

# **From Race To Culture To Esthetics: A Museographic Journey into French Ethnology\***

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When I attended classes at the Musée de l'Homme (the National Museum of Man in Paris) in 1965-66 to prepare for my degree in ethnology, we received training in physical anthropology.<sup>1</sup> I even recall accidentally dropping, on exam day, an Inuit humerus (we still called them Eskimos then), breaking it into two pieces. Meanwhile, our favorite readings were books by Michel Leiris and Claude Lévi-Strauss who, in the wake of the UNESCO Declaration of 1950 on the question of race, explained that the significant differences between groups of humans were in fact cultural and not racial. In the end, culture prevailed over race and the physical anthropology course vanished from the Ethnology curriculum in the whirlwind of reforms of 1968. It was replaced by courses in population genetics and biological anthropology, which would study the influence of social and cultural factors on phenotypic and genotypic differences. Even though Culture had in the end won the game against Race, the debate was rooted in many years of intellectual and institutional history. The management and orientation of the Musée de l'Homme between the 1920s and the 1950s is a perfect window into this past. In this reflection essay, I draw upon my own experiences with, and readings of, this history to situate the story of the still-new Musée du Quai Branly within the changing contexts of French anthropology and ethnology, including the history of the Musée de l'Homme out of which it has arisen.

## **From Race to Culture: The Triumph of Ethnology?**

A book was recently published telling the story of the career of Paul Rivet, founder of the Musée de l'Homme and specialist on the Americas (Laurière 2008).<sup>2</sup> Rivet's meandering career path reflects the transition from race to culture. Like most "anthropological museographers" of the time, Rivet had been trained as a medical doctor. Before him there were Paul Broca, Jean Louis Armand de Quatrefages de Bréau, and Ernest-Théodore Hamy, who founded the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography in 1878; subsequent after Rivet there were Henri-Victor Vallois, Jacques Millot, and finally Robert Gessain, who from 1968 to 1979 was the last Director, later Co-Director, of the Musée de l'Homme to have been trained in medicine.

We must keep in mind the naturalist roots of the study of ethnology. The Chair of Anthropology (remember that for a long time in France, the word "anthropology" implied "physical anthropology"), which was established in 1855, and the Musée de l'Homme were both subordinates of the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle (Natural History Museum). Any evolution in the study of ethnology was then merely a function of how far the above mentioned doctors would go beyond their initial training. Hamy had already taken a first step. As assistant and later the

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\* The editor wishes to acknowledge the assistance provided by Raymond J. DeMallie and Noemie Waldhubel in the final preparation of the final French and English language versions of this essay. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

successor of Quatrefages as Chair of Anthropology, he assembled at the Trocadéro Museum collections of prehistory, (physical) anthropology, and ethnography, an emerging discipline that captivated his interest.

Rivet made an even more eloquent transition from race to culture. After serving as a military doctor in Ecuador, where he conducted his first ethnographic field work in 1902, Rivet returned to France and joined the Laboratory of Anthropology. Here he conducted research on prognathism (1909-10), and on the study of facial angles as tools for “ethnic diagnosis” in the study of the racial composition of a population. From 1910 to the mid-1920s, Rivet’s interests evolved from anthropometry to the study of cultures, as evidenced by his peer groups and the institutions with which he was associated. At the French Institute of Anthropology, founded in 1911, he worked in partnership with Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Marcel Mauss, Marcel Cohen, and Antoine Meillet and manifested, through his work, his interest in linguistics and in the study of techniques (as related to the principles of diffusionism, which prevailed at the time). In 1925, he co-founded, with Lévy-Bruhl and Mauss, the Institute of Ethnology (the name itself sounded like a cry of victory over the School of Anthropology of Paris that had been founded by Broca in 1876).<sup>3</sup> This new movement in favor of ethnology, as influenced by sociology, which was then at the height of its popularity, was confirmed when he changed the title that he held at the Natural History Museum from “Chair of Anthropology” to “Chair of Ethnology of Fossil and Modern Men.” Rivet was determined to develop a science of synthesis which would bring together the study of the physical characteristics of peoples, or anthropology proper, the material characteristics of prehistoric and sub-contemporary civilizations (prehistory, archeology, and ethnography), the study of social phenomena, or sociology, the history of religions, and the study of linguistics (see Laurière 2008:341-374). In 1928, he took the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography, which had been dormant since the death of Hamy in 1908, under the responsibility of his Chair. As a result of this merging, and with the support of Jean Zay, Minister of National Education under the Front Populaire, Rivet reorganized the Museum of Ethnography and promoted its collections in a very successful exhibition at the 1931 Colonial Exhibition in Paris.

