

# Ethnology: a science on display

Fabrice Grognet

*'If ethnology has something to tell us, the ethnographic object remains, for its part, all too frequently silent.' So saying, Fabrice Grognet shows how, despite constant evolution and change, ethnographic museums are still far from having found a way to make their collections speak. The author is an assistant at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. He holds a diploma of advanced studies in museology from the National Museum of Natural History in Paris and an M.A. in ethnology from the Sorbonne.*

Does ethnology have something to tell us? The question may appear odd: ethnologists communicate publicly in symposia, radio broadcasts and television shows, they publish books and articles and – most of them – lecture. But what public do they really reach?

It has to be acknowledged that ethnologists' discourse and knowledge are usually intended for a small circle of individuals who share a particular level of education and culture (scientific 'peers', or trainees, cultural initiates, connoisseurs of 'primitive arts', college and university graduates who are consumers of 'culture'). What then becomes of the notion of popularizing ethnology among the 'general public', the lay public? Is such popularization even possible?

One place appears suited to achieving it: the museum, and in particular the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (which will serve as the reference point for these considerations), the only museum in France that presents human beings and their works throughout the world (whereas the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires covers ethnology in France). The museum is open to all, admittance to the exhibition in the entrance hall even being free of charge. In addition, the Ministry of Education, which is responsible for the museum, arranges visits by school groups. In such circumstances, the museum, as a public educational facility, may be regarded as the ideal context for popularizing ethnology.

In France, ethnology, museums and popular science share a long history. Everything really began in 1880, when the then Ministry of Public Instruction decided to establish the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (MET), using collections and a building that had

originally served for the Universal Exhibition of 1878. At that time ethnology had not yet become institutionalized in France, then a major colonial power that needed a museum that would serve as a 'showcase' for its expansionist policy, and would bring together, on a single site, the ethnographic objects in its possession. At the same time, the museum corresponded to the need felt by this fledgling science which, in France as elsewhere in Europe, required its own institution, one that the French capital lacked. From then on, the museum and ethnology had a shared destiny, thanks to the action of political forces, involving a proclaimed ambition to promote public education as a sort of social *raison d'être* for the new institution.

## From artefact to showpiece

In a nutshell, three major periods may be identified as regards the changing manner in which ethnographic items are presented.

During the first period (from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1930s), museum practice was to display artefacts in exhibitions that gave prominence to arrays of particular objects (for example, sets of weapons or pottery). Such presentations were intended to be exhaustive, and followed a classification based on the level of industry of cultures (from the most 'archaic' or 'primitive' to the most 'developed' or 'evolved'). The halls and rooms thus became repositories for the objects as much as places for their display, as in a library. Associated with these arrays of objects were hyper-real wax models portraying 'the other': 'primitive man', clutching an assegai. Such displays, which owed a great deal to the colonial context of the time, as well as to evolutionist theories, made a visit to the museum akin to 'a trip into the heart of



*The 1965 exhibition, Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Homme.*

barbarism', as a journalist of the time pointed out.<sup>1</sup> While the initial ambition of the museum was to instruct, it must be acknowledged that it made a rather poor showing in this respect:

There is in Paris, in a wing of the Trocadéro, a museum that is little known and little frequented as a result of its remoteness. ... We regret that the spirit which informs the exhibition is not fuelled by the notion that a museum must instruct, that it is not enough to line up items in carefully dusted showcases; in short, that the public should carry away from its visit some lesson, and retain a lasting impression thereof.<sup>2</sup>

In point of fact, ethnology as a body of knowledge remained to be built. The 'study-bound ethnologist'<sup>3</sup> was not in a position to supply information on an artefact that he had not himself collected. As a result of the gaps in a branch of science still in its infancy, particulars

concerning the objects displayed could be only minimal; such a situation, associated with a museum practice focused on spectacular, imposing displays of 'exotica' (models, reconstructions, arrays of 'trophies'), could arouse interest ultimately only in the aesthetic qualities of these objects, to the detriment of their cultural dimension. In many respects, humankind became a show, or more exactly, one part of humankind became a sort of attraction for the other. All these factors combine to make us see the MET, in retrospect, as a museum of 'exoticism', a 'quasi-art museum', since it had moreover 'played a role in the discovery of American art which in the 1880s enjoyed a vogue equivalent to the craze that arose for African art at the beginning of the century'.<sup>4</sup>

Subsequently, with the professionalization of ethnology (establishment of the Institut d'Ethnologie in 1925), the exhibition itself became more 'scientific', introducing an educational dimension, in order to make the sheer diversity of cultures more widely known to a public of inquiring spirits in whom the French colonies had already aroused a curiosity about all things exotic. To displays that aped or mimicked reality, Georges-Henri Rivière, who took over responsibility for museum practice at the MET in 1928, preferred a presentation that foreswore all staged effects and was illustrated rather by photographs taken in the field, supplemented by texts written by ethnologists. By splitting up its displays into geocultural areas, the museum illustrated and reflected the monographs being produced by scientists. It thus made the transition from exhibitions of ethnographic objects to the exhibition of the science of ethnology. This constituted a revolution in museum practice, museography becoming the visible part of current research undertakings.

