



*Great Narratives of the Past. Traditions and Revisions in National Museums* Conference proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Paris 29 June – 1 July & 25–26 November 2011. Dominique Poulot, Felicity Bodenstein & José María Lanzarote Guiral (eds) EuNaMus Report No 4. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press:  
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## **Historical Narratives of the Nation and the Internationalization of Museums: Exhibiting National Art Histories in the Jeu de Paume Museum between the Wars**

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### **Abstract**

In 1983 Benedict Anderson insisted on the foundational role that museums have played in the construction of *imagined communities*. To better grasp the mechanisms at work in the shaping of historical narratives of the nation as it takes place in the museum it is vital to cross-reference the history of nationalism with recent studies on cultural and artistic circulation. The latter have proved that national identities are inherently constructed at a transnational level. The question is, therefore: what happens to the historical narratives manufactured by national museums at a time when museums as such undergo a process of internationalization mediated by traveling exhibitions?

My contribution will focus on a batch of exhibitions conceived by the national museums of several European countries and hosted by the Paris Jeu de Paume between 1921 and 1939 (exhibitions of Belgian, Swiss, Romanian, Dutch, Canadian, Austrian, Danish, Swedish, Polish, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, Catalan and Latvian art). I will analyze this group of exhibitions in terms of the construction of national stereotypes, both at the level of the material production at the hand of foreign museums planning exhibitions abroad and from the point of view of their reception by more or less specialized publics, beginning with the Parisian curators. The texts of catalogues and documents clarifying the makeup of individual events will be compared with the specifically visual devices: catalogue illustrations and the choice of works to be reproduced in journals, newspapers, on postcards, posters and advertisements. Our aim will be to clarify the political stakes at play in these choices.

Through the first half of the twentieth century, the expansion of temporary exhibitions and the subsequent development of a network of loans and exchanges among museums resulted in a wide circulation of works of art at a European and global scale (Haskell 2000). This renewed mobility of museum collections was not limited to the displacement of individual works: exhibitions, especially after the Great War, began to be conceived at the outset for export. Between the wars, in the general context of an enhanced cultural diplomacy among former ally countries (or, as in France, a politics of cultural prestige), exhibitions designed to introduce a foreign public to the artistic heritage of a specific country abound.

This particular genre, or subcategory, offers a unique vantage point for a discussion of the historical narratives of the nation as shaped by national museums, not least because it requires us to rethink the terms of the question. A score of now classic studies on the construction of national identities has called attention to the instrumental role of the museum as an institution in the development of “imagined communities”(Anderson 1983; Thiesse 1999). However, what happens to the historical narratives manufactured by national museums at a time when museums themselves undergo a process of internationalization, mediated by travelling exhibitions? In other words, what does it mean to construct a “history of national art”, or a “national history of art”, for a foreign museum? How does the image of cultural identity as displayed before “others” differ from the internal image conceived for an autochthonous public? What particular categories of items are mobilized? What are the strategies for display?

I would like to address these questions by examining a corpus of twenty exhibitions hosted between 1923 and 1939 by the Jeu de Paume Museum, whose curator was then André Dezarrois<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of these events was introducing the Parisian public to groups of works on loan from the national and regional museums of each country. How to study this corpus of exhibitions from the point of view of the construction of national identities? As it is hardly possible to focus on individual examples in this context, I would rather like to attempt a *global* analysis of this corpus. These exhibitions provide particularly clear instances of the way a constitutively trans-national construction of a historical narrative of the nation operates at an institutional and intellectual level. The adjective “trans-national” implies different layers of meaning. At a first level, we have the relationships between the “exhibiting” country and France. At a second level, European relationships: from the point of view of Italian institutions, for example, the 1935 Italian exhibition at the Jeu de Paume was one of several showcases of Italian art that were traveling through Europe in the context of a deliberate strategy of display of Italian cultural prestige abroad. French institutions, for their part, conceived of the exhibition at the Jeu de Paume as an open-ended but organic cycle of events connected with the several exhibitions of French art that were being hosted in foreign museums in the same years<sup>2</sup>.