He next launched, in collaboration with Georges-Henri Rivière, the Musée de l’Homme project, created in 1937 during the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques (International Exhibition of Art and Techniques) and inaugurated in June 1938. It was a “laboratory-museum,” organized into geographical departments (White Africa and the Levant, Black Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania) and thematic departments (physical anthropology, prehistory, musical ethnology, etc.). The museum also included a library and a workshop for restoration. Although Rivet also included the anthropology, prehistory, and paleontology collections of the National History Museum, the new establishment testified to the “triumph of ethnology” (de L’Estoile 2008:668), with an outstanding tendency to ethnic classification and “naming mania.” The galleries of the museum presented the diversity of cultures, not only with “objects of exceptional shapes and forms” but with “‘small objects’—objects of everyday life—made by inventive and modest artisans” (Laurière 2008:417), as a reminder of the “laborious origins” of civilizations. The project was both scientific and political. As a man of the Left and President of the Committee of Antifascist Intellectuals since 1934, Rivet was “moved by a remarkable commitment to teach, and he was very conscious of the public service mission he had been entrusted with” (Laurière 2008:418). His desire was “for the masses, the manual workers,

and anyone who entered the museum, to understand what they had in common with wild and primitive peoples—gestures and speech, technology and art” (Laurière 2008:418).

The Hall of Arts and Techniques, designed by Anatole Lewitzky and André Schaeffner and later modified by André Leroi-Gourhan, is representative of Rivet’s concept: to reaffirm the equal dignity of cultures and the unity of *Homo faber* and *Homo sapiens*. These years of “the triumph of ethnology” also formalized the separation between the ethnology of France and the ethnology of “Others,” represented, for the most part, by the French colonial empire to which a special program of exhibitions was devoted. As a response to the creation of the Musée de l’Homme, dedicated to the study of “Others” in terms of space and time, the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires (Museum of Folk Art and Traditions) opened in 1937 and was dedicated to the study of “Us.”<sup>4</sup>

Rivet’s concept of multi-disciplinarity, which favored ethnology, lasted for about thirty years. In 1941, Rivet fled to escape the Gestapo and Henri-Victor Vallois, who succeeded him from 1941 to 1944 and again from 1949 (following Rivet’s retirement) to 1961, did not undermine the original project, in spite of his background as an “anthropologist” specializing in races and comparative anatomy. Nor did Jacques Millot and Robert Gessain, who headed the museum starting in 1961 and 1968, respectively. Instead, the decline of ethnology at the Musée de l’Homme dates back to the mid-1970s. It followed the end of the French colonial empire and is moreover due to several factors, including internal circumstances, such as the addition of the Chair of Prehistory (1962) to the museum’s original single Chair, followed by the split of the original Chair into two Chairs, one dedicated to ethnology and the other to physical anthropology (1972). This threefold management, which contradicted the original project of a “science of synthesis,” led to detrimental rivalries within the institution.

The Chair and the Laboratory of Ethnology, whose work had declined in quality, no longer attracted young researchers to the museum but only those who were in the last phases of their careers. Meanwhile, interests had shifted from the study of techniques to the study of kinship systems and myths, while the earlier basic methods of ethnological research such as collections, inventories, and monographs had given way to more individual forms of ethnographic experiences. Starting in the early 1980s, the prehistorians and anthropo-biologists who had replaced the “physical anthropologists” took over the space previously occupied by ethnologists. This situation was clearly visible in the last three exhibitions organized at the Musée de l’Homme—a prehistory exhibition “La nuit des temps” (“The Mists of Time”) in 1990, and two exhibitions on biological anthropology and population genetics, “Tous parents tous différents” (“All Related Yet All Different”) in 1992 and “Six milliards d’individus” (“Six Billion People”) in 1994. The disappearance, or at least the dramatic decline, of ethnology at the Musée de l’Homme was accelerated by the transfer in 2003 of approximately two-hundred-fifty-thousand objects from the ethnographic collections to the Musée du Quai Branly (MQB). As for the Musée de l’Homme project, the museum is currently closed for renovation and will reopen in 2012. Its new focus will be “the great story of humans, from the beginning until today” and it will be run by its two surviving research departments, “Prehistory” and “Men, Natures and Societies.” Ethnology seems to have lost the game. Did it perhaps gain anything with the transfer of its collections to the Musée du Quai Branly?