More recently, as a result of two museographical trends developing from the 1960s on, the ethnographic exhibit has been presented as a showpiece and an art work in its own right. With the advent of these two trends, we can no longer claim to be dealing with exhibitions focused on ethnology as a science, even though the texts and, in a general manner, the ethnological discourse are produced by scientists.

The first trend effects a reconstruction of reality even more radical than that sought in the nineteenth century, putting the object back in context in a setting or 'atmosphere'. Such 'as-if-you-were-there' presentations rely, for example, on life-size re-creations of an actual street or house. Generally speaking, this approach tends not to involve a great deal of explanatory material. Moreover, the attempt to recreate a setting may give a confusing impression of being there without really being there. Can such a re-creation enable the museum visitor to gain greater insight into a culture than an ordinary tourist who has actually passed through the village? Furthermore, this type of approach tends to present large numbers of objects created specially for the exhibition, interspersing such items created for purely decorative or recontextualizing purposes with 'authentic' artefacts created for reasons quite remote from museum display. Indeed, it will be noted that this museographical trend is today frequently equated by the scientific community with the 'disneylandization' of museums.

The second trend aims to display ethnographic objects as a visual artistic experience (*Masterpieces from the Musée de l'Homme*, 1965; *Primitive Arts in the Artists' Workshop*, 1967). Such presentations of objects in isolation, accompanied by only minimal explanations, may be



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described as the 'aesthetic' approach. The visitor's interest is sustained by the display of isolated 'highlights', creating a sort of 'aesthetic shock', which is customarily justified by referring to the delight experienced by the beholder.

*A New Caledonian gallery in the Trocadéro Museum, Paris, circa 1875.*

### **Missions and professionalization**

Leaving aside the ideological and political dimensions inherent in any attempt to create a new museum institution, these three museographical periods would seem to be akin to three stages in the life of the museum or, more precisely, to a sort of gradual maturing of the museum in its functions.

The Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro was initially established in order to bring together ethnographic items that had hitherto been dispersed. First and foremost, the museum sought to conserve series of artefacts that it did not fully understand (inadequacy of scientific

theory), just as the collectors had before it with their cabinets of curiosities.

Subsequently, ethnological science became institutional, the professional field ethnologist superseding the enlightened armchair amateur. A new understanding of the same ethnographic objects became possible. Museography thereupon proceeded to apply this new understanding, selecting objects on the basis of the theoretical divisions or breakdowns of the era. The 'laboratory-museum',<sup>5</sup> a unique institution of ethnology, thus gave a high profile and cultural import to a new science that could not fail to prevail (in particular *vis-à-vis* physical anthropology), while at the same time displaying cultural realities that were doomed to become extinct as a result of colonialism.

Thereafter, ethnological research gradually lost interest in the artefacts themselves, and was thus able to establish itself and develop in institutions that lacked ethnographic collections. The museum thus ceased to present science in the making, and bore witness rather to 'traditional' and 'pre-industrial' ways of life, and hence to the past history of societies. In a way, the presentation was thus made for its own sake, since it was subject neither to the duty of conservation (existence of reserve collections) nor to the requirement to display a science (the shift of ethnological interest away from the artefacts as such towards a structuralist approach). The exhibition had acquired a measure of autonomy *vis-à-vis* conservation and research, and accordingly allowed itself to entertain, or to attend more closely to matters of layout.

This brief historical survey clearly reveals that the presentation of ethnographic objects is contingent upon museographical fashions, which are themselves

dictated by the links between museums and ethnological research. The one constant is the avowed goal, namely, to educate the public about alien cultures. But is this objective, however clearly proclaimed, always attained?

If ethnology has something to tell us, the ethnographic object remains, for its part, all too frequently silent. How then can it be made to communicate? 'First and foremost by ridding ourselves of the notion of art work. The object must shed its invasive aesthetic dimension!'<sup>6</sup> Without rejecting the object's aesthetic nature, we can attempt to define it in terms of its use, its usefulness; for, before it ended up as a museum exhibit, it served a purpose, had a life of its own. However, in aesthetic displays, information concerning past use is generally limited and hazy. In such cases, the descriptive cards in fact usually have four headings (object identification, region or origin, collector, item number), of which only the first two are of any use to most of the museum's non-professional visitors. Attention may also be drawn to the uninformative nature of such formulae as 'anthropomorphic statuette', 'zoomorphic mask' or again 'small dish in semi-hard wood', which are all too frequently the sole particulars serving to identify the artefact.