A simpler, monographic approach would hardly do justice to this great complexity. The mechanisms that preside over the construction of national identity in the museum are inseparable from these multi-layered interactions. I will therefore attempt a cross-sectional study of these exhibitions, in order to point out a number of patterns that appear to underlie the writing and the techniques of visualization of an historical narrative of national art as staged abroad and for foreign eyes. In so doing, I will attempt to address at the same time the two levels of production of historical narratives of the past through exhibitions on one hand, and their reception in Paris on the other.

The first point of interest concerns the choice of Paris itself as the showcase for a country's art and national history (Joyeux-Prunel 2009; Casanova 1999: 190-198 ; Sapiro 2009: 249-289). Within the international network of exhibitions as it began to develop in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, the place of display was of fundamental strategic importance. Within a system of multiple circulations of objects, being able to showcase material in prestigious venues, especially abroad, meant obtaining enhanced visibility for the collections of a museum. The location and frequency of exhibitions and possibly celebrated loans from prominent partners also affected the ranking of a country or an institution in the scoreboard of international prestige. This is one of the reasons why a study of the international system of exhibitions and their role in the construction of national identities needs to be conducted as a geohistory, if not a geopolitics of exhibition practices.

In this particular case, for example, it is essential to observe that exhibitions at the *Jeu de Paume* were usually organized at the initiative of the national museums of the countries that wished to be represented, through the direct contact taken by their officials with André Dézarrois to propose a retrospective of the country's national heritage in Paris<sup>3</sup>. Archival materials clearly show that the contribution of the *Jeu de Paume* was limited to providing spaces whilst transportation and insurance, as well as organizational costs, were entirely covered by the guests. Italy and the USA appear to be the only exception, possibly for reasons of exceptional prestige of the first and the excellence in contemporary art in the second case<sup>4</sup>.

Regardless of the motives – the ambitions of the “exhibiting museums” or France’s wish to attract celebrated works – the choice of venues is essential for the development of a historical narrative of the national self, of a nation’s art and heritage. In our case, an artistic and cultural genealogy is implied in which France plays a fundamental role in the development of the “exhibiting” country: the history of national art is rewritten “for” and “through” France. Particularly interesting documents, in this regard, are the historical essays that open the catalogues, invariably signed by the representatives of “exhibiting” museums. One of the leitmotifs of this literature is the deep-rooted historical and cultural ties that link the “guest” country to France. There is no doubt that such exhibitions are major diplomatic events, but it would be a mistake to dismiss these rewritten genealogies as a mere act of opportunism or a strategic statement. The writing and rewriting of the national self “through France” is a chapter in a cross-historical elaboration of national identity that needs to be studied in the long term. For example, the representatives of foreign museums evoke a canonical commonplace of late nineteenth century French criticism when they attribute the “reawakening” of local artists and the rediscovery of specifically national pictorial resources to the prestige of modern French painting. France helped other countries to be more “national”; nineteenth century French painters had been a model for the “locals”, who had rediscovered and painted in their wake the reality and nature of their own home countries: this is a motif that recurs with almost obsessive frequency, and with minimal variations, in many catalogues.

In the specific case of the exhibition of Belgian art (1923), the rewriting of the country’s artistic genealogy takes place in the context of a long-standing debate between Belgian and French art historians: the exhibition, as we shall see, was but the final chapter of a polemic on the “shared heritage” of the two countries. A sort of symbolic restitution took place when Ernest Verlant, of the boards of directors of the Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts de Belgique and Hippolyte

