attempt to survey a drama with several parallel acts. It treats the ongoing changes in some anthropological and ethnological museums, a distinction that is not clear in a country where (social) anthropology and European ethnology are but two faces of the same coin. We shall also pay visits to Paris biggest museums for fine art and natural history, because the ties between these museums are closer than we often acknowledge.

There are at least four main wefts in the warp: one concerns paradigmatic changes with-

in the scientific disciplines, another is new ways of representing the self and the other – whether from distant cultures or from a not so distant past – a third is changing public taste and market mechanisms, and the fourth concerns political power.

The debate on power and representational issues is common to the former colonial nations. What impact did the museums once have on colonial policy? What have these power relations meant for the interpretation of objects from the colonies and for the overall understanding of these cultures? What transformations of meaning are the artefacts subjected to when displayed in the West? How should museums exhibit such objects today? And in general, how ought the museums to address colonial history and its legacy? It has dawned upon the museums that

they do not stand outside time and historical processes, as neutral recorders, but that they have been and still are committed participants. This insight has had considerable consequences for French anthropological museums.

Important for the current changes in several European museums of ethnology and cultural history are the issues of pluralistic societies, homogenizing and differentiating forces, the problem of identifying 'national cultures', supra-national structures and the new European economic-cultural construction. Other important background factors in the closing of the French national ethnological museum are the absence of a late nation-building period based on popular culture of the kind which took place in several other European states, and a traditional French centralism under attack from re-cent decentralization policies. Furthermore, a new museum law<sup>1</sup> (2002) has added to the debate.

## A Highly Improbable Scandinavian Scenario – and French Reality

Seen from the Northern fringe of Europe, one might draw the following scenario: the national Ministry of Culture decides that the national ethnological museum (Skansen in Stockholm, Frilandsmuseet in Copenhagen, or Norsk Folkemuseum in Oslo, all of which are situated in capitals on the east coast) is to close and to be replaced, on the west coast, by a new museum – not for the national culture, but for European and North Sea civilisations. Furthermore, the biggest anthropological museums in these capitals are also ordered to close, to fuse and to transform into museums of primitive art and civilisations. And finally, very influential politicians decide – against the pronounced will of the scientific staffs – that the national museums of fine art, by definition dedicated to Western highbrow art, have to include primitive popular art from the Third World.

Improbable? Yes, certainly, with perhaps one exception: the Museum of World Cultures (*Världskulturmuseet*) that is currently being planned in Gothenburg. In the case of France, however, all these actions are now decided or have already taken place. The closure of the two venerable anthropological museums in Paris is

a fact and the new creation – *le Musée des Arts et Civilisations* (MAC, now called Branly) – will be inaugurated in 2004/05, in a new building on a prestigious site on the Quai Branly, as neighbour to the Eiffel Tower. Its front looks onto the river Seine and faces *le Musée de l'Art Moderne* on the opposite riverside – as if modern art and 'primitive' or 'ethnic' art have made a rendezvous. The price label amounts to around 200 million Euros. And meanwhile the French President has ordered the recalcitrant fine art museum *le Louvre* and its exasperated director to hold a permanent exhibition of ethnic art.

In spring 2000, the Ministry of Culture decided that the national museum of French popular culture, *le Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires* (MNATP), be restructured. The decision means moving from a protected (and almost forgotten) position on the western outskirts of Paris to a lighthouse position at the mouth of Marseille's old harbour. The ancient fortress of Saint Jean, together with a new building on the mole, will house the new museum on a dream site in the midst of a busy harbour. Its name, *le Musée de Passage*, foretells flexibility and versatility (and hopefully not ephemerality!), whereas the full subtitle – *le Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée* (MCEM) – announces a considerable change both in its geographical extension and museological programme. Even this project will cost close to 200 million Euros, and the inauguration date is fixed for 2008/09. Since 2002, the first pilot team from MNATP in Paris has been in place in Marseille, preparing the transfer of the collections and a series of preliminary exhibitions.

In the same choir of museum voices, but much less loud yet, other institutions join in. Even in the national archaeological museum (*le Musée des Antiquités Nationales* or MAN), situated in a still more protected and forgotten place outside Paris, St. Germain-en-Laye, the staff has started thinking aloud about either its discontinuation and transfer of its collections to regional museums or whether to become a museum of European cultures – one of the arguments being that France, as such, did not exist in the prehistorical and historical period it covers.

French museum employees are ambivalent.

Some see the changes as the logical answer to outdated museum practices, while others fill the newspapers with critical articles, organise protest meetings and urge for strikes. The opposition is not unified: personal strategies and the defending of (too protected?) workplaces intermingle with (rather conservative?) scientific arguments and resistance to what is sometimes interpreted as a market-oriented heritage policy.

The present changes in these cultural and scientific institutions cannot be totally separated from political life in France. French presidents have had the habit of leaving posterity with memorials, and culture is an important field for posthumous reputation in France (unlike Norway!). Among the best known presidential projects are the great avantguard art centre *le Centre Georges Pompidou* and François Mitterrand's national library, nicknamed TGB or *la Très Grande Bibliothèque* – a huge expense in French cultural budgets. But all French presidents have also been museum builders. Giscard d'Estaing finished *le Musée d'Orsay* that Pompidou had initiated, and one of Mitterrand's cherished projects was the reconstruction of *le Louvre*. The present holder of the office, Jacques Chirac, has chosen the field of ethnic art. The result is the abovementioned Branly museum – for art and civilisations, a creation that owes its birth to a strange blend of political power, the media, new public tastes, and a change in scientific paradigms.

