

# Negotiating Colonial History:

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## African Arts Exhibitions in Contemporary French Museums

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## Introduction

Over the past decades, the exhibition of African arts in western museums has been particularly scrutinized, and introduced a number of discussions regarding the representations made in these institutions of so called non western cultures, particularly in relation to the rise of postcolonial studies. However, despite the wide acknowledgement of the criticisms addressed to museological representations of ‘other’ cultures, changes in museum practices can be slow and are often challenging, which has been particularly true in French institutions for a variety of reasons which will be explored further in this thesis. Indeed, although curatorial teams are acutely aware of the questions the exhibition of African arts can pose, museum displays have seldom evolved towards the level of postcolonial self-reflexivity advocated by numerous scholars. For example, the Quai Branly museum in Paris, an institution dedicated to the exhibition of ‘non western’ arts, which is currently celebrating its ten years of existence, while being an important research center, has often been criticized for the approach demonstrated by its display, at times recalling the primitivist framework used in older exhibitions.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, while a significant part of the African art collections currently stored and exhibited in French museums originated from the former French colonial empire, mentions of this particular part of history are still met with reluctances, and tend to raise difficulties within the displays, a phenomenon which consequently impacts the presentation and treatment of the works, as it will be explained along this thesis. In fact, although discussing the colonial heritage has been a challenge for most former colonial powers in Europe, a number of nations have already engaged in the conversation through the establishment of various public spaces, including museums of the colonial history, as it is for instance the case with the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. Such an institution however does not exist in France, and while the French colonial history is customarily left aside within African art exhibitions, the topic has become increasingly discussed over the past fifteen years in the French social and political sphere, leading to tensions and controversies. In fact, as it will be further analyzed in the first chapter of this thesis, although the colonial history was partially forsaken from the national historical narrative after the 1960’s and the end of the decolonization process, this tendency was however reversed around the 1990’s. Since then, the colonial past has slowly

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<sup>1</sup> Musée du Quai Branly, “Recherche Scientifique, Colloques et Enseignements”, accessed on 20/06/2016, <http://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/recherche-scientifique/activites/colloques-et-enseignements>

became a major subject of concern in the French society, leading to various governmental measures and public debates, which however still raise paradoxes and difficulties.

A number of French African arts exhibitions, such as the one on sight at the Quai Branly museum, originated from former colonial institutions, such as the Colonial Museum of the Porte Dorée Palace (1931-1935), which will be further discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. As a result, although contemporary exhibitions showcase various types of objects, some of which having no direct connection with the colonial past, the history of the exhibition of African arts in France remains linked with the nation's history insofar as most of the first exhibitions dedicated to these artworks used to showcase African artists and their cultures as 'Primitive' ones, presenting the objects in a manner that would particularly underline their assumed 'primitiveness'. Although such approaches have since been firmly criticized and abolished within French museums, involuntary vestiges of these frameworks might arguably still hover in some institutions, as it will be further discussed in the first chapter of this thesis

Furthermore, museums in France constitute authoritative public spaces that might be understood as significant sites of memory for the nation. Indeed, the particular narratives presented through their displays tend to reflect or respond to the national perspectives commonly formulated on certain topics. In fact, the links between national identity and museums have been well established by a number of scholars, and will be further detailed in the third chapter of this thesis. Moreover, many contemporary French museums of African arts shelter and exhibit objects that were collected during the colonial period. Although the methods of collection of these particular works will not be explored further within this thesis for reasons of length, it might however be necessary to remind that although some artworks are nowadays the objects of repatriation claims, it concerns a minority of the works. Indeed, the acquisition of African artworks by French museums during the colonial period was primarily characterized by various forms of exchanges and legitimate economic transactions.

Regarding the connections between museums, as public institutions, and the national discourse, the analysis of the vestiges of the colonial history within contemporary French exhibitions of African arts might appear as particularly revealing of the current difficulties the French contemporary society is facing in interpreting and re incorporating its colonial history into its national narrative. In fact, this thesis will even argue that the ghost of colonialism might still act as a form of repressed memory within exhibition spaces, impacting the objects presented as well as the displays, but remaining unspoken of for the most part, a point that will be further developed in the third chapter. As a result, this thesis will attempt to discern how the representation of African arts in French public museums could be understood as

symptomatic of the country's contemporary difficulties encountered in the discussion of its colonial past?

In order to frame the discussion, the first chapter will be dedicated to the methodological framework used during this analysis, and offer a brief survey of some of the major points of discussion concerning the exhibition of non western art made over the past few decades in relation to the rise of the New Museology, a school of thought which will be explained later. It will also address the French context through a brief survey of the contemporary concerns concerning France's colonial past, and evoke the history of some of the country's major exhibitions of African art. The second chapter will evoke the links between museum displays and the notion of identity, reviewing the history of the representation of African arts in order to evoke the complex processes of appropriation and re interpretation of the works at stake within the western institutions. Finally, the third chapter will be centered on the contemporary concerns raised by the negotiation of the colonial history, and take the example of the River display, used at the Quai Branly Museum, as an illustration of Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology within French exhibitions. This chapter will also finally review some of the new approaches that have been introduced in some European and American museums.

## **Chapter 1: Framework and Contextualization**

### 1.1. Methodological Framework and Key Concepts

As this thesis will be dedicated to the study of the representations of African arts within French museums, it will briefly discuss some of the major contemporary exhibitions displayed in the country, in order to offer readers a broad overview of the current functioning of these institutions. The analysis however aims at understanding the presentation of African artworks in relation with the French colonial past, and the current difficulties encountered in the evocation of this part of history, as symptomatic of the nation's struggle to confront its colonial past. As such, it will particularly focus on public institutions. Indeed, public museums, in addition to representing a major part of the French cultural system, might be understood as particularly powerful agents in the construction of canons within the museum world, as well as symbolical of a certain national discourse. In this respect, the Quai Branly museum in Paris could be considered as a leading institution, and as such, it will be closely analyzed as a major example of the current tensions and paradoxes underlying the exhibition of African arts in French public museums.

Furthermore, this thesis will primarily focus on art museums rather than anthropological ones, but some of the differences and similarities of the two types of institutions will nonetheless be further explained in the second chapter. However, because of the limited length of this thesis, the argument will primarily focus on the example of the Quai Branly museum, which will be further described later in this chapter, as well as in the third chapter. Despite these limitations, one should nonetheless keep in mind that France presents a great diversity of museums showcasing African arts, both in Paris and in the Provinces, both public and private institutions, founded between the middle of the nineteenth century and the contemporary period.<sup>2</sup> Finally, although this thesis is first and foremost concerned with contemporary displays, it will also regularly refer to historical museums and exhibitions, in order to understand the lasting impact of the colonial period into French contemporary institutions.

The understanding of the denomination 'African arts' could represent a first issue in the analysis of these displays, as it can be thought as a particularly broad category including various types of objects, from textiles to paintings, and contemporary artworks as well as ancient ones. Considering that this thesis aims at understanding the relationship between

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the history of 'non western' art exhibitions in France, see Aldrich, "The Colonial Legacy of Non-Western Art in French Museums", 2005, p.245-290

French museums and the objects they display through a historical lens, the core of this argument will be targeted on historic sub-Saharan African sculptures. Indeed, going back to the early twentieth century onwards, this particular group of objects has slowly become a form of canon in the representation of African cultures, as African masks were notably popularized as a source of inspiration for avant-garde artists such as Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) or Alberto Giacometti (1901-1966). An important part of the collections acquired by French museums of African arts were gathered during that particular period as a consequence of these rising interests. Moreover, these same objects were also showcased in later major exhibitions, such as *Primitivism* in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, or *Magiciens de la Terre*, presented at the Centre Pompidou in 1989, which contributed to spark the current trend of discussions on the representations of non-western arts. Finally, focusing on African historical sculptures seemed more coherent as these works still represent the largest part of the current French exhibitions, and are presented as a focal point within the displays evoked in this thesis. Furthermore, many museums create a distinction between sub-Saharan and Maghreb African countries, which this thesis will echo as it focuses primarily on French museums and their displays. As a result, the understanding of African arts in this particular context will have to be restrained, and although this nomenclature might not do justice to the multiplicity of art forms existing throughout different historical periods across a whole continent, nor evoke the vitality of its contemporary art scenes, it is however primarily designed to reflect on the terminology employed by the museums analyzed throughout the argument. In a similar vein, the terms ‘western’ and ‘non-western’, will also be used along this thesis despite their intrinsic limitations and the artificial dichotomy of ‘self’ and ‘other’ they tend to imply, which will be further explained in the second chapter. Considering that this study will inquire into the current representations of African arts in a former European colonial power, this frame of analysis, despite its issues and constraints, will serve as a functional tool, and the dichotomy it might imply will be further analyzed in the second chapter of this thesis.

Furthermore, as it has been previously mentioned, the essay will also evoke a number of post-colonial theories and writings, and consequently apply the terms ‘colonial’ and ‘post-colonial’ as respectively temporal and theoretical frameworks. While the beginnings and the development of the colonial period in France will be described in the following parts of this chapter, it might seem useful to recall that the end of the decolonization process is generally understood as corresponding to Algeria’s independence in 1962, after the liberation of other colonies situated in Asia and different regions of Africa. The notion ‘post-colonialism’ will be



first and foremost understood as encompassing the theoretical body of texts that developed as a response to the cultural social and political legacies of the colonial period. The term itself might however appear as problematic if thought as clear-cut chronological point. In fact, ‘post colonialism’ might imply a different temporality, a time for which the colonization would remain a thing of the past and, and as it has been highlighted by Ella Shohat, such a perspective might tend to: “undermin[e] colonialism’s economic, political, and cultural deformative-traces in the present”.<sup>3</sup> The denomination will however be useful as a theoretical framework, and its temporal implications will be further discussed in the third chapter of the essay.

### 1.2. Exhibiting African Arts and the New Museology

The past decades have witnessed the emergence of new theoretical perspectives as well as changing practices within the museum world, which aimed at interrogating the methods and functions of the institutions. Often called the ‘New Museology’, this current of thought appeared during the 1970’s in reaction to the growing criticisms museums were subjected to, as they were notably perceived as elitist institutions.<sup>4</sup> Departing from the idea that museums create knowledge and discourses through their choices of displays, a greater attention has been given to the notion of representation within exhibitions. The concept of canon for instance has been called into question as art museums have started to be understood as constructing particular narrative of art history through a selection of works, and consequently leaving a number of contrasting voices unheard.<sup>5</sup> The choices made in museum displays might indeed tend to normalize some discourses and legitimize certain artworks over others, a process which henceforth illustrates the significant role of major institutions as cultural ‘taste makers’. Although this type of mechanism is ineluctably linked with the creation of any form of display, which in order to build a coherent structure needs to select a number of objects and perspectives, the New Museology has nonetheless allowed for more reflexivity on exhibition making processes, and questioned museums’ impacts by introducing a shift of focus from objects towards ideas.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, museums have become understood as important economical, social, and political agents. Indeed, the constitution of canons contributes to add value to certain types of

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<sup>3</sup> Shohat, 1992, p.105

<sup>4</sup> McCall & Gray, 2014, p.20

<sup>5</sup> Macdonald, 2006, p.3

<sup>6</sup> Macdonald, 2006, p.2

objects, impacting the art world's economy, as it will be further illustrated in the second chapter of this thesis. More importantly, through their pedagogical ambition, exhibitions also contribute to the shaping of a common knowledge for their communities. As they bring forth a selection of narratives and values, towards which visitors are invited to identify, they participate in the formulation of a common knowledge and identities.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of the impact of the New Museology and the rise of interest for post colonial studies, the exhibition of non western art has become a major topic of discussions in the museum world over the past few decades.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, a growing number of scholars and museum practitioners started to raise their concerns about various display practices during the 1980's and 1990's, and the reactions induced by the famous 1984 MoMA exhibition, *Primitivism in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* constitute a good example of this change of perspectives. The show presented numerous western avant garde works in conversation with the African, Native American and Oceanic artworks that famously influenced a number of these artists. The first issue posed by the exhibition laid in the description of these later artworks as 'primitive' and 'tribal', in opposition with a 'modern' western approach. This attitude consequently reduced African arts to an intuitive, even uneducated, form of expression that would spontaneously emerge from artists, and presented it in diametrical opposition to the 'civilized' western art history. Moreover, the artists' perspectives on aesthetics were often completely dismissed as the exhibition presented a singular narrative of art history fixated on western criteria of taste, considered as universal, and focused on a self-centered interpretation of the artworks.<sup>9</sup>