Fierens Gevaert, curator in chief of the same institution, wrote in the short introduction to the catalogue that the history of old and modern Belgian art would be unthinkable without a dialogue with France. They never went as far as to speak of an “influence” – faith in the autonomy of national art is another constant of these catalogues – but the dialogue with France was presented as particularly fruitful (Verlant 1923:29). Belgian national traditions in art seemed to entertain a harmonious relationship with their French counterparts: in the aftermath of the War an irenic representation of the relationships between the two countries, now comrades in arms, had replaced the fierce rivalry that had emerged in the early twentieth century with the exhibitions of Flemish and French primitives. This representation, as already noted, went with a sort of symbolic restitution, on the part of France, of a number of works endowed with deep-seated national implications. I am thinking of the paintings of the so-called “Maitre de Flémalle” or “Maitre de Mérоде”<sup>5</sup>, owned by French museums, but whose Flemish origin had been ascertained as early as the end of the nineteenth century. These works had been displayed in 1902 in Bruges under the signature of the Flemish artist Robert Campin, but in 1904, with the Louvre exhibition of French primitives, France had snatched them back and reattributed them to the French “Maitre de Flémalle”, a choice that had scandalized a number of experts, not only Belgian, but also German, British and Italian (fig. 1) (Thiébaut 2003: 35-39; Passini 2012). In 1923, at last, these panels were displayed as Flemish paintings at the exhibition on Belgian art hosted in the French capital – a token of renewed friendship between two countries and people, as explained by Léonce Bénédite, curator of the Musée du Luxembourg and chief organizer of the exhibition, in his preface to the catalogue (Bénédite 1923: 26; Arnoux 2007: 139-140).



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**Figure 1:** The « Maître de Flémalle », La Nativité (Musée de Dijon), in *Les Primitifs français exposés au Pavillon Marsan et à la Bibliothèque nationale du 12 avril au 14 juillet 1904*, catalogue, Paris, Musée du Louvre, 1904, plate.

Apart from the way such events embodied a certain kind of relationship with France, how were national arts “staged” in these exhibitions, how were they materially put on display? The archives of the Jeu de Paume, unfortunately, don’t reveal much about expography. The catalogues, however, suggest that the set-up of these events was invariably chronologic, following in sequence the evolution of a national corpus through its defining stages. Hosted by the alleged “capital” of European art, these exhibitions were synthetic and highly mediatized representations of the “legitimate heritage” of a country. A particularly interesting question, therefore, is to what epoch; to what works in particular does the “exhibiting” museum (or do ...museums) trace back the beginnings of “national art”?

The double exhibition of Italian art, a section on medieval and modern art at the Petit Palais and one on contemporary art the Jeu de Paume, opened with three roman sculptures on loan from the Louvre, welcoming the visitors at the entrance, under the dome of the Petit Palais, despite the title of that section, “From Cimabue to Tiepolo”<sup>6</sup>. It wasn’t possible for me to ascertain whether the initiative went back to art critic Ugo Ojetti, chairman of the Italian committee and literally “metteur en scène” of the exhibition, or to his French counterpart, Raymond Escholier, the curator of the Petit Palais. This choice, however, went particularly well with the general concept of a double exhibition that was rooted in the political myth of Rome, and that not only opened but also closed under the sign of romanity: the Louvre statues on one end, a group of artists supported by the fascist regime on the other. André Dezarrois himself insisted on this point in a short contribution that followed the historical introduction to the catalogue, signed by the Italian art historian Antonio Maraini. According to Dezarrois, the works of Carena, Tosi, Casorati, Chirico, Tozzi, De Pisis, Severini were a visible proof of “the ferment of a country that is rising from its ashes, rescued and beautified by Fascism”<sup>7</sup>. Maraini, accordingly, concluded his historical survey with a paragraph on “fascist revolution” and the rebirth of a “genuinely Italian art”: “As a tribute to this new life, the work of five pioneers and masters of art [...], working in different directions but endowed with the same innovative spirit and a deep-seated, spontaneous sense of tradition, have been gathered around the busts of the King and the Duce and Primo Conti’s ‘March on Rome’: the painters Spadini, Boccioni and Modigliani and the sculptors Andreotti and Wildt”<sup>8</sup>.

A diametrically opposite approach to this kind of colossal retrospective was the exhibition of Danish art, opening with the eighteenth century. As explained by Karl Madsen, former director of the Copenhagen Arts Museum and chairman of the Danish committee, before that date Danish artists were working “under the spell of foreign schools”, particularly the Dutch. Only after the foundation of Copenhagen Academy of Fine Arts in 1754 – writes Madsen – “national talents began to come to the fore”<sup>9</sup>. A very rigid notion of “influence” is at work here, allowing observers to make sharp distinctions between national and non-national, and therefore to mark the boundaries of “legitimate” artistic heritage.