I shall present these museums one by one. A diagram (p. 40) will guide the reader through a messy terrain of institutions and acronyms.

## Transformation I: From MAAO to Branly

This is the story of how a colonial museum became a museum of ethnic popular art and ended up as a museum of art and civilisations, in a constant effort to obscure or find ways to reconcile a disgraceful past.

Through most of the 20th century, Paris has hosted three great anthropological museums, one for Asian art (*le Musée Guimet*), one research centre and museum (*le Musée de l'Homme*), and one that covers African and Pacific art (*le Musée*

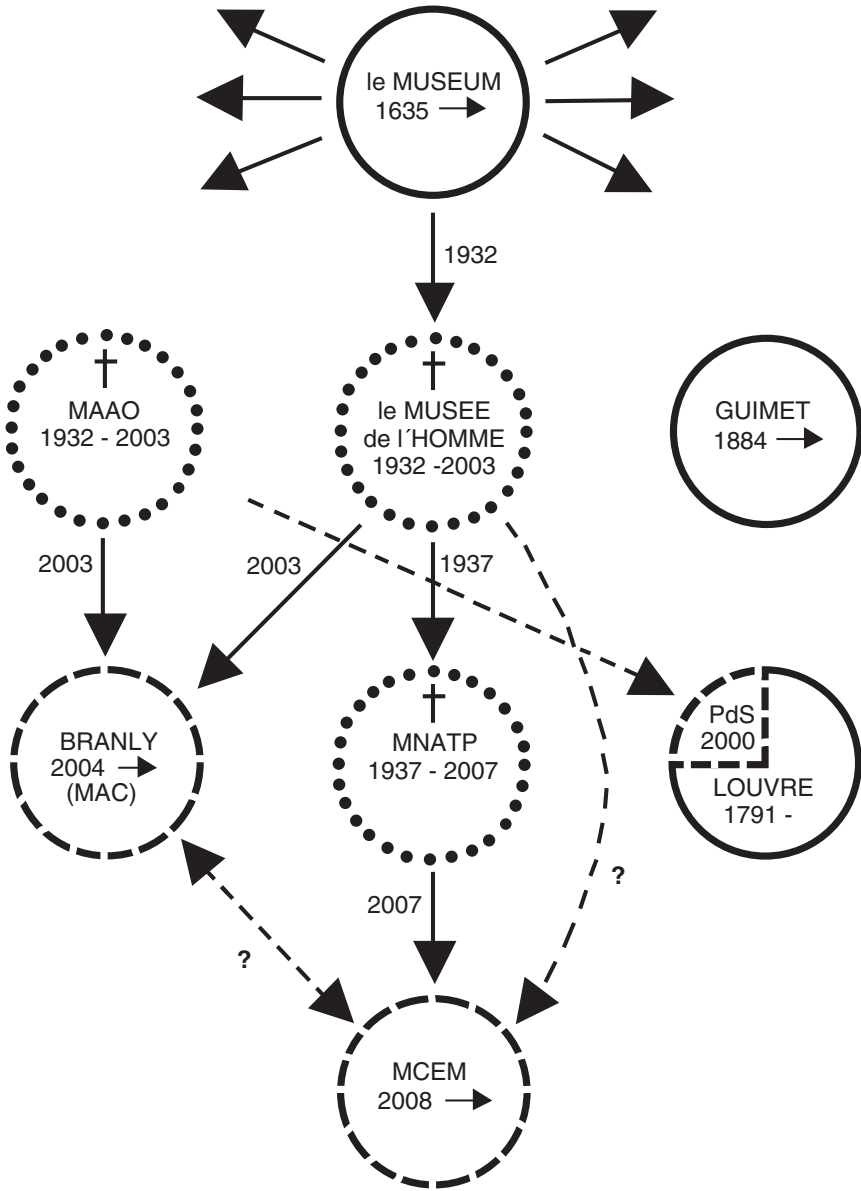
*national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie* – or MAAO). It is the two latter ones that are now being closed, moved, amalgamated and resurrected as President Chirac's memorial.

MAAO, once called 'the Colonial Museum', is situated at La Porte d'Or near the Vincennes forest. It was born out of the Colonial Fair in 1931, and its doors will be closed in 2003.

Colonial fairs were staged from late 19th century until the interwar period, as a parallel to the world's fairs (which often had their own colonial pavilions). Here the colonial powers met to present products, commodities and exotica from their colonies, natives and their villages included. The present museum building, an imposing edifice with friezes and wall sculptures showing colonial motifs, was the centre of the fair. From 1933 it served as a permanent museum, under the name *le Musée Permanent des Colonies*. This was the final phase of the colonial period, and the museum fully experienced the disintegration of the colonial empire. As early as in 1935 the name was changed to *le Musée de la France d'Outremer*, 'The Museum for French overseas areas'. In 1960, when decolonisation was a matter of fact and the last colonial war was being waged in Algeria, poet and minister of culture André Malraux decided to give the museum a name that elevated its artefacts to the status of fine art: *le Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens* (MAAO).<sup>2</sup> In this way the intellectual élite meant to escape from the colonial past and to situate the displayed cultures on the same level as Western cultures.