Another major point of criticism made around that period to several exhibitions of African art concerned the lack of context given to the works. In facts, many institutions tended to present a number of objects without any clear frame of reference, the dates of production and names of the artists for instance going unmentioned inside many displays. Although in some cases information might have gotten lost over time, the practice still constituted a customary one, which could be considered as an inheritance from the displays implemented during the colonial period. Moreover, such representations contributed to create a dichotomy between western and non western artworks, the later being restricted to the status of cultural artifacts, depicted as emerging from undifferentiated individuals within timeless

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<sup>7</sup> McLean, 1998, p.248

<sup>8</sup> For an introduction to exhibition ethics, see Gazi, 2014

<sup>9</sup> Price, 1989, p.33-34

cultures, in opposition with the clear contextualization given to western works, through apparent mentions of periodicity and intentions.<sup>10</sup>

The criticisms engendered by the rise of post colonial studies and the New Museology however allowed for significant changes within museum displays, and most of these points have nowadays disappeared from contemporary presentations.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the exhibition of non western art has become one of the spotlights of critical scrutiny in relation with the notion of representation, enriching the discussion and transforming discourses inside museums.<sup>12</sup> Over the past few years especially, a number of new exhibitions have attempted to propose less authoritative narratives in order to become more inclusive. For instance, the exhibition *African Art, African Voices: Long Steps Never Broke*, organized by the Seattle Art Museum in 2002, implemented a number of different narrations along its display through the use of audio guides, in order to disrupt the expected dominating voice of the institution. This operation aimed at allowing visitors to become critical active subjects in the construction of their own understanding of the show.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, world art studies are currently developing within the academic world, proposing new models for the interpretation of artworks and trying to deconstruct Eurocentric postures in art studies.<sup>14</sup>

These transformations however are not without challenges, and seemingly neutral displays, focusing on the aesthetic qualities of the objects for instance, are often favored in order to avoid controversies. This is particularly true in the case of French institutions, where despite the acute awareness of most curatorial teams towards the questions involved in the representations of African arts, museums often depend for a large part on public funding, and what could be understood as a political statement is often met with reluctances. Although the system of subventions established by the French government allows for low entry prices and a certain diversity of institutions attracting a variety of publics, the state consequently acts as a regulatory agent regarding the content of the narratives presented. Indeed, either directly through the enactment of certain policies, the commission of particular institutions, such as the Quai Branly, or by being some museums' primary source of funding, the state constitutes a relevant actor in the French cultural world.<sup>15</sup> Finally, it is also worth noticing that postcolonial studies are still a minor field within the French academic world, and have raised

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<sup>10</sup> Price, 1898, p.60-61

<sup>11</sup> Macdonald, 2006, p.4-5

<sup>12</sup> Macdonald, 2006, 4

<sup>13</sup> Hermer, 2006, p.366

<sup>14</sup> McLean 2011, p. 162

<sup>15</sup> Benhamou, 2014, p.47

some difficulties inside the institution, particularly considering that history as a discipline has often been constructed in relation with the constitution of the national narrative, which will be further developed in the third chapter of this thesis.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.3. Displaying African Arts in France: Historical and Political Context

The French colonial empire at its height between the 1920s and 1930s, expanded over ten million square kilometers, spread across the five continents, and impacted the lives of over one hundred million people in the colonies.<sup>17</sup> Its history is often considered as starting during the Ancient Régime, with the establishment of the first settlements of ‘New France’ in Canada in the early 1600s, followed by the expansion of the first colonies in the Americas and the Caribbean’s. In Africa, the development of the slave-trade during the seventeenth century induced the settlement of commercial posts on the west coast of the continent.<sup>18</sup> While the colonization of North Africa slowly developed after the invasion of Algiers in 1830, the colonial empire in Sub-Saharan Africa quickly grew at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly between the 1880’s and the First World War, in reaction to European rivalries. The race for colonial power in the African continent between France, Belgium, Britain, Germany and Portugal culminated in the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, during which these nations agreed on their respective spheres of influence, and implemented a set of rules for the claiming of new colonies.<sup>19</sup> With settlements in West Africa situated in the contemporary nations of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Benin, Togo and Niger, as well as the French Equatorial African Colonies, located in present-day Cameroon, Gabon, Chad, Central African Republic and Congo, the French colonial empire rapidly constituted colonial domains that often dismissed the pre existing boundaries of native societies, and implemented violent politics of control.<sup>20</sup>

Within the French metropolitan society and around the 1880s, Jules Ferry (1832-1893) was among the first political figures to rationalize the logics of the colonial expansion, evoking the country’s commercial and political gains, and justifying them by referring to

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<sup>16</sup> Bancel, 2005, p.90

<sup>17</sup> Aldrich, 2005,p.3

<sup>18</sup> Forsdick, 2007, p.33-34

<sup>19</sup> Oxford reference, “Berlin Conference”, in N. Castree, R. Kitchin, and A. Rogers, *A Dictionary of Human Geography*, 2013, accessed on 05/08/2016

<sup>20</sup> Forsdick, 2007, p.37-38

France's moral duty of 'civilizing mission'.<sup>21</sup> The idea that the French society was ethically superior to the people in its colony was part of an imperialistic ideology that created a hierarchy of cultures meant to legitimize the colonial expansion, and has been advocated for through various means of communication. During the twentieth century, museums and colonial exhibitions became an important tool for the promotion of the colonization, progressively incorporating its rhetoric into the broader national discourse of identity. Through the particular narrative implied by their representations of the colonized nations, these institutions henceforth contributed to the formation of a binary discourse of self and other, which will notably be addressed further in the second chapter of this thesis.<sup>22</sup>

With the beginning of the decolonization process, engaged after the end of the Second World War, mentions of the colonial empire progressively disappeared from the official national discourse.<sup>23</sup> After the end of the Algerian war in 1962, considered as the last step of the decolonization, the General Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970), who was president of the French Republic at the time, promulgated a set of amnesty laws allowing for the penal erasure of the crimes committed during the conflict. This general pardon consequently introduced a long period of national amnesia regarding the colonial past, which would not only impact the judicial and political discourses, but also national cultural institutions.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, over time mentions of the colonies vanished from museum displays and memorial monuments, symbolizing the deletion of this past from the national narrative. It is only during the mid-1980s that a regain of interest for the colonial period allowed for a "rediscovery" of the former colonial empire.<sup>25</sup> The re introduction of the colonial history within the official discourse however remains a recent phenomenon, and the debates it generated seem to have reached a peak over the past fifteen years.

Indeed, the colonial empire often remains considered as a controversial and difficult subject, and the lasting absence, despite regular calls for its foundation, of a museum dedicated to its history is a striking example of the struggles yet implied by the topic.<sup>26</sup> In fact the past decades have witnessed a multiplication of memorial laws aiming at coordinating the re introduction of the colonial period into the official national narrative of the French history.

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<sup>21</sup> Forsdick, 2007, p.40

<sup>22</sup> P. Blanchard, S. Lemaire, 2008, p.116

<sup>23</sup> Aldrich, 2005, p.18

<sup>24</sup> Liauzu, 2005, p.102

<sup>25</sup> Aldrich, 2005, p.16

<sup>26</sup> N. Bancel, P. Blanchard, "Pour un musée des colonisations et de l'esclavage !", *Le Monde*, 13/05/2016, [http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/05/13/pour-un-musee-des-colonisations-et-de-l-esclavage\\_4919177\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/05/13/pour-un-musee-des-colonisations-et-de-l-esclavage_4919177_3232.html)

In this regard, the debates prompted by the article 4 of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2005 law illustrate the uneasiness of this process, and the anxieties raised by the articulation of a difficult history into the national discourse. The paragraph, declaring that schools program shall “recognize in particular the positive role of the French presence overseas, notably in North Africa”<sup>27</sup> has been regarded as especially controversial. Although historians were not consulted during the elaboration of this law, a number of them quickly spoke out against what they considered to be a problematic state interference with academic researches, and an endangerment of the historical and “scientific truth”.<sup>28</sup> Although the portion of the law referring to the “positive role” of the colonization was withheld after almost a year of public dispute, it constitutes however a compelling illustration of the uneasiness with which the evocation of the colonial history is still met.<sup>29</sup>

Considering the importance of museums in relation to the establishment of a national narrative, it seems particularly striking to notice that over the past fifteen years, an important number of institutions were either created or deeply transformed, and the Pavillon des Sessions, opened in 2000 to exhibit non western art in the Louvre, the Musée des Civilisations de l’Europe et la Méditerranée (Museum of the civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean) inaugurated in 2013 in Marseilles, and the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, are all concrete examples of the recent transformations occurring in the French cultural scene, resulting from the state’s attempts to remodel its national patrimonial narrative.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, museums are generally trusted institutions, and as such, they might constitute privileged spaces of discussion and represent valuable tools for the negotiation of difficult histories, such as the colonial period. In fact, this thesis would argue for the potentiality of cultural institutions to offer critical perspectives on discourses and representations, and to constitute significant spaces of mediation for the negotiation of the colonial past and its legacies.

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<sup>27</sup> The complet article states that : “Les programmes de recherche universitaire accordent à l’histoire de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord, la place qu’elle mérite. Les programmes scolaires reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord, et accordent à l’histoire et aux sacrifices des combattants de l’armée française issus de ces territoires la place éminente à laquelle ils ont droit.”, Légifrance, JORF n°0046, 23/02/2005

<sup>28</sup> Liauzu, 2005, p.101

<sup>29</sup> Légifrance, JORF n°40, 16/02/2006

<sup>30</sup> Lebovics, 2004, p.187-188

#### 1.4. Introduction to the French Exhibitions of African Art: The Quai Branly Example

Along the different stages of the colonization process, French colonizers brought back a number of objects to show in their home country, and started to build collections. From the 1860's onwards, a number of private and public institutions started to be implemented in several French cities, in order to present foreign cultures to the public, as well as tools for the promotion of the various commercial and political benefits the country was getting from its colonies.<sup>31</sup> As a result of this phenomenon, large museums were founded, and an important part of the contemporary French exhibitions currently displayed in these institutions still coincides with the areas of the former colonies, many artworks originating from the African West Coast in particular.

Considering the history of these collections, the Quai Branly Museum constitutes a compelling case for the study of colonial legacies within French institutions, as the museum, despite its recent history, has been constituted around the former collections exhibited at the Musée de l'Homme (Museum of Mankind), and at the Porte Dorée Palace, both historically relevant colonial institutions located in Paris. Moreover, the Quai Branly, with its 1 350 000 visitors per year, tends to define canons and trends in exhibition making, and as such, constitutes a key institution for the exhibition of African arts in the French cultural scene.<sup>32</sup>

As one of the major public exhibition of African arts to be constituted during the twentieth century in France, the Colonial Museum, hosted at the Porte Dorée Palace, constitutes a striking example of the functioning and intentions of the exhibitions held during the colonial period and their legacies. The massive building, first created to host the 1931 colonial exhibition in Paris, was indeed thought as a tool for the promotion of the French empire and its ideology, represented through a clear visual program constituted of bas-relief and large mural paintings [fig. 1].<sup>33</sup> Between 1935 and the 1950s, the building became the Museum of Overseas France, presenting a collection of objects from the colonies to the Parisian public. After 1961, following the decolonization, previous mentions of the French colonial empire were erased and the display transformed, to showcase the new National Museum of African and Oceania arts, which was however still constituted of the same set of objects. In 2003, the works were transferred to the Quai Branly museum, leaving the building empty and able to shelter the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration (National City of

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<sup>31</sup> Aldrich, 2008, p.545

<sup>32</sup> Musée du Quai Branly, "Missions et Fonctionnement, Chiffres Clés", accessed on 20/06/2016, <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/missions-et-fonctionnement/chiffres-cles/>

<sup>33</sup> Murphy, 2007, 29-34

the History of Immigration), which opened its doors in 2007.<sup>34</sup> The other institution which transferred parts of its collections to the Quai Branly was also an institution with a former colonial history, the Musée de l'Homme, established in 1938 in Paris. The ethnographic museum, which display has vastly evolved over time, historically aimed to combine physical and cultural anthropology in order to present a large overview of human evolution across time.<sup>35</sup> Considering the two institutions, it seems particularly striking to notice that the Quai Branly museum inherited its collections both from an art and from an anthropological institution, illustrating the profound historical links between the two approaches in the exhibition of African arts, links which will be further explained in the second chapter of this thesis.

