



Museum exterior, featuring the garden designed by Gilles Clément, May 2006
photograph by Nicolas Borel
Musée du quai Branly

Narratives of colonisation

The Musée du quai Branly in context

by Alexandra Sauvage

Abstract

Paris's new ethnographic museum, the Musée de quai Branly, opened on 23 June 2006. In this paper I explore the origins and historical context of the museum and its collections. I am interested in why certain cultural strategies (such as history) become more appropriate over time than others (such as aesthetics) in representing cultural diversity. I examine the implications of the choice of an aesthetic basis for

the permanent exhibitions, and what this means for the museum's narrative of colonisation. Finally, this paper draws on the history of Indigenous Australian collections and Australia's involvement in the museum's design to illustrate the French malaise in handling colonial legacies, and to demonstrate the limitations of the new museum in communicating its objectives to visitors.

Introduction

France wishes to pay homage to whom, throughout the ages, history has all too often done violence. People injured, exterminated by the greed and brutality of conquerors. People humiliated and scorned, denied even their own history. People marginalised, weakened, endangered by the inexorable advance of modernity. Peoples who want their dignity restored.¹

Jacques Chirac's strong words on the opening of his presidential project, the much awaited new ethnographic Musée du quai Branly (MQB), reveal the will to defend a museum that has been the centre of controversy from its inception in 1996 until its opening on 23 June 2006. From the name of the museum (it was originally to be called the 'Musée des arts premiers', the 'Museum of First Arts'), to its mission (is it an art or an ethnographic museum?) the project reveals much about the malaise of the French in discussing their colonial heritage. Chirac's speech was the culmination of a 10-year struggle to articulate a response to ongoing criticisms of the role of ethnographic museums. As Laurier Turgeon and Elise Dubuc once noted: 'Museums in general, and ethnographic museums in particular, are places where the majority group's limits of tolerance for various minority groups are measured'.²

The MQB was developed under the auspices of Chirac's close friend, merchant and art collector Jacques Kerchache, whose claim that 'the world masterpieces are conceived freely and equally' became the museum's motto. The first step in French institutional recognition of the significance of non-European cultural heritage was to develop a permanent collection of the 'first arts' in the Louvre. This was also

controversial because of the perceived lack of a 'reconciled way of looking at these collections'.³ The MQB was presented as *the* place not only France but the entire European continent lacked, a place where art and science would meet, a major European centre for scientific excellence and a fulcrum for dialogue between European and non-European cultures.

The new museum remained first and foremost a presidential project destined to be a monument to Jacques Chirac's time as French head of state. Rarely in the history of ethnographic museums has one received such close attention from the highest national authority. Since 'how we define the nature of museums ultimately depends on how we define ourselves and how this self-definition relates to the self-definition of others',⁴ the MQB was invested with a particular function to define the national 'self' and the non-national, non-Western 'other'. This provided a major constraint on curators as they developed the permanent exhibitions, in addition to the usual difficulty for ethnographic museums in finding stories that resonate beyond the colonial thinking that framed the original collections. In France, two museums were in charge of defining the non-Western other within a colonial narrative: the Musée de l'Homme (Museum of Mankind), built in 1937, which organised its collections according to evolutionary theories; and the National Museum of African and Oceanic Art (MNAAO and later MAAO), opened in 1931, which was the museum most closely aligned with the imperial enterprise.

The neglected state of the ethnographic collections provided an imperative to build a new museum with adequate temperature and humidity control.⁵ Another impetus came from the metamorphosis in ethnographic museums worldwide as decolonisation has unfolded. The media coverage left the

impression that the MQB was an original, unique and innovative initiative, but this was far from the case. The project of the MQB was neither operating in a historical vacuum, nor did it constitute a radical change in museum practice in the context of this global trend. In this paper I explore the origins and historical context of the MQB, comparing it with initiatives in other European museums. I am interested in why certain cultural strategies become more appropriate than others over time in representing cultural diversity. I examine the implications of the choice of an aesthetic basis for the permanent exhibitions, and what this means for the museum's narrative of colonisation. Finally, this paper draws on the history of Indigenous Australian collections and Australia's involvement in the museum's design to illustrate the French malaise in handling colonial legacies, and to demonstrate the limitations of the MQB in communicating its objectives to visitors.

Museums and colonisation: the global context

For over 15 years, museums have been aware that their work needs to be made more relevant to the societies whose natural and cultural heritage they hold. Museums around the world have undertaken much good work in developing work practices and collections that respond to people's demand to know more about their local history, their national identity and their place in the world. Not that museums did not have a social purpose before. Ethnographic museums initially set out to elucidate the 'manners and customs' of distinct ethnographic peoples, within a world context. But the museum was also a powerful tool to showcase the genius and grandeur of nations and engender a sense of 'belonging' through the cultural education of citizens.⁶ Many museums still

maintain elements of this purpose and, even if patriotism is not their main objective, they are still perceived as the caretakers of cultural treasures and the memory of the nation's glorious past.

Indeed, even if we think of museums as repositories of scientific knowledge, they still owe their original existence more to wars and the European social practice of boosting prestige through the collecting of trophies and curiosities. The British Museum was founded in 1753, before the triumph of colonialism during the Victorian period, but it nonetheless became directly linked to early colonial wealth, particularly that of Sir Hans Sloane, whose collections of Jamaican plants served as the founding collection around which the museum was built. The Louvre in Paris opened around the same time, the castle being turned into a public institution so that along with a democratic ideal, an appreciation of culture could be enjoyed by all. A century later, colonial temporary exhibitions proved highly popular and led to the development of colonial museums, such as the Royal Museum of Belgian Congo, built on the initiative of King Leopold II after the colonial exhibition of 1897, and the Musée de la France d'outre-mer in Paris, following the 1931 colonial exhibition, which even glorified colonialism through the architecture of the building. From their very beginning as modern public institutions, museums told powerful narratives of colonisation: European visitors could marvel in front of the displays that highlighted the power of their nation overseas, and absorb the national discourse according to which 'inferior' peoples would 'progress' through the gift of Western modernity.