As seen from its name, MAAO has mainly been a museum of popular art from the Third World. Its permanent exhibitions are concentrated upon prestigious objects, ritual objects, religious and symbolic expressions, and not dioramas and contextual settings. Singular objects – beautiful, mystical, and strange – confront the visitor. The texts are limited; sometimes some lines about the cultural provenance or the ritual, sometimes only a word telling which missionary or officer donated the object. And of course no mention of the uncomfortable fact (which MAAO shares with many other anthropological museums) that many objects were probably stolen, looted or acquired by other dubious means. For many years MAAO has suffered from a low

- Old "safe" institutions
- Discontinued institutions
- - - - New institutions



MAAO = le Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie

MCEM = le Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée

BRANLY = le Musée des Arts et Civilisations le Musée Branly

PdS = le Pavillon des Sessions

MNATP = le Musée National des Arts et Traditions populaires

GUIMET = (le Musée des arts asiatiques)

number of visitors (except for schoolchildren visiting the crocodile park in the cave). Symptomatically, the greatest success lately has been the temporary exhibition (2001–02) on the Western, colonial gaze on native populations of the Pacific, a self-reflexive and self-critical presentation of how the West has perceived them as cannibals and hula-hula girls.<sup>3</sup>

MAAO has for a long time been in the centre of a debate on ethnographic artefacts, ‘primitive’ or ‘ethnic’ art (or *les arts premiers*) and fine art, a debate that was opened as early as at the beginning of the 20th century. Several avant-garde artists (Picasso was only one among many) considered these objects on the same level as modern Western art, and this leitmotif leads directly to the present debate on the Branly museum.

The last seminar at MAAO bore the title “From a colonial museum to a museum of the cultures of the world” (1998). It was precisely the idea of the equal footing of the cultures of the world that Malraux and the intellectuals in the 1960s wanted to promote by the shift of name. But the museum has never really fulfilled this mission, partly because the building in itself represents a problem (with its artistic representations of the colonial empire). The main difficulty, however, has been the focus on anthropological artefacts as objects of art, a bias that served to emphasize the distinction between research and an aesthetic approach.

It is this cleavage that the forthcoming Branly museum – the Museum for Art and Civilisations – is supposed to bridge, by marrying the prestigious collections of MAAO and the research traditions of *le Musée de l’Homme*. For MAAO, the impending closure and subsequent integration in Branly may be seen as a natural development, and not as a dramatic or even traumatic break, as is the case for the more renowned *Musée de l’Homme*.

## Transformation II: From *le Musée de l’Homme* to *Branly*

The next story is about how an anthropological research institution could end up as a museum of fine art – a scenario that has frightened many researchers. Newspaper reports from the field

often bear headlines like “Strike”, “Crisis”, “Scandal”, “Civil war”, etc. But all do not despair. We shall start with a quick look at the history of *le Musée de l’Homme* (MH), for a better understanding of the present state of affairs.

Close to the Gare d’Austerlitz in Paris lays a complex of museum units. The succinct name is *Le Muséum*, or officially *le Museum national d’histoire naturelle*. Its roots go back to the 17th century royal medical garden, and over the centuries it has grown to a complex of museums (*galeries*) of palaeontology, mineralogy, zoology, a botanical garden, etc.<sup>4</sup> A growing interest in the development of mankind, in the borderland between biology and culture, led to the establishment in 1932 of a somewhat different *galérie* – *Le Musée de l’Homme*. This passage from natural history to culture history is by no means an uncommon genesis of anthropological museums. At the present time, *Le Muséum* is being reorganised, and one of several pieces in this operation is MH.<sup>5</sup>

In 1938 MH was moved to le Palais de Chaillot at Trocadéro, a palace built for the World’s Fair in 1937.<sup>6</sup> A main problem has been MH’s administrative status, as this satellite consists of three departments or ‘*laboratoires*’: one for biological anthropology, one for prehistory and archaeology, and one for anthropology. The collections are important.<sup>7</sup> These departments are subordinate to the director of *Le Muséum*, and their leaders have been compared to feudal barons “governed by some common interests and hard internal struggles”.<sup>8</sup> It is the anthropological department, with its collections, that is to be transferred to Branly. This means that the library will probably be split.<sup>9</sup> Another difficult issue is the request from the forthcoming MCEM (see below) to take over the European and North African parts of the collections, since MCEM’s focus is the Mediterranean region.

If organisational problems are part of the reason why MH is paralysed, another serious problem is the decline in research activities. MH has an almost mythical past in anthropological research history. With MH French anthropology shifted its basis from missionaries’ and governors’ reports and gifts to fieldwork observations and active collecting campaigns. Fieldworking French anthropology began here

in the 1930s, with the long expeditions to Africa (Djibouti-Dakar) and the Pacific. The name of the museum brings to the mind celebrated researchers like Paul Rivet, Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris, André Leroi-Gourhan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and others. In short, MH – and not the universities – was once the main locus of anthropological research in France.

Today however many will claim that research in the museum has for a long time been going downhill; MH has ended up in anthropological backwaters and many researchers have quit the institution. A scholar who has been a spokesman for this view is the anthropologist Maurice Godelier, who is also one of the proponents behind the forthcoming Branly museum. According to Godelier, MH has become a ‘ghost from colonial times’ for two reasons: the ministry of research and education has starved the museum through low budgeting, and – an even greater problem – MH itself has not managed to follow up the development of new intellectual paradigms in modern anthropology.

