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Echoes of the "Primitive" in France's Move to Postcoloniality: The Musée du Quai Branly

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Abstract: With the opening in June 2006 of the Musée du Quai Branly in a prime location in Paris, the French government—in the case, President Jacques Chirac—has made a major statement of its interest in being a champion of the lands of the global South. Cultural objects from the Americas, Africa, the Pacific, and Asia are displayed in a setting that manifests architects Jean Nouvel's vision of the dark world whence they come. The museum is disappointing in a number of ways for France's goal of postcoloniality and as a showcase for the once colonized cultures. Neither primarily an exhibition of cultural objects nor a celebration of the art of the South, Nouvel and his team have created an unfortunate spectacle.

(1) With not enough economic, political, or military capital for it to play a leading role in today's international politics, the French state has decided to deploy its cultural capital to win friends and influence people. In particular, the former colonial world intermittently courted by the United States and, more recently by China, seemed to President Jacques Chirac a place for France to reaffirm the defense of global cultural pluralism that it champions in UNESCO, and in the display of the world's cultural treasures in the museums of Paris. The last two French Presidents have left monuments to themselves and to their hopes for France-in-the-world as their legacies. Georges Pompidou wanted to make France once more the capital of the world's modern art with the museum which bears his name. Then, François Mitterrand wished to show himself and France as the great champions of the printed book in our computerizing age, with a new national library building that looks like four opened books on edge made of glass. Now President Chirac's legacy—the museum is destined to bear his name after he leaves office or this world—has opened to demonstrate France's great respect for the cultures of the global South. Completed in June of 2006, it is worth a visit to see exactly what form this interest in what once were—in the colonial era—major non-urban, non-literate cultures of the world takes. Let me offer here some first reactions of my visit to the opening and then focus the lens more sharply to search out more analytically useful insights.

On First Experiencing the Museum

(2) The rolling opening of the Musée du Quai Branly—for that is how it is called for now—began on the twentieth of June 2006 in the presence of President Jacques Chirac. Also invited were Kofi Annan; the Australian foreign minister, Alexander Downer; the Secretary-General of the International Organization for Francophonie, Abdou Diouf; and from Vanuatu, Chief Laukalbi. [1] As visitors waited outside the two story glass screen Nouvel had erected to protect the museum from the urban busyness of the roadway and the Seine river traffic, they could study the quai-side elevation of the building. The street-level view is anarchic. As if dropped by an inattentive giant, in no apparent order, several buildings lie close to the bigger main one. These are the offices, a space for temporary exhibitions, a café, and the bookstore-giftshop. On the roof terrace—not accessible to ordinary museum visitors—are twin streams leading to an elegant and costly restaurant.

(3) Corbusier-like, the big structure stands elevated above the ground on columns. On the second story a glass facade covers the display hall. This glass curtain was decorated with a continuous silk-screened green forest image, creating the effect of a long barrier of dense foliage. The glass jungle was punctuated along its length with different-sized yellow, orange, brown, grey, and aubergine colored boxes, perched like tree houses, on the glass verdure (Fig. 1). Once inside, one could see these as spaces punched out along the wall of the main hall for smaller thematic displays. In postmodern fashion, Nouvel had given the façade so many angles and facets that it was hard for the eye to gain a “commanding” perspective of the structure. And then precisely at 3 PM the holders of invitations were invited to enter.

Figure 1: Exhibition boxes with leafy wall behind. All photographs in this article are by the author. (Most images can be clicked for a larger version.)

(4) Twisty paths led towards the big building. The walkway was bordered

by still young plantings of grasses, bushes, and trees, which with time will create lush vegetation quoting the flora of the lands whose treasures are on display inside. Eventually, during the leafy seasons, the museum would just peep out here and there from behind the forest. But even now the entrance door was hard to find. Not the foliage, as most plants were not even knee high yet, but rather Nouvel's demotion of the idea of a grand entrance-way made me take a wrong turn. I found an entry to the building through an external door of the Lévi-Strauss auditorium, a handsome pitched hemicycle with seats upholstered in blood-red plush. Once inside, after some more wandering, I arrived at the entrance lobby of the collection.

(5) There I came on a familiar face, or actually several faces: the three story tall Northwest coast totem pole that had stood at the entrance to the Musée de l'Homme (Figs. 2, 3). Facing the pole, protected in a glass cylinder which extended to the top floor of the museum was the stored collection of musical instruments. The visitor could walk the New York Guggenheim-like ramp from bottom to top to see more of the collection than what could be displayed in the main exhibition hall. The first exit off the steep ramp led through a white walkway with an installation of images and words projected on the floor. Walking further we arrived at the entrance to a dark tunnel leading to the permanent exhibitions.

Figures 2, 3: Totem Pole as it was in front of the Musée de l'Homme and now in the lobby of the Musée du Quai Branly

(6) Tunnels usually end in blessed light. On emerging from this one, the visitor is plunged into the yet darker world of the exhibition plateau. Music with a strong drum beat was playing faintly. It could be heard almost subliminally. The drumming and other exotic music, playing in different parts of the exhibition hall, as well as the "primitive" objects vaguely visible from a distance in the obscurity of the hall made me think—as other reviews have also suggested—of Conrad's story of African savagery. [2]

(7) The low light both drew the eye more imperatively to the displays standing under cones of brighter illumination and at the same time seems to intensify the surrounding gloom. The ambient light was just enough to read the little bit of identifying text that each case posted.