After the Second World War, criticism of colonial ideology took various forms: through the political process of independence in Asia and Africa, and through the growing demands for social

recognition from cultural minorities in North America and in Commonwealth countries such as Canada and Australia. This led museums to reflect on what kind of stories their exhibitions were telling, and to progressively reconfigure them towards contemporary views. Although some of the last to change, ethnographic museums are probably the most eloquent embodiment of this general trend: they have developed at a striking rate since the 1990s into fashionable, attractive places using design and high-tech devices to tell new narratives of colonisation, to counter criticism of earlier museums by Indigenous peoples and others.

Indigenous leaders challenged museum authorities, calling into question the veracity of the stories within their walls. For example, in Australia, Aboriginal communities and political leaders have fought since the late 1960s for a more respectful treatment of their ancestors' human remains.⁷ In Canada, Cree people boycotted the Glenbow Museum's exhibition *The Spirit Sings* that was designed for the 1989 winter Olympics.⁸ In both countries, Indigenous claims have led the premier museums associations — the Canadian Museums Association in 1992 and the Council of Australian Museums Association in 1993 — to endorse documents that established new relationships between museums and Indigenous peoples by compelling the institutions to work collaboratively with Indigenous peoples on issues of collections management, preservation, exhibitions and institutional representations of their cultures, and encouraging Indigenous curatorship.⁹ The United States of America also passed a federal law in 1990, the *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act*, by which Native American peoples have the right to repossess human remains, sacred objects and cultural material that belonged to their ancestors.¹⁰

The post-colonial reinterpretation of imperial history that has developed since the 1970s ultimately affected museums and changed curatorial practices.¹¹ A new museology promotes museum work that is socially relevant, and focused on individual and community cultural development rather than on a nation's greatness.¹² At the core of this new museology lies a criticism of 'the standard narrative of national history, and especially of its imperialist and racist components', 'a questioning of the racial and the evolutionary categories and hierarchies which previously governed the collection of museums' objects' and 'the adoption of a pluralist, international perspective'.¹³ More museums now attempt historical exhibitions that are organised and presented as catalysts for change by revealing aspects of the large and complex history of European expansion that have previously been ignored. For example, the guide to the New York Society's 2005 *Slavery in New York: A Landmark Exhibition* opened with the following statement:

Many people first became aware that slaves once lived in Manhattan when a construction project in 1991 accidentally uncovered the African Burial Ground near City Hall, a haunting reminder of the city's hidden past. Indeed, few of the millions of people that walk New York's streets today realize that at the time of the Revolution there were more slaves in New York than in any other city except Charleston, South Carolina.¹⁴

The exhibition was so successful that it continued beyond its initial schedule, reflecting deep public interest in hidden narratives of colonisation.

Colonialism was a major force in founding many European nations. Yet there is neither a 'national museum of colonialism' nor a 'museum of national history' to explain



Interior view of the museum, showing the permanent collection galleries
photograph by Nicolas Borel
Musée du quai Branly

to the French, the British,¹⁵ the Spanish, the Portuguese or the Dutch the historical links that bind them to other regions of the world and to remind them that contemporary immigration issues — legal and illegal — often have roots in colonial pasts. For better or for worse, and whether it is their assumed objective or not, the institutions that are best equipped to tell a century-long history of colonial expansion are often ethnographic museums.

Reframing the discourse: European initiatives

European ethnographic museums have not been exempt from the new trends in museology. In Sweden, the previous Ethnographic Museum of Göteborg has been transformed into the Museum of World Culture. In Holland, the Tropenmuseum has replaced what began as the Colonial Museum of Haarlem, following

the independence of Indonesia in 1949. In England, the Pitt Rivers Museum, which opened in Oxford in 1891 and which has retained its Victorian museography since, has also radically changed its discourse. In fact, its displays are now so outdated that they challenge visitors to consider what the European practice of collecting has meant to the people being colonised. It has become both a museum of what an ethnographic museum used to be, and a critique of that museology. In Belgium, the Royal Africa Museum in Tervuren is also undergoing an important restructuring and is experiencing an interesting metamorphosis.¹⁶ In 2002, this state-funded museum commissioned Belgium's 'most eminent historians to give the public the one thing they have been deprived of for so long: the truth'.¹⁷ A temporary exhibition entitled *Memory of Congo: The Colonial Era* was mounted in 2005 'in which not only the European but also the African players take their part'.¹⁸

Clearly, there are winds of change in the way Western nations perceive their colonial heritage, their national history and their subsequent self-definition. Of course, as Laurier Turgeon and Elise Dubuc remarked, ‘not all ethnographic museums are cast of the same mould’¹⁹ and the worldwide process of readjusting ethnographic collections is a very uneven one. But one clear trend is that ethnographic collections are often more revealing of the collectors than of the ‘collected’, and are now often exhibited accordingly. In colonial times, there was a clear separation between history as the study of the ‘civilised’ peoples and ethnography as the study of ‘primitive societies’; in the post-colonial era this divide has gone.