For the pragmatic Godelier, Branly opens up new possibilities. His vision is to establish a centre for research and teaching on objects and societies, “a post-colonial museum where the West may carry through a critical but distanced evaluation of its own history, without a sense of culpability...”.<sup>10</sup> Godelier joined a small planning team for Branly, in addition to himself consisting of an architect (Jean Nouvel, who has designed the Branly edifice), an ‘aesthete’ (President Chirac’s friend, the antique dealer Kerchache), a museum curator (the director of MAAO) and a high-level civil servant (who has carried through the project on the President’s order).

Godelier has been the scientific face of a cultural construction that has been questioned by many. And many have wondered why a politically radical but highly esteemed researcher<sup>11</sup> offered his services to a conservative president and to a museum of art. The critics accuse Godelier of having been too naïve, with reference to the commercial interests behind the project, interests which will probably give priority to economic and aesthetic considerations rather than to scientific ones. Godelier withdrew from the leadership team in 2000. If his critics turn out to be right, the whole anthropological estab-

lishment should also be blamed. To the anthropologists at MH, it was simply unthinkable that the museum would be discontinued and reorganised. They remained in their ivory towers and ignored opportunities to participate in a constructive discussion of how to form the new institution.

But the political authorities voted the creation of Branly, an architectural contest was announced, and the winning project was nominated in December 1999.<sup>12</sup> An appropriation of 1.1 billion francs was granted by the conservative Juppé government in 1997 and confirmed the following year by Jospin’s socialist government – one of the more harmonious cases of agreement under the political cohabitation between a conservative president and a socialist government – and the construction phase has started. The debate on the museographic programme and the relation between aesthetics and science was periodically very heated, especially in 1999 and 2000, but the most critical voices seem to have acquiesced by 2002. It was Chirac who won the public relations war in the press. Journal headlines in 2000 were of the following type: “Chirac in his secret garden”, “Jacques Chirac attacked Culture via an original gateway”, “He gets his museum raised against the arrogance of the élite”.

### An Intermezzo in a Museum of Fine Art – or Something More?

The third tale is about the French president, his favourite hobby and how he managed to make the public join his campaign against conservative museum curators and Western art taste. It illustrates the fact that scientific considerations are but one factor in the shaping of cultural institutions; strong societal interests – in this case represented by politicians, antique dealers, art collectors and the market – are part of the game.

President Jacques Chirac is an inveterate collector and amateur of *les arts premiers* or ‘ethnic art’. From the very beginning of his office, in 1995, he advocated the idea that ethnic art be included in the Louvre, a museum that had so far been closed for objects from the Third World. Chirac’s official argument was that the



exclusion of ethnic art from this prestigious museum contributed to the building of fences between the world's cultures. The idealist side of his argument was that all cultures are on an equal footing. The idea met with strong opposition from the staff, and most curators were sceptical of this "mixture of antiques and fetishes"; the Louvre's vocation was to display Western art, and the origin of this art in Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquity and in the European Renaissance.<sup>13</sup>

The French press claimed that the idea of both the Branly museum and the Louvre exhibition did not come from Chirac himself, but was whispered in his ear by his friend Jacques Kerchache, a well-known collector and dealer of ethnic art. And it was this friend who was appointed 'the aesthete' of the leadership team of Branly. In the world of science and research – to the extent that they oppose the project – Kerchache is regarded as the devilish incarnation of the private collector who has got his foot into the museum world.

Reluctantly, the Louvre had to accept a permanent exhibition in one of its galleries, *Le pavillon des Sessions*, of 120 top objects of ethnic art, as a forerunner to Branly. The exhibition was inaugurated in April 2000 by Chirac himself, in some papers styled *le président des Arts Premiers*. The man who dictatorially and single-handedly did the selection of the objects was his friend Kerchache, a definite outsider in the Louvre. According to the press, the Louvre's director, in other contexts one of the most colourful personalities of the French museum world, was exceptionally silent when accompanying the President at the preview. Needless to say that the exhibition was enthusiastically received by the public.

The Louvre exhibition was a victory with enormous symbolic implications for those who argued for the Branly museum. The presentation in the Louvre meant that ethnic African, American and Polynesian art<sup>14</sup>, for the first time in France, was really accepted as aesthetically equal to the best of Western art. "No hierarchy within art, no more than among cultures" was the obvious message. "Respect for other cultures" was Chirac's repeated slogan in interview after interview. All parties saw this event as a cultural-

political declaration of the greatest importance for the future museum landscape. The public were enthusiastic, and the newspapers came up with headlines like "Mayan statues and Zulu masks side by side with Mona Lisa" (*Paris Match* 13.4.2000), "The revenge of the Primitive" (*L'Express* 13.4.2000), "Ethnic art enters the Louvre by the front door" (*La Croix* 15.–16.4.2000). Even *International Herald Tribune* covered the event with "Bowing to Pressure, the Louvre Goes Primitive" (14.4.2000).

