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## **Museums and History in Contemporary France**

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### **Abstract**

France's history museums have undergone extensive and rapid change over the last two to three decades. Following on from major changes in the world of France's art museums, the major projects that characterise the new take on history in the museum lead us to ask what they tell us about the relationship between history in the museum and academic historiographical practice. History museums are perhaps more related to the present and the needs of society than to the practice of historical erudition in the traditional sense. Is there such a thing as an ideal formula for these new history museums or displays? In what sense can one observe a radically new vision of heritage that refuses a nostalgic mode of representation but also any kind of spectacular merchandising and dramatizing of history, whilst leaving room for critical historical knowledge?

## Introduction

As the result of a series of constructions, renovations and announcements for new projects, the landscape of France's history museums has been changing fast over the last decade. This tendency follows on from a wave of developments in the field of the art museum that precluded this transformation. This is a fact that needs to be remarked in the context of another remark; the absence of an immediate impact of the considerable success of the French historical school of the 1960s to 1980s on the renewal of museums and exhibitions. During that period, France's most eminent historians were broadly published, establishing their media presence by appearing on television shows etc., but they participated little if at all in the major museum projects of their time.

The relationship between history museums and historiography might at first appear to be an obvious one. For indeed history museums do not merely present collections of objects from the past but also claim to represent the historical discipline and the point of view of professional historians, mainly academics. Yet, it remains difficult to establish whether museums follow precise rules that govern their relationship to academia. Do they look to academia for criteria of organisation, for the selection of their collections and its quality? Does the need to reflect current historiography have an influence on the financing or the management of the institution? In other words, the objectives and obligations of museums appear to be considerably different from those of the historical sciences.

In scholarly history, the relationship to the function of the archive is clear, but generally speaking the museum is not so much dedicated to the indexing and storing of source materials as to seeking out emerging curiosities by illustrating the vicissitudes of scholarly interests and by more or less vulgarizing the latest finds of research for visitors (Le Goff 1977; Kavanagh 1990). And whilst successive revolutions in historical writings have systematically produced revolutions in documentation processes – the same cannot be said for the collections of history museums. The question of the reverse effect of museographical representations on the writing and understanding of history is rarely considered.

## Historians and the Critique of the History Museum

French historians only really began to show an interest in history museums at the beginning of the 1990's when a series of major conferences and exhibitions was organised to deal with the issue of museum history – beginning with the 1993 conference celebrating the bicentenary of the Louvre (Pommier 1995; Joly, Compère-Morel 1998) and the 1994 exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay, *La Jeunesse des Musées* (Georgel 1994). Art historians' interest for the question of museums is older – but was traditionally limited to looking at the relationship between artists and the museums – or simply focused on the history of its decors (Gaehtgens 1994, 1996; Chaudonneret 1991, 2004; Allard 2006). More specifically, for many an academic historian, the museum (whether or not they played an active role in relation to it) was a place to be celebrated as a tribune or as a tool for civic engagement, for social unity and for the representation of the intellectual authority of the findings of history.

For another group of academics however, the analysis of the museum was generally the subject of strong criticism considering the relationship between history and fiction – be it in

museographical or scholarly work; this kind of thinking about the museum was much inspired by the intellectual currents of the 1970 (Michel de Certeau) and the semiotic perspectives that had been established by Roland Barthes' « reality effect » or the poetics of tropes recognised by Hayden White as « metahistory ». Finally a radical critic of the relationship between museums and power, as a kind of public spectacle led to a general condemnation of museums of contemporary history that appeared as serving the consumer needs of tourism and a conventional duty to memorialize certain historical events. Such a perspective was particularly developed in the reactions to the development and establishment of two museums which respectively deal with the first and second world wars: Peronne and Caen (Wahnich 2005). In the case of Peronne, debates concerning the museums became polemic opposing the so-called « école de Péronne » and those who criticized it Nicolas Offenstadt or Rémy Cazals. Whilst the Péronne school claimed the development of a new approach that established a portrait of the war in a contemporary social context of consensus and patriotic participation, historians such as Offenstadt and Cazals underlined that it is not only our present day humanistic sentiments that lent so much importance to cases of mutiny and their repression. They claimed these to be the significant products of the sentiments of the time itself, identifiable as a culture of peace, which could be convincingly observed in such sources as the press and war diaries. The remarkable point here is that in these debates, though they have gone beyond the scholarly circles, they nevertheless do not really take the reaction of the visitors to the museum into account.