Reframing the discourse: the French colonial ‘saucépan’

In France, ethnographic museums are undergoing a similar metamorphosis, but any reform of the national French narrative of colonisation seems to have reached an impasse. The MQB has taken a different path from its European counterparts. Before it opened, the museum’s website featured the construction of the building, the work of the museum’s main stakeholders, and the future collections. At the time, it explained the genesis of the museum’s project by portraying the ethnographic artefacts not as elements of colonial expansion but rather as the inspired initiatives of highly respected French artists and intellectuals:

Non-Western arts acquired a crucial place in museum collections in the course of the 20th century. This was achieved thanks to Fauvist and Cubist artists, under the influence of writers and critics, from Apollinaire to Malraux, and also to research work carried out by leading anthropologists, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss.²⁰

No mention was made of the colonial context in which artefacts were collected and studied, although Apollinaire and Lévi-Strauss’s interest in extra-European cultures was clearly marked by a harsh criticism of the colonial system. How these artists came to know about non-European cultures was not relevant. In 2007, this narrative remains unchanged and, unlike other museums, the MQB makes no mention of how it confronts colonialism. The museum encourages visitors to ‘take the time to inform themselves on major thematic areas: masks and tapa in Oceania, costumes in Asia, and African musical instruments and textiles, each the subject of a fascinating video presentation’.²¹ This is the only context the museum provides for its collections. According to Jacques Chirac’s skilfully worded speech that managed to acknowledge the wrongs of colonial violence and dispossession without branding them as colonial, the museum adopted a strategy of being ‘far removed from the stereotypes of the savage or the primitive’²² — announced as if it were *avant-garde* — but simply removed the evolutionist perspective and abolished dioramas, two practices that most ethnographic museums had abandoned many years ago. This was nonetheless the main view held by anthropologist Emmanuel Désveaux,²³ scientific director of the MQB between 2001 and 2005:

I think that we better approach postcolonialism when we empty the museography of any narrative, either implicit or explicit, that is linked to evolutionism. It is by getting rid of this saucépan that we enter fully in the post-colonial era.²⁴

The colonial legacy is thus portrayed as a noisy saucépan that France has decided to silence once and for all within the walls of its museums. The Museum of Mankind is under threat and is under-resourced.

The MAAO, whose architectures acted as a constant reminder of the colonial past, is to become an ‘immigration museum’.²⁵ Whereas the narrative of dismantling colonial values is everywhere in the documents that present the MQB, from the presidential opening speech to the guidebook or the media releases, such discourse is nowhere to be found in the museum or on its website. While there has been an obvious attempt to justify publicly the creation of the MQB as a relevant institution for the twenty-first century, such discourse is not directed towards the museum’s visitors. Unless they have followed closely the news about the museum since 1996, visitors will find nothing that might challenge their traditional assumptions about non-European cultures, assumptions neatly identified in the museum’s objectives listed by President Jacques Chirac: to dispel ‘the mists of ignorance, condescension and arrogance’, to promote ‘mutual understanding against the clash of identities and the mentality of closure and segregation’ and ‘to promote dialogue between cultures and civilisations’.²⁶

Unlike the National Museum of Australia, the MQB does not have any restitution policy or program. French museums have the obligation to preserve and stock (‘conserver’ also means to stock in French), while in English-speaking countries curators have, by definition, only a duty of taking care of the collections (from the French ‘soigner’).²⁷ Although most English-speaking curators are probably unaware of these etymologies, the distinction is telling. As an alternative the MQB aims to mount travelling exhibitions, so that Indigenous communities have an opportunity to see their cultural heritage; but this remains dependent on the good will of the museum and is limited by the costs. A second alternative will take the form of what Emmanuel Désveaux calls a restitution *in situ*:

The possibility that representatives of a given community manipulate objects which contemporary ritual use has been proved is considered and could take place in the reserves of the museum. We could thus invite for example, two or three shamans to come and perform a ritual, manipulate and smoke in ‘sacred’ pipes.²⁸

Whereas museums tend more and more to collaborate with Indigenous peoples in the preservation of collections and the development of exhibitions, the Musée du quai Branly proposes a complicated, marginalising and (most) un-traditional way for Indigenous communities to benefit from their cultural heritage. Clearly, everything indicates that it was a political choice to ignore the 30-year-long fruitful dialogue between anthropologists, curators and Indigenous peoples that has taken place worldwide, a dialogue ‘between cultures’ that has informed museum policies for the last decades. Instead of following this general path, the efforts of the MQB are directed to promoting the ‘aesthetics’ of the collections.

The aesthetics of the ‘people without history’

‘People without history’ is an expression coined by anthropologist Eric Wolf whose 1982 work contradicted the Western notion prevalent at the time that peoples who do not rely on written records have no history.²⁹ Wolf showed that the Western definition of history was too narrow to encompass world history, the involvement of Indigenous peoples in global phenomena, such as trade, or historical change in these societies.