Opened in 2006 and centered around an extensive collection of 300 000 works from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas, the Quai Branly Museum has soon become a major institution in the French cultural scene, and has been the object of numerous discussions within the academic world since its opening.<sup>36</sup> Its construction was originally decided in 1996 by the former French president Jacques Chirac (1932 -), in order to showcase the diversity of world's cultures.<sup>37</sup> The creation of a major cultural project is an ongoing tradition for French presidents, who customarily establish large institutions in Paris as a symbol of their legacy, from Georges Pompidou's (1911-1974) Pompidou Center to François Mitterand's (1916-1996) glass pyramid in the Louvre.<sup>38</sup> The museum, located nearby the Eiffel tower, is sheltered inside a new building [fig.2] created by the star architect Jean Nouvel (1945 -). The construction, voluntarily distinctive from typical museums outlines such as the white cube model, carries a strong identity meant to "draw out the emotions at play within the primal object" according to the museum's press kit.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the architecture tends to present the objects in a very theatrical manner, through the use of dramatic lightning, glass boxes and cave-like structures, and a minimal use of written labels, which results in an overall experience where scenography seems to significantly dominate over content [fig.3].<sup>40</sup>

The layout of the museum might also be problematic as it tends to emphasize the idea of the exploration of a strange, mysterious space, over a cultural contextualization of the

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<sup>34</sup> Murphy, 2007, p. 41-48

<sup>35</sup> Musée de l'Homme, "L'Histoire du Musée de l'Homme", accessed on 20/06/2016, <http://www.museedelhomme.fr/fr/musee/histoire-musee-homme>

<sup>36</sup> Musée du Quai Branly, "Missions et Fonctionnement, Chiffres Clés", accessed on 20/06/2016, <http://www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/missions-et-fonctionnement/chiffres-cles/>

<sup>37</sup> Musée du Quai Branly, "Brochure Institutionnelle", 2015, p.8

<sup>38</sup> Price, 2007, p.33

<sup>39</sup> See Clifford, 2007, p.4

<sup>40</sup> Clifford, 2007, p.10



objects, which as a consequence tends to present the works as remarkable artifacts rather than artworks per se. To enter the museum, visitors first have to cross the park, and take a ramp that will lead them to the *Plateau des Collections* [fig. 4], where the permanent exhibition is on display. While visiting the institution, one can first notice the numerous analogies made between the structure and a metaphorical natural world, considering that the park is sometimes referred to as “a forest”, “plateau” in French can also signify a topographical elevation, and the layout of the first floor is structured by the River display, a corridor-like construction separating the different zones in the length of the room [see plan fig.5]. Moreover, the permanent display is divided into four major sections, corresponding to Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas, each organized geographically, which contributes to stress the idea that visitors are exploring a foreign space.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, within the African section, the creation of a number of smaller cave-like rooms along the wall of the permanent display might constitute a major problem of representation. Indeed, these structures, some of them being particularly dark [fig.6], present African sculptures in dimly light boxes, evoking mysterious – even magical – objects, strongly reminiscing of the notion of ‘fetishes’, an impression that is emphasized by the lack of contextualization of the works.<sup>42</sup> As a result, the general architecture of the building tends to procure visitors with the feeling that they are entering an enigmatic, mystical space, where strange objects are on display to create wonder, rather than carry knowledge about the societies that produces them, or be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities.<sup>43</sup>

Although the temporary exhibitions, located on the second floor of the building, allow for a certain flexibility of exhibition design, the permanent display is fully integrated within the architecture of the building, which contributes to a more immersive experience for spectators, but also considerably restricts the possibilities for revisions and innovations from the curatorial team. As a consequence, the latter, composed of dedicated museum professionals, acutely aware of the issues and criticisms raised by the building, are often limited in their possibilities to transform and navigate the museum’s representations of non western arts.

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<sup>41</sup> Clifford, 2007, p.10

<sup>42</sup> Clifford, 2007, p.15

<sup>43</sup> This effect is precisely what the architect Jean Nouvel aimed at producing, as explained in the museum’s press kit quoted in J. Clifford’s article from 2007: “It is a haunted place, wherein dwell and converse the ancestral spirits of those who discovered the human condition and invented gods and beliefs. It is a strange, unique place, poetic and disturbing.”p.4

To better understand the uneasiness and difficulties with which the museum's structure has been met, and is currently negotiated, the successive changes of names of the institution represent a particularly compelling example. The very name of the Quai Branly museum, which is today known as the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, has indeed evolved over the past few years, as it was at first titled Musée des Arts Premiers. This term, which constituted an awkward surrogate for the denomination 'primitive arts', has soon been considered too problematic, and its replacement by the location of the building underlines the difficulties met by the institution in defining a clear agenda. Indeed, the name "Quai Branly" rather "serve[s] as synecdoche – literal placeholder for a project seeking its *raison d'être*"<sup>44</sup> according to James Clifford. This lack of apparent definition for the museum is also particularly revealing of its difficult positioning in relation to its display and the representations the institution aims at communicating. Indeed, the institution represents the complex negotiations currently occurring between a somewhat outdated vision of non western art, imbedded in the primitivist approach implied by the design of the building, which presents the works as strange and mystical artifacts, and the criticisms it raised. These tensions are even underlined by the installation of temporary exhibitions on the second floor concerned with colonial representations, such as "The invention of the savage"<sup>45</sup> in 2012, which nonetheless indicated a possibility for the creation of an antagonistic discourse within the building. As a consequence of these elements, the Quai Branly Museum might constitute a particularly interesting case study in the discussion of the exhibition of African arts in France, and the structure of the building itself will be further analyzed in the third chapter of this thesis.

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<sup>44</sup> Clifford, 2007, p.8

<sup>45</sup> Exhibition "L'Invention du Sauvage", for more information see Mclean, "Reinventing the Savage", 2012

## Chapter 2: Museums, Representation, and Cultural Identity

### 2.1. Museums, National Identity and the Constitution of the ‘Other’

The notion of national identity has been an important topic of discussions over the past decades, both in the academic world and in the public sphere, as illustrated by the creation of a ministry of “immigration, integration and national identity” between 2007 and 2010 in France. Although the agency of such a ministry could be questioned, it nonetheless highlighted the growing interest given to the concept of nation within contemporary politics. To better understand this particular notion, one could refer to the anthropologist Benedict Anderson, who wrote in 1991:

“I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.[...] It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members [...] yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>46</sup>

According to the author, nations are artificial cultural product constituted through a sense of community, which is ordinarily based on common narratives of affiliation, shared values and histories. Considering this definition, national museums could then be understood as key institutional structures in the creation of a common public identity, as they often propose particular historical narratives towards which visitors are invited to identify. In fact, the links between public museums and national identity has been increasingly studied by academics over the past decades in relation with the New Museology and the rise of interests towards the notions of representation and discourse.<sup>47</sup> Observing that historical memory is a construction which privileges particular narratives over others, museums have growingly been understood as social and political apparatuses contributing to the legitimization of some of these narratives. As a result, they have been criticized as leaving aside certain voices that would not conform to the common national understanding of history, leading to an over-representation of some communities and viewpoints to the detriment of others. There is however a real evolution in a number of museums towards more inclusivity, with the construction of increasingly dialogical displays and the addition of conflicting voices to the main narrative, which tends to disrupt the authoritative aspect that a singular story might have, and allow for the opening up of new perspectives.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Anderson, 1991, p.6

<sup>47</sup> McLean, 1998, p.245-246

<sup>48</sup> McLean, 1998, p.250

Analyzing museums in relation with the concept of national identity, one could only notice the importance of historical anthropological museums as a relevant factor in the construction of the national narrative, the depiction of an exoticized ‘Other’, particularly during the colonial period, acting as a reverse mirror for the national ‘Self’, and as such allowing for the consolidation of a particular identity.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, a significant part of the artworks hosted in contemporary French museums, such as the Quai Branly, were first displayed as anthropological objects during the colonial period. As a result, in order to better understand these phenomena, this thesis will give a brief overview of the constitution of these exhibitions, in relation with the concept of the ‘Other’.

Starting with the cabinets of curiosities of the Ancien Régime, collecting objects from distant places has always been an important practice promoted by the elites in order to underline their social statuses, and carry studies aiming at offering a better understanding of the world.<sup>50</sup> After the Enlightenment, a number of societies began to be founded around the ideas of voyage and exploration, bringing a growing number of non western works and artifacts to Europe, where they would be exhibited to the public.<sup>51</sup> These objects started to be incorporated in the emerging sciences of ethnology and anthropology, allowing for the creation of new discourses shaping the representations of non western cultures, along with the relationships between European and African nations. Indeed, sciences aiming at depicting and understanding the ‘other’ became imbedded in the imperialistic ideology characteristic of the period, and gradually developed into a political tool of both justification for the colonial ideology, and control of the colonized populations.

The representation of non western societies through seemingly scientific texts has been particularly acutely analyzed by Edward Said (1935-2003) in his influential book from 1978, *Orientalism*. Although the essay focuses particularly on the relationships between European colonial powers and the Middle East, some of the processes described by the author can also be transcribed to Africa, which also inspired a number of texts used to promote the colonial expansion. In the words of Said, Orientalism constitutes:

“a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; [...]it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a

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<sup>49</sup> Gouriévidis, 2014, p.6

<sup>50</sup> For a comprehensive study of the evolutions of early modern private collections towards modern museums, see Hooper-Greehill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, 1992.

<sup>51</sup> Aldrich, 247

manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; [...] [Orientalism] as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world."<sup>52</sup>

In other words, Orientalism can be understood as the creation of a discourse, often presented as scientific knowledge, which represents the 'Oriental' through an essentialist perspective, defining him as a polar opposite of the 'West'. This process participates to the constitution of an antagonistic 'Other', which therefore allows for the constitution of a binary narrative, contributing to the definition of the western 'Self'.

Although Orientalism takes its roots in discourses and treatises pre dating the colonial period, the turn of the nineteenth century witnessed a growing corpus of texts on foreign places and populations that soon became increasingly articulated with politics and the apparition of imperialistic ideologies. At that time the elaboration of an Orientalist representation of colonized populations helped secure a certain definition of the self within western nationalistic narratives, while justifying the domination of the colonial powers through the idea of 'civilizing mission'. Indeed, the perception of overseas populations, rather than being determined through dialogue with the nations involved, became defined through stereotyped perceptions. Furthermore, western orientalists, being considered as experts in their fields, were given the authority to speak for their subjects of studies, silencing the populations concerned through the texts, and the representations they produced. In this aspect, Said's theory was heavily influenced by Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and his researches on epistemology and the construction of knowledge.<sup>53</sup> Within this framework, language and knowledge can in fact be thought as political apparatuses, as they constitute powerful tools of categorization, defining our visions and understanding of things.

Although Said denounces the concept of the 'Orient' as a generalizing and essentialist construct, one can however notice that the author nonetheless used this notion at times to contradict the imagined visions proposed in orientalists writings, while later in the text firmly rejecting the existence of any "real Orient", the term being described as a necessarily limited and illusory concept. As a result the idea of the 'orient' in this context can only be a negative one, disrupting the representations culturally determined by western imaginations, while preventing any hypothetical definition. As stated by James Clifford: "Orientalism inauthenticity is not answered by any authenticity".<sup>54</sup> This problem can somewhat be

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<sup>52</sup> Said, 2003, p.12

<sup>53</sup> On Foucault's theory on the evolution of western knowledge and its structure, see *The Order of Things*, 1989, in which the philosopher describes the successive episteme that shaped its construction between the classical and modern periods.