It remains that in France the museum is often considered by the majority of historians with condescending disdain. In some cases it has been clearly formulated in appeals addressed directly to the government by historians themselves. In response to this we find the no less stereotypical discourse of curators and other professionals concerning the specificity of their work and the presentation of museum media. In short, it is as though historians are deploring the fact that they do not, or that they no longer control history museums, their discourses and scenographies and are aspiring to conquer them back and so to rediscover a lost scholarly activity. This explains their criticism of the museographical inventions of curators, considered as amateur historians – in opposition to the academic. A spectacular manifestation of this could be read in a group of articles published by the journal *Le Débat* to mark the opening of the *Musée d'Orsay*. The debate generally looked at the possibility for the museum to become - more than a place of conservation and presentation of objects - a site for the construction of a specific form of visual culture history. Maurice Agulhon presented his appreciation of the historical information provided by the new museum and its chronological divisions. He did so, much as a professor would correct a student's work by noting the good and the bad points, much as the expert might judge the work of an amateur encroaching on his territory (Agulhon 1987; Sherman 1990).

The expression of regret, which has become nearly banal in the face of what one might call the divorce between the museum and historians seems to suppose that at one point there was a happy union between them – an idea that can only be recognized as an invented golden age – against which one can better develop the legitimate lament over a current state of affairs. In fact, if we consider the situation of history museums in the past we can see that they were never under the direct responsibility of historians. In France, professional historians have never been at the origin of the creation of a history museum. Whilst they have sometimes presented petitions or appeals in favour of the creation of their ideal establishment (as was the case with the program of

the Mucem, Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée planned in Marseille) their initiatives appear as corporatist and are generally met with silence. The initiatives for museums in the twentieth century generally emanated from those who had been part of history – deportees or members of the resistance during the Second World War for example, or indeed passionate collectors (Boursier 1997). The decision to build history museums in contemporary France has always emanated from local or national political entities and always as a reaction to some kind of specific issue that was the subject of topical debate or attention. For example the creation of the House of the children of Izieu and a museum in Lyon dedicated to deported Jewish children was decided upon in 1987 during the tribunal hearing of Barbie, one of the leaders of the Gestapo in Lyon (the Centre d'histoire de la Résistance et de la Déportation opened in 1992), whilst it was the commemoration of the bicentenary of the French Revolution that led the department of the Isère to open a museum of the Revolution in Vizille – though it had as yet no specific collection.

### Shifting Temporal References

One of the most common strategies of the contemporary museum is the presentation of objects and images of the past as symbols of the abjection, designed to inspire horror and disapprobation of a phenomena or a situation. From this perspective many history museums are indeed museums of historical criminality. In France during the Revolution the contagious effect of the images of royalty and religion was feared, and so Lenoir used the monuments of the monarchy to show the barbaric character of former times. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the criminality of the *Ancien Régime* was the equivalent of the barbarous acts carried out by enemies of the nation in the twentieth century.

The first institution to document and expose contemporary history of the twentieth century was the library and museum of war, founded in 1917 by a rich Parisian industrial baron, Henri Leblanc, and his wife in their apartment on the avenue Malakoff. Established in the castle of Vincennes from 1925 onwards it is still conserved today with the library in Nanterre and the museum at the *Invalides*. The appeal to emotion of remembrance, the *damnatio memoriae*, is clearly expressed in the first catalogue written in 1916 by Leblanc : « Over the centuries people will be able to come to our home to recall the glories and the horrors of this immense conflict – they will find documents that fill their soul with a love for France and a horror of Germany and Germans ».