Peasant and folkloric artistic expressions are sometimes included in the official self-representation of national art, as a key to its most ancient layers (fig. 2). If we study our corpus of exhibitions in terms of a system of centre and periphery, we immediately notice that the countries exposing popular artworks in Paris are invariably peripheral: Poland, Rumania, Latvia, Canada. Was this a choice of the organizers, a request from Dezarrois himself? The documents are not

very clear, but regardless of the more or less explicit role played by Dezarrois, here is a textbook example of a cross-construction of national identities, interiorizing the point of view of Paris.

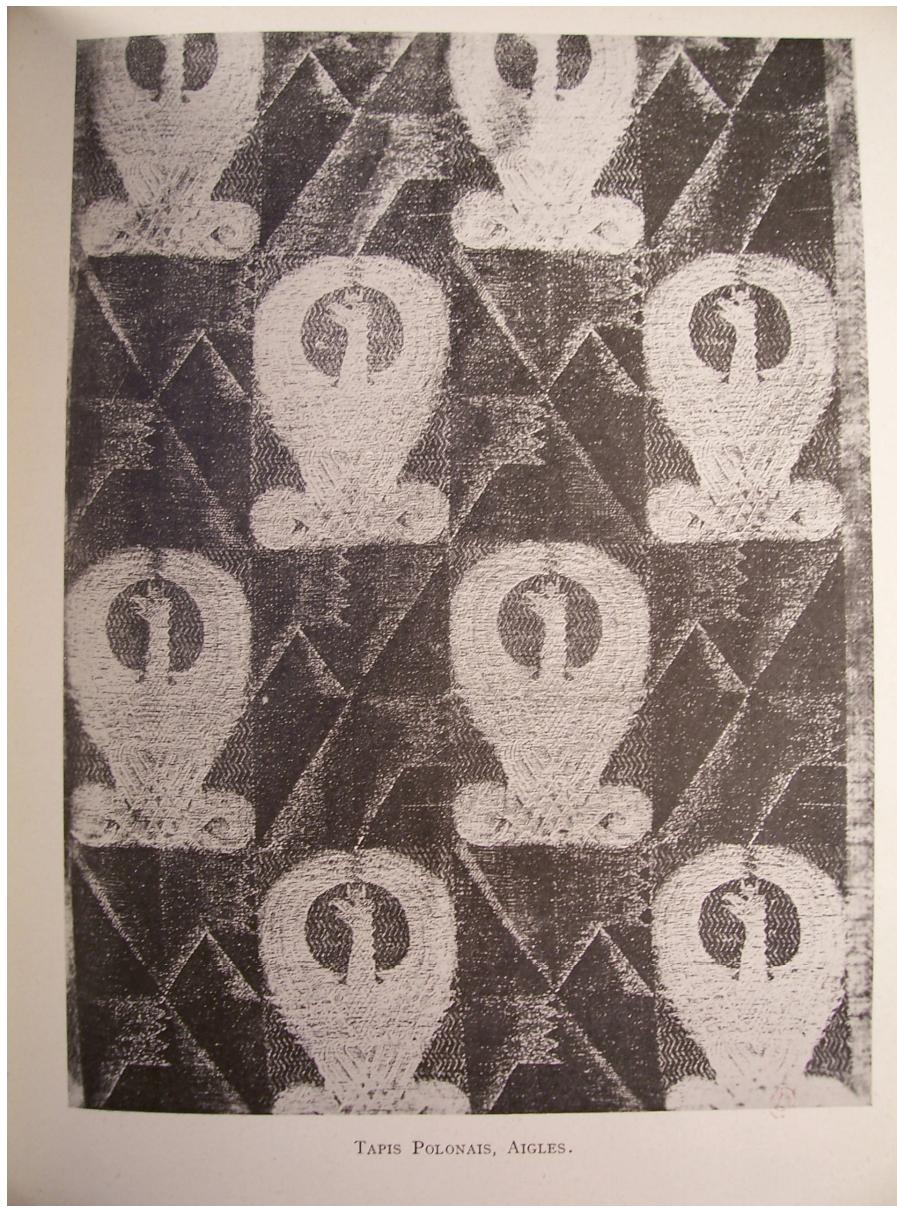


Figure 2: Polish carpet, in *Exposition polonoise: la Pologne 1830-1920-1930*, catalogue, Paris, Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1931, plate.