Despite its alleged mission to be a place for dialogue where cultures meet, the MQB does not include the European continent: its collections are constituted by the cultural material of those peoples that did not have

a written history when European colonisers arrived. Defined as ‘ethnic groups’ without any given definition, their cultural material is referenced as in the Louvre: name (eg mask, box, comb), origin, material and date, the latter indicating more often when it was collected rather than when it was produced. Often, the name of the collector is mentioned: we might ask what is the purpose of such information, since the aim of the museum is supposedly to combat the idea of Western hegemony and to put cultures on an equal footing. There is no new information that could ‘dispel the mists of ignorance’. The exhibitions give only an external description of these cultures, making them look superficial, distant in time and space, and indeed without much historical context. This is exacerbated by the MQB’s practice of using the ‘ethnographic present’ tense in its exhibition labels, something which has been generally superseded in ethnographic museums:

ORNAMENTATION AMONG MOUNTAIN PEOPLES

Women, and most men, wear a profusion of silver, copper, brass, seed or glass pear jewellery. The Hmong and the Yao have a particular penchant for solid silver jewellery; the Hani like to attach it to their clothes, or, like the Nung, make works of art of their buttons and fasteners. These adornments represent a family’s wealth, add to its status and show that a man is taking care of his family.³⁰

Only the peoples that had a famous empire are presented with a historical perspective:

The Aztecs

The Aztecs dominated the political and cultural scene of Mesoamerica for 150 years prior to the Spanish conquest. The emperor headed their highly hierarchical society, with

warriors playing a key role. The triple alliance (with Texcoco and Tlacopán) meant that in less than a century the Aztecs were able to take control of most of central Mexico, as well as a large part of the Pacific coast.³¹

Such captions barely contrast with colonial labels that implicitly classified peoples from the less to the most civilised. Eighteenth-century explorers’ diaries conveyed little admiration for the cultures of mountain peoples and this tone remains in the first caption. By contrast, the Aztecs were always admired, even by the Spanish *conquistadores* who slaughtered them. The second caption continues this tradition. The museum cannot rely on the aesthetics of ethnographic objects alone to provide a historical context for objects that do not already have ‘history’. Aesthetics alone cannot change an entrenched narrative.

The announced aim of the MQB is to ‘offer a ground-breaking new conception in terms of scientific equipment, organisation and the collections on show to the public’.³² This is not to be found in a narrative that, in essence, has remained colonial, though less bluntly articulated. All the innovation has been invested in technology: the quality of the glass of the display cases as well as the lighting greatly enhance the exhibited works. The installations benefit from the latest curatorial aesthetic practices, giving the objects an aura of sophisticated beauty, far from the traditional stereotype of the gloomy, dusty corridors of old ethnographic museums. The treatment of ethnographic objects as beautiful artworks increases their significance and value in European markets. As Sarah Amato says:

Acknowledging these artefacts as art amounts to an acknowledgement of the civilisations they represent as capable of creating works of genius. In the museum narrative, where



Oceanian masks collection
photograph by Antonin Borgaud
Musée du quai Branly

art history becomes a substitute for human history, and societies capable of creating works of individual genius stand at the apex of development, this signifies that societies formerly regarded as ‘primitive’ can be deemed fully ‘civilised’.³³

And this is precisely why Emmanuel Désveaux defends the aesthetic stance: as he rightly says, everything in the West is evaluated in terms of technical progress. The problem with the traditional ethnographic museum is that it naturally classifies according to a technical hierarchy, and the Western visitor will instantly interpret the classification from the less to the most advanced in technical progress.³⁴ On the contrary, Désveaux argues that beauty is not connected to technical progress and constitutes an ideal way to build an ‘anti-evolutionary message’. Or does it? Exoticism — the attraction to the distant

stranger — has shown how beauty could coexist with a technical hierarchy of societies: Western peoples could find ‘non-European’ peoples beautiful and appreciate their customs, while still considering themselves more civilised. By giving a Western definition and a Western aesthetic value to non-Western objects and artefacts that were not produced for aesthetic consumption in the first place, does the museum move, as it claims, ‘beyond the heritage of the West’s earlier contacts with other cultures’?³⁵

Throughout their short history, it seems that French ethnographic museums have had just three options: the ‘cabinet of curiosities’ option, the ‘ethnography’ option or the ‘aesthetic’ option. As early as 1931, Marcel Mauss instructed his students, and more especially Marcel Griaule, on what to collect on the ‘mission Dakar-Djibouti’:

A collection of ethnographic objects is neither a collection of curiosities,

nor a collection of works of art.

An object is nothing but a witness, which must be seen in relation to the information it provides about a given civilisation, and not in relation to its aesthetic value. We must therefore get into the habit of collecting all sorts of objects and rid ourselves, first of all, of two preconceptions: purity of style and rarity.³⁶

The 3000 artefacts collected by Griaule on that particular mission formed the founding collection of the Museum of Ethnography of the Trocadéro (later to become the Museum of Mankind). On principle, the museum later chose to emphasise the aesthetics of its ethnographic collection, to distance itself from these colonial practices. However, the Museum of Mankind was reluctant to implement this approach as it rendered the institution itself obsolete. Indeed, the choice of the aesthetic approach provoked an outraged debate from the beginnings of the museum project, even though the MQB was supposed to provide a balance between the aesthetic approach of the MAAO and the ethnographic perspective of the Museum of Mankind. The staff of the latter went on strike in protest for two months, opposing the emphasis on aesthetics and, understandably, fearing for their future.³⁷ But since the MQB was a presidential project, rising from the ashes of the MAAO and the Museum of Mankind, their protest was in vain.³⁸

Media coverage of several events between autumn 2005 and spring 2006 encouraged French public interest in their colonial heritage. Key among these were the suburban civil unrest at this time (and the French Interior Minister's tough management of it³⁹), the petition of the 'Natives of the Republic'⁴⁰ (denouncing institutional racism) and Jacques Chirac's creation of a National Day commemorating

the abolition of slavery. Stéphane Martin, president of the MQB, exploited these events, claiming that the museum was a 'much needed "political instrument" to explore the presence "of the non-European world in the life of Europeans" [and that it] was important for a country that had seen social "troubles".'⁴¹ All of a sudden, the MQB was vested with a new function, far from aesthetic considerations. But how was the museum supposed to achieve such an objective if it emphasised only visual appeal and ignored the historical context of the objects on display? This concern was expressed by several French historians, particularly the leading experts on French colonial history. Historian and vice-president of the French League for Human Rights Gilles Manceron worried that the MQB might become merely a showcase for colonial clichés:

Many historians feel France has not come to terms with the real history of its colonial era. This idea of a jungle or a forest surrounding the museum, a place where you will discover the 'dark continent' is a problem. It's as if these other continents are still savage, exuberant, dangerous and primitive. These are all the old clichés that still abound in France ... In surveys conducted in December and January, most of the population thought French colonialism was a positive thing. This comes down to the official discourse which never tells them otherwise.⁴²

To impose such a historical context for colonisation on the museum transforms it into a place of fiction, as the evolutionist narrative did. According to Emmanuel Désveaux, it is the role of institutions to oppose the current 'market trend', of which Indigenous claims are part:



Façade of the administrative building featuring *Jimbala and Kumerra*, by Aboriginal artist Lena Nyadbi, 2005
photograph by Antonin Borgeaud
Musée du quai Branly

Although we will take them into account, we do not think it is wise to construct a discourse on the collections that purely respond to Indigenous claims. They are unstable, rarely consistent and they collide with the present state of scientific knowledge. More than that, their ideological roots, however legitimate, tend to filter out the realities of history.⁴³

The Musée du quai Branly has difficulty matching its objective of intercultural dialogue and debate with the means employed to achieve this. One wonders how an institution could claim to be historically relevant while ignoring the historical context of its collections. Australia's involvement in the project and the Aboriginal collections of the museum exemplify this tension.

Indigenous Australia at the quai Branly: showcasing the French malaise

Indigenous Australia and the MQB are intertwined in two ways: firstly as the legacy of French past interest in Indigenous Australia, and secondly in its contemporary interest, which led architect Jean Nouvel to include the work of eight Aboriginal designers in the architecture for the new institution.

In 1999, Nouvel expressed his wish to feature contemporary Aboriginal art in the architectural design of the building. In doing so, the French architect was showing that he fully understood the ultimate role of the museum — to put cultures on an equal footing and to promote intercultural dialogue — and proposed that this be reflected in the structure of the building. This was very well received by both the

French and the Australians. For the French, Nouvel was following the French tradition of ceiling painting. As Philippe Peltier explains:

Throughout the ages, French public or state buildings — such as the Hall of Mirrors in the Versailles Palace — have been decorated by the leading artists of the day ... In traditional Western culture, ceiling painting was never purely decorative, but also the site of story telling, often telling the tales of antique mythology. Similarly, the themes of Aboriginal paintings are taken from mythical times.⁴⁴

The MQB would become ‘an embassy’ for Australian Indigenous people, showcasing their contemporary creativity. To the Australian government, it was ‘a high profile opportunity for Australia and our Indigenous artists’. Within Australia, Indigenous affairs were especially fraught, with the federal government failing to support the reconciliation process. However, the Prime Minister, John Howard, and the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Amanda Vanstone, appreciated the value of Indigenous cultures for promoting Australia to an international audience. The government committed A\$300,000, divided between the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Australia Council for the Arts.⁴⁵ The Council was in charge of what was to become the largest international commission of contemporary Indigenous art in Australia, curated by Aboriginal curators Brenda Croft and Hetti Perkins. The resulting works are nonetheless not primarily for the public, except for the library and the facade.⁴⁶ While passers-by can see the variety of designs distantly from the street level, visitors cannot access the upper levels of the museum’s administrative building.

More problematic is the place of the Aboriginal collections within the MQB.

Here it is important to understand the place they were assigned in France prior to their arrival at the MQB. The history of France’s aesthetics approach to its ethnographic collections has been partly traced by Fred Myers in his fascinating article on Aboriginal art in France.⁴⁷ A major collection was gathered by Karel Kupka, who collected Aboriginal bark paintings in Arnhem Land during the 1950s.⁴⁸ Kupka was an artist and the paintings were presented to the French as works of art rather than ethnographic material, an initiative that received the full support of the Surrealists such as André Breton.⁴⁹ This approach later served both the MNAAO and the MQB in their quest to escape the colonial paradigm. No less than 250 bark paintings were acquired by the MNAAO during the 1960s and ‘at Kupka’s instigation — they formed the basis of Europe’s most significant collection of Australian Aboriginal barks, with their own exhibition hall’.⁵⁰ Desert acrylic dot paintings were first produced in the early 1970s and by the 1980s were well-established in the art market and being exhibited in museums of modern art worldwide, such as the Musée national d’art moderne (Georges Pompidou) in France. By the late twentieth century Aboriginal works had established a place as ‘art’ rather than ‘ethnography’.

In the early 1990s, following a national restructuring of French museums, the MNAAO tried to place some distance between itself and its colonial past. A decision was taken to buy some acrylic paintings — now internationally renowned — to complement the museum collection based on Kupka’s legacy. This purchase, it was hoped, would redefine the scope of the museum for a post-colonial era.⁵¹ The Western definition of the aesthetic value of Kupka’s Indigenous collections (in the context of the new acrylics) would, paradoxically, save the museum from the charge of colonialism.