The objective is the same in the museum for comparative sculpture at the Trocadéro, there Camille Enlart, after World War One, placed special cartels to show which of the plasters had been damaged by the Germans. He stated that this does not only apply to the recent war but that such « green cartels will be extended to other monuments of the Trocadéro. They need to be placed alongside those monuments of Roman Gaul that were destroyed by the first invasions of the Barbarians or the vestiges of Théroouanne (French commune), wiped out by their descendants in 1553; the busts destroyed in Strasbourg in 1870. The museum that resumes the history of our artistic culture needs to point to the hatred and disdain for civilization that has been the work of the enemies of its civilization in the past ». Such episodes confirm the process of construction of national identity and the feeling of having lost a common heritage – illustrating what Renan had already intimated in the text of his famous conference held at the Sorbonne in 1882 « What is a Nation ? » : « In terms of national souvenirs : grief is worth more than trophies as they imply

duties, they command a common effort ». The commemoration of the destructions of the First World War through these collections makes them appear as veritable national « *lieux de mémoire* ».

The « *histoire immobile* » so dear to Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie triumphed and depicted the « world that we have lost » (Peter Laslett) in the network of museums of popular art and tradition initiated by Georges-Henri Rivière, definitively eclipsing older out-dated traditional history museums. The ideal of the museum as a laboratory of French ethnography was best illustrated by the museum of Beaune in the 1950s and 1960s (Bleton-Ruget 2006). In the course of the 1970s and 1980s it was in a series of museums sometimes called the second generation of Rivière that the modernity of the historical *école des Annales* was presented as a social history from the « bottom up ».

The invention of the ecomuseum or the museum of society did have a considerable impact on turning the gaze of anthropology back onto itself, from far off societies to our own: the anthropology of France was elaborated during this period, replacing the anthropology of the others by an anthropology of ourselves (Weber 2003). The reasons for this are complex, the combine processes of decolonialisation, the reconversion of academic anthropology and a public policy demand emanating from the state *Mission of ethnological heritage* (Segalen 2005; Cuisinier 2006).

## **A Generation of Memory Museums**

When the 20th anniversary of the Liberation was celebrated in the 1960s, the foundation of museums of the Second World War that were related to these commemorations came about at the initiative of private associations. These museums are the direct representatives of their ideals of the memory of the war and were often created on symbolic sites – such as the camp of Struthof, the execution site of the citadel of Besançon or the Vercors countryside – sites of resistance combats. The museum of national resistance was founded at Champigny-sur-Marne in 1965. Set in a large home from the nineteenth century, on the banks of the Marne, in a park baptized as the *Vercors*, after the pseudonym of the founder of the secret *Editions de Minuit*, it brought together the most important collections pertaining to the French resistance during the Second World War – the product of more than 2000 donations and private and public deposits. The museum also aimed to deal with French social history from 1929 to 1947.

The current presentation still echoes the principals set out at its creation – that is to perpetuate the memory of an exemplary history. In the decades just after the war the politics of memory initiated by the state remained traditional in spirit and in form – the museum itself was created by former members of the resistance – and for over 20 years they collected objects and documents from friends and family. In 1963 teachers in Grenoble, who were former resistance fighters, established, with the help of the departmental archives of the Isère, an exhibition dedicated to the Resistance in the region. The success of the exhibition led to the creation of a permanent museum inaugurated in 1966 renamed in 1970 the Museum of the Resistance and of the Deportation, supported by Pierre Mendès-France, at the time deputy of the department.