The policies adopted in the selection of works are essential to a study of exhibitions as construction and representation of a national aesthetic identity. Again, I will limit myself to a few examples that will hopefully clarify some of the political and intellectual implications of these events. As we shall note elsewhere, what is going on is a cross-construction of identities that can be studied both in terms of the design of an exhibition and its Parisian reception.

The 1923 exhibition of old and modern Belgian art, for example, placed national art under the sign of the “observation of nature” (Verlant 1923:28-35). This position had already been asserted at the seminal exhibition of Flemish primitives in Bruges, and the early twentieth century French discourse had assimilated it. The choice of works – promoted by a committee formed by curators of the Belgian Musée Royal de Beaux-Arts and the Anvers Musée Royal de Beaux-Arts –

reflected that representation. The 1923 exhibition significantly opened with the two panels of the Altarpiece of the Mystic Lamb by Hubert and Jan van Eyck, on loan from Gand cathedral, flanked by additional solo works by Jan van Eyck, such as the portrait of the artist's wife on loan from Bruges. These were followed by a gallery of primitives, the same that had been displayed twenty years earlier at the exhibition of Flemish primitives in Bruges, one of the cornerstones of the construction of a national aesthetic identity as founded on pictorial naturalism. Rubens' works led up to the section on modern Belgian art. This, too, was placed under the sign of naturalism, to stress the continuity of national traditions. The choice of works itself as submitted to Dezarrois by the Belgian board of organizers, is evidence enough: such painters as Alfred Verwée (fig. 3) and Rik Wouters were allotted considerable space, while Ensor was absent, even if many of his works had been purchased by Belgian museums, beginning with the Arts Museum of Ostend. Therefore, it seems particularly promising to analyze these exhibitions as a construction and "staging" of national stereotypes.



Figure 3: Alfred Verwée, *L'embouchure de l'Escaut* (oil on canvas, 1880, Bruxelles, Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts de Belgique), in *Exposition de l'art belge, ancien et moderne*, Catalogue, Paris, Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1923, plate.

Four years later, in 1927, the exhibition of Canadian art opened its doors. In his preface to the catalogue, National Gallery of Canada director Eric Brown insisted on the category of "pioneer art" as a foundation of Canadian aesthetic identity that was reflected in the country's artistic production, and he evoked the beauty of Canadian nature as a privilege object of said "pioneer art" (Brown 1927: 11-12). This non-European example appears significant from the point of view of a visual construction of national identity. Again, no photographic documents survive in the archives of the Musées Nationaux. However, the catalogue's cover, the only illustrated instance in the series, is a visual synthesis of an identity whose construction combined motifs of exploration, discovery and the taming of the wild (fig. 4). The illustrations of the catalogue insisted on these themes: landscape dominates (16 photographs on 26 are landscapes). Let us not forget that this kind of visual record, conceived for later reference, constitute as it were the memory of exhibitions. This visual summary of Canadian art must have exerted a powerful "canonizing" influence on the Parisian public.

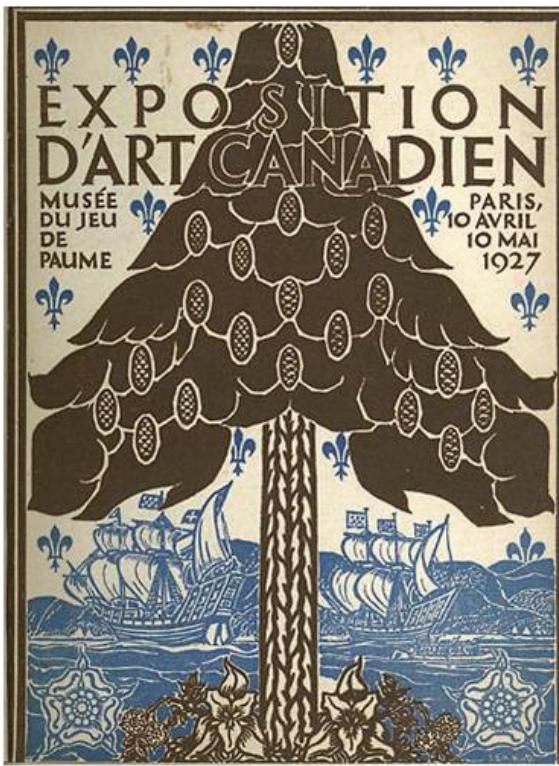


Figure 4: Exposition d'art canadien, Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paris 10 April – 10 May 1927, catalogue cover.

