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Bernard Dupaigne, *Le Scandale des arts premiers: la véritable histoire du musée du quai Branly*

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- 1 ALTHOUGH VARIOUS RESEARCHERS proposed projects to document and analyze the birth of the new Musée du quai Branly most, if not all, were denied privileged access to the field of decision-making and interpretive discussions that established the fascinating contradictory identity of the new institution. In the regrettable absence of proper academic studies, books such as Dupaigne's, and the series of articles documenting the ups and downs of the Project published over the last decade by Emmanuel Le Roux in *Le Monde*, are nearly all we have to tell the story of one of the most controversial museum projects undertaken this past decade. The shortcomings of this work, its partiality, its rhetoric, and its use of newspaper, interviews and other sources to substantiate its preconceived conclusions all illustrate why academic museological case studies should not be considered an unwelcome intrusion in affairs of State.
- 2 While the work claims to deal with the period 1995-2006, most of it focuses on the four years between 1996 and 2000 and concentrates on the conflict between the French anthropological world, particularly the curators of the Musée de l'Homme's laboratoire d'Ethnologie and the Gaullist art establishment represented by Jacques Kerchache, the arch-villain of the story, and Jacques Chirac. After 2000 the work begins to lose some of its focus and finishes with a general critique of the ambitious and expensive museum projects the Chirac Government has sponsored. The arguments between the two camps, frequently pugnacious, often professionally reprehensible, usually unpleasant and rarely intellectually stimulating, voiced in the main French newspapers, have shaped what may still become a remarkable institution capable of confounding its supporters and critics alike in charting a new intellectual foundation for research on non-Western art and culture. Bernard Dupaigne reiterates tiresome intellectual debates. He documents the admittedly sometimes dubious way authorities acquired additional

collections for the new museum (the acquisition of 276 pieces of African art from the Barbier-Mueller Museum and works from other collectors who were friends and clients of Kerchache, while a whole chapter is given to the scandal surrounding the acquisition of Nok terracotta's that divided the Museums international advisory board and brought it widespread criticism). He expresses outrage and incredulity at the «cronyism» through which Jacques Chirac pushed his project through to completion, the cowardice of Henry de Lumley, the then Director of the Musée de l'Homme for failing to defend the institution, the marginalization of research, corruption, the incompetence which saw the financial cost of the project dramatically escalate, and the arrogance of the architect, Jean Nouvel, for constructing collection storage areas under the flood plain of the Seine.

- 3 Bernard Dupaigne traces a genealogy of the grand project to unite «primitive art» with the historical traditions of the world's great civilizations from Malraux (for whom they were «primordial arts») to Kerchache and Jacques Chirac (who preferred the term «arts premiers»), though he fails to mention that Claude Lévi-Strauss, ten years earlier than Malraux, had also harbored similar visions. Kerchache's attempted unsuccessfully to interest Mitterand in his project, but failed to achieve support until Jacques Chirac, a collector of African art himself, was elected to the Presidency. In 1995 Jacques Chirac made a speech at the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle where he claimed art and ethnology to be two very different things, and thereby according to Dupaigne ignited the beginning of the hostilities that have characterized the development and realization of the Project ever since.
- 4 In 1996, Jacques Chirac endorsed kerchache's campaign for an additional gallery in the Louvre to exhibit «arts premiers». Against the opposition of its Director and curators, Kerchache and the architect, Jean-Michel Wilmotte were given the task of designing the Pavillon des Sessions which opened in 2000. Originally Kerchache and Chirac had planned modernizing and restructuring the neglected Musée de l'Homme, but with frequent opposition from its curatorial staff and after a failed attempt to remove the musée de la Marine to enable future expansion, it was felt easier to build a new museum. In 1996 a commission, which included Kerchache and various other political appointments, was established to examine the terms of reference of the proposed new museum. Its report recommended the amalgamation of the collections of the musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (MNAAO) with those of the Musée de l'Homme to create a new Musée des Civilisations et des Arts Premiers. Kerchache, up to his death in 2001, was made advisor to Germain Viatte, the former Director of the musée national d'Art moderne, and entrusted with exhibition planning and interpretation in the new Museum. The accusations and counterpoints between the two camps have seldom quieted. Dupaigne unavoidably, as Director of the Musée de l'Homme's former Laboratoire d'ethnologie, is unable to act as a neutral or dispassionate observer himself. He argues that at the outset the curators of the Musée de l'Homme were not hostile against the idea of exhibiting non-Western objects as art, but against the idea of «arts premiers», because it denied such objects had history or had undergone change and treated them as «original art» thereby encouraging what he calls a «new obscurantism». As if to prove his point, he includes an appendix, which lists the different collaborative projects, the Musée de l'Homme did with the MNAAO; another listing non-western art exhibits assisted by the Musée de l'Homme; a comparative table of exhibitions done by Kerchache and more usefully a forth appendix which gives a chronological summary of the events between 1962-2006. For Bernard Dupaigne the

quai Branly is a «musée pharaonique». He repeatedly accused the new museum project of creating a neocolonial representation of the world, a «palais des arts primitifs». He finds support in the opinions of other anthropologists including Louis Dumont, Daniel de Coppet and Maurice Godelier, but when he discusses how this neocolonial aestheticism should be superseded he repeats only traditional and formulaic dated options – Godelier’s desire for thematic and comparative approaches, or the need for ethnographic contextualization. Dupaigne’s work, more than anything, evidences the bareness of the intellectual debate around the establishment of the quai Branly and while he protests at the polemical and aggressive accusations of Kerchache against his anthropologist colleagues, he ignores similar personal hostilities that the anthropological establishment directed against Kerchache.

- 5 All in all this is a disappointing book about an apparently disappointing episode in French museological history in which neither the anthropologists or the aesthetes comes out particularly well. Furthermore, the books publication was probably timed to coincide with the opening of the quai Branly to cause maximum embarrassment. However, instead of the re-vindication the author had hoped for, the new Museum with its intellectually challenging temporary exhibitions and the tools for a much greater contextualization of the collections than ever the Musée de l’Homme was able to muster, strongly contradicts many of his central theses. The work may at best be a timely reiteration, using a contemporary case in point, of the intellectual problems surrounding ethnographic representation that have haunted museology without any resolution for nearly a century, but because of the authors complicity in the events he documents, it fails to achieve academic status. With so much political and symbolic capital invested in the Project, these crises of public ethnographic representations became exacerbated to the point that they may have finally reached climacteric where we will all realize the terms of these encounters themselves need to be radically rewritten. That however, would be quite a different book to the one under review.

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