Twenty or thirty years later, as the last direct witnesses of this time were dying out and the associations of the Resistance and the Deportation losing strength– it became necessary to think about these forms of transmission of a past of militant efforts and to save the heritage collected by these museums, their archives and collections. The museums needed to be restructured to

cater for a generation that has no direct memory of these events. Mona Ozouf remarked on the fact that very often local museums of the Second World War were museums where the feeling of having lived through something together was expressed – no matter how insignificant the particular events being described might be – the point was not to represent a « grand history » but to affirm a memory of a local community, to recall that something had been gone through together as a solidary group. The range of history museums is large with considerable variations – from those that commemorate traumatic events such as the destruction of Oradour – to those that speak of the shortage of food– as in the Museum of daily life during the Occupation, where ration tickets and wooden shoe soles are displayed.

Caen and Péronne are in a sense symbolic of two opposing notions in the creation of a new generation of war museums: one is a museum of ideas and humanistic implication – the other is a museum of objects. The museum-memorial of Peace in Caen was inaugurated in 1988 (Quétel 1992; Brower 1997). The Historial of the Great War opened in Péronne in 1992. The museum of Péronne is the only one of the current museums that one might say directly bears witness to the latest work and research of historians, as led by the Research Centre that has been adjoined to the museum itself. Both are however the self-conscious kind of *lieux de mémoire* whose development was predicted by Pierre Nora in 1984 in the first volume of the famous series of books bearing the same name. They both clearly break with the typical military museum, exemplified by the *Musée de l'Armée*, founded in 1905 as a fusion of the Artillery museum (born during the Revolution and established in the *Invalides* from 1871 onwards) and the army's historical museum, founded in 1896 by the society called La Sabretache, whose president was the painter Edouard Detaille – it was based on the idea of the retrospective Universal Exhibition held in Paris in 1889 (Barcellini 2009).

In Caen, an attempt was made to create a « new kind of museum » that could take you on « a journey through history » thanks to a highly theatrical scenography. The visit ends with 3 films of which the “D-Day” is the most popular. But visitor numbers do not match those of the private and local museums set on the sites of the D-Day beaches themselves. For several reasons the Caen memorial became the focal point in the debate being waged between historians and critical intellectuals in the 1980s and 1990s. The memorial was judged according to perfectly contradictory perspectives, making it a turning point for the representation of history in the museum in France. Its influence is visible in the Memorial Charles de Gaulle of Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises (2008) that is set in a building constructed by the same architects as the Caen Memorial at the foot of the hill where the huge Lorraine Cross was erected.

The Péronne museum also tried to found itself in opposition to the tradition of history museums: the name historial is designed to situate it somewhere between the notion of memorial and history. Stéphane Audouin-Rouzeau, a historian closely related to the institution wrote in 1992 that it is a history museum and a memorial. In 1987 the Historial organized a movement called « Bring your name into the museum », in order to collect objects from donors offering to have their names mentioned in the activities of the Historial as their objects would become part of inalienable national historical heritage. This needs to be set in the context of initiatives such as the very mediated series « words from the veterans » (France Inter) and the growing financial value (and sometimes aesthetic value) of objects from the trenches that occurred in parallel to growing scholarly literature on the subject. We might borrow the interpretation given by Sophie

Wahnich (2005): “The historial of Péronne is a place for writing a history that judges and condemns a conflict that it is working to erase. In this way the Historial is a place for the invention of a European memory for the present (...) Caen gives way to a memory of the Second World War. It proposes a very constructed history (...) For the needs of our contemporary time, in addition to a purely historical discourse, it also develops an ideological one, which is not exactly that of a memorial of the war as one can observe in the memorials dedicated to the D-day and the battle of Normandy”.

Outside of these two major establishments, local history museums have also been affected by the renovation and construction of new museums underway since the 1970s and which by the end of the 1990s could be numbered at about 300. These last 30 years have witnessed a decisive evolution in terms of history museums – as much due to territorial cultural politics as to a mutation in professional practice. An example of this might be the creation in 1984 of a communal museum of Estivareilles (musée départemental de l’Armée Secrète et de la Résistance) inaugurated by Lucien Neuwirth, an important personality in the Resistance and the Secret Army of the Loire.