The 1924 exhibition of Swiss art is particularly relevant from the point of view of a construction of national stereotypes, because it emphasizes its limits. French critics had a particularly hard time summarizing the specific “national genius” of Switzerland in a single formula. They invert the issue by claiming that Swiss national identity lies in the country’s openness, in its ability to mediate between contrasts and different identities. This was the solution provided by both Auguste Marguillier and François Thiébault-Sisson in “Journal de Genève” and in the “Temps” of May 1924 (Marguillier 1924; Thiébault-Sisson 1924). At the same time – and this is a point that needs to be stressed – French critics were obviously unanimous in clearing Swiss, Belgian and Dutch from any suspicion of German influence. It should be observed that Germany was conspicuous by its absence at the Jeu de Paume.

I will not insist on the meaning of this absence, discussed by Mathilde Arnoux in an excellent essay (Arnoux 2007: 160-169), but to conclude I wish to introduce some similar cases, in which the organizers of an exhibition sought to detach or disengage a corpus of national art from a rival tradition. It is the case of the 1937 exhibition of Catalan art from the X to the XV century. In a time when the Spanish civil war was raging, its chief promoter, Joachim Folch i Torres, director of the Catalonia Arts Museum of Barcelona, had conceived a history of national art that harked back to a reading of the Catalan middle ages that had been put forth in the 20s and 30s by a score of militant specialists of medieval Catalonian art, particularly Josep Puig i Cadafalch (Vidal i Jansà 1991). According to this reading, Catalan art was completely original and independent, and its privileged stylistic ties with France excluded at the outset Castilian influences of any sort. The choice of Paris can be explained in terms of the additional visibility afforded by the simultaneous presence of an International exhibition of arts and techniques, or by the cordial relationships that Catalan specialists of medieval art entertained with their French counterparts. However, it was

also a way of placing emphasis on a supposedly ancient and strong relationship. One of the goals of the exhibition, in fact, was an attempt at an integrated definition of a stylistically homogenous and wholly independent “Mediterranean region” comprising Catalonia, Southern France and North-Eastern Italy. That was the cradle of Romanesque art. By letting France into the genealogy of Catalonian art, in a word, it was possible to expunge Castilian Spain.

