

Les musées d'ethnologie: culture, politique et changement institutionnel.* Camille Mazé, Frédéric Poulard, and Christelle Ventura, eds. Paris: Éditions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2013. 288 pp.

Reviewed by Sally Price

There's a word missing from the title of this book, which is completely devoted to *French* "museums of ethnology." Readers looking for an assessment of the history or current state of ethnographic museums may be disappointed by this narrow focus, in which no more than an occasional tip of the hat is given to museological developments outside of France or literature about them. Readers looking for reflections on French culture and politics will, on the other hand, find a great deal of interest. This is a book about France—its politics, its ideologies, its social hierarchies, its cultural self-image, and the structure of its academic disciplines—all through the lens of museological history. (No attention is given to museums in France's overseas departments; that's a study waiting to be tackled by future researchers.)

Recent work on particular museums by young Ph.D.s accounts for most (not all) of the essays. The 20-page introduction (authored by the three editors, only two of whom contribute subsequent chapters) weaves in and out of the themes addressed in the rest of the book, many of which concern the "crisis" in French ethnographic museums of recent decades. Historical events in the nation at large (wars, demographic shifts, industrialization), the role of political power, and the relationship between Paris and the rest of the country are central. Floating silently in the background of the whole book is the French cultural hierarchy that makes ethnographic museums the poor cousins of fine arts museums—"the only ones taken seriously by the Direction des musées de France" (17, 168-69).

The book is then organized in three sections—museums that deal with alterity, with representations of France, and with specific French territories—each with three essays.

In the first one, Fabrice Grognet traces the genealogy of the musée de l'Homme back to the 18th century and offers a detailed account of its evolution up to the 21st. His reflections on the museum's relationship to a whole range of institutions—from the national natural history museum and the Trocadéro ethnographic museum to the museum of popular arts and traditions and the Jardin des Plantes—produce an immensely useful, well-documented history of French ethnographic museums. But his essay also helps us to understand how the different disciplines that fuel these museums (e.g. "*ethnologie*" vs "*anthropologie*") were conceptualized at different points in time, and how that played into decisions about their roles in the French cultural establishment.

Christelle Ventura then offers a chapter on the musée du quai Branly (which today houses the complete ethnographic collections of the musée de l'Homme), drawing on her doctoral research (courageously conducted despite president Stéphane Martin's curt refusal to give her access to the museum-in-construction on the explicit grounds of her "profile" as a student!). Her presentations of the three central players—collector Jacques Kerchache, French president Jacques Chirac, and architect Jean Nouvel—set the scene for thoughtful reflections on the

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museum's "de-anthropologization" of its ethnographic objects and the "polyphonic" (some say "cacophonous") discourses in its much-touted "dialogue of cultures."

A chapter by Anne Monjaret and Mélanie Roustan about the palais de la Porte Dorée focuses on the architecture of this remarkable building and the various messages it has conveyed over the years. Built for the colonial exposition of 1931, subsequently turned into a museum of Overseas France and then a museum of African and Oceanic art, and refitted as a center for the history of immigration after its collections were removed to the Quai Branly in 2003, its striking décor has never allowed its original role as a monument to France's colonial past to be fully erased, making it a symbolic target for activists concerned about the plight of undocumented immigrants and other present-day legacies of that past.

The second section opens with Richard Dupuis's essay on the history of agricultural museums, linking it to demographic shifts and the changing place of agrarian society in French national ideology. This turns out to be a (to me, surprisingly) central aspect of museum history in France, reflecting at times a veritable "exaltation of the mythical values of the earth" (137) and involving energetic bursts of activity such as the creation of eighty-five such museums between 1945 and 1973. The 1971 invention, in France, of the idea of "ecomuseums" stems directly from these presentations of rural life.

Martine Segalen then provides a combined autopsy and eulogy of the museum of popular arts and traditions (MNATP) in the Bois de Boulogne, to which she has devoted most of her professional life. This essay condenses material from her comprehensive book about the museum and, like Dupuis's chapter, offers interesting insights about the place of rural society in France's self image. Here, as throughout the book, cultural hierarchy, political power plays, competition for funding, heated debates about location, and tensions over the aesthetic versus pedagogical goals of museums drive the story.

Camille Mazé's chapter about the museum of European and Mediterranean civilizations (the MuCEM, which opened in Marseille in June 2013) follows logically upon Segalen's, since the MuCEM in a sense rose from the ashes of the MNATP as the heir of the latter's collections. Here, the debate about the relative weight of different aspects of French culture (Paris vs the countryside, elite vs popular culture, etc.) gives way to a debate about whether to focus on France's relationship with Europe or the Mediterranean region. This newest of the institutions treated in the book began to take shape at the same time as a more general expansion of interest in the European dimension of museums, as seen in the 2000 creation of the Network of European Museums and the international conferences it has organized (2008-2013).

Each of the chapters in the book's final section discusses museums devoted to a particular region of France—two in the extreme north (one by Hélène Melin, another by Anne Hertzog) and one in Brittany (by Serge Chaumier). Here the interest in rural culture continues but is joined by varied manifestations of France's industrial patrimony. The material covered in these chapters ranges widely, from ceramics, textiles, mining, shipping, and aeronautics to forests, abbeys, and graphic novels. And the role of tourism, largely absent from the previous sections, comes into play.

As sometimes happens in books, certain footnotes, printed in a tiny font and separated out from the main text on the ostensible grounds of extraneousness, carry key messages well worthy of being singled out for mention. Two notes in this book, for example, point to the frequent practice in France of giving the directorship of a museum to an administrator from the political party in power who is a graduate of one of the elite (and elitist) *grandes écoles*, often by summarily dismissing the academic or professional curator first assigned to the role

(65, 195). Or again, consider the footnoted remark about how exhibits at the musée de l'Homme “plunged each ‘race’ or each ‘people’ into a state of mythical pre-contact ‘purity’” where the author notes that: “Today’s musée du quai Branly was built on this same ideological heritage” (48).

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