History museums became the subject of cultural policy and tourism development with the ecomuseum, society museums, museums related to archaeological sites, regional park houses etc.(Duclos 1992; Ifri and Gueneau (dir.) 1997). One of the singularities of history museums is that they are often managed in a shared partnership between the State and local authorities, contrary to major national museums that are directly affiliated to a central administrative entity. The administrative history of these museums reflects this specificity.

The investment into history museums made by local government needs to guarantee the scientific quality of their new museographies and in order to fulfil this task an association of history museums was created. At the central Direction des Musées de France, Marie-Hélène Joly, was put in charge of the inspection of History museums. It appeared necessary in the 1990s to gain an overview of the general state of history museums dealing with the Second World War – in order to understand how these museums work, their status, the ownership of the collections, their public etc. (François 1996). In 2000 the inspection of the museums stated that « These museums suffer from an absence of conceptual thinking on the notion of resistance itself. The future of these museums can only be insured if they develop a nationwide reflection on this issue. For if their creation was brought about by a myriad of individual initiatives there possible progressive disappearance needs to be examined and lead to a collective idea of their role » (Georges 2000). New criteria need to be applied to scientifically evaluate the conservation of the often personal objects that form the collections of these museums. The fact remains that the state has not intervened in any significant way in relation to the 200 museums that make up the category of World War museums (Barcellini 2005).

The *Guide to France’s history museums* that was published in France in 1996 by Marie-Hélène Joly underlined the fact that keeping these museums alive only made sense if their conservation was organized and structured. Simply maintaining them open to the public is not enough – as their unique objective is not mere contemplation or aesthetic pleasure, as in the case of *Beaux-Arts* museums. Their main purpose is to incite curiosity, interest and establish memory. The other aspect of their mission is clearly to provide objects that explain history itself and the existence of the institution. In writing this guide, she affirmed the specific values of history museums as

opposed to the art museum, which is indeed the major museum model in the French tradition of the DMF. The aim of the history museum was to serve the explicatory work of the historian – giving him specific sources such as visual imagery (propaganda images – etc). The conference organized in 1996 on the Historial of Péronne and coordinated by Marie-Hélène Joly and Thomas Compère Morel, was edited as *History museums for the future* (1998) and it constitutes what I would call the « disciplinary » moment of the history museum in France.

Its lessons were fruitful, inspiring Robert Bresse, director of the National Army museum, in charge of the museums modernization programme that has since taken place, to state that “My mission is to transform a museum of objects into a history museum” (quoted in Guillet 2012: 73). The conference helped orientate this important renovation – whose most significant addition was the Historial Charles de Gaulle, a spectacular site – it is conceptually and physically an audiovisual monument structured around the idea of sound and image as the “matériaux muséographiques gaulliens” without any objects (but with a movie theatre of 200 seats at its centre. Just like a film the visitor follows a story where he is not invited to rewind, to compare or analyse – to stop for explanations, it is a call to an emotional reaction that does not give room for reflection. Shock aesthetics (to use a term from J. L. Déotte) govern this kind of museum experience. More widely the museum spectacle is given over entirely to a relationship governed by emotions.

## **New Museums and the Ethics of Sustainable Development**

The notion of « fair » memory (Paul Ricoeur) or more largely speaking the critical revision of national *lieux de mémoire* have since the 1990s made the museum into a new site for civic power of a specifically republican kind, that is as citadels against the rise of the Extreme right and anti-Semitic tendencies. The national political agenda has become involved in their conception – sometimes in competition with certain associations and local powers. Jean-Yves Boursier observed in relation to museums of the Second World War that we’ve gone from museums created and supported by a specific interest group to museums that express a normative kind of moral discourse in the form of elaborate operations of communication. This has led to the development of spaces that are not really history museums but as termed by Gilles Vergnon (2005; 162) they are “memorials hors sol” that is to say conceptual memorials that transmit global messages: “the horrors of war, the ignominy of its barbary, compassion for its victims providing a de-historicisation of the Resistance – which appears as an episode in an eternal combat between Good and Evil”. This funerary trend in recent French history museums might be understood as a manifestation of what John Lennon (2000), a British specialist of the tourist industry, termed as « dark tourism ».