The above was a very brief introduction to some of the main topics of a work in progress on the representation of national identities in and through art exhibitions. My aim is to show how the construction of national identities as it takes place in the international circulation of items and knowledge that invests the museum in the twentieth century is essentially a cross-construction, a trans-national process. These experiences resonated in Henri Focillon's 1937 preface to the catalogue of the exhibition *Masterpieces of French art*: when he set out to define the genuine characters of national French art, one of his explicit references was the cycle of national exhibitions hosted by the Jeu de Paume.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The countries involved are: Belgium (*Exposition de l'art belge, ancien et moderne*, 1923, and *L'art belge depuis l'impressionnisme*, 1928), Switzerland (*Exposition de l'art suisse du XVe au XIXe siècle : de Holbein à Hodler*, 1924, and *L'art suisse contemporain depuis Hodler, peinture et sculpture*, 1934), Romania (*Exposition de l'art roumain, ancien & moderne*, 1925), Holland (*Exposition hollandaise : tableaux, aquarelles, dessins*, 1926), Canada (*Exposition d'art canadien*, 1927), Austria (*Exposition d'art autrichien : les trésors de Maximilien, prêtés par la République d'Autriche*, 1927, and *Exposition d'art autrichien*, 1937), Denmark (*L'art danois depuis fin XVIIIe siècle jusqu'à 1900*, 1928), Sweden (*L'Art Suédois depuis 1880*, 1929), Japan (*Exposition d'art japonais, école classique et contemporaine*, 1929), Poland (*Exposition polonaise: la Pologne 1830-1920-1930*, 1931), Portugal (*Exposition portugaise : de l'époque des grandes découvertes jusqu'au XXe siècle*, 1931), China (*Exposition d'art chinois contemporain*, 1933), Italy (*L'Art italien des XIXe et XXe siècles*, 1935), Spain (*L'art espagnol contemporain, peinture et sculpture*, 1936), Catalonia (*L'art catalan du Xe au XVe siècle*, 1937), United States (*Trois siècles d'art aux États-Unis*, 1938), Latvia (*Exposition d'art de la Lettonie. Peinture, sculpture et art populaire*, 1939)
- <sup>2</sup> In 1932 the Musées nationaux organized the exhibition *French Art 1200-1900* at the Royal Academy of London. In 1935 *L'Art français du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* was hosted in New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art), Toronto and Ottawa (National Gallery of Canada); in 1937, the exhibition *La peinture française de Manet à nos jours* was presented first at the National Museum of Belgrade, later at the national museums of Warsaw and Prague.
- <sup>3</sup> The archival material for these exhibitions can be consulted at the Archives des Musées nationaux, série X-expositions. The following notes will specify the call numbers of individual documents of interest.
- <sup>4</sup> The exhibition of contemporary Italian art organized at the Jeu de Paume in 1935 (*L'Art italien des XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, catalogue, Paris, Jeu de Paume des Tuilleries, 1935) was the counterpart a great retrospective exhibition of Italian art, *Exposition de l'art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo*, catalogue, Paris, Petit-Palais, 1935, that opened its doors at the same time at the Petit Palais. The archival material for both exhibitions can be consulted at the Archives des Musées nationaux, série X-expositions, carton 22 “1935-Art italien”. The expenses for the organisation and the promotion of the event were covered by the Italian state on one hand and the Ville de Paris and the Réunion des Musées nationaux on the other: the respective quotas were 500.000 francs, later raised to 700.000 francs (X-expositions, carton 22, dossier 1 “organisation”). On the exhibition of American art, *Trois siècles d'art aux Etats-Unis* (1938), a partnership between the Jeu de Paume and the New York Museum of Modern Art, see I. Guyat, *Musée du Jeu de Paume 1938. Trois siècles d'art aux Etats-Unis, exposition présentée par le Musée d'art moderne de New York en association avec la direction des Musées nationaux français. Un échange culturel exemplaire ?, “maîtrise”* dissertation, Université de Paris I – Sorbonne, 1993.
- <sup>5</sup> Specifically, *La Nativité* (now at the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Dijon) and the *Vierge Glorieuse* (Musée Granet, Aix-en-Provence) : See *Exposition de l'art belge ancien et moderne*, catalogue, Paris, Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1923, p. 37.
- <sup>6</sup> *Exposition de l'art italien de Cimabue à Tiepolo*, catalogue, Paris, Petit Palais, 1935, p. 299-300.
- <sup>7</sup> “Le mouvement de l'Italie renaissante, sauvée et embellie par le fascisme”, *L'Art italien des XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, catalogue, op. cit., p. 35.

- <sup>8</sup> “C'est en témoignage de ce début d'une vie nouvelle qu'on été réunies autour des bustes du Roi et du Duce et de la ‘marche sur Rome’ des chemises noires de Primo Conti, les œuvres de cinq artistes [...] qui furent nos pionniers et nos maîtres dans des directions diverses mais en ayant tous, outre l'esprit rénovateur, un sens inné et profond de la tradition : ce sont les peintres Spadini, Boccioni, Modigliani et les sculpteurs Andreotti et Wildt”, A. Maraini, *Preface*, in *L'Art italien des XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, catalogue, cit., p. 26
- <sup>9</sup> “Jusqu'au milieu du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, les meilleurs parmi les artistes qui travaillaient au Danemark y avaient été appelé de l'étranger, au XVII<sup>e</sup> notamment de Hollande. Ce n'est qu'après la fondation, en 1754, de l'Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts à Copenhague [...] que les talents nationaux commencèrent à se faire valoir”, K. Madsen, “Introduction”, in *L'art danois depuis fin XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à 1900*, p. 5.

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