The MNAAO managed to buy a collection of acrylic paintings, against the will of the director of the National Gallery of Australia, Elizabeth Churcher, who objected to the placement of Aboriginal contemporary art next to showcases presenting French colonial heritage of Africa.⁵² The MNAAO had distinguished itself from other museums by its permanent exhibition of Oceanic arts. But that museum did not survive the inception of the MQB, which inherited both the barks and the acrylic collection. Though collected after the colonial era, and always presented as art, both collections ended up ultimately in an ethnographic museum. This accident of history has added to the difficulty of installing a ‘decolonised’ narrative of colonisation.

The Aboriginal collections are found in the first, and largest, part of the museum, ‘Oceania’. They therefore share space with the cultural heritage of the peoples of Melanesia and Polynesia, whose exhibited objects record, as the museum guidebook notes, ‘the major stages in the history of French collections since the early nineteenth century’.⁵³ Although it is geographically sensible to have juxtaposed Maori, Aborigines and Melanesians, it is deeply problematic in terms of cultural and historical understanding: these peoples have too little in common, apart from having experienced Western colonisation, to give the impression of a meaningful whole to the viewers. Before visitors arrive at the Aboriginal exhibits, they see an ethnographic presentation of Melanesians’ relations with ancestral beings, secrets of initiates in which decorated skulls collected at the end of the nineteenth century are displayed. Thematic exhibitions consist of ritual murder in Papua New Guinea and ‘headhunting and funeral rites in the Solomon Islands’. Information is scarce: the few videos show extracts of old black and white film made by ethnographers, so visitors

are effectively in a traditional ethnographic museum reproducing the traditional Western imaginary of Oceanic peoples. Although nothing in the museum explicitly states that such people are ‘savages’, visitors are led to interpret the displays in this way.

At the very end of the ‘masks transversal’, standing apart from the rest of the Oceania wing, is a small room exhibiting bark paintings, where barely six people can stand not more than one metre away from the exhibited works. Without any introduction, the barks are ‘arranged floor to ceiling as if in a fin de siècle salon’, as Michael Utak noted.⁵⁴ The pattern of display pays homage to Karel Kupka, but no explanation of this is given, unless one looks for it in the multimedia presentations, which again can be viewed by only two or three people at a time. The acrylic paintings are also hung too close to each other, in relative obscurity, making it hard for the viewer. Some visitors managed to get information, either through the use of audioguides or as part of a guided tour, but they appeared to me to be perplexed by the presentation. The presentation of artworks dating from the 1950s and the 1980s made no sense to them in an ethnographic museum. What is recent art doing here? Isn’t ethnography about old ‘collected’ stuff? Their puzzlement revealed their lack of understanding of the roles of archaeology and ethnology, and their intersections in relation to colonial expansion. These visitors were at a loss because nothing told them that colonisation is the *historical* link that explains why nineteenth-century ritual artefacts and contemporary paintings have been put together in the same discursive frame, although they have nothing in common. Their state of confusion is the result of the French inability to articulate a coherent narrative of colonisation that allows a historical explanation for the collections.



Paljukujara Soak in the Great Sandy Desert

by Helicopter

photograph by Patrick Gries

Musée du quai Branly

Conclusion: ‘May the visitors who pass through the doors of the Musée du quai Branly be filled with emotion and wonderment’?

A few days before the opening of the MQB, Henri-Pierre Jeudy, a sociologist at the CNRS (the French National Centre for Scientific Research) wrote in the newspaper *Libération* that ‘the Musée du quai Branly should be the most beautiful sanctuary of ethnology. It will be the first time in the history of science, that a grand temple be erected as the living memory of what was a great adventure of

human knowledge’.⁵⁵ When visiting the museum, one cannot but agree with such a statement. As ethnology, the ‘daughter of colonialism’, lost its *raison d'être* at the end of colonial expansion, it cannot be presented in its conventional form without reflection. By failing to recontextualise the ethnographic collections historically — which could show how ethnology as a discipline has completely changed its modes of research and objectives — the MQB becomes a reminder of what ethnology was until recently, without any reflection about what it has become.

The progressive infiltration of a historical perspective, to provide new ways

of interpreting ethnographic collections, informs us about how our colonial history has shaped our cultural identity and our understanding of the world. The MQB's choice to retain an aesthetic approach instead of a historical one perpetuates the 'curiosity/ethnography/aesthetics' triangle and remains entrenched in a colonial paradigm. The MQB fails to provide ways to transcend the colonial era or a suitable base on which to start afresh, a base on which all peoples are on equal footing. The West cannot afford the luxury of treating non-European cultural collections as merely of 'visual appeal'; it must fully grasp the historical context of such collections. It is an institutional duty that is not achieved by briefly acknowledging the sociopolitical context of non-European heritage as part of the universal history of humanity. Other layers of history — local, national, Western — have to be acknowledged as intermingled and active in shaping narratives, and the display of objects must reflect these.

The MQB may have been more successful if it had provided a historical context for its permanent exhibitions.⁵⁶ Visitors are at present at a loss to make sense of what they see. They actively seek information, complaining about the darkness and of the cramped conditions, while struggling to see the small videos and the captions. Meanwhile, they continue to be horrified by the head-hunters, to smile at the idea of gaining prestige through the collecting of pig teeth; they wonder what 'Insulindia' is and where it could possibly be on a world map; they try to recall their trip to Mexico and what their guide there said about the Aztecs to balance the lack of information in the museum. They express surprise that not all African masks have 'big lips and a big nose' and wonder whether there is a mistake in indicating that the line-

shaped, slit eye masks come from Gabon: should not they be from China?