Constructed as a way of exorcising an experience of trauma, an instrument for dealing with grief, the Caen memorial has extended its geographical and chronological coverage to include the cold war and peace movements all over the world. Péronne has chosen a European perspective, whilst the European Centre of deported resistance members in the Camp of Struthof seeks to represent as many examples as possible of active militant engagement against Nazism. The Alsace Moselle Memorial dedicates an exceptional scenography to a description of the changing frontiers between France and Germany, from 1870 to the Second World War, as a history that still conditions the identity of the region and is relative to the construction of Europe itself. In the



museum of Resistance and Deportation in Grenoble reference is also made to other crimes against humanity such as genocides in Rwanda or Cambodia.

The opening up of French historical museography has been very much related to an affiliation with international networks such as ICOM and more specialized associations. So it is that these new constructions show the influence of contemporary criteria in terms of professionalism and meet an international standard of museography that is also related to the needs of international tourism and to the global success of international architects and the legitimacy provided by the adherence to internationally recognized models (Whitmarsh 2001). The most significant example of this is perhaps the program of the *Cité de l'immigration* at the *Porte dorée* in Paris. Jacques Toubon, former minister of Culture and project leader for this new museum travelled around the world to consider other immigration museums as sources of inspiration for his team, indeed, Ellis Island and has often been cited as a model by the minister's team. Finally an international conference on immigration museums in the world was organized at the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* to prepare for its creation.

In a country that had stopped building history museums, the last decades have witnessed a sudden flowering that has to be recognised as a particular phenomena. The buildings that house these new museums are part of their general program. In Caen and Péronne, the metaphor of the break or the tear has been integrated into the architecture, symbolizing the martyrdom of the town during the Second World War for Caen and the murderous battlefields of the Somme in the second case. Henri Ciriani chose the visual of a « crack » to symbolize the idea of the trenches and the break with the past caused by the war, thus playing with a post Le Corbusier architectural vocabulary. James Young (1993) has identified the syndrome of the absent tomb in relation to the buried architectures of memorials and other museums. Elsewhere again from Oradour to the Vendée, these buildings are hidden, erasing themselves behind the importance of the memorial site itself or behind the natural environment, as influenced by the context of sustainable development models.

The Vendée Historial, managed by the Regional council and situated close to La Roche-sur-Yon, in the village of Lucs-sur-Boulogne, cost 14 million euros for the museum building alone, to which we should add 4 millions in scenography costs, half the cost of an average museum in France, according to the curator. Its architectural particularity is its vegetal roof, developed by Plan 01, a collective of Parisian architects. The inside of the building, with its industrial-type structure, is modulable – a hall of over 1.020 m<sup>2</sup> gives access to seven spaces developing chronologically every historical period from Prehistory onwards. Based on the model of the multiplex cinema it can only be understood in the context of modern entertainment culture, with its cafeteria and a museum for children, a feature that is exceptional in France. Its exhibitions are all temporary, generally illustrating famous people originating from the region, such as Richelieu or dealing with issues related to the War of the Vendée. This establishment marks a decided break from earlier local institutions such as the ecomuseum of the Vendée and from the nearby *Puy-du-fou*, which is the only major site of theatrical historical re-enactment shows in France.

The Historial of the Vendée prefigures a new institutional culture of history museums. It represents a culture of entertainment capable of conciliating educational agendas with more playful distractions, to the detriment perhaps of certain local traditions of historical scholarship and the preservation of a higher quality of museography such as museum inspection has tried to

maintain on a national level. As such it is the product of new conditions of financing and management, and of the new status of history, cultivated as a market strategy for tourism as well as an expression of identity. The construction of a regional identity of the Vendée, though a classical topos of local scholarly history does not appear as a determining element here.