<sup>54</sup> Clifford, 1988, p.260

paralleled with the issues raised by denominations such as ‘non western’ or ‘African’ arts within this thesis. As it has been discussed in the first chapter, although intrinsically limited, and necessarily imbedded in an artificial framework, these terms are however difficult, perhaps even impossible to replace, as the process of categorization they imply, although problematic and at times detrimental, is nonetheless necessary to the construction of any form of discourse or discussion.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, a similar problem arises within museum displays, as no matter how self reflexive and pluri-vocal an exhibition can be, it will nonetheless always have to present a choice of objects and narrative(s). As a result, the museum, as a space historically designed for the production and diffusion of knowledge, seems to be intrinsically imbedded in these difficulties.

In France, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed the apparition of a growing number of institutions centered on the presentation of overseas populations and the benefits derived from the colonization. The colonial system was indeed justified and promoted to the public opinion through exhibitions in the European continent, and consequently, displays were often imbedded in an imperialistic ideology, presenting the colonized societies as ‘primitive’, in need of France’s influence and its ‘civilizing mission’. Returning to the idea of nationhood, these representations also had a particular impact on the formulation of a national identity narrative, as they created a binary opposition between the French society and African cultures, constituting an easily identifiable ‘Other’.<sup>56</sup>

## 2.2. Between Anthropology and Aesthetics: What Representations?

The development of colonialism during the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century was accompanied with the expansion of a particular imperialistic ideology that notably relied on visibility and classification to efficiently control colonized populations. In the words of Anderson:

“For the colonial state did not merely aspire to create, under its control, a human landscape of perfect visibility; the condition of this ‘visibility’ was that everyone, everything, had (as it were) a serial number. This style of imagining did not come out of thin air. It was the product of the

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<sup>55</sup> This perspective is perhaps restrictive and there might be a number of theories and writings successfully overcoming this point that I am not aware of, I have however been trying to present the issue to the best of my current knowledge.

<sup>56</sup> Mitchell, 1992, p.290

technologies of navigation, astronomy, horology, surveying, photography and print, to say nothing of the deep driving power of capitalism.”<sup>57</sup>

To the list of technologies cited, one could add the colonial museum as another apparatus of categorization and regulation. Indeed, this type of institution allowed for visitors to gaze at objects from distant places, presenting the works as metonymies for their societies of origin, and offering the impression of a world on display, which spectators could grasp and understand through the act of looking.

The potential of the gaze as implying power dynamics was first evoked by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, a book from 1975, in which he noticeably recalls of the apparition of the concept of discipline, enacted through surveillance and its logics, as a technological power characteristic of the rise of modernism. In her evocation of museum history and the shaping of knowledge, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill explains how disciplinary technologies arose during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in parallel with the development of cultural and scientific institutions, and allowed for the creation of organized spaces assigning ranks and values, impacting the constitution of the first museums. In her words:

“Discipline as a power/technique operates through hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination. The concept of hierarchical observation indicates the connection between visibility and the establishment of deep-seated relations of advantage/disadvantage, and introduces the idea of an apparatus designed for observation, which induces the effects of these relationships deployed through the visibility of those subject to it.”<sup>58</sup>

These processes are especially visible within museum displays as visitors’ gazes are directed towards a set of classified objects, which are assigned particular meanings and values according to their placement within exhibitions, and the labels that might accompany them. In this aspect, the museum appears as a perfect apparatus for the classification and display of a systematized and rationalized knowledge.<sup>59</sup> The colonial exhibition of 1931 represents a striking example of a hierarchical display, constructed to promote the colonies to visitors in an organized fashion, and differentiate the diverse colonized populations according to stereotyped images, while offering an overview of the French empire to the public.<sup>60</sup>

In parallel with the establishment of the first colonial museums, the discipline of modern anthropology rapidly developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, and contributed to the foundation of a number of institutions, such as the Musée de l’Homme

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<sup>57</sup> Anderson, 1991, p.184-185

<sup>58</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p.169

<sup>59</sup> For more information on this subject, see Hooper-Greenhill on “The disciplinary museum”, 1992, p.167-190

<sup>60</sup> For a detailed analysis of the 1931 colonial exhibition, see Ungar, 2008, p.260-267, and Hodeir, 2002, p. 233-252

(1937) in Paris, to showcase the diversity of human cultures. These new institutions exhibited African sculptures as culturally meaningful artifacts, emblematic of foreign social practices. At first the museums were however imbedded in an authoritative narrative of human evolution characteristic of the colonial period, representing African cultures as ‘primitive’ in comparison with the western ‘civilized’ self. However, over the following decades, anthropological museums evolved towards a more inclusive and dialogical perspective. Furthermore, it seems important to remind that some of the first attempts at challenging the colonial evolutionist perspective, notably through cultural relativism, in the academic and the museum world were notably prompted by anthropologists.<sup>61</sup>

In parallel, various colonial museums showcasing African sculpture evolved or transferred their collections to art institutions, which gradually erased every mentions of the colonization after the 1960’s.<sup>62</sup> The new museums however conserved some traces of the colonial displays in their representations of African arts, for instance through their lack of contextualization, conveying the idea of timeless cultures and anonymous artists. Moreover, a distinction between anthropological and artistic displays was historically established by the separation of the Musée de l’Homme and the Museum of African and Oceania arts at the Porte Dorée Palace, and their institutional rivalry.<sup>63</sup>

Within art museums, displays underlying the notion of aesthetics have become a major part of the French cultural scene in regards to the exhibition of non western arts, and the Musée Dapper in Paris [fig.7] represents a good example of this approach. The private institution, created in 1986, showcases a number of African sculptures inside glass boxes [fig.8], underlying their aesthetic qualities to present them as objects for contemplation.<sup>64</sup> Despite the value of the approach taken by this display and the richness of its collection, one could note that although the museum Dapper exhibits the works as artistic objects worthy of respect and appreciation, their perceptions are still limited to a Eurocentric vision of aesthetics and taste, as the display does not mention African approaches on art but rather relies on visitors’ own sensitivity. Interestingly however, the name of the museum was inherited from the Dutch humanist Olfert Dapper (1636-1689), a savant, who wrote the influential treatise

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<sup>61</sup> Among these figures, Franz Boas’ work on cultural relativism became a cornerstone in the study of anthropology, and had an important social and political impact, see Greenfield, 2001

<sup>62</sup> Aldrich, 2005, p.290

<sup>63</sup> Aldrich, 2005, p.254

<sup>64</sup> Musée Dapper, “Historique : Le Musée Dapper”, accessed on 15/07/2016, <http://www.dapper.fr/fondation-historique.php>



*Description of Africa* in 1668 without ever leaving his home country.<sup>65</sup> As a result, the name of the museum could be thought as an acknowledgment of the necessary partial and subjective nature of discourse, showing a stimulating level of self reflexivity on the part of the museum's curatorial team.

Finally, in order to move beyond the artificial dichotomy of aesthetics versus anthropological displays, a growing number of scholars have been arguing for the introduction of African perspectives on art within the exhibitions. Indeed, this framework would allow museums to underline the works' aesthetical values, while still attempting to shift the focus from a western-centered attitude towards art history, to a more diverse understanding of the concept of beauty, introducing different definitions for the idea of artistic taste, while allowing for a better understanding of the works' primary intentions.<sup>66</sup> Although this framework might necessitate the use of extensive explanatory labels or the addition through other channels of a considerable body of information, it could however represent a particularly valuable standpoint on the works, as well as on art history as a discipline. Indeed, as the field has so far been widely dominated by a Eurocentric narrative of evolution, historically relying on the idea of canons and a universalist perspective on aesthetics, dominated by western tastes, the introduction of these new approaches could perhaps efficiently disrupt the authoritative voice of the museum, and open up a discussion on the nature of art itself. The emergence of world art studies over the past decade in a growing number of universities, advocating for a combination of approaches and disciplines, represents a first step in a direction that is both challenging and immensely promising.<sup>67</sup>

### 2.3. *The Social Life of Things: Interpretation, Appropriation and Authenticity*

Within museums the works on display are given a particular interpretation, through the presence of labels, the corpus of objects with which they might be presented, along with the possible scenography in place within the building. This process, although concomitant with any form of exhibition, is particularly visible in regards to non western art, as the works are often mainly unknown from the public, and so are their primary functions and messages. As a result, the meaning given to a particular sculpture might greatly vary depending on its

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<sup>65</sup> Musée Dapper, "Qui était Olfert Dapper ?", accessed on 15/07/2016, <http://www.dapper.fr/fondation-olfert-dapper.php>

<sup>66</sup> As an example of this perspective, see S. Vogel article, "African art, Western eyes", 1997

<sup>67</sup> Van Damme 2006, p.77-78

presentation, and what could have been perceived as a primitive artifact within a colonial exhibition will be thought as a culturally meaningful item inside an anthropology museum, or an object for aesthetic contemplation in a white-cube like space. Moreover, the display of many African artworks has widely evolved throughout time, depending on the evolutions of institutions, and adding another layer of historical implications to the works' significances.

In his essay on *the Social Life of Things*, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai explores how meaning and social relevance can be attributed to an object. He explains how:

“[the things’] meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.”<sup>68</sup>

In his text, Appadurai considers commodities as cultural products essentially characterized by dynamic social exchanges, rather than being merely delimited to their conditions of production. As a result, he evokes the various contexts, usages, and exchanges that can be made of an object, and how these social relationships determine its relevance. Adapting this perspective towards the historical African sculptures exhibited in contemporary French museums, one could first notice the diversity of usages and exchanges these types of works went through. Indeed, returning to the example of the Quai Branly, a number of sculptures were inherited from the Porte Dorée Palace collections, founded during the 1931 colonial exhibition. As a result, although one should keep in mind that the works acquired during the colonial period do not represent the entirety of the French collections of African arts as they grew and evolved over the years, the history of some of the artworks remains intrinsically linked with the evolution of the perceptions and representations surrounding African arts in France.

Furthermore, a number of African artworks exhibited in French contemporary museums could be particularly interesting to analyze in regards to Appadurai's theory, considering the important changes of usage some historic sculptures went through. Indeed, as an example of objects customarily produced and designed for a different purpose than being exhibited in museums. African masks [fig. 9], which often represent a highlight in contemporary exhibitions, were for instance originally created for distinct usages and with different meanings than the ones they might be given within a museum display. Indeed, during the twentieth century, masks were primarily meant to be worn and danced during

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<sup>68</sup> Appadurai, 1986, p.5

social gatherings and public representations, constituting culturally relevant actors directly impacting societies' public life, rather than being the objects of contemplation they are today. In fact, masks were even often hidden from the public's eyes when they were not danced, illustrating the striking shift of usage and significance these works went through.<sup>69</sup>

As a result, one might even start to wonder how the notion of authenticity could be understood within museum displays, especially considering that the concept has historically been promoted as constitutive of African art exhibitions. For decades African sculpture has indeed been considered as "primitive", and therefore intrinsically "authentic" because of the pre supposed closer relationship of its artists with the natural world, a proposition characteristic of the colonial and 'primitivist' approaches.<sup>70</sup> Consequently, the notion of authenticity has often been used to constitute a particular corpus of works conveying the idea of an imagined and timeless past, during which no exchanges or major evolution would have occurred within the African art production.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the interpretation of the artworks and the constitution of discourses became controlled by collectors rather than art makers, European institutions such as museums constructing classificatory systems which allowed for the constitution of canons.<sup>72</sup>

In fact, although the emphasize on authenticity as a core value of African artworks has gradually decreased within contemporary displays, the concept still constitutes a problematic one, and a number of objects collected during the colonial period also went through some important transformations over the years. As the anthropologist and former director of the Musée de l'Homme's African collections, Manuel Valentin, explains it, some works were indeed altered, either by the action of time or by former museum curators, who, during the first part of the twentieth century, at times adapted or even amputated a selection of objects from attributes considered as superfluous, so they could fit better in the displays.<sup>73</sup> This process of adjustment and appropriation of the artworks by the institutions in charge of them was even described by Valentin as transforming some of the works into "afro-european" "hybrids".<sup>74</sup> Although such phenomenon concerns a minority of objects inside French exhibitions of African arts, this type of works might nonetheless constitute an interesting

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<sup>69</sup> As an example see Vogel's 1997 article on Baule artistic practices

<sup>70</sup> See Price, 1989, "The Night Side of Man", p.37-55

<sup>71</sup> Kasfir, 1992, p.42

<sup>72</sup> Kasfir, 1992, p.43-45

<sup>73</sup> Valentin, 2014, p.75-76

<sup>74</sup> Valentin, 2014, p.69

illustration of the variety of artworks currently exhibited in museums, and allow for a reconsideration of the notion of authenticity.

