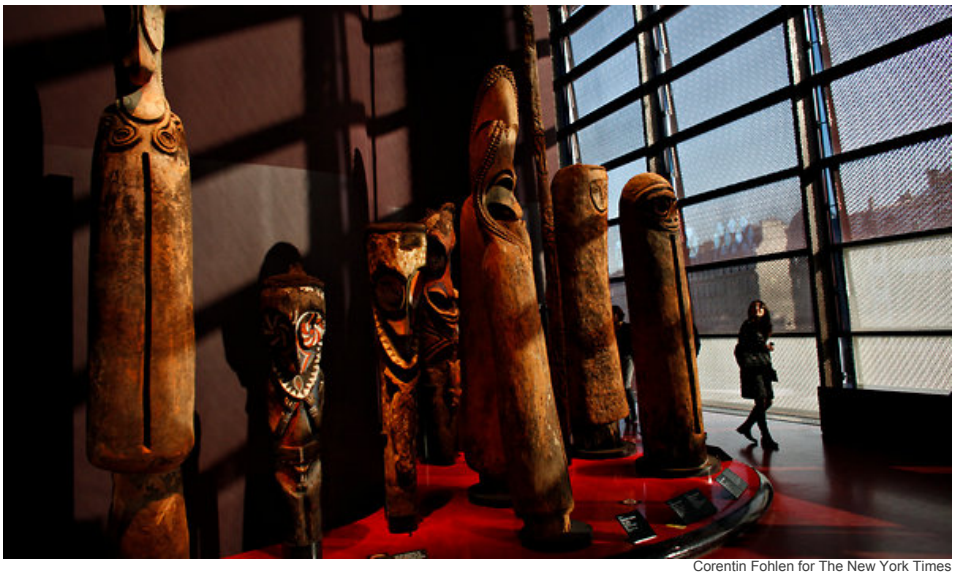
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

French Museums Atone for a Colonial History



Corentin Fohlen for The New York Times

Objects from around the world have been assembled at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris and are displayed more for aesthetic effect than for context.

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN
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PARIS — You walk through a garden lush with overgrowth, a cultivated wilderness with exotic grasses gone deliberately to seed. Inside the effect is the same: You enter the eerily atmospheric hall where you meander past artifacts from Oceania, Africa and other realms beyond Europe's borders, as speckled daylight seeps through window scrims decorated with forest foliage. The displays are lush with miscellany: here, an ivory statuette of a goddess from the Tonga islands that once was shown in an 18th-century curiosity cabinet; there, a desiccated human skull, covered in black-colored beeswax, acquired in early-20th-century Papua New Guinea.

But wait: before trying to decipher this strange universe, at the Musée du Quai Branly, consider another, elsewhere in Paris. Only here the impression is of vast, arching spaces and skylights that cast no shadows. You readily recognize the iconography of church portals, pilasters and statuary. It looks as if entire facades had been amputated from cathedrals