There is indeed a real need to 'dispel the mists of ignorance' but we must question the underlying intention of the French state, which seems to value the role of external exhibition designers over that of the curators. Was it really about paying 'homage to whom, throughout the ages, history has all too often done violence'? The museum is quite revealing of the limited extent to which France is ready to reform its grand narrative of colonisation. The opening of the museum has generated an important amount of educational material designed for schools. Some of those documents were provided by the the Ministry of Youth, Education and Research's National Centre for Educational Resources (CNDP). CNDP's journal *Textes et Documents pour la classe* (Issue 918) proposes ways that the MQB can complement the national school curriculum. During secondary schooling, the museum's collections can serve the history programs on 'great discoveries: Europe and its expansion', the economic sciences programs on 'Europe and the dominated world: exchange, colonisation, confrontation', and the French programs on (French) travel writing.⁵⁷ We are far from the alleged ground-breaking objective of the state to put world cultures on equal footing: the grand narrative remains one of Western superiority over the rest of the world, and objects retain their colonial function, that is, to illustrate Europe's domination. The museum that will embody Jacques Chirac's words — 'our calling as a nation that has long prized the universal but that over the course of a tumultuous history, has learned the value of otherness' — remains to be built.

This paper has been independently peer-reviewed.

Notes

- 1 President Jacques Chirac, address at the opening of the Musée du quai Branly, Tuesday 20 June 2006, www.ozco.gov.au/news_and_hot_topics/speeches/mqb_opening_speech/, accessed 3 May 2007.
- 2 Laurier Turgeon & Elise Dubuc, 'Ethnology museums: New challenges and new directions', *Ethnologies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2002, www.celat.ulaval.ca/acef/242a.htm, accessed 9 December 2006.
- 3 Marine Degli & Marie Mauzé, *Arts premiers: Le temps de la reconnaissance*, Découvertes Gallimard, Paris, 2000. My translation of 'reconciliation des regards', p. 105.
- 4 Comment of Professor Willem Landman in 1988, quoted by Udo S Küsel, 'Negotiating new histories in new South Africa', in Darryl McIntyre & Kirsten Wehner (eds), *National Museums: Negotiating Histories*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2001, p. 35.
- 5 Sarah Amato, 'Quai Branly Museum: Representing France after empire', *Race and Class*, vol. 47, no. 4, Sage Publications, London, 46–65, p. 56.
- 6 On the creation of the museum as public institution, see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, Routledge, London, 1995; Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, Routledge, London, 2000.
- 7 On the issue of human remains, see for example Paul Turnbull, 'Ancestors, not specimens: Reflections on the controversy over the remains of Aboriginal people in European scientific collections', *Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History*, 27 April 1997, www.jcu.edu.au/aff/history/articles/turnbull.htm, accessed July 2005; on Aboriginal critique of museum practices, see for example John Mulvaney, 'Museums, anthropologists and Indigenous peoples', *COMA Bulletin* #23, Fortitude Valley, COMA, April 1990.
- 8 See Stéphanie Bolton, 'The task force on museums and First Peoples, a decade later', www.aboriginalcuratorialcollective.org/objects/index.html, accessed 22 December 2006.
- 9 The names of these reports are quite enlightening: the Canadian report was entitled 'Turning the page: Forging new partnerships between museums and First Peoples' and the Australian one was called 'Previous possessions, new obligations: Policies for museums in Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples'.
- 10 See the US Department of Interior website: www.cr.nps.gov/nagpra/, accessed 22 December 2006.
- 11 See in particular works on issues of Western identity and the 'other' such as Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Pantheon, New York, 1978; Homi Bhabha, 'The other in question: Difference, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism', in Francis Barker, *Literature, Politics and Theory*, Methuen, New York, 1986; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1988.
- 12 See for example GLLAM, *Museums and Social Inclusion: The Group for Large Local Authority Museums Report*, University of Leicester, Leicester, 2000; Jocelyn Dodd & Richard Sandell, *Including Museums*, RCMG, Leicester, 2001.
- 13 Graeme Davison, 'National museums in a global age', in McIntyre & Wehner, *National Museums*, pp. 18–19.
- 14 Ira Berlin & Leslie Harris (eds), *Slavery in New York*, The New Press, New York, 2005, p. 2.
- 15 In England, the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum is not a national institution: it is privately owned and its creation was not supported, let alone desired, by the British Government.
- 16 See for example the museum website: www.africamuseum.be/, accessed 16 November 2006.
- 17 Andrew Osborn, 'Belgium exhumes its colonial demons', *Guardian*, 13 July 2002, www.guardian.co.uk/congo/story/0,,797565,00.html, accessed 3 May 2007.
- 18 See Jean Luc Vellut (dir.), *La Mémoire du Congo: Le temps colonial*, Editions Snoeck/Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Gand, 2005; and the exhibition website, www.congo2005.be, accessed 16 November 2006.
- 19 Turgeon & Dubuc, 'Ethnology museums'.
- 20 Musée du quai Branly website, www.quaibrany.fr/article.php3?id_article=930&R=1, accessed 9 July 2003.