Furthermore, the study of a selection of African masks currently held in French collections might constitute a particularly striking example of the questions raised by the notions of appropriation, interpretation and authenticity within museum displays, along with the impact of institutional discourse on the art market. Indeed, as it has been mentioned previously in this thesis, following the interest of famous artists such as Picasso and Henri Matisse (1869-1954), a taste for what used to be considered as “primitive” arts emerged during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, colon and missionaries started to purchase masks in West Africa, in order to sell them back to Europe and notably France, where the market was rapidly expanding. However, these masks were usually not primarily designed for aesthetic contemplation but rather constituted social devices, meant to be worn and danced.

As the European demand for these works grew stronger, some African artists consequently started to produce masks directly for the new market, creating works that would use the same formal and visual vocabulary, while being retrieved of particular social or religious significances. Instead of representing a specific entity or concept, artists would focus on the formulation of a recognized aesthetic vocabulary, sometimes even slightly adapted to western expectations.<sup>75</sup> Nowadays, it is generally possible to determine if the objects have been worn and danced or if they were more likely produced for a European market by closely examining the masks’ patinas. In the later scenario however, the artworks are usually confined to the reserves of museums and only rarely put on display, except on some notable occasions such as the exhibition *Collection d'art africain du musée de Grenoble. Un patrimoine dévoilé* (*African art collection of the Grenoble museum, a patrimony unveiled*), curated by Laurick Zerbini in 2008, which devoted an entire room to these works.<sup>76</sup> This type of exhibition however remains rare, and the masks known as having been created specifically for a western public are still often considered as ‘inauthentic’, or at least controversial objects by a number of contemporary museums.

Such attitude could however be regarded as paradoxical, considering that the mere fact of exhibiting masks against a wall, as static representations and without the costumes or accessories usually attached to them, is in itself a contradiction of their primary purposes. Furthermore, the example of the masks produced for a western public during the twentieth

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<sup>75</sup> For more information on the subject, see the exhibition Catalogue : *Collection d'art africain du musée de Grenoble. Un patrimoine dévoilé*, 2008.

<sup>76</sup> Ibidem

century might also remind of the issue of ‘tourist art’, which will however not be further developed in this thesis due to its limited length. Finally, these discussions raise the question of what actually constitutes the authenticity of an art work, which criteria are used to determine an object’s worth and relevance, and who gets to decide on those criteria. As a result, the various examples mentioned in this essay underline the artificiality of such notion, stressing the necessity of reconsidering some museum practices, and perhaps introduce the *Social Life* of the objects within contemporary displays.

#### 2.4. The Museums as a Contact Zone

The rise of the New Museology and the growing demand for more inclusivity and dialogue within museum displays has led to valuable transformations inside numerous institutions. Moreover, the apparition of these new frameworks and methodologies might carry interesting solutions to navigate the tensions imbedded in the representation of non western art within French institutions.

Among these new approaches, the notion of contact zones, first described in relation to museum studies by James Clifford in an influential essay from 1997, has soon become an important evolution in the field. Inspired by the work of the anthropologist Mary Louise Pratt, who defined the contact zone as a liminal space where different cultures could meet and differences be negotiated, Clifford argues for reciprocity of exchanges between museums and the cultures which produced the objects on display. He evokes how:

“When museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship – a power – charged set of exchanges, of push and pull.”<sup>77</sup>

Rather than considering the museum as a center dominating the creation of discourse, and as such controlling the representations of non western societies, Clifford argues for the elaboration of collaborative programs that would actively involve the communities in question. He explains how displays could become more dialogical by taking into consideration ‘source voices’, namely the opinions and perspectives of the societies that produced the works, and understanding the construction of exhibition as partnerships rather than the formulation of a mono-focal authoritative discourse. In the text, Clifford particularly underlines the notion of reciprocity as fundamental for the constitution of a contact zone, and

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<sup>77</sup> Clifford, 1997, p.192

considers the museum as a mediator between cultures, rather than an institution necessarily imbedded in a Eurocentric vision of knowledge and reality.<sup>78</sup>

First and foremost, despite the indisputable value that the notion might have in order to disrupt the authoritative narrative of ‘self’ and ‘other’ within the museum space, the idea of ‘contact zone’ would nonetheless require actual connections and exchanges on curatorial methods and practices between institutions and communities, which seems particularly difficult to achieve for museums concerned with a whole continent or even the whole world, as it is for instance the case at the Quai Branly. Moreover, although this perspective could allow communities and artists to regain agency in the representation and the interpretation of their works, the practical adaptation to such a laudable approach within some institutions is also rendered difficult by the foundational elements of museum practices. Indeed, in the words of Robin Boast:

“The museum, as a site of accumulation, as a gatekeeper of authority and expert accounts, as the ultimate caretaker of the object, as the ultimate arbiter of the identity of the object, as its documenter and even as educator, has to be completely redrafted. Where the new museology saw the museum being transformed from a site of determined edification to one of educational engagement, museums of the 21<sup>st</sup> century must confront their neocolonial legacy.”<sup>79</sup>

In fact, museum practices, through the act of selecting objects and putting them on display are intrinsically authoritative, which represents a first difficulty in the establishment of a truly reciprocal relationship. In this context, the museum remains an inherently asymmetric space, which represents an ‘Other’ through necessary processes of categorization and representation, partially inherited from the colonial period.<sup>80</sup> As a result, the notion of contact zones might partly fail in its attempt at deconstructing the power dynamics at stake within museum displays, because of the constant asymmetry of forces at work.

Moreover, although such concept advocates for the inclusion of source voices in the understanding of the objects, it nonetheless does not necessarily take into account the history of the objects or their modes of exhibitions within western institutions. Indeed, the concept of ‘contact zone’ might also tend to represent contemporary museums as being de facto ‘post colonial’ spaces, which might paradoxically contribute to silence the colonial history, and showcase the artworks as untouched by the institution’s history. Furthermore, such lack of historical acknowledgment might also fail to recognize the violence some societies were

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<sup>78</sup> Boast, 2011, p.60

<sup>79</sup> Boast, 2011, p.67

<sup>80</sup> Or as explained by Boast: “they remain sites where the Others come to perform for us, not with us.”, 2011, p.63

subjected to during the colonial period and consequently complicate the kind of genuine relations a contact zone would theoretically need to thrive.<sup>81</sup> As a result, although politics of inclusion and cooperation constitute particularly relevant and deeply valuable practices within African art museums, they could perhaps become even more efficient and sustainable solutions if accompanied by a deeper acknowledgement of the colonial history of the exhibitions.

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<sup>81</sup> Boast, 2011, p.65

## Chapter 3: Colonial History and Disrupted Temporalities

### 3.1. Memorialization, Forgetfulness and the National Historical Narrative

As it has been previously evoked in this thesis, the colonial past represents a sensitive and challenging topic of discussion within the contemporary French society, which could be partially explained by the difficulty of re-introducing such a problematic history into the national narrative.

In fact, one could first recall of the historian Ernest Renan's (1823-1892) statement, who declared in 1882:

“the essence of a nation is that all of its individual members have a great deal in common and also that they have forgotten many things”.<sup>82</sup>

Renan was indeed one of the first academics to define the modern concept of the nation, which he perceived as a community constituted over shared values, and more importantly, a common historical narrative. As an example, he evoked in his text how events such as the Saint-Bathélémy – the massacre of thousands of Protestants during a religious conflict in 1572 – needed to be removed from the collective memory, in order to maintain the unity of the nation and offer a positive story towards which citizens could identify.<sup>83</sup>

Renan's reliance on the idea that a coherent historical narrative is determinant in the constitution of nationhood in order to legitimize the country's institutions is characteristic of a shift in the conceptualization and representation of the nation, which emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period characterized by the rise of nationalisms. In the words of Anderson:

“Awareness of being embedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of ‘forgetting’ the experience of this continuity – product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century – engenders a need for a narrative of ‘identity’.”<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, the rise of modernity according to Anderson was accompanied by the disintegration of the idea of a continuous, traditional time, partially imbedded in the former dominance of religious or monarchical institutions. This process instigated a new necessity for the establishment of a particular historical narrative towards which citizens could identify, and nations be legitimized, nationhood being thought as a tool to define relationships and understand one's place in the world.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Renan, 1996, p.52

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Anderson, 1991, p.205

<sup>85</sup> See Anderson, chap.11, “Memory and Forgetting”, 1991, p.187-206



From this point of view, the idea of re-introducing colonialism within the French national history might seem like a particularly challenging, and even potentially destructive task. Indeed, the story of the colonial empire is not one to be easily resolved and settled, but rather one that fundamentally contributed to transform and shape contemporary French institutions. Moreover, unlike other difficult histories, such as the Vichy regime during the Second World War, the colonial period cannot be considered as a brief interlude, or better yet “‘the negation’ of both the Republic and France”.<sup>86</sup> In fact, the colonization lasted for a large part of the French Republic, and constituted a far-reaching phenomenon whose vestiges are still visible today.<sup>87</sup> Considering these elements, the difficulties encountered by official institutions in the renegotiations of the national narrative over the past fifteen years, seem rather understandable. However, despite the necessary challenges the re-appropriation of this past might pose, the discussions it would prompt seem particularly necessary in contemporary French society, regarding the current rise of social tensions and the political issues the country is faced with.<sup>88</sup> In this context, the museum might appear as a potential mediator, able to negotiate the difficulties and paradoxes induced by the evocation of the colonization and its contemporary implications, through the constitution of a social space open to public discussions, and the disruption of customary representations.

In fact, museums are often considered as sites of memory, and as such, could be thought as particularly revealing of the difficulties a nation might be encountering in relation with the negotiation of its own past. Indeed, on a very practical level, the evocation, or absence of it, of the colonial history in museums and monuments could be seen as a manifestation of the state’s stance. According to Robert Aldrich:

“Monuments and museums reveal three stages in France’s production of a material patrimony of colonialism.[...] These phases relate to lived experiences: the triumphant apogee of colonialism in the 1930s, the painful decolonization of the 1950s and the early 1960s, a rediscovery of the colonies in the 1990s. They also exemplify three stages of the working of memory. In the colonial age, museums and monuments created memories. In the period of decolonization and its aftermath, memories were forgotten, repressed or denied. In the contemporary moment, memories are being recalled.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Stoler, 2011, p.142

<sup>87</sup> Bancel, Blanchard, 2008, p.498

<sup>88</sup> I was notably referring to the current rise of the far right as well as previous events such as the 2005 uprisings in the Banlieues, for an overview of current societal tensions evoked in relation with the colonial history, see Stoler, 2011, p.125-133

<sup>89</sup> Aldrich, 2005, p.18

This analysis is particularly well exemplified through the history of the Porte Dorée Palace, which former collections are now hosted at the Quai Branly Museum. Indeed, as it has been mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, the institution, first constituted as a colonial museum, evolved into a Museum of African and Oceanic Arts, to start hosting in 2007 the National Museum of Immigration, despite diverse calls for the institution of a museum dedicated to the history of the colonization within its walls. Although the colonial iconography of the building was preserved as a testimony of the institution's past, the museum still struggles with its architectural heritage, representing at once a space of both remembrance and forgetfulness.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, the Quai Branly Museum, which inherited the former Porte Dorée's collections, also shows signs of struggles with the evocation of the objects' histories, as it will be further analyzed in the fourth part of this chapter.