The leading French newspaper, *Le Monde*, brought up the big guns. From the editorial column the museum was abused for its Eurocentric world view: *le Grand Louvre*, the world's biggest art museum, had been one of the last to cling to a Europe-centred cultural ideal. President Chirac was effusively praised for bringing to conclusion this "hopelessly out-dated quarrel between 'exotism-aesthetes' and fundamentalist anthropologists". The editor took the occasion to broadcast his opinion of *le Musée de l'Homme* and its conservative staff: "The Louvre as well as the antiquarian museum [= MH] will from now on have to move out of the ivory tower and swallow their old taboos" (14.4.2000). Even the influential *L'Express* underscored the ethnocentrism of the Louvre and brought to mind that the Metropolitan Museum in New York inaugurated a wing for ethnic art almost twenty years ago.

The Louvre event reinforced an increasing trend in the public interest for this type of antiquarianism. The number of private collectors in the field has grown enormously, and the prices for African and other ethnic art have been soaring upwards during the last decade. The most expensive single item acquired by Branly on the market in 2000 cost around 20 million francs (3 million Euros). It is a widespread opinion that Branly, with its supplementary acquisition budget of 200 million francs for 1998–2004, is driving the prices upwards. The answer from Branly is that the American private collector market sets trends and prices and that the upward movement started as a result of the Metropolitan Museum policy in the early 1980s.

The exhibition in *Le pavillon des Sessions* is defined as a permanent exhibition. What will happen to it when Branly opens its doors in

2005? The diplomatic answer from the director of Branly is that “permanent does not necessarily mean eternal”!

### Transformation III: From MNATP to MCEM

The fourth story is as amazing as the preceding ones. Or how should one otherwise qualify the closing of the national museum for the national heritage, to the benefit of a museum for European, North African and Middle Eastern encounters?

The history as well as the destiny – or rather the possibilities – of the French national ethnological museum, *le Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires* (MNATP), is closely connected to the MH-Branly complex. MNATP is the result of a series of offspring. As the mother institution, *Le Muséum* gave birth to MH in 1932. In 1937 the French collections were separated from MH and established as a museum in its own right, MNATP. The radical political climate under *le Front Populaire* (1936–38) was of great importance for the creation of this monument for national, popular culture. In 1972 MNATP moved from Trocadéro to a modern building in the Boulogne forest in West Paris.

For readers acquainted with North, Central and East European museums of popular culture, two characteristics should be mentioned. The immediately visible difference is the absence of an open-air department of the ‘Skansen’ type. Another important difference is the cohabitation with a good-sized research unit financed by the French research council, *le Centre d’Ethnologie Française* (CEF). This unit has for periods housed up to 20 or 30 researchers, in addition to the scientific staff of the museum, and thus – theoretically – offered possibilities for museum research that other European institutions could hardly dream of.

MNATP presented innovative museological activity during the first decades, under its legendary founder Georges Henri Rivière. But the museum stagnated in a rather fixed and nostalgic image of pre-war, agricultural France. Since the 1980s the institution has been in deep crisis. The reasons are complex, but some

elements can be briefly listed (see below for a more thorough discussion):

- France is a strongly centralised society, where the countryside and its cultural forms never enjoyed any real status. Popular culture never provided material to the nation building process, as it did in several young nations.
- Metropolitan ethnology and folkloristics (as opposed to anthropology or the study of distant cultures) had to fight for academic acceptance. Only at a very late stage did Academia start looking at their own popular heritage as an object of study on equal footing with distant cultures.
- France is a nation of immigrants, for whom rural culture has little meaning, as opposed to urban culture.
- Tourists do not come to Paris to study popular culture, but élite culture (which grosso modo corresponds to fine art).
- Finally, the institutionalised separation of museum curators and researchers (see below) is often contra-productive for research in museums. The researchers tend to follow their own ways and to neglect the needs of the museum.

For all these reasons MNATP is a monument that may be torn down without great offence to the national feeling of the French.

The public turned their back on the museum – from 153,000 visitors in 1978 to between 30,000 and 60,000 in the late 1990s; “Pre-war rural France is no longer a success”, was the dry remark from *le Figaro* (14.12.99). The tourists are disinterested, and so are the inhabitants of Paris and the surrounding district. A newspaper humorously calculated that at the present frequency it would take 162 years for all the present inhabitants of Paris and Île de France to have visited the museum!

The relationship between the research unit and the rest of the staff is a general problem for French museums. With a scientific background, you can be either a curator who is responsible for collections, acquisitions, reserves and exhibitions, or a researcher – normally on a lifetime contract with the national research



council (CNRS), and free to move around if you find more interesting research projects in other units or institutions.<sup>15</sup> Many in the latter group prefer to pursue their own tasks and projects, sometimes independently of the museum's policy (cf. the debate in many countries from the 1980s on the cleavage between the ethnology practiced in universities contra museums), whereas others quit the museums for greener pastures elsewhere. From the point of view of the museum, the result is very much the same: a dysfunctional research unit. I would like to underscore that this is a *general* problem inherent in the structure that does not apply permanently or to every museum.

Many efforts were made through the 1980s and 1990s to refloat the ship. Seminars were arranged and a succession of directors strove to find solutions. The rescuer was Michel Colardelle, a researcher and professor of l'École du Louvre with a past in the Ministry of culture<sup>16</sup>, and thus not totally ignorant of what goes on in the ministries and the lobbies. The politicians were for a long time indifferent to MNATP and not willing to allocate resources to save a national museum – situated, as most of them were, in the Paris region. However, a recent law on the decentralization of cultural institutions made it possible for Colardelle to win acceptance for the relocation of the museum.<sup>17</sup> Actually, the decision means closing the old museum and establishing a new one in Marseille: new with regard to the name, the museological programme and the field to be covered. When the terms 'moving' or 'transfer' are used, it is because the old collection will be transferred and those of the staff who want to move along are invited to do so.