## **Towards Aesthetics: The Defeat of Ethnology?**

The circumstances by which the Musée du Quai Branly was created are common professional knowledge. The monumental project was so costly and generated so much debate and controversy that every ethnologist today feels obliged to have an opinion on the museum.

It is a tradition in France for the head of state to take up a cultural challenge in an effort to leave his mark on the architectural and intellectual landscape: Giscard d'Estaing inaugurated the creation of the Musée d'Orsay (dedicated to 19th century art), François Mitterrand commissioned the glass pyramid of the Louvre, and Jacques Chirac was to become the man of the so-called "arts premiers" (primitive arts) with the creation of the Musée du Quai Branly. In 1990, Jacques Chirac, then mayor of Paris and someone very fond of exotic art, met Jacques Kerchache on a beach in Mauritius. Kerchache was a former art dealer with questionable practices, viewed as a sort of French Indiana Jones with a touch of Serge Gainsbourg, ("a French culture hero... whose perpetual three-day growth of beard was part of his carefully cultivated 'cigarette-dangling-from lips, lecherous persona'" [Price 2007:2]). His wish was to have a collection of so-called "arts premiers" artifacts exhibited at the Louvre museum. The Louvre curators had refused, arguing instead that such objects should be displayed at the Musée de l'Homme or even more appropriately at the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, dedicated, as its name implied, to the aesthetic productions of distant civilizations. Despite the objections, ten years later, "the unthinkable...happened" (de Roux as quoted in and translated by Price 2007:59). On April 13, 2000, Jacques Chirac, now President of the Republic, inaugurated a pavilion at the Louvre, to display "arts premiers" masterpieces selected by his friend and mentor—a friend who will also play an important role in the creation of the MQB. This museum was indeed to be the result of the implementation of recommendations from Kerchache and his team who selected objects based "not on criteria of rarity, fashion, size, material or date...but rather on the exceptional aesthetic quality of the pieces brought together" (quoted in Viatte 2006:32).<sup>5</sup> The same "aesthetic" viewpoint was endorsed by Germain Viatte, heritage curator and art historian, who was in charge of acquisitions and museography at the MQB until 2006, and who acquired 8,200 pieces for the museum between 1998 and 2005 for the tidy sum of 22 million Euros while unequivocally proclaiming the priority of aesthetics over the very minor role of ethnographic context. He wrote: "We were opposed to any attempt to reconstitute context, which often seems deceitful..., but we did believe, however, that a clear presentation of the intelligence and beauty of technical solutions, the 'design,' and the way each piece addresses concerns of the contemporary world would be extremely stimulating for visitors" (Viatte 2006:14). This preference for aesthetics led to the creation of a magnificent museum, featuring masterpieces of Oceanic, American, African, and Asian civilizations, but with no consideration for the way people live on these continents. As Anne-Christine Taylor wrote, "Branly rejects the mirror-museum model of scientific reasoning" (2008:682). Ethnology has been driven out. Nothing is said—or at least very little (on small signs on the display windows)—of the people mentioned, of their daily lives, their resources, their techniques, their social and political organizations, or their value systems; to the point that visitors leave the museum amazed, but without having learned anything of the "technical conditions of the creation of displayed objects or the symbolic universe they reflect" (Formoso 2008:672). A museum of art was born. One, even two, museums of ethnology, the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, ceased to exist when their collections (some three-hundred-thousand

objects) were transferred to the MQB. As I noted earlier, the former is to become a museum of anthropology dedicated to the “human story;” and as for the Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie, it was converted into the “Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration” (National Center of the History of Immigration) and inaugurated in October 2007. So museums follow one another, not according to scientific imperatives, but according to the preoccupations of the state and of French society. Immigration replaces Empire.