The history of immigration in Grenoble might be considered symmetrically to the Vendéen case. Les expositions dedicated to minorities present in the region, Greeks, Italians and North Africans, were the first examples of a recognition of these communities and their history in French Museums (Duclos, 1999). According to their curator, J.-C. Duclos « regional museums of heritage cannot consider their role to be complete if they do not widen their horizon beyond their own regional history and origins ». Following this policy the museums conceived of and organized a series of exhibitions beginning in 1989 dedicated to the memory of members of foreign communities: Italians of the Apulia (*Corato* - Grenoble en 1989), Greece (*Des Grecs* en 1993), Armenia (*D'Isère et d'Arménie* en 1997) and the Maghreb community 2000, (*D'Isère et du Maghreb, Pour que la vie continue...*). It was dedicated to the scientific examination of transplanted identities, their objective « to constitute a collective memory and to contribute to teaching about difference and respect of other cultures and to the idea of sharing a composite culture » (J.-C. Duclos, 2000). In fact, the study of the public undertaken on this occasion concluded that the museum could teach us to recognize differences. The museography that was adopted presented for each exhibition a person who became the voice of a whole community; this was an adaptation of a North American model of museography that calls upon authentic life stories and witnesses – or even on fictional life reports to give the visitor a sense of having a participative point of view (Idjéroui, Davallon 2002). This museology of immersion, a term often used in relation to science museums, has also come to be used in relation to history museums. French museums have modestly even timidly adopted the history-fiction approaches to be found in America or Canada, nevertheless, it is a clearly observable tendency, for example in the Vercors museum where the story of an assassinated little girl is told. It has also led to the introduction of the use of sound and recorded stories such as in the Museum of Resistance in Grenoble where the streetscape is accompanied by a soundscape.

## **The Variable Scales of History-Memory**

The history museums illustrates particularly well the dilemma presented by the opposition between « a history that teaches more but explains less and a history that explains more but teaches less » as observed by Claude Lévi-Strauss. For indeed biographical history and anecdotal history are at the bottom of a scale, they do not contain their own explanation but only find their place when they are considered as a building block of a wider history, which in turn might also be part of something greater. However, we'd be wrong to believe that these incorporations could constitute a total form of history, for what is gained on the one hand is lost on the other. Biographical and anecdotal history are the least explicative but they are rich in information because they consider individuals in all of their particularity, detailing for each, nuances of character, the detours of their motivations and the different stages of their deliberations. Such information is schematized, then slowly erased and finally disappears when we move towards greater or « stronger » histories (Lévi-Strauss 1962; 346-347).

Today one of the major challenges facing the new museum being established at Marseille is the historicisation of what was the museum of tradition and popular art. For indeed its founder, Georges-Henri Rivière was not a historian, and the museum presented a kind of eternal vision of French traditions constructed through an empathetic, loving relationship with traditional objects. In opposition to this, the director of the new museum, Michel Colardelle, intends to consider the objects as clearly inscribed in an explicit historical context. This is the counter attitude to the “ideology of Malraux”, as it is sometimes referred to, and a call for contextualisation – that of the contemporary Mediterranean world. It will be considered through five themes to be renewed every five years, presently these are : Paradise, water, the way, the city, Masculin/Feminin.

The appeal to memory has become the leitmotiv of a history « in the second degree » (Bacot, Coq 1999). From Paul Valéry’s statements on the new consciousness of the mortality of civilisations to those of Daniel Halévy concerning the unprecedented acceleration of history – a need has appeared for reassurance in terms of the permanence of the nation, of society and community. It is the theory of compensation in the face of what appears to be the acceleration of history pointed out Hermann Lübke and developed by him in relation to contemporary museography.