- 21 Information provided by the MBQ website at www.quaibranly.fr/index.php?id=76&L=1&S=0, accessed 9 July 2003.
- 22 Chirac, opening address.
- 23 His biography and involvement at the Quai Branly can be found at www.quaibranly.fr/index.php?id=873, accessed 22 December 2006.
- 24 Julien Guilhem, 'A propos du Musée du Quai Branly ... entretien avec Emmanuel Désveaux', *Ethnologues comparées*, no. 3, 2001, recherche.univ-montp3.fr/mambo/cerce/r3/j.g.htm (my translation), accessed 2004.
- 25 This museum, called La cite nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration, will open in June 2007. It will be interesting to see how the narrative of colonisation is told there, as one of the museum's objectives is to assess the common cultural heritage of the French and immigrants to France, including immigrants from former colonies. However, following the decision of the newly elected president Nicolas Sarkozy to create a 'Ministry of Immigration and National Identity', eight of the twelve historians forming the scientific committee have decided to resign. This comes to confirm the present state of malaise of the French state in handling colonial heritage. For more information see the historians' website: www.cnhi-demission.com (English version available), accessed 4 June 2007.
- 26 Chirac, opening address.
- 27 Emmanuel Désveaux interviewed by Julien Guilhem, in Guilhem, 'A propos du Musée du quai Branly' (my translation).
- 28 ibid.
- 29 Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982.
- 30 Musée du quai Branly, *Museum Guide Book*, Musée du quai Branly, Paris, 2006, p. 124.
- 31 ibid., p. 255.
- 32 Information provided by an earlier version of the MQB website: www.quaibranly.fr/article.php3?id_article=930&R=1, accessed 9 July 2003.
- 33 Amato, 'Quai Branly Museum', p. 55.
- 34 Emmanuel Désveaux, 'Le Musée du quai Branly au miroir de ses prédécesseurs', *Ethnologues*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2002, www.erudit.org/revue/ethno/2002/v24/n2/006648ar.html, accessed 9 December 2006.
- 35 www.quaibranly.fr/article.php3?id_article=930&R=1, accessed 9 July 2003.
- 36 Quoted in Philippe Pataud Célérier, 'Museum stories: Relationships and reproductions, major and minor arts', *Art Tribal Special Report*, Spring/Summer 2004, Tribarts France, Paris, 2004, pp. 86–9.
- 37 On the debate within the commission on the museum, see Amato, 'Quai Branly Museum', pp. 56–8. On the strike of the Musée de l'Homme staff, see Aude Brédy, 'Le Musée de l'Homme en colère', *L'Humanité*, 17 December 2001, www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/2001-12-17/2001-12-17-255247, accessed 20 December 2006.
- 38 See for example the debate at the Senate on 5 February 2002, available at <http://senat.fr/seances/s200202/s20020205/sc20020205018.html>, accessed 26 December 2006.
- 39 For a detailed report of these events, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005_civil_unrest_in_France, accessed 26 December 2006.
- 40 My translation from the French 'Indigènes de la république'. For more details, see their website: <http://www.indigenes-republique.org>, accessed 26 December 2006.
- 41 Angelique Chrisafis, 'Chirac leaves controversial legacy with monument to African and Asian culture', *Guardian*, 7 April 2006, available at www.guardian.co.uk/france/story/0,,1748871,00.html, accessed 9 December 2006.
- 42 ibid.
- 43 Désveaux, 'Le Musée du quai Branly', French version available at www.erudit.org/revue/ethno/2002/v24/n2/006648ar.html, accessed December 2006.
- 44 Philippe Peltier, *Aboriginal Ceiling Paintings: Presentation*, <http://213.56.137.163/uploads/media/doc-2508.pdf>, accessed July 2006.
- 45 Australian Government (Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister for the Arts and Sport), *Australian Government Contribution to Indigenous Art*, 29 September 2004.
- 46 Tommy Watson's work on the ceiling and column in the ground-floor bookshop is accessible to the public as well as the facade by Lena Nyadbi, and a mural painting designed by Paddy Nyunkuny Bedford. Judy Watson has two works at the MQB: one is etched into the street-

- level window, visible to the public. Michael Riley's photo series is also easily seen from the street. The other Aboriginal designers and artists are Michael Riley, Gulumbu Yunupingu, Tommy Watson and Ningura Napurrula. Musée du quai Branly, 'Australian Indigenous art at the heart of the architectural project of France's Quai Branly Museum', press release, 8 September 2005. For a detailed description of their work, see www.ozco.gov.au/news_and_hot_topics/media_releases/musee_du_quai_branly/, accessed December 2006.
- 47 Fred Myers, 'Uncertain regard: An exhibition of Aboriginal art in France', *Ethnos*, vol. 63, no. 1, 1998, 7–47. Also available on the author's website: <http://homepages.nyu.edu/~frm1/>, accessed 3 May 2007.
- 48 Collections nonetheless date from early mid-nineteenth century and the largest component is that of Aboriginal weapons from south-eastern Australia that formed part of Victoria's contribution to the 1878 Paris Exposition.
- 49 Myers, 'Uncertain regard', p. 15.
- 50 *ibid.*
- 51 *ibid.*, p. 18.
- 52 *ibid.*, p. 14.
- 53 Musée du quai Branly, *Museum Guide Book*, p. 31.
- 54 Michael Utak, 'Quai to the kingdom', *Bulletin*, 4 July 2006, pp. 114–15.
- 55 Henri Pierre Jeudy, 'Un sanctuaire de l'ethnologie', *Libération*, 20 June 2006, www.liberation.fr/rebonds/187244.FR.php, accessed 3 May 2007.
- 56 The MQB also holds temporary exhibitions, but these are not analysed here as the narrative they tell differs according to their curators. If the exhibition *Qu'est-ce qu'un Corps* successfully went beyond the colonial paradigm, the exhibition *D'un Regard l'Autre* that opened in September 2006 closely followed the permanent exhibitions' discourse.
- 57 Information available at: www.cndp.fr/lesScripts/bandeau/bandeau.asp?bas=http://www.cndp.fr/revuetdc/numpreced.asp, accessed January 2007.

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