I have visited the MQB twice. The first time was with a delegation of experts on a tight schedule. I admired the architectural design of Jean Nouvel, who conceptualized the building, and the surrounding garden, a sort of Garden of Eden likely to awaken myths of primitiveness, the very myths that are so strongly conveyed by the MQB. I admired the winding ramp that leads to the “plateau des collections” (permanent collection floor), the cylindrical glass tower filled with musical instruments, and I was once again convinced that in contemporary museums, the container is more important than its contents. But I was disappointed with the objects displayed, no doubt very beautiful, but showing only a partial, reductive, merely aesthetic, view of societies and cultures. In comparison to the 15,000 objects displayed at the Musée de l’Homme, only 3,500 objects are displayed here—the difference in numbers helps give an idea of just how much information was lost. I was struck by the meager displays dedicated to the Middle East and their inadequate signage. Not a word was said about the remarkable steel known as Damascus steel—unequalled prior to Sheffield steel—that was used to make the blades of the Classical Age Iranian swords on display, or about their grips, made of walrus ivory from the White Sea. A temporary exhibit on the Body was no more convincing—the visitor was drowned in information, to the point where it no longer made any sense. It seemed as though the comprehensiveness of this temporary exhibit was an attempt to make up for the parsimony of information in the displays of the permanent collection.

I returned to the MQB in April 2009 as I was preparing for the symposium at which this paper was originally presented, and I spent a number of hours contemplating the objects displayed on the permanent collection floor. This time I had planned ahead and acquired the *Museum Guide* (MQB 2006)—which does point out that the Iranian sword grips are made of walrus ivory—and I made every effort to chase from my mind the negative criticism that the museum has received. I was seduced. It would be hard not to be impressed by an institution that now stands out, as Beaubourg once did, in the Parisian landscape, that has an annual budget of 52 million Euros, that employs—directly and indirectly—about six-hundred people, and that is home to remarkable collections for which the Guide—without great difficulty—provides much more comprehensive background information than the small display signs. As I listened furtively to visitors, I was surprised to find myself in tune with the views of Taylor, head of research at the MQB, and who therefore has good reasons to defend her institution. She wrote, “The aesthetic dimension of our exhibits serves as bait to stimulate the visitor’s imagination and desire to learn” (Taylor 2008:681). Interactive multimedia, ingeniously positioned near display windows, helps to stimulate the desire to learn and know more.

In short, I admit that I was pleased, and that I found myself, once again, going against the general opinion of my profession. Pending, unresolved issues, however, began to nag my aesthetic pleasure and good conscience: Is it really possible to remain this blind and silent about the (colonial) context in which these objects were collected? About the peoples and the individuals

who produced them? In his book on the 1998-2005 acquisitions, Viatte (2006) speaks more of the collectors who exchanged these objects among themselves and ultimately transmitted them to the museum than about the societies that produced them and the historical context that made their collection possible. The museum, we are told, is a place for the “dialogue of cultures,” but, assuming that this expression actually means something (see Debray 2007), who participates in this dialogue? It would seem as though the museographer is engaged in a dialogue with himself.

Marvelously situated on the left bank of the Seine River—albeit a designated flood zone—surrounded by beautiful and timeless gardens, the MQB offers a brief moment of happiness in a sterile atmosphere, far from the turmoil of history, from the educational missions of museums, and from the harshness of daily life here and there, yesterday and today. Quite far indeed from the realities of the past and present.

## Notes

1. This piece was presented on the occasion of the conference “Race in Culture: 20th Century Ethnology in Comparative Perspective,” organized by Alice L. Conklin and Dorothy Noyes at Ohio State University (Mershon Center) on May 1-2, 2009.
2. See Jean-Pierre Digard’s (2009) excellent review of Laurière’s *Paul Rivet: le savant et le politique* (2008).
3. Note that this new institute was funded by the Minister of Colonies and that many colonial administrators took the courses that were offered there.
4. On the subject of Museum dedicated to Others versus Museum dedicated to Us, see de L’Estoile 2007.
5. See Digard’s (2008) review of Viatte’s *Tu fais peur tu émerveilles, Musée du Quai Branly, acquisitions, 1998-2005* (2006).

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