If we consider the current situation in comparison to that of the 1950s and 1970s, history museums benefit from a renewed positive image in the eyes of the visiting public (Donnat 1994). They have taken into account modifications of the ambitions and practices of historians, their exhibitions have become more thematic and specialised, even fragmented in a certain sense, always conserving the legitimacy and claiming the authority of an anonymous author, a fact that is not entirely unproblematic from the point of view of ego-history. Current developments are characterised by the multiplication of memorial museums that deal with everything from the colonial history of North Africa to site memorials, victim memorials and peace memorials. There is a new profusion of what Annette Becker (1998) has termed as « musées ouverts », created on the site where dramatic events need to be commemorated. Their intentions are heavily underlined by ethnic concerns of human-rights, which they express far more explicitly than was the case in history museums, traditionally thought of as places for teaching history. Here the agenda of the history museums presents a space for the performance of the visitor’s duty to engage with a memorial issue.

The history museum enjoys a great deal of credibility as it presents authenticity in the form of real physical witnesses of the past that are presented as pieces of evidence of its presence. They appear as proof of the truth of the museum’s discourse. But today’s history museums are much more museums of the present than traditional history museums. In the museums of the 1980s “the immersion in practices of the past, far from being nostalgic was a way of stirring present day problems” (Préface de la brochure de la Fédération des Ecomusées, 1990). The ecomuseum in particular elaborated a new representation of heritage conceived of as a new awareness of ourselves in society, thanks to its constant updating by its “owners” (Benzaid 1980; Fleury 1988; Segalen 1989). In this way it partakes of the new dynamics of “heritage” in society. Whilst the classical history museum used the past for a vision of the future, the ecomuseum, to use Freddy Raphaël (1987) excellent observation, is « a provocation « a provocation of memory » The utopia of Rivière’s ecomuseums in the 1970s attempted to make the visitor an actor in the museum,

even though such ideas were often based on failed memorial experiments, as has been shown by Octave Debary with the example of the Creusot.

In the last century, *patrimonialisation* has been a process that has tried to give a voice to an otherwise silent heritage – to all those remains of the past addressing the feeling of urgency due to a fear of loss. The domain of heritage was that « of another country or place » a more beautiful one (« Time beautifier of things ») one that was foreign and that had disappeared (Lowenthal 1985). The contemporary history museum is more occupied with giving meaning to the way life was lived, through exhibits that present a succession of view points of the life of a particular population or territory. Through these tentative efforts, this new kinds of museum sought an alternative to the constructions of the last century. Many a museum of history and archaeology that today enjoys spectacular development satisfies a particular need in terms of the conservation of a form of heritage but they also seek to fulfil a social mission related to a particular community or to themes that are today considered as important: identity, ethnicity, gender... History museums of the Resistance are particularly revelatory of current concerns (Boursier 1997; Young 1993).

Whilst at the end of this complex evolution, the history museum appears as a central institution today and continues to enjoy a relatively uncontested place in western culture, the fact that it is represented by a wide variety of museum types, varying both in terms of the collections they hold and the ideas that they represents, allows its definition to be constantly questioned. Considering the work of the post-modern critic, Andreas Huyssen, and after a comparison of the museums of Péronne, Verdun and the Caen Memorial, Daniel J. Sherman also underlines the necessity for museums to remain open to different types or modes of memorial discourse – so as not to fall into the trap of the spectacular merchandising of history that excludes a critical and scholarly approach or the direct equation of museographical discourse with the work of the historian that can frustrate the needs of memory itself (Sherman 1995). The contemporary interest in important sites, historical monuments, private castles and other sites or territories affected by their transformation into heritage sites, has become a subject of study for the ethnologist of our own societies. The inhabitant and the visitor receive attention in a discourse that might be considered as an effort to « domesticate history » (Fabre 2000). The relationship between heritage and the writing of history is the current issue that history museums have to deal with, in their revision of notions of identity and traditions they need to find a midway between a continuity of intentions and the appearance of new horizons of reference.

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