### **Display is not enough**

However, is an exhibition of ethnographic items, sustained by a scientific discourse, any better able to provide an understanding of the culture of other peoples, which is the purpose of a museum of ethnology such as the Musée de l'Homme? In point of fact, only an understanding of the ethnological discourse accompanying it enables an artefact to speak for itself. But what grasp do the different categories

of visitors have of ethnological concepts? How do visitors to the Musée de l'Homme represent, or perceive, such concepts as 'culture', 'ethnic group', 'religion', 'rites of passage', 'traditions', 'institution', 'identity', 'acculturation', 'kinship', 'family', and so on? These are so many terms, frequently used in their everyday sense, with which the visitor will be confronted. At a more fundamental level, what conception do visitors to the Musée de l'Homme have of ethnology *per se*? Do they see it as a science, or as an occupation that combines travel with adventure? Do they have the impression of being in a science museum or (already) in a museum of 'ethnographic arts'?

Here we touch upon the conceptions and preconceptions of the various sectors of the public. For, if there is one notion that deserves to be challenged, it is indeed that of the 'general public' or the 'public at large', expressions intended to characterize the average visitor. Visitors are not interchangeable 'empty boxes' that need only to be stuffed full of ethnological facts in order for understanding to dawn. On the contrary, each individual is the bearer of more or less precise, socially determined ideas and notions that define his or her vision of things, or 'representation of the world' (in which ethnocentrism is never very far away). However, such representations may very frequently be built up on the basis of outdated scientific concepts and data that have found their way into common parlance, as for example that of 'race'. As a result, a proper understanding of the message of an exhibition of ethnological artefacts can frequently be gained only by overcoming the stereotypes and notions entertained by visitors prior to their visit to the museum. To return to our example of the idea of 'race' as conceived by an 'imaginary visitor', it may be wondered



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what the impact must be of the sort of museum practice that presents cultures by geocultural areas and not in a thematic manner. Is this museographical approach, which has persisted since the earliest days of museum exhibitions of ethnographic artefacts, the one that is best suited to putting across the idea of the unity of humankind amid the diversity of cultures? Or, put more simply, why, in the final analysis, should two museographical principles that may prove to be complementary be pitted against one another: the geocultural approach being capable of arousing both wonder and curiosity; and the thematic approach replacing it in a more synoptic framework, one that can call into question the seeming singularity or exoticism of a particular practice?

Thus the aesthetic exhibition and the ill-focused educational exhibition could, paradoxically, have the same result: that of providing no further insight or knowledge about an alien culture, or of failing to alter a mistaken perception of the diver-

*The Chaamba showcase from the Trocadéro Museum's 1934 exhibition on the Sahara, organized according to Georges-Henri Rivière's principles that foreswore all staged effects, preferring photographs taken in the field, supplemented by texts written by ethnologists.*

sity of cultures. In the final analysis, there is thus no 'miracle' definition of what an exhibition of ethnographic artefacts should be. The debate that pits 'aesthetic' presentation against 'ethnological' presentation of the same collections must today be regarded as outmoded: neither can guarantee a better understanding of an alien culture.

The historical evolution of the museum's task structure, which has today led to the primacy of the exhibition and a concern to cater to the different sectors of the public, might well indeed trigger a metamorphosis of the museum as an institution, one in which we would see the emergence of occupations connected with cultural mediation (museum public monitors, museologists) alongside strictly ethnological occupations. Such a metamorphosis would lead to the development of two distinct yet complementary professions and practices: on the one hand, ethnologists and fieldwork undertaken through and for research; and, on the other, museologists and the practice of a discourse conducted in the field of activity of the former, through and for exhibitions. More than a division between research and the museum, the aim would be to professionalize the work of popularization in the same way as research work.

Yes, ethnology has something to say. But to whom and how? These are the questions to which a contemporary museum of ethnology must provide the answers. ■

#### Notes

1. N. Dias, *Le Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro (1878-1908)*. *Anthropologie et muséologie en France*, Paris, Éditions du CNRS, 1991.

2. *La Tribune des colonies*, 24 March 1898, archive of the Musée de l'Homme.

3. In the nineteenth century, the term 'field ethnographer' or 'field ethnologist' had yet to be coined; anthropologists and ethnologists remained confined to their studies, scholars theorizing in a museum context on the basis of travel tales and objects usually brought back from the colonies by missionaries, soldiers and travellers.

4. A. Dupuis, 'Anthropologie et muséologie, un aspect de l'histoire du regard anthropologique', *Œil anthropologique*, No. 8, 1997, pp. 43-57.

5. The idea of the laboratory-museum dates from the early 1930s, when the MET was reorganized; however, the idea would only be fully realized with the simultaneous creation in 1937 of the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires. This concept of the laboratory-museum boiled down to treating the museum and ethnology as equivalent by combining museum-based activities with research activities. In other words, a new structure intermeshing the activities of collection, research, conservation and display was set up, with the ethnologist as the central figure in its organization. In point of fact, the museum was defined more by its professional scientific dimension than by its cultural and educational dimension.

More than a 'laboratory-museum', the institution was a 'museum-laboratory'. See F. Grognet, 'Le "Musée-Laboratoire": un concept à réinventer?', *Musées et Collections Publiques de France*, No. 233, 1999, pp. 60-3.

6. A. Vitard-Fardoulis, 'L'objet interrogé ou comment faire parler une collection d'ethnographie', *Gradhiva*, No. 1, 1986.