The resistance to change has been very strong. In spite of the failing public and an intrascientific development that has enforced radical changes in the museological programme, it took a long time to gain acceptance for moving out of Paris an institution classified as a national museum. However, the majority of the staff has finally agreed to move along with their institution, just as the majority of the MH staff has decided to join Branly.

Today the operation seems to be assured, although the transition to a conservative government in 2002 has given rise to some anxiety. For

Branly – the Parisian anthropological museum of art and civilisations – the situation seems safe: the construction works have started, and a conservative government will not oppose a conservative president and his prestigious project. And Chirac continues his campaign for '*les arts premiers*': in October 2002 he proposed the establishment of another new section in the Louvre – devoted to Islamic art. The political arguments for this idea are not difficult to understand, in a world tormented by the growing conflicts between Western and Islamic cultures. There is every reason to believe that the President once more will see one of his cherished projects successfully carried through.

The agents working for the Marseille museum, however, have lost some nights' sleep, as the newly elected conservative government has stopped several cultural projects already planned by the former socialist government. The reason is a tougher economic climate combined with ambitious plans for reducing public expenditure and important tax reductions. What has probably saved MCEM is Prime Minister Raffarin's political dream: a new and much more comprehensive law on decentralization, proposed by his cabinet in October 2002.<sup>18</sup>

So much for the spectacular changes in the museum landscape. In the next two paragraphs we shall have a closer look at the contents of two institutions rising from the ashes of the old ones.

### *Branly – a Post-colonial Museum?*

"Let us create a museum about the others, together with the others, without enclosing these societies in cages ... We want to transcend the guilt of the West, without denying the history ..." (M. Godelier, *la Libération* 20.4.99).

The hottest debate has taken place over the transformation of the anthropological museums, and the critics have been louder than the defenders. Those critical of Branly, often joining forces with those opposing MCEM, have drawn on a broad range of arguments, from the purely nostalgic ones (that the efforts of the founding fathers, like Rivet and Rivière, deserve eternal recognition and safeguarding), via the more

than dubious ones (that the planned changes will mean a dead stop to serious research and a coup de grace to heritage) to the more or less absurd ones (technical arguments against transport and storage of collections, quality of new reserves, etc.). Along the gamut of arguments in favour of status quo, the most legitimate ones seem to be those concerning working conditions for the staff, arguments that militant labour unions have presented with force.

The argument that rallies many of the critics is the difficult balance between research and aesthetics. The planned name of the museum at Quai Branly – *le Musée des Arts et Civilisations* – signals aestheticisation and the prioritisation of the expressive side of the object, to the detriment of context. It may easily end up as a museum on the collectors' terms. The apprehension is not unfounded, given the present boom for collecting 'ethnic art' in France. Furthermore, the aestheticisation of objects from distant cultures may be interpreted as an easy way to evade the problem of representing the Other, a classic headache for anthropological museums.

The Louvre exhibition gave support to the sceptics. It is a purely aesthetic display, where the form aspect of the objects is cultivated. Masks and statues are mounted without any context, just as Western art, like Greek busts and Roman statues, are traditionally exposed. On the other hand, the visitor may enter an adjacent room and look up information on the objects. The defenders of Branly have been eager to stress that whereas this is a purely aesthetic exhibition, to be displayed permanently in *the art museum* of the Louvre, the future Branly intends to relate the objects to their cultures. According to them, Branly has a double aim: the visitor should be offered the chance to *admire* and to *be moved by* the most exquisite objects and immaterial expressions of other cultures, and at the same time have the opportunity to *understand* living conditions and thought patterns of these cultures (*Le Monde* 31.5.2000). The spokesmen for Branly argue that the aesthetics, and the technological and the functional aspects of objects, are on equal footing from a museological point of view; and they also, equally, serve as historical evidence.

It is this plurality of meanings that the Branly staff wants to give room for, and that many critical and even furious anthropologists do not believe in. The problem for the latter, on the other hand, is the positive public reception of the Louvre exhibition, and the extraordinarily effective criticisms of 'ethnocentrism' and scientific 'fundamentalism'.

Maurice Godelier, once the scientific leading light of Branly, had to face several stormy attacks. His answer used to be that Branly's goal was to *recreate a musée de l'Homme* – a museum of Mankind – intended to be both an outstanding teaching institution and a research centre in first division. His vision was an institution that combines four dimensions of the objects: their aesthetic aspect, their museographic career, their functional and ritual context, and the society they once were part of. And in addition, a fifth dimension which transcends these, in tune with the universal and existential problems of anthropology valid for all societies: about their forms of power, rituals, representations of wealth, death, etc., or in his own eloquent wording: "This museum shall combine the artefacts of Art and of Life; it shall combine the powers of Gods with the fact that Man, after all, eats his food with a spoon!"

The critics do not have much faith in Godelier's vision. On the other hand, these critics get no sympathy from the authorities. The recurrent strikes among the MH staff and the often-repeated claim that the transfer to Branly (and to MCEM) puts heritage in peril are met with silence. The lack of a real dialogue is remarkable; one party sees the development as the rescue, the other – the minority, though – as a total disaster. Even the submarine *Koursk* was used as a metaphor for what was happening to heritage! To no avail: neither verbal criticism, nor strikes, reunions and protest demonstrations have managed to stop this post-colonial museum project.