In response to the frequent use of a vocabulary of forgetting and memory loss, Ann Laura Stoler however recalls of the concept of "colonial aphasia", which she defines as:

"an occlusion of knowledge [...]. It is not a matter of ignorance or absence. Aphasia is a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things. Aphasia in its many forms describes a difficulty retrieving both conceptual and lexical vocabularies, and most important, a difficulty comprehending what is spoken."<sup>91</sup>

Rather than considering the colonial history in France as merely 'forgotten', Stoler uses the notion of aphasia to indicate the simultaneous presence and absence of the colonial past in contemporary France. Through this approach she disrupts the typical narrative of remembrance, to rather evoke the many ways in which memories of the colonization did not disappear, but have instead become inaudible and misidentified over time.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, the notion of aphasia offers a way to perhaps better understand the contemporary anxieties raised by the evocations of the colonization in public discourses, as it primarily describes a condition in which the subject becomes unable to clearly identify his/her situation.<sup>93</sup>

Within African art museums, such mechanisms could be illustrated through the difficulties encountered by institutions in evoking their own pasts and the history of their displays. In this respect, the River structure at the Quai Branly Museum, the only construction presenting the colonial history of African art exhibitions within the building, acts as a striking

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<sup>90</sup> For an analysis of the Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration's internal tensions in relation to the building's history, see Labadi, 2013

<sup>91</sup> Stoler, 2011, p.125

<sup>92</sup> Stoler, 2011, p.145

<sup>93</sup> Stoler, 2011, p.153-154

example of the ambivalent attitude of the museum. Indeed the structure, installed at the very center of the permanent display, physically stopping visitors in their tracks, is however made somewhat invisible by the surrounding darkness, creating the paradoxical impression of an unseen but palpable obstacle, which will be further explored in the fourth part of this chapter.

### 3.2. Memorial Conflicts, Difficult Heritages and Hybrid Identities

As evocations of the colonization have become increasingly frequent within the French social and political sphere over the past decades, the discussions and transformations they induced have not been without raising certain tensions. In fact, the term ‘memorial conflict’ has been used by several French scholars to characterize the difficulties encountered by governmental institutions in their depiction of the colonial period, which notably raises an interesting epistemological distinction between the notions of ‘history’ and ‘memory’. Indeed, while the first term relates to “the construction of the ‘historical fact’”<sup>94</sup>, introducing history as a scientific discipline based on certified sources, the concept of ‘memory’ rather implies the reconstitution of a particular past, primarily aiming at generating a coherent narrative towards which one is able to identify. As a result, ‘memory’ also involves a necessary individual and ideological subjectivity, characterized by an affective relationship with the past.<sup>95</sup> Although this process is essential for the creation of shared identities within the national frame, it nonetheless stresses the difficulty for institutions to introduce problematic heritages into the common narrative. Considering that national unity can be perceived as depending on citizens’ ability to recognize a common story, the anxieties raised by the renegotiations of the French historical discourse could be understood as a logical response to a disturbance in the identification process.

This interpretation might also recall of Sharon MacDonald’s concept of *difficult heritage*, which she describes as:

“a past that is recognised as meaningful in the present but that is also contested and awkward for public reconciliation with a positive, self-affirming contemporary identity. ‘Difficult heritage’ may also be troublesome because it threatens to break through into the present in disruptive ways, opening up social divisions, perhaps by playing into imagined, even nightmarish, futures.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> “la construction du « fait historique »”, Bancel and Blanchard, 2008, p.496

<sup>95</sup> Bancel and Blanchard, 2008, p.496

<sup>96</sup> MacDonald, 2009, p.1

First described in relation to the negotiation of the Nazi past in contemporary Nuremberg, the concept can however be broadened to include modern discussions about the colonization and its present remnants. Regarding the consequences of the official acknowledgment of such histories, MacDonald however points out that although challenging, politics of transparency can also have positive effects on the perception of the nation, which admissions of past failures can be seen as “a sign of integrity”<sup>97</sup>, and allow countries to move forward.<sup>98</sup> From this standpoint, museums, thought as increasingly self-reflexive institutions with the rise of the New Museology, could constitute privilege spaces for the mediation of difficult heritages and the tensions they induce.

It is however necessary to acknowledge that although addressing difficult heritages might constitute a necessary process for contemporary societies, it should not be limited to the “act of performing contrition”<sup>99</sup> and as such, solely focus on past failures, but rather examine these failures for the purpose of moving beyond them, and hopefully introduce more inclusive and dialogical narratives. As explained by Homi Bhabha:

“remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present”<sup>100</sup>

As a result, memory is never a neutral concept, and possesses crucial social and political implications in the present. As such, although national historical narratives need to be scrutinized critically, they might also have a potentiality for promoting beneficial and positive values, through notably the acknowledgement of difficult histories and contradicting voices, in order to promote inclusion and perhaps ease contemporary social tensions.

In his 1994 article “DissemiNation”, Bhabha incidentally offers a thought provoking perspective on the understanding of the processes of cultural identification at stake in the constitution of national narratives, by challenging the concept of historicity while arguing for the exploration of disrupted temporalities.<sup>101</sup> In his words:

“The boundary that marks the nation’s selfhood interrupts the self-generating time of national production and disrupts the signification of the people as homogenous. [...] We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation *It/Self*, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous

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<sup>97</sup> MacDonald, 2015, p.16

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> MacDonald, 2015, p.18

<sup>100</sup> Bhabha, 1994, p.63

<sup>101</sup> Bhabha, 1994, p.200-201

histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference.”<sup>102</sup>

In his text Bhabha disrupts the idea of the nation as a unified homogenized entity, but rather characterizes it as a fundamentally ambivalent one, which narrative is constantly challenged by contradicting discourses, arising from heterogeneous groups within its own borders. Rather than considering this “continuous slippage”<sup>103</sup> of narratives as potentially destructive, Bhabha argues for the understanding of these elements as constitutive of the liminal nature of the nation itself. Moreover, he describes this permanent state of tension between contradicting narrations and histories as a promising tool for the establishment of a more dialogical perspective.

Within the context of African art exhibitions, the discussion of the colonial history of some of the objects and their modes of exhibition, along with an increase in self reflexivity from the institutions concerning the necessary processes of appropriation and interpretation their display represent, might perhaps allow for a repositioning of contradicting or marginal voices within the official discourse. Museums of African arts in France, because of the direct links some of their objects have with the colonial history, as well as through their presentation of extra-national cultures, might indeed constitute a valuable liminal space in which difficult histories could be better negotiated, along with inter-cultural dialogue.

### 3.3. Performing Memory: From Melancholia to Hauntology

The frequent use of the concept of memory has allowed for the constitution of parallels between individual psychological processes and the idea of a larger, social psyche. From this standpoint, one could recall of the notion of melancholia, and notably of its contemporary depictions in post colonial theory. First described by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in 1917, melancholia corresponds to “an endlessly repeating remembering, and mourning, as a working through in order to forget”.<sup>104</sup> Within the field of memory studies, the notion was first used to describe the psychological and social legacies of the Holocaust, to be later adapted to other forms of traumatic histories, including the colonization.

Regarding this approach, one could nonetheless argue that although the use of psychoanalysis might indeed constitute a valuable device to better understand the shaping of

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<sup>102</sup> Bhabha, 1994, p.212

<sup>103</sup> Bhabha, 1994, p.201

<sup>104</sup> Ward, 2007, p.192

memory as a social phenomenon, this approach within the context of African arts exhibitions might however set aside some of the paradoxes imbedded in the objects themselves. Indeed, as it has been evoked in the second chapter of this thesis, a number of works constituting a part of the historical collections were exhibited in museums and as a result, subjected to complex processes of appropriation, interpretation, and even at time physically adapted to suit certain displays. As a result, in addition to the vestiges of former colonial modes of exhibition, notably expressed through problematic reminiscences of primitivist approaches in museum displays, the colonial history could even arguably be considered as partially interiorized, even embodied, by certain objects. These works could then be understood as hybrid testimonies of a past which cannot be merely exorcized through mourning, or the notion of melancholia, but which could rather be critically examined and investigated in order to open up new possibilities in exhibition-making.

Confronted to the issues raised by the concept of melancholia in relation to the negotiation of the colonial history, one would indeed need to find other approaches to think and represent the colonial heritage within the museum space. In this aspect, the concept of hauntology, coined by the philosopher Jacques Derrida in his book *Specters of Marx*, first published in 1993, might appear as particularly insightful in thinking the disjointed temporality implied by the simultaneous presence and absence of the colonial past within African art museums in France. Although the notion was first developed in relation to the legacies of Marxist theory, it has since been successfully applied to other domains such as cinematic studies, literature or postcolonial thought, underlying the deep resonance of the concept with various mediums.<sup>105</sup>

In his text Derrida explains how:

“To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.”<sup>106</sup>

In other words, the philosopher introduces hauntology in opposition with the concept of ontology, the science of definition concerned with the nature of being, while playfully stressing the acoustic similarities of the two terms. As a result, hauntology is an elusive notion that refers to a state of temporal disjunction, allowing for the simultaneous presence and

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<sup>105</sup> For a thought provoking example of ‘hauntology’ used as an analytical concept in relation with postcolonial literature, and more precisely the legacy of slavery, see Craps, 2010

<sup>106</sup> Derrida, 1994, p.161

absence of the specter, or ghost, which is neither fully confined to the past, nor entirely active in the present. In Derrida's terms:

“haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not dated—never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of the calendar”<sup>107</sup>

In fact, hauntology refuses the perception of time as a linear and chronological process, to rather propose the idea of a temporal dislocation, which could perhaps be thought in relation with Bhabha's conception of time, as evoked in the previous part.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, regarding the argument developed in this thesis, the understanding of colonialism and post-colonialism as successive clear-cut temporal frameworks is indeed problematic. In fact, as it has been briefly explained in the first chapter of this thesis, the prefix 'post' tends to imply the end of a particular period and the beginning of a new one, namely the colonial, followed by the post colonial, times. As a result, post colonialism might be understood as an ambiguous theoretical time-frame, denying the continuity of colonialism in the present, while being precisely focused on its contemporary consequences and effects.<sup>109</sup> As a result, Derrida's hauntology might then appear as a particularly promising metaphor in thinking these paradoxes.

Through the notion of hauntology, the philosopher also refers to psychoanalytical perspectives on memory and trauma, while attempting to move beyond them. Indeed, rather than taking on an 'ontological' approach aiming at exorcising the specter, Derrida urges us “to learn to live *with* ghosts”<sup>110</sup> instead, and to refuse to relinquish their stories to the past, in an ongoing movement of re-examination and concern for justice.<sup>111</sup> As a result, rather than perceiving haunting as a pathological state, Derrida argues for its disruptive potentiality, as a tool to think beyond restrictive and maladjusted temporal frameworks.

#### 3.4. A Specter in the Museum: the Case of the River Display at the Quai Branly

The concept of hauntology could in fact be particularly well illustrated through the example of the Quai Branly, both in consideration to the history of some of the objects it exhibits, but also quite literally within the display thought the presence of the River structure.

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<sup>107</sup> Derrida, 1994, p.4

<sup>108</sup> Derrida, 1994, p.25

<sup>109</sup> Shohat, 1992, p.102

<sup>110</sup> Derrida, 1994, xviii

<sup>111</sup> Craps, 2010, p.469

Considering the building itself, it is striking to notice that the vocabulary of the ghost has been very much present and even promoted as part of Jean Nouvel's architectural vision. In fact, the museum's press kit describes the edifice as:

“a place marked by symbols of forest and river, and the obsessions of death and oblivion. It is a sanctuary [...] It is a haunted place, wherein dwell and converse the ancestral spirits of those who discovered the human condition and invented gods and beliefs.”<sup>112</sup>

Although the concepts of death and haunting can be traced back to a primitivist perspective on African arts, which considers the artworks as strange, even mystical artifacts, linked to the expression of a dark, 'primitive' power, the use of such lexicon in the Quai Branly promotional statement might appear as relatively surprising.<sup>113</sup> However such terminology seems to fit particularly well in Derrida's depiction of hauntology, although this time, it is the legacy of the colonial past that could be interpreted as a spectral presence permeating the institution.