(8) After my visit, I asked several art historians and museum people about

the conservationist considerations in lighting organic objects, especially things made of paper, textiles, and other light-sensitive materials. “Well, we have to be careful...” was the normative opinion of the two who had not yet seen the exhibition. The one who did, scoffed at the theatrical effect of the lighting scheme. [3] But, all the speculations of conservationist caution were made irrelevant by Nouvel’s statement in press interviews that he had lit the hall to evoke the original settings, the mystery and spirituality, of the worlds of the pieces on display. [4]

The Conradian Effect

(9) The exhibition area, one great hall, was divided into Asian, Pacific, African, and American areas. But these areas were not clearly demarcated and I was never sure where I was or how to get to some other culture zone. This wandering in the subduing darkness of primordial cultures was just the effect that Nouvel was looking for. It is responsible for the vagueness, and perhaps sadness, in my account about where I encountered the exhibits I describe. Edward Said once pointed out that in Joseph Conrad’s tales in general, and especially in *Heart of Darkness*, individuals’ efforts to “see a direct relation between the past and the present, to see past and present as a continuous surface of interrelated events, is frustrated.” And if an event in the past was “an episode of disaster..., one is made gloomy and sad.” That sadness, of course, weakens the will to find a more honest connection between past and present. “*The result is that sadness aims at eliminating the obligation to seek new ways.*” [5]

(10) What initial indications for a recommended itinerary visitors could find followed routes defined by two thick brown mound-like walls, shapes suggesting the mud construction of pre-cement civilizations. Varying in height from something like five to more than seven feet, they ran nearly the length of the great hall which itself was some one hundred and sixty feet long. But on touching the material, it turned out not to be mud, but leather. Given all the blatant “dark continent” imagery I had already encountered, the leather wall felt creepy.

(11) Television screens playing loops of rituals or dances were inserted here and there along the way. In little bends or cutouts, perhaps two people could sit and, using a touch screen monitor also imbedded in the wall, more deeply explore some cultural question pertinent to that area. There weren’t many of these interactive screens and people spent a lot of time at them. The visitor has to wander and wait before eventually a monitor becomes free.

(12) Finally, somewhere in virtual Africa, I could access a few layers on a monitor. What I saw seemed well done, interesting and—as far down as I went—as culturally informative as one might want. The intelligent touch screens in that setting made me feel even more intensely the unresolved tensions both at Quai Branly, and in our thinking, about whether we should look at striking objects from non-urban, non-literate societies as artifacts of their lives, as anthropologists might, or as works of art, as an art historian would. But as I continued my tour, the innocent dilemma dissolved in my mind. Nouvel’s museum has transcended that simple dichotomy. Let us pass now from first impressions to a more analytic view.

An Effect of the Real

(13) Quai Branly has not successfully solved the thorny problem—which, admittedly, may not have an *ideal* resolution—of how in the West to show the objects collected by conquest, swindle, and purchase during the colonial era. [6] The ancestors of this sort of museum, cabinets of curiosities of princes, or shows of war trophies captured from urban societies, gave way in the course of the imperial nineteenth century to more systematically organized museums dedicated to displaying things—including human remains—collected from defeated and colonized cultures. Nineteenth century overseas anthropology got its start here: non-European societies, it seemed logical, could be understood in the manner of archeologists, by studying specimens of their material culture. Explorers, missionaries, naval officers, or even purposeful collecting expeditions would bring back objects from the subdued peoples to be catalogued, studied, and shown to the public. So was born what became in 1878 the Paris Museum of Ethnography and its successor, renamed in 1938, the Musée de l'Homme. This museum's last great artifact-gathering expedition, the so-called "Mission Dakar-Djibouti" (1931-1933), was France's last such armed anthropological voyage. Dogon pieces it collected in Mali are on display at the Quai Branly. [7]

(14) In more than one way, World War II put to an end this kind of artifact-based anthropology. Not only was field work made impossible by war and enemy occupation, but nationalist voices both in the colonies and metropole began to demand the very European rights of nationhood, of the values of 1789, and even of socialism. [8] Studying ceremonial figures or masks would give little evidence of the societies which had provided perhaps half of France's army of liberation and whose members were now demanding their rights as fully French citizens, or failing that, independence.

(15) Claude Lévy-Strauss returned from New York exile with a new model of "social anthropology." But this was not yet the Lévy-Strauss of structuralist myths. Working in the New York public library, he had authored a great study of the *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Every culture had kinship systems, and since they manifested similarities with one another, there was nothing invidious about studying how these patterned ties contributed to social organization. Creating the Laboratory of Social Anthropology in Paris, and then named to a chair at the Collège de France, he championed a refounded discipline which largely broke free of reading cultures off their things. The tight bond of anthropologists with museums was thus severed. [9]

(16) From the 1970s on, the big question museums of society all over the West were asking themselves was what to do with all this accumulated cultural stuff. Conceptually—this second time—these foreign cultural objects lay there for the taking. In the postwar years, they were increasingly "taken" for art following a long process initiated at the turn of the twentieth century largely by Paris-based Dada artists and the surrealists around André Breton. Yet the cultural promotion of so-called "primitive" art was completed not in Paris, but in New York during World War II, where the exiled French Surrealists discovered American Indian art and taught the Americans to value it for its aesthetic qualities.

(17) In February 1988 Susan Vogel, then director of the Center for African Art in New York, opened a show called "Art/Artifact." [10] Various African objects were presented in different rooms and settings. For example, a piece of white heavy handmade rope was tied to a fishing boat, with the appropriate locally-made nets and other artifacts placed near to hand. A label explained the tools of fishing on display. Next to this display the visitor could see another length of the same dazzling white rope

handsomely coiled and arranged in the center of a well-lit white-backgrounded installation. The simple label named the society and the rope's material. Tool? Art? Susan Vogel's innovative idea was that the meaning of displayed objects came from however their observation was framed. The meaning did not come from the object but from the observer, or more precisely from the dialectic of what the curator did and what the visitor saw. [11]

(18) Despite the fears expressed by social scientists before the opening, that Quai Branly would be an art museum, it is not quite that; nor is it a museum of societies. Nouvel's scenography situates pieces collected willy-nilly in colonial times, displaying most neither in aesthetically dramatic fashion as is the case in the Louvre's Pavillon des Sessions (Fig. 4), nor historically or ethnographically contexted (Fig. 5), as many ethnologists had wanted.

Figure 4: Pavillon des Sessions in the Louvre

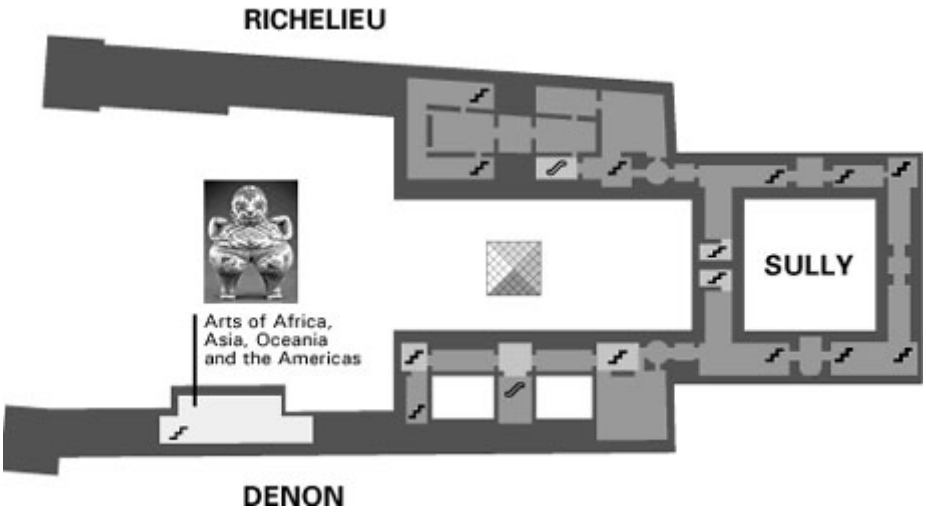


Figure 5: Northwest Coast Housepost cut in two to fit space at the Musée de l'Homme

(19) To be sure, aestheticizing is done. Objects from widely varied cultures are all shown in homogenizing elegantly shaped, adequately lit glass cases. Here and there particularly handsome pieces were isolated in dramatically highlighted cases to emphasize their qualities as great art. [12] Throughout there is a minimum of text: for instance, “Haida mask, wood, gift of heirs of André Breton,” or “Tsimshian ceremonial frontlet, gift of Lévy-Strauss.” The names of the Western/French collectors who donated pieces are given, but never information about how pieces “from the collection of the Musée de l’Homme,” for example, came to France. Often the older records are poor on this score, but more modern collecting expeditions, like the 1931 one, to the Dogon region in Mali, led for the ethnographic museum by Marcel Griaule, kept better accounts. In any case, whether the information exists or not, we are not told anything about the first, decisive, move in the

acquisition stories of any piece. We see cultural objects whose accessible history begins only in the West. [13]

(20) Unlike Frank Gehry who inserts his structures in place with little regard for the surrounding milieu, Nouvel wanted to contextualize the Musée du Quai Branly in his idea of the civilizations it will represent. [14] Hence the village layout of the site, the choice of exotic landscaping, the vegetal walls (Figs. 6, 7), the mostly earth colors and décor, the lighting as might be experienced under a dense forest canopy, and so on. In particular, the main building and the pieces it contains once more recapitulate the affinities of aesthetic modernist formalism with the *primitive imaginaire*. [15] In a simpler era all these qualities would have put the museum on the art side of Susan Vogel's art/artifact dualism.

Figures 6, 7: The external wall of an office wing; interior of an executive office

(21) But today a third term would serve us better since this powerful architectural performance creates a problematic *spectacle*. The diversity, contradictions, and complexities of the worlds the museum contains meet the eye, to take Guy Debord's words, as an "affirmation of appearance;" the lives lived in the cultures on display register "as mere appearance." Nouvel's is a spectacle made of the cultural capital of peoples of the Southern hemisphere accumulated, turned into commodities of the culture industry, and bombastically displayed. In his museum, objects are transformed into images, or rather, into one grand horizon-filling persuasion-image of the global South. This approach differs from a classical modernist one. Modernists are well aware of themes, context, biography, and history; but they choose to valorize form and formal innovation in the arts. [16]

(22) Stéphane Martin, Quai Branly's President, and the French government want the museum to be an important sign of France's special friendship for the once colonized. For Martin, Quai Branly represents France's postcolonial turn. Trophies of conquest are now to be seen as objects of mysterious beauty. Of course, the slippery nature of the word confuses what is at stake in present day French "postcoloniality." Since the end of World War II the major European powers have largely withdrawn their direct political control over the lands of the southern hemisphere. As a result of that distance of space and time, we can see much more clearly what the colonial era was about. But it is premature, if measured in international power-political, military, cultural, and economic terms, to speak of a successful postcolonial move. And as the riots of the fall of 2005 so dramatically exhibited on French television, France is not yet truly postcolonial in its domestic social relations. [17]

(23) Nevertheless, Quai Branly might justly be seen today as a successful postcolonial museum precisely because it is a spectacle. Here is a museum apparently honoring objects gathered during a less honorable colonial

past. It serves, to adapt the words of Guy Debord, "as the visible *negation* of life, as a negation of life [among the colonized] which *has become visible*. [18]

(24) Postcolonial spectacle does not come off without people. But Western publics have begun to understand the cultural framing of the apparently decontextualized works displayed in modern art museums. It is the same for "primitive" art: museum visitors know that there is an untold story behind the striking work standing alone in the well-lit display case. Like shows on the U.S. History Channel, spectacle also takes on the guise of technical information. Accordingly, here and there at Quai Branly we discover islands of anthropology. [19]

(25) The three most important ethnographic displays are revelatory of where the museum has gone wrong. In most of the four areas the visitor sees one or more arrangements of variations on the same object. Examples of the painted skins of plains Indians, the varieties of ceremonial masks of the Pacific Northwest, and from the Pacific, war clubs of similar design are displayed side by side in a case. At first look the effect is a little like the old nineteenth century ethnographic museums that organized displays on diffusionist or evolutionary principles. But here the intent is more to show how the makers and their societies, even in the case of utilitarian objects, were interested in—often subtle—formal nuance.

(26) To demonstrate the specificity and myth-creating unity of the peoples of the Americas, the anthropologist Emmanuel Désveaux has curated a small exhibition of diverse objects from all over the Americas in the main hall organized according to the dichotomies of structuralism. Between 1964 and 1971 Lévy-Strauss had published four volumes titled collectively, *Mythologiques*, proposing the mythic connections that inform this exhibit. [20] Many social scientists have difficulties appreciating the naked-dressed, honey-ashes, raw-cooked of the Lévy-Strauss school. It is a very mysterious way to show the intellectual unity of humanity. A Northwest Coast conical woven ceremonial hat is exhibited next to a South American conical Indian basket in Désveaux's exhibition. Same forms, but reversed, so in some deep sense linked, the curator seems to be claiming. Beyond such mystifications, there is little additional explanatory material. [21]

(27) The great multiplicity from pole to pole of the economies, social organizations, gender relations, and mythologies of indigenous America are captured in a few dualities of speech in this structuralist scheme. If we knew the specifics of every case under investigation, we would not need science to sort out a complicated world. But when the sorting device has such a large mesh as this, we lose too much information important both for understanding of and action in the world.

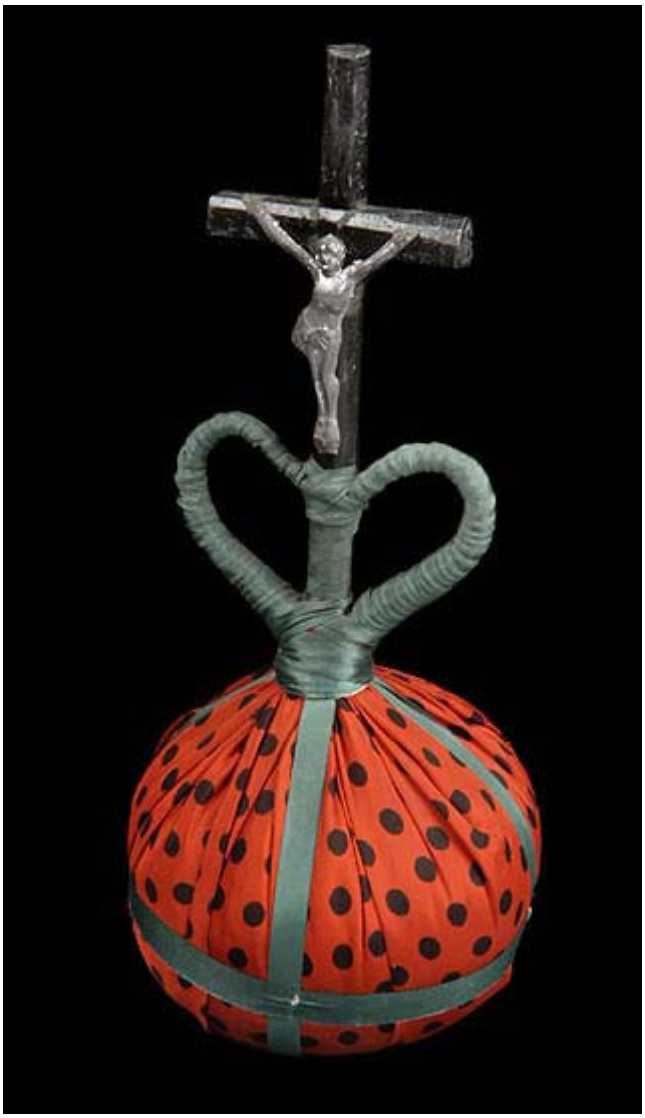
(28) The third and most fascinating anthropological display is called "African Heritage" in the English version of the trilingual signage, "Herencia Africana" in the Spanish version, but curiously "Les Amériques noires" in French. The display case faces backward from the entrance at the far end of the walk through the cultural areas. The printed matter in the English version reads as follows. [22]

> It is impossible to dissociate the colonization of the Americas from the slave trade that brought millions of Africans to work on New World plantations between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. These deported slaves duly created Afro-American cultures throughout the Caribbean, Brazil and the southern United States. African slaves adapted musical, artistic, and spiritual traditions to their new American

surroundings. In the sphere of religion, Haitian Voodoo and the Candomblé cult in Brazil became essential factors of national identity. Each deity of African origin, with its own special attributes has a double among Christian saints.

(29) "Les Amériques noires" is the most culturally sophisticated display. But its themes of empire, slavery, black skins, cultural métissage, and even nation-building are not picked up anywhere else on the exhibition plateau. The exhibit was largely the initiative of a specialist on Mexican cultural mixing (*métissage*), anthropologist-historian Serge Gruzinski. It displays the striking red, black dotted, and stuffed-with-a-don't-ask-what's inside-cloth globe contained in a metal armature surmounted by a crucifix (Fig. 8), which was the image used on the poster for the large conference Gruzinski had organized on cultural métissage in April 2004. A banner decorated with sewn patterns and sequins in the Haitian Voodoo manner shows Saint James Major—like Saint George, important to many of the multiply traditional religions of the Americas—sitting astride a horse. A naïve painting from the colonies shows mixed artifacts and rituals. Wrought iron figures, tridents, and not quite Christian crosses all give evidence of the mixing of African and Christian belief practices caused by the transportation of the slaves to work in the new world.

Figure 8: Voodoo orb with Crucifix



(30) But these are ethnographic displays of a new kind. In the first

example we are shown multiple versions of often utilitarian objects as variations in an art form. The second, the Lévy-Strauss-structuralist display, proposes—abstracted from real lives—an idealist unity and uniqueness of all new world cultures.

(31) The third case presents artifacts evidencing cultural mixing, or to be specific: indigenous religions plus Christianity plus ongoing invention. Although easily missed because of its poor location, the exhibit proposes a valuable additional dimension to the museum's displays. But it is the only place that this idea is shown rather than told. By its uniqueness on the exhibition floor "Les Amériques noires" suggests that métissage is unique in history, rather than the basic truism that cultures have always borrowed, traded, and mixed. The two transverse paths across the museum's long axis suggest cultural contact of neighboring zones. But that is ancient history, and misleading as well. The contacts were often from very far away: Pacific cowry shells are found in all four areas, as are European trade beads. What we see sometimes as the "golden age" of the art of a non-European society usually happens once the artists get Western tools—which they never refuse—to make elegant versions of what they made before contact. Contemporary knowledge of global cultural networks puts the museum's simple depiction of cultural interconnections in a way that has the unintended effect of primitizing the description of how the cultures on display were early connected to the elaborating world system. This ahistoricity is where the blind spots of modernist aesthetics and anthropology converge. For as both in modernism and cultural anthropology we are shown locally unique objects existing in an ethnographic and aesthetic *Now*, or more accurately in a ghostly timelessness.

(32) If the museum's spectacle removes what it exhibits from both the movements of historical time and changes of place, its insistent contemporaneity puts into relief a nagging question about what we were seeing: are these cultures dead, changed, still creative, or just part of the swelling mixture of cultural flotsam and jetsam that defines the global age? "The Black Americas" exhibit attempts to explain cultural persistence-and-change today at least in a realm of some world religions. But, to put the overarching theme of the new American Indian Museum in Washington (Fig. 9) as a question for Quai Branly, the people who created these things and had these beliefs, "Are they still here?" [23]

Figure 9: Entrance to the Cherokee hall at the National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C.