## MCEM – a Post-national Museum?

The working title of the forthcoming museum in Marseille is *Passages*, and the subtitle *le Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée* (MCEM). The name implies two new

perspectives, on the one hand the supranational and European, and on the other the regional (the Mediterranean): in either case a turning-away from the national. A thoughtprovoking change indeed for a museum originally dedicated to the national culture.

The arguments from those who promote MCEM is that the public's disinterest in the present MNATP may be explained by the fact that the French today are confronted with an everyday reality and prospects for the future that are totally different from those prevailing when the museum was established. MNATP has suffered severe criticism for its outdated conception of national culture and its lack of understanding of European contemporary culture. According to some critics, MNATP has become a historical museum instead of an ethnological museum. The French have unequivocally become subjects of Europe, the French nation has become a highly pluralistic society, and the borders of France do not capture one cultural unity; its territory is the meeting place for myriads of different influences. The French daily have new culinary, religious, linguistic, economic, etc. experiences, which by no means correspond to the heritage that MNATP safeguards.

The old national project – it is claimed – has no future; the museums have to expand in time and space, to Europe and adjacent areas, and bring history into dialogue with the present. The vision is a multidisciplinary research centre which poses questions that concern people: about urbanism, sport and leisure, migration and immigration, food and feasts, myths, religion and confessions, fashion and the body, distribution of resources, mobility and unemployment, violence and terrorism, youth and old age, etc., and to present these themes in historical depth.

MCEM expresses a vision of a radically different museological programme (but much still remains to be developed). MCEM will cover the period from ca 1500 up to the present day, but concepts like 'popular art' and 'traditions' are felt to be insufficient for an institution which aims to feel the pulse of a pluralistic society where the tempo of change and the free flow of things and ideas have accelerated. An expression often used is *le métissage culturel* –

the creolisation of culture. The choice of the term 'civilisations' in the name marks the museum as a centre for research on society rather than on traditions.

There is undoubtedly a tinge of political-strategic reasoning behind these arguments, which have been approved by French authorities. And the EU authorities will certainly applaud the toning-down of national identities and a corresponding focus on a European identity. And a Europe of regions will probably sound more interesting in EU ears than a Europe of nations. However, it is difficult to see that the creation of MCEM will be reduced to such motifs. The EU has never been a good project for French governments, left or right, and the French public opinion on EU matters is divided in two similar blocks. Furthermore, the transfer and transformation of MNATP was given rather low priority by the French authorities (in spite of the recent decentralization policy), and the EU funding in the project is insignificant.

There are in Europe today a group of museums that follow a policy of supranational identity building: the newly established *Museum Europäischer Kulturen* in Berlin, the forthcoming *le Musée de l'Europe* in Brussels, and a still very loosely planned museum of European cultures in Torino, in addition to MCEM. Discussion of these museums is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>19</sup> But MCEM differs from the others in one respect: the will to break down the understanding of Europe as a cultural unity and the (EU) notion of one European identity.

While one of the aims of MCEM is to reflect cultural similarities and dissimilarities in Europe, another is to break with a narrow European identification by focussing on the Mediterranean area, showing how the civilisations of North Africa and the Middle East reach far into Europe, not least through the melting pot that Marseille has been for at least two thousand years. A focus on cultural encounters across Europe's external borders may help to break down rather than build up frontiers. How MCEM will cover the adjacent African and Oriental civilisations is not quite clear yet. A local network of museums and research units around the Mediterranean must be established. Also, further dialogue with MH

and Branly is required for a possible transfer of the North African collections, which cover the cultures of Magreb and Machrech. However, a splitting-up of MH's non-European collections is still a bone of contention. So far, only the transfer of the European collections from MH to MCEM is assured.

### “Museums ain't what they used to be” ...Nor are Popular Art or Culture. Some Concluding Remarks

France has recently experienced a lively museum debate, with a focus on five of its big national institutions. The fate and the destinies of these museums are closely intertwined. They have all been drawn into a debate on representation and ideologies, they are part of a political discourse, and they are – rightly or wrongly – accused of lagging behind the general development of their scientific disciplines. The actual debate has revealed the political role of the museums and their participation in ideology production. What is perhaps more striking, to an observer from the North, is the direct intervention and the active role played by politicians in this renovation.

In general, the ongoing transformations in the museum landscape can be seen a corollary of new ways of understanding the nation, Europe, the Third World. Whereas national ethnological museums have been criticised for the use of popular culture for nation building purposes, with (false) national identities and nationalism in the wake, the anthropological museums have been accused of maintaining old power structures. Museums are power language: if one museum supports identity building by stressing the sunny side of one's own culture, the other museum creates distance by presenting the Other's heritage as strange or primitive.

This is a well-known rule, but seemingly it does not apply a hundred percent to the French pattern, and less today than yesterday. As for the anthropological museums, it is correct that they have for a long time been criticised for maintaining colonial relations and creating distance. The museum for the French 'national' heritage, however, has long since ceased to function as a mirror for national pride – that is,

if it ever had that function? The museums that have played such a role in France are museums of fine art. Criticism of ethnocentrism and euro-centrism has been much more severe for the Louvre than for any museum of national popular culture. It is no exaggeration to say that what has been a very important element in the constitution of French national identity is *fine art* and bourgeois or urban traditions, not *popular art* and popular or vernacular traditions. This is one of the main reasons why the national museum of popular art and culture can be dismissed as a 'historical' museum and replaced by a new institution for 'European civilizations'.

With this perspective in mind, one may ask if there isn't a close connection between the French identification with fine art and the elevation of exotic popular culture to the status of (exotic) fine art. That is how anthropological museums tend to develop into museums of art from the Third World. For the 'ethnic' collections, the appreciation of the objects has since long been concerned with three aspects: authenticity, aesthetics and rarity (and not the artefacts' function). This tradition explains why – in spite of some opposition – it is possible to establish a museum for 'art and civilizations' (Branly). It is easy to foresee that it will become a success as a museum of art. But it is more uncertain whether it will also be a success as a museum of anthropology (or 'civilisations').

For the same reason, MNATP was unable to succeed. It was based on two different logics, that of the popular object as an object of art, in a truly French tradition (among other things, for example, the display of 'pure' objects in the former study galleries), and on the other hand the logic of ethnology, i. e. popular culture as lived life. It could perhaps work for a historically distant society, like that of France up to the war, but not for an urban, industrialized, multicultural society like contemporary France. The forthcoming MCEM has certainly picked up this warning from the past. The challenge will be to manage to base the activities on one single logic: that of ethnology as a study of contemporary society in its historical dimensions.

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## Other sources

- MNATP's scrap archives (containing several hundred newspaper articles).
- Unpublished reports and working documents on the MNATP/MCEM project.
- Oral information from curators and researchers of the museums.

## Notes

- 1 A new museum law (2002) will reorganise the French museums. Main changes are on the one hand the categorization as national museum of around 500 museum of art, cultural and natural history (only around 40 today), on the other hand better conditions for some of the private museums, but also less strict rules for declassification and alienation of collections. The most critical voices see this as part of a market-oriented policy that fits well into the Branly strategy.
- 2 Later 'national' was added and the name changed to *le Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie*.
- 3 *Kannibals et Vahinés: Imagerie des mers du Sud*.
- 4 *Le Muséum* itself has lately been through several transformations and ideological-critical debates (the relationship Man – Nature, evolution and ecology, research versus exhibitions, etc.), the story of which surpasses the scope of this article.
- 5 Concerning the criticism of *Le Muséum*, especially of the treatment of the collections, as well as the reorganisation, see i. a. the discussion in *Nature* vol. 362 (1993) and vol. 401 (1999).
- 6 At the same time MH took over after *le Muséum d'Ethnographie*, which since 1880 had been housed by the old Palais de Chaillot.
- 7 The paleo-biological collection consists of 150.000 items, included 35.000 human skulls; the prehistoric-archaeological collection of 500.000 items, and the anthropological one of ca 250.000–300.000. The common library comprises ca 300.000 volumes.
- 8 *Le Monde* 13.12.2001.
- 9 The issue of splitting the library has been difficult, and the sole victory of one month's strike in Nov.–Dec. 2001 was a (temporary?) promise that the library should not be split.
- 10 See interviews with Godelier in *Sciences* 20.4.99, *La Libération* 20.4.99 and *Telerama* 12.1.2000.
- 11 Maurice Godelier is a former *directeur de recherche* CNRS (the French research council) and currently *directeur d'études* (both positions correspond to a chair) at *l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* in Paris. Godelier has through most of his career professed a marxist orientation, but has recently described himself as a pragmatic regarding scientific theories.
- 12 The winner project has been presented in a



- series of newspaper articles, and the architect Jean Nouvel's proposition was positively received by the press (see i. a. articles in *Le Monde* 10.12.99 and *l'Humanité* 28.3.00).
- 13 It has been a French tradition to keep a broad range of museums with specialized and limited responsibilities, and not with thematically broad collections like that of i.e. *The Metropolitan Museum of Art* in New York.
  - 14 Asian ethnic art was not represented, as the recently restored and renewed Musée Guimet in Paris (*le Musée national des Arts Asiatiques*) is responsible for this field.
  - 15 The French research council – *le Conseil National de Recherche Scientifique* (CNRS) – employs some 12 000–14 000 persons in full, lifetime positions. Half of these are researchers, the other half research technicians. Around 2 000 CNRS researchers work in the fields of social sciences and the humanities, and a considerable group of these in the research units of the museums. As free researchers, they can chose their affiliation and may also be associated with several research units.
  - 16 Michel Colardelle has been councillor for Jack Lang, former minister of Culture.
  - 17 A law on the decentralization of institutions of culture was passed around 1990, and the secretary of state who is responsible for museums and heritage questions carries the title 'Secretary of state for heritage and cultural decentralization' (*le secrétaire d'Etat au patrimoine et à la décentralisation culturelle*). Decentralization is a new trend in French politics.
  - 18 The new law covers the decentralization of a series of functions, not only culture, to the 26 regions of France. Paradoxically the regions – whether the councils ar socialist or conservative – are hesitant or negative to the idea of decentralization. The regions are afraid that the costs will have to be paid by them. The reform is so radical, in relation to the French tradition of centralization, that it is called "the new Revolution" – and many consider it too radical to succeed.
  - 19 See Rogan 2003 for a discussion and comparison of these museums.
  - 20 Se Cuisenier 1991 and Duclos 1992, for a more lengthy discussion and contradictory views of the clash of logics inherent in the MNATP museum conception.