Within the museum, the colonial history, although ever-present through the history of a part of the objects it displays, is seldom addressed. Indeed, as it has been previously examined in the first chapter in this thesis, the exhibition tends to privilege a more scenographic approach, using the architecture, the lights, and the general organization of the display to articulate meaning, while limiting the amount of interpretive labels. In the analysis of a post-colonial haunting at the Quai Branly museum, one can however only be struck by the example of the River display, located at the very center of the permanent exhibition. Indeed, the structure, conceived as the sole device directly evoking the colonial history in the museum, despite its strategic location and the necessity for visitors to regularly walk past it, stays quite literally 'in the shadows' of the building, the architecture of the Quai Branly rendering it inevitable, while simultaneously obscuring its content.

Indeed, the River was constructed at the very heart of the museum as a lengthwise corridor-like structure situated in the middle of the exhibition space [see plan, fig.5], to organize the display by distributing the different geographical zones along its sides. While exploring the Quai Branly, visitors are consequently regularly required to enter or move around this particular display, in order to access the parts they are aiming to. Although such construction allows for an efficient distribution of space and a better discernment of the different areas, it might however become rapidly frustrating if one wants to rapidly navigate

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<sup>112</sup> See Clifford, 2007, p.4

<sup>113</sup> For a survey of the links drawn between African arts and the concepts of death and darkness in primitivist approaches, see Price, 1989, p.42-46



the different sections, as the River can only be crossed in its center [fig.10] and at its ends, representing an imposing barrier that one has to painfully circumvent. As a result, visitors who want to quickly travel across sections in order to see a selection of objects are still obliged to follow the standard progression of the display to get to the particular points they want to see. Consequently, this type of spatial organization might seem particularly authoritative, as it substantially determines and restricts visitors' movements inside the exhibition.

As it has been previously mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, the lightning inside the Quai Branly has been carefully crafted in order to shed a light directly on the objects while leaving the rest of the building in a semi obscurity, in order to provide an eerie feeling to the public exploring the space. The River structure is no exception to this pattern, and as the construction was first and foremost constituted as an architectural apparatus, the low walls are kept in relative darkness. In order to better understand what I mean by the utilization of lightening effects at the Quai Branly museum, one could refer to the photograph of the River presented in the illustrations table [fig.11] that I took during my visit of the institution. I am particularly underlying this point as other available photographs of the Quai Branly are often taken by professionals, and as such, are usually well lighted [fig.10]. The actual impression conveyed by the display however tends to be one of relative obscurity, which might notably let visitors walk past the River without noticing its inscriptions.

Indeed, the structure's low walls are covered with explanatory labels evoking the colonial history, in relation with the constitution of the museum's collections, some of them being even engraved, and as such, embodied to a certain level by the structure. Although precious, the information are however kept in a relative darkness which might seem particularly unappealing to a part of the public, or even cause them to be utterly missed. Referring back to Derrida and his concept of hauntology, one could note how the philosopher describes that:

“The specter, as its name indicates, is the frequency of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible. And visibility, by its essence, is not seen, which is why it remains *epekeina tes ousias*, beyond the phenomenon or beyond being.”<sup>114</sup>

Within the River display, one can witness the same process at play, as the walls, representing a strikingly visible obstacle to visitors' movements, are however kept in darkness, rendering their actual discourse, the acknowledgement of the colonial history of part of the artworks and former modes of exhibition, invisible to a portion of the public. As a result, the Quai Branly's River could be thought as an appropriate metaphor for its institution's apparent difficulty to

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<sup>114</sup> Derrida, 1994, p.100

explore its colonial past. Indeed, while situated at the heart of the museum, the River, and what it stands for, remains permanently in the shadows of the edifice, invisible to an inattentive eye despite its palpable presence, silent, while visitors keep on passing by, attempting to cross the structure.

At a broader level, this type of phenomenon could even be extended to the functioning of many French museums of African arts, which, while built on the foundations of former colonial apparatuses of power and displaying a number of objects intrinsically marked by the history of colonialism, remain for the most part oblivious to the specter of this past, permeating their walls while remaining invisible to their publics. To a certain extent, this paradox could even be understood as a symbol of the nation's contemporary difficulties to negotiate its own difficult heritage.

Although this perspective is primarily metaphorical, and as such tends to set aside the practical, structural, and financial difficulties such institutions might face, rendering the undertaking of deep transformations challenging, especially in regards to a subject that tends to exacerbate political tensions as much as mentions of France's colonial past does, one might however hopefully find this approach helpful in the opening up of a discussion on the necessity to acknowledge the historical relevance of the objects, and the ways they were formerly displayed.

### 3.5. New Perspectives in Exhibition-Making

The role and aims of the museum as a cultural institution have considerably evolved, from the cabinets of curiosities of the early modern period, to public spaces displaying material culture during the nineteenth and twentieth century, to finally become the pedagogical and social spaces they are today. Moreover, as the social and political impact of these institutions have become increasingly scrutinized in relation with the apparition of the New Museology, innovative practices aiming at developing self reflexivity within museums have increasingly developed, offering new possibilities and approaches for exhibition-making. Although these new perspectives do not necessarily concern the inheritances of the colonial history or African art exhibitions directly, they might nonetheless represent valuable avenues for further reflections on future possibilities for museums, and this last part will particularly focus on two thought provoking displays and practices located in North America and Europe.

As a first example of thought provoking museum practice, the exhibition *African Art, African Voices: Long Steps Never Broke a Back*, curated by Pamela McClusky in 2002 for the Seattle Art Museum, which has been briefly mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, constitutes a challenging example of a successful disruption of the museum's authoritative voice, substituting it by a diversity of perspectives. Indeed, the exhibition attempted to remove the curatorial authority from the institution, and rather offered the opportunity to the public to actively participate in the production of meaning, by presenting a number of intersecting narratives. In practice, the show chose to suppress labels, considered as authoritative apparatuses, in order to dissolve the idea of a linear narration, and instead included different contributions through the use of audio guides. This method offered numerous narratives originating from a diversity of agents and source voices, evoking the various aspects, usages, and meanings of the objects exhibited in the space, and as such, forced visitors to actively participate in the interpretive effort, while procuring them abundant information.<sup>115</sup> Overall, the exhibition was considered as a real success, and travelled to other institutions such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2004.<sup>116</sup>

Through its reliance on audio documentation, the exhibition was able to showcase a variety of sources, contributing to the creation of a dialogical display as the different voices presented would intersect and complement each other. Moreover, this strategy allowed for a better inclusion of source voices, contextualizing the objects from different standpoints. Finally, on a structural level, the show also provided the public with a tool to actively participate in the narrative of the exhibition, by avoiding the hierarchisation of sources, and instead letting visitors prioritize themselves the approaches they preferred. In this regard, such practice might appear as particularly precious as well as pedagogical, as it allows the public to understand and critically analyze the necessary subjectivity of discourse, and disrupts the idea of the museum as an authoritative institution to rather present it as a space of discussion. As a result, this type of innovative process could represent a valuable possibility for future exhibitions of African arts in France, through its inclusive and dialogical methodology. Indeed, this type of display would suppress the artificial dichotomy between the anthropological and the aesthetic standpoint historically constructed in museums. Furthermore, in addition to the presentation of source-voices, such method could also allow for a better acknowledgement of the long and complex evolution of African art exhibitions

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<sup>115</sup> Hermer, 2006, p.360-361

<sup>116</sup> Hermer, 2006, p.366-367

and of the artworks they display, as some contributors could evoke the colonial history as well.

On another level, different initiatives have also appeared in Europe over the past few years, in order to propose new prospects in exhibition-making. Among them, the museum confederation *l'Internationale*, constituted of six modern and contemporary art institutions, the Moderna Galerija in Slovenia, the Museo nacional centro de arte Reina Sofía and the Museu d'art Contemporani de Barcelona in Spain, the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen in Belgium, the SALT in Turkey, and the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands, attempts to analyze and re think museum practices within an international frame, underlying the necessity for contemporary museums to collaborate on larger projects.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, the organization aims at constituting a socially relevant space of discussion for “transcultural dialogue on society and visual art”.<sup>118</sup> In parallel with the organization of exhibitions, conferences, and education programs, *l'Internationale* also regularly edits an online magazine centered on a collaborative work on the collections, evoking several developing questions in the field of curatorial practices and museum studies, such as “Real Democracy”, “Ecologising Museums”, or “Decolonising Practices”.<sup>119</sup>

In addition to the value of introducing dialogue and cooperative practices between international museums, such program also argues for the necessity for contemporary cultural institutions to constitute pertinent spaces of discussion of public utility, in order to remain relevant for their societies.<sup>120</sup> As a result, such standpoint might also allow for the transformation of some museums into spaces of mediation for difficult histories, which could perhaps be successfully applied to French museums of African arts, in order to better acknowledge and question the colonial remnants haunting the exhibitions, and perhaps finally offer new ways to “learn to live *with* ghosts”.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> VanAbbe Museum, “L'Internationale”, accessed on 20/07/2016, <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/about-the-museum/support-and-partners/linternationale/>

<sup>118</sup> L'Internationale Online, “About”, accessed on 20/07/2016, <http://www.internationaleonline.org/about>

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> D. Ruyters, “A Cosmology of Museums: Interview with Charles Esche”, *Metropolis M*, (17/04/2013), accessed on 01/08/2016, <http://metropolism.com/features/a-cosmology-of-museums/>.

<sup>121</sup> Derrida, 1994, p. xviii

## Conclusion

The exhibition of African arts in western institutions has been a major topic of discussion in museums studies over the past decades, which sparked of lively debates and new initiatives in the field of museums practices, such as the exhibition *African Art, African Voices: Long Steps Never Broke a Back* for instance. However some exhibitions might have remained, at times, problematic. Within the context of French museums, many institutions still struggle with the negotiation of the colonial past concerning their displays, as well as the history of the institutions themselves. In fact, on a broader level, France, as a former colonial power, has experienced difficulties to articulate its colonial history in relation with a larger national narrative. Indeed, the memorialization of the colonization in France, from the 1960s to the present, has been an ongoing process which still raises tensions, particularly over the past fifteen years with the introduction of controversial, and often contradicting, governmental measures. Considering that African art exhibitions in France were often constituted on the basis of former colonial displays and that this particular history has profoundly impacted the objects as well as the displays of these objects, the discussion of the colonial history within these institutions might become increasingly relevant.

While former exhibitions tended to represent African artworks as objects characteristic of ‘primitive’ populations, ‘Others’ diametrically opposed to the French ‘Self’, one can still at times notice the involuntary vestiges of this primitivist approach within contemporary exhibitions. The invisible but perceptible presence of the colonial history in French institutions has become an important problem, which concerns even seemingly recent museums such as the Quai Branly Museum. Indeed, this particular structure, currently celebrating its ten years of existence, was built on the former colonial collections of the Porte Dorée Palace and the Musée de l’Homme, and presents African artworks within a very potent architecture, creating a dark, strange space of wonder, which might easily evoke the remnants of older primitivist displays. As such, one could argue that the museum is still haunted by a colonial ghost, a ghost that even becomes a concrete obstacle in visitors’ path in the case of the River display.

The Quai Branly constitutes a particularly clear example of such phenomenon, illustrating how the exhibition of African arts in contemporary French museums might be understood as symptomatic of the country’s difficulties to address its colonial history. As a result, in order to finally be able to ‘live with the ghost’, or perhaps even put it to rest,

museums would need to acknowledge its presence first, to finally display new and innovative forms of representation.

Although such changes are particularly challenging to undertake, because of the political issues they might prompt as well as more practical matters, such as a lack of funding to create new displays in some institutions, they might however be particularly needed in the light of France's contemporary social and political difficulties. Furthermore, considering that museums are often understood as sites of memory and constitute generally trusted institutions, these structures could perhaps better favor the opening up of a dialogue, along with a critical analysis of the relationship between what is told and what is left aside within the nation, than other types of less trusted institutions.