(33) Two interrogations nest in that simple phrase. First, it should be noted that it is impossible today to mount an exhibition of indigenous cultural objects in the United States or Canada without the full cooperation and participation of artists, elders, and community leaders from that society. That was not the case with Quai Branly. What might still be a living or remembered cultural tradition in the area on display is ignored in Chirac's museum. From the Quai Branly perspective, at least at this point, "they are no longer here." [24] Second, the "Are they still here?" question also wants to know: are the artists of the cultures on display still making pieces in the societies' traditions; or quoting from tradition; or making "airport art;" or, refusing the traditional styles, but proudly wearing their

ethnic identities nevertheless, making art like their fellow artists in New York, London, Paris, and Berlin? (Fig. 10) What is Quai Branly's relation with contemporary art?

Figure 10: Mask by contemporary Indian artist Tony Hunt, Jr. for sale at the NMAI giftshop

(34) Nouvel invited eight members of an Australian aboriginal artists' cooperative to paint the corridors and window frames of the office building on the rue de l'Université side. From the sidewalk one can see the lintels and the sills of the windows covered systematically with regularly repeated patterned black and white, and sometimes black, red and yellow abstract designs. These paintings are continuations of the same patterns which cover the ceilings and side walls inside (Figs. 11, 12). Moreover, one of the artists, Judy Watson, has painted the outside wall of the same building with what, to my inexperienced eye, looked like ranks of fat grey caterpillars climbing a steep hill. So, there is contemporary art in the Musée du Quai Branly, if for the moment, only from other nations' former empires—and as decor. [25] But also on this rue de l'Université side, close to where the Australians painted, there is a hall for temporary shows of—we are promised—the contemporary art of the global South. The first one, an installation by Yinka Shonibare, a Nigerian-born Londoner, "Jardin d'Amour," is scheduled to open in the spring of 2007. [26] Displaying art made today by artists from the South as either interior design or in temporary exhibitions are inadequate answers to the question—which the planners of Quai Branly seem not seriously to have posed themselves—of the status in the West of the present day art of the South.

Figures 11, 12: Corridors and exterior window sills of the office wing of

The Dream of Unreason

(35) After a brief tour of the rather uninteresting gift and book shop (also with an Aboriginal-painted ceiling), a smaller, simpler, white building next to the grand "government house" of this little colonial village, I left the site and found a café away from the museum—where would Western energy be without this African plant—and tried to digest the mystical-religious mis-en-scène I had just experienced.

(36) A dark cool place, perhaps in the Louvre. Magnificent Romanesque columns, their capitals showing wonderfully strange animal and human figures, support its ceiling. An altar stands at one end with a beautiful triptych on it. It is Mathias Grünewald's Issenheim alterpiece (which is in Colmar; but my imagination has begun to redecorate the café). Beautiful carved wooden screens border the triptych. The magnificent organ is playing churchy music, incense fills the air, and actors dressed as priests scurry about doing priestly things. There are staffed confessionals along the sides which bear a sign that offers "fun penances" for good confessions. Another sign point to monk's cells in the basement where interesting religious experiences are promised to visitors. A notice announces masses on the hour, each time following different rites. To enrich the visit, tour phones—with the voice of Pope John Paul II speaking to you in any language you want—and religious garb with a choice of Orders are offered for rent. I suppose having read a little Jean Baudrillard and seen *The Truman Show* and *Wag the Dog*, longbefore I visited Quai Branly, had made my critical unconscious sensitive to the fictions of contemporary sociopolitical life.

(37) My reverie was not art, but many of the things I imagined were splendid, nor was my fantasy ethnography, although in my church visit were music, costumes, priests, rituals, and mystery. I had imagined a spectacle. And Nouvel's dark museum of the primitive evokes endless new ideas for similar spectacles: recreations of the Paris of 1789, of 1830 (bigger than *Les Miserables*, the musical) of the bittersweet city of Edith Piaf, or, maybe most inviting to the tourists who are the target audience

for the Musée du Quai Branly, a safe trip to wild, dangerous places.

(38) We see in a most disturbing form in Nouvel's museum the danger at the heart of Debord's complaint: that cultural life is being transformed into a commodity by the agency of spectacle. It is true that everywhere museums today need the money that large publics bring, and that they compete with television, high tech films, and Disney. I am not engaged in the great American sport of French bashing. [27] Many American museums are already far along the path to becoming venues for commoditized spectacle. Recall the 1998 Guggenheim "Art of the Motorcycle" exhibition, or its 2000-01 show of Armani clothes. [28]

(39) Indeed—unfortunate distinction though it may be—French museums are moving to the forefront of the museology of the spectacle. Last summer, timed for the opening of the *Da Vinci Code* in Paris movie houses, the Louvre was offering both maps and recorded guides for a *Da Vinci Code* tour. At the same time the bookstore displayed piles of the novel for sale. But how far along the road to cultural capital commodified as spectacle can France go before the French "exception" becomes a marketing strategy only?

Notes

[1] Vanuatu, the former Hebrides Islands, which in colonial times the French had administered with the British at a certain moment had become a target for Presbyterian missionaries who frowned on the continuation of the local pagan beliefs and practices. The French had intervened to save the indigenous culture—at least in Chief Laukalbi's account—by driving out the missionaries. In thanks the people of Vanuatu had sent a representative along with a pole carved in the local way to the museum's inauguration. Among the other dignitaries in the audience were Eliane Toledo, wife of the newly-elected Indian President of Peru, and of course, Claude Lévy-Strauss.

[2] I felt these Conradian vibrations and wrote my impressions before I had read Michael Kimmelman's scathing review in the 2 July 2006 *New York Times*, "A Heart of Darkness In the City of Light." So here for once the findings of both auteur and reception theories—Nouvel wanted what Kimmelman saw and disliked—harmoniously, if negatively, converge.

[3] Let me thank my consultants: Aldona Jonaitis, director of the University of Alaska Museum, my son, Ethan Lebovics, of the Science Museum of Minnesota, who works as an exhibition installation manager, and Patricia Mainardi, former Executive Officer of the CUNY Graduate Center Program in Art History, who twice visited the exhibition.

[4] See the transcript of Nouvel's interview on Arte TV at www.arte.tv/fr/recherche/1246272.html (accessed 27 January 2007). Video excerpts (requiring RealPlayer) are available at www.arte.tv/fr/connaissance-decouverte/quaibranly/Jean_20Nouvel/1244954.html (accessed 27 January 2007). Nouvel speaks of the lighting in the first of the three vignettes ("La description du projet"). Unfortunately, Marlon Brando is no longer available to recreate Mr. Kurtz.

[5] Prefiguring his later work, Said did his doctoral thesis on Conrad, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 95, 101.
Italics mine.

[6] Roland Barthes's phrase "effect of the real" refers to the use of

recognizable real places, situations, and appointments to enhance the credibility or power of a work of fiction.

[7] Benoît de L'Estoile, "From the Colonial Exhibition to the Museum of Man: An Alternative Genealogy of French Anthropology," *Social Anthropology* Vol 11, no. 3 (2003), 349; Nélia Dias, *Le Musée ethnographique du Trocadéro, 1878-1908* (Paris: Ed. CNRS, 2003); George Stocking, (ed.), *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

[8] Actually, it was more complicated than I can relate in the text. To the degree it could, Vichy's overseas administrators encouraged indigenous peoples to take pride in their cultures. In part, a reaction of the Right to the totalizing republicanism they had replaced, in part, to keep their colonials from falling for the blandishments of the Japanese Greater Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, Vichy's colonial policy inadvertently fuelled the postwar growth of independence movements. See further Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001)

[9] Of course, this is not entirely true, as for example his structuralist readings of Northwest Coast Indian masks *Way of the Masks* suggests. But, since Lévy-Strauss's reorientation of the profession, it is hard to name works by anthropologists that rely primarily on collected cultural objects as evidence for statements on how societies are organized. Hence, the anthropologists left the door ajar for art historians to enter.

[10] The catalogue of this pathbreaking show contains a fine Introduction, see Susan Vogel, ed., *Art/artifact* (New York: Center for African Art, 1988).

[11] Back in the 1980s this viewer-constructs-the-thing-viewed was a radical new but compelling idea. It was translated in the hands of a few sophisticated museum thinkers as provocative permanent exhibits. From 1980 until his recent (2006) retirement, Jacques Hainard directed the ethnographic museum of Neufchatel Switzerland. He organized his exhibitions as moments in the history of Western museum representations of objects from non-urban societies: e.g. a room set up like a cabinet of curiosities, through various anthropological takes from the nineteenth century, to the museum of "primitive" art model, and finally the post-modern room (with objects from many cultures—including those of the West) cluttering a banquet table.

[12] As art historian Thomas Beachdel pointed out in a personal communication, the clear glass exhibition cases, while nicely transparent, at the same time sow visual confusion as it is difficult to concentrate one's view on the contents of a case because of the ocular noise coming from the very closely-spaced neighboring cases.
Imagine Russian nesting dolls made of different glass figures viewed all at once.

[13] With our foretaste of the recent increase in demands for improperly taken artworks to be given back—the Getty Museum Italian scandal, objects now voluntarily to be returned by the Metropolitan Art Museum, and the Greeks' renewal of their older outstanding claim for the Parthenon pieces at the British Museum, we will continue to see a worldwide increase in claims for restitution of all cultural goods. And of course, one day, not long from now, either French people whose ancestors lived in the former colonial empire or, more likely, heads of the states created after decolonization will arrive at the Musée du Quai Branly to request the return of their cultural treasures. When in the course of a conference on

the eve of the museum's opening (*France and its Others: New Museums, New Identities*, sponsored by the University of Chicago Center in Paris, 1-2 June 2006) Abaubakar Sanogo, a francophone African graduate student studying film at the University of Southern California, asked the French museum administrator participants about returning cultural articles, one heard in response a marvelous baroque discourse on what a complicated question that was. The officials' double-talk showed that none of the administrators there had given this issue much thought.

[14] Conversation with architectural historian Nebahat Avcioğlu of the Columbia University Institute for Scholars, Paris, 26 June 2006 Paris.

[15] See chapter 4 "France's Black Venus," on the affinities between empire and aesthetic modernism in my *Imperialism and the Corruption of Democracies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[16] Following Marx, Debord is decrying capitalist societies' making all use values into exchange values, and then—his contribution—presenting the resulting cultural world of commodities as a kind of theater of the real.

[17] Ibid. chapters 1 and 2, and my paper "Two Paths to Postcoloniality: The Musée du Quai Branly and the National Museum of the American Indian," given 1 June 2006 at the conference *France and its Others: New Museums, New Identities*, sponsored by the University of Chicago Center in Paris.

[18] From the Black & Red English-language printing of the 1977 translation of Debord's *La Société du Spectacle* (Paris: Champs Libre, 1971), posted on the Debordian Website at http://library.nothingness.org/articles/all/all/display/16 (accessed 21 January 2007), see "The Society of the Spectacle," trans. Chapter 1, para. 10 (italics are Debord's; text in brackets is mine). Somewhat differently, Michael Kimmelman concluded in his harsh review, that "Quai Branly's story is the spectacle of its own environment." Still captivated by the aesthetic moderns' claim of the universal applicability of their canons, he held up the totally decontextualized art exhibit at the Pavillon des Sessions in the Louvre as the way to go, see Michael Kimmelman, "Heart of Darkness in the City of Light," *New York Times*, 2 July 2006.

[19] The anthropologist Maurice Godelier, the original research director, was literally locked out early in the planning process, and was replaced by the former student of Lévy-Strauss, Emmanuel Désveaux, who in less than a year gave way to Anne-Christine Taylor. She is interested in the "ways ordinary or industrial objects become works of art," see the interview with her by Nicolas Journet, "Retour à l'objet de l'art," *Sciences Humaines* 3 (June-August 2006), 18. I detail what Godelier told me in an interview about his coming back from vacation and finding the lock changed in his office on pp. 154-57 in my *Bringing the Empire Back Home* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Soon after his departure from the Quai Branly planning Team, Roger-Gérard Schwartzenberg, Minister of Research awarded Godelier the highest honor of the national research foundation, the CNRS Gold Medal for scientific achievement.

[20] *Mythologiques I-IV* (trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman): *Le Cru et le cuit*, 1964 (The Raw and the Cooked, 1969); *Du miel aux cendres*, 1966 (From Honey to Ashes, 1973); *L'Origine des manières de table*, 1968 (The Origin of Table Manners, 1978); *L'Homme nu*, 1971 (The Naked Man, 1981).

[21] That was my feeling after trying carefully to read Lévy-Strauss's handsome celebration of the masks of his fetish peoples of the Pacific

Northwest, *The Way of the Masks*.

[22] I have not altered the rather infelicitous English text, but include here the original French version for the reader to compare.

Les Amériques noires

> La colonisation de l'Amérique est indissociable de la traite de millions d'Africains vers les plantations du Nouveau Monde entre les 16e et 19e siècle. Cette déportation a donné naissance à des cultures afro-américaines dans l'ensemble géographique constitué des Caraïbes, du Brésil et du sud des Etats-Unis. Les esclaves africains ont adapté les traditions musicales, graphiques et spirituelles à leur nouvel environnement américain. Dans le domaine religieux, le Vaudou de Haïti ou le Candomblé du Brésil sont devenus des éléments d'identité nationale. Chaque divinité d'origine africaine, associée à différents attributs, se double de la représentation d'un saint chrétien.

[23] "Two Paths to Postcoloniality..." *France and its Others* (see note 17).

[24] In North America, at least, the Indian myths collected and published by Franz Boas, for example, are regularly replaced in the exhibition information by the often differing stories that contemporary elders tell the curators.

[25] Three of the eight Aboriginal artists came to Paris for the opening: Judy Watson and Yunupingu—whose younger brothers Galarrwuy and Mandawuy, sing in the rock band Yothu Yindi, as well as John Mawurndjul from Maningrida in Arnhem Land. The museum's currently slim acquisitions budget is being used mostly to fill holes in the collection. There is no policy that I know to systematically acquire contemporary art from the four areas on display. For more on the larger strategies and divisions of labor regarding acquisitions and exhibitions in the French national museum system. See my "Two Paths to Postcoloniality..." *France and its Others* (note 17).

[26] According to the museum's web announcement, the exhibition was inspired by French gardens. Amidst the growing things and the fountains of her installation, the artist will "reflect on identity and history at the crossroads of the two cultures to which she belongs."

[27] Nor have I found much merit in the mourning rites of those attached to that old coffin of colonialism, the Musée de l'Homme. For an instant book which came out the day the Musée du Quai Branly opened, see the history of its creation from its beginnings in Kerchache's and Chirac's heads to just before the formal opening in June 2006 by the anthropologist Bernard Dupaigne, *Le Scandale des arts premiers: le véritable histoire du musée du quai Branly* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2006). From 1991 to 1998 Dupaigne had served as Director of the Ethnology Laboratory of the Musée de l'Homme. His book is understandably quite critical of the dissolution of the older institution to create Quai Branly.

[28] The Guggenheim's website hyped the show in the language of a fanzine, the exhibition "*Giorgio Armani,* with an innovative design by Robert Wilson, presents Armani's work and celebrates his legendary career."

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