Museums, as institution shaping discourses and ordering knowledge are indeed major structures in the constitution of shared representations, however, as it has been argued by Timothy Mitchell:

“The exhibition does not cut us off from reality. It persuades us that the world is divided neatly into two realms, the exhibition and the real world, thereby creating the effect of a reality from which we now feel cut off. It is not the artificiality of the world-as-exhibition that should concern us, but the contrasting effect of a lost reality to which such supposed artificiality gives rise. This reality, which we take to be something obvious and natural, is in fact something novel and unusual.”<sup>122</sup>

As a result, considering that the creation of meaning and knowledge, at the basis of the museum's action, necessarily involves the presentation of a partial narrative, imbedded in the particular cultural context of the society it arises from, perhaps a more positive attitude towards representation would then be to acknowledge and use the necessary artificiality of discourse. In fact, institutions could then purposefully adapt their narratives in consideration to the wider social frame they are placed in, while offering visitors critical tools to understand and interpret the construction of these narratives, introducing meta communication within museum displays as a pedagogical tool. Within the context of African art museums in France, this type of approach could for instance be implemented through explanatory labels, acknowledging and questioning the residues of the colonial past inside the institutions, and proposing a reflection on the evolutions of African arts exhibitions, which could allow visitors to reflect on the notion of colonial 'haunting' inside museums and offer more self-reflexivity within the displays.

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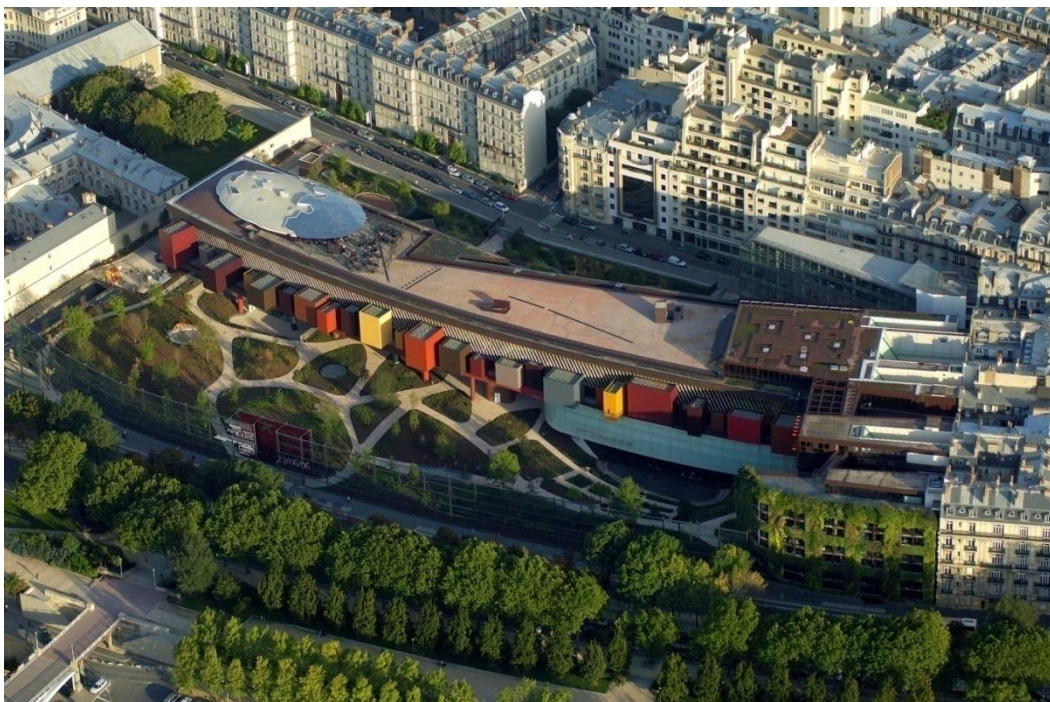
<sup>122</sup> Mitchell, 1992, p.300

Finally, although this thesis was primarily focused on the colonial history of African art exhibitions in French museums, one of the goals of these institutions is also to present foreign cultures and artworks in an attempt to increase intercultural dialogue. As a result, the introduction of source-voices, along with the development of collaborations between institutions at an international level, might also constitute particularly relevant paths for the future of African art exhibitions.

## Illustrations



**Figure 1:** Porte Dorée Palace, entrance, Paris, France.



**Figure 2:** Quai Branly Museum, aerial view, Paris, France.





**Figure 3:** Quai Branly Museum, Paris, France.



**Figure 4:** African section, Quai Branly Museum, Paris, France, (photograph by Claire Jandot).

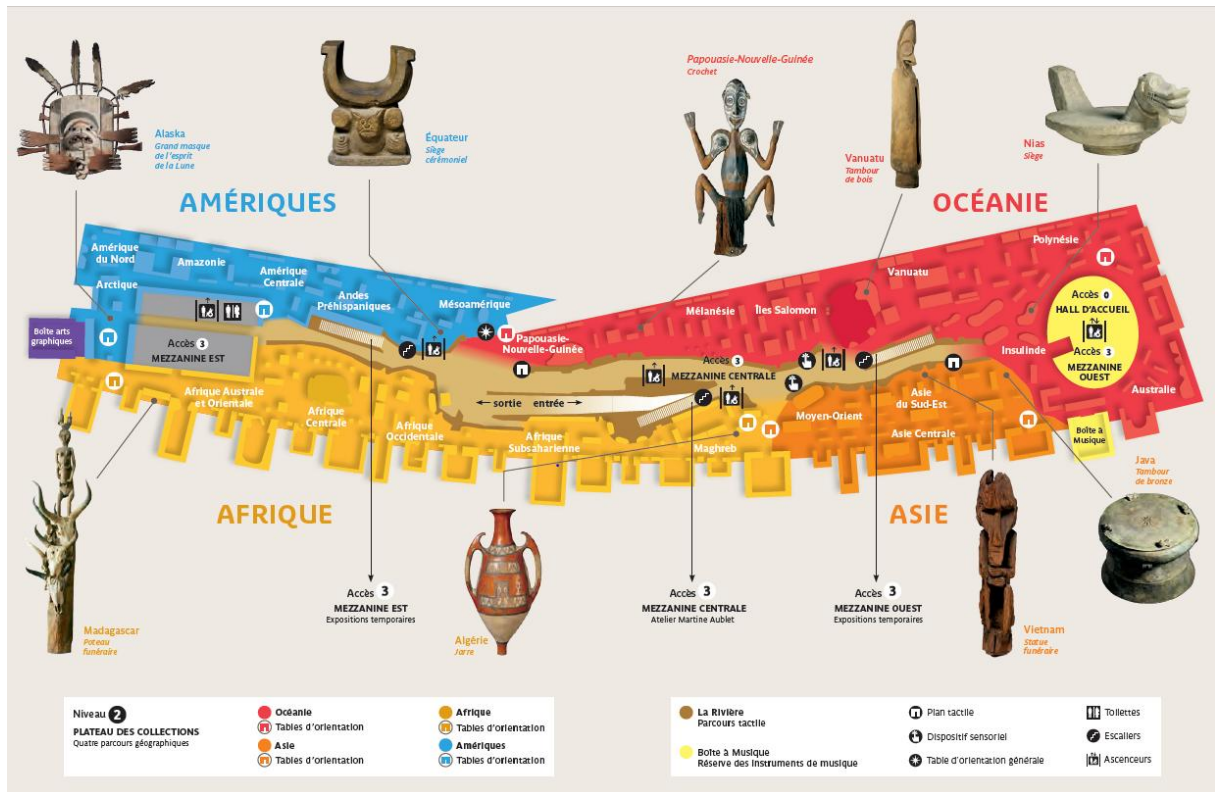
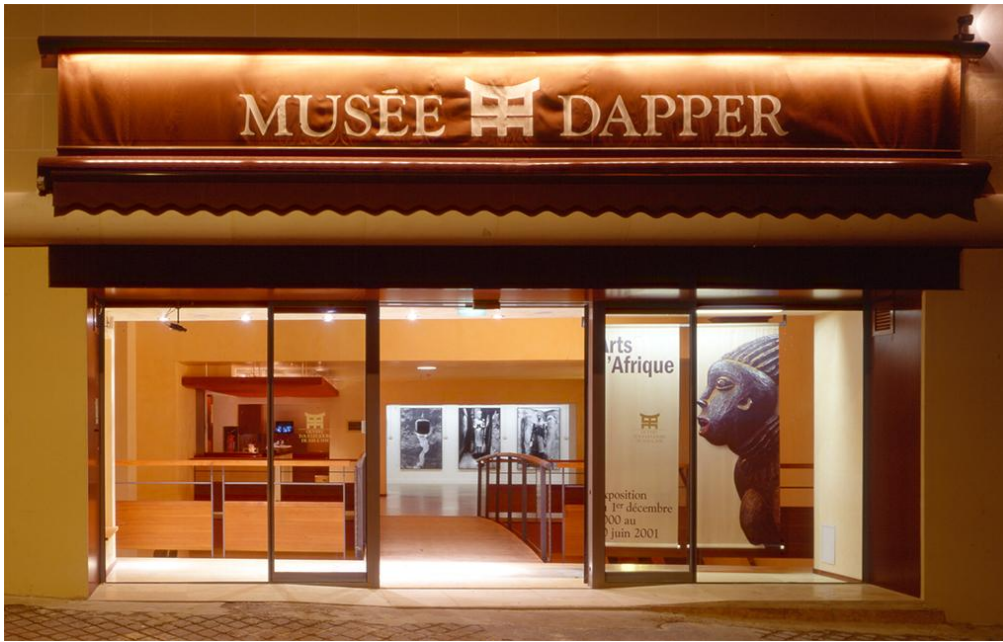


Figure 5: Plan, Quai Branly Museum, Institutional Brochure, 2015.



Figure 6: African section, Quai Branly Museum, Paris, France, (photograph by Claire Jandot).



**Figure 7:** Musée Dapper, entrance, Paris, France.



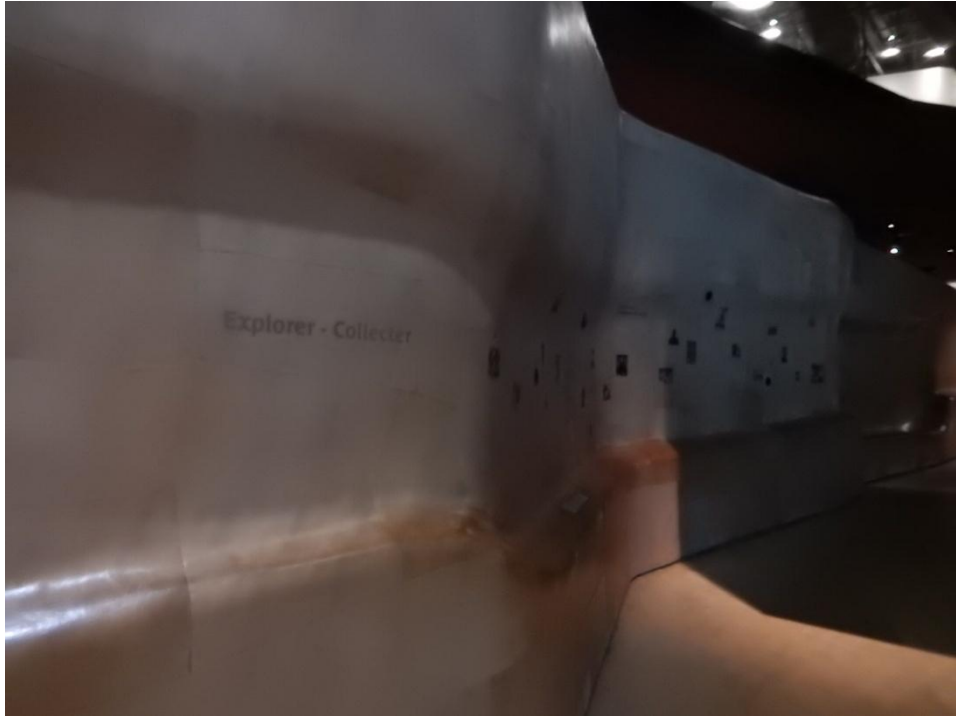
**Figure 8:** Musée Dapper, first floor, Paris, France, (photograph by Claire Jandot).



**Figure 9:** Krou Mask, Ivory Coast, before 1900, polychrome wood, cotton, vegetal fibers, metal, shells, feathers, bovine skin, 68 x 20 x 17,5 cm, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France.



**Figure 10:** River display, top-view, Quai Branly Museum, Paris, France, (photograph by Cyril Zannettacci).



**Figure 11:** River display, Quai Branly Museum, Paris, France, (photograph by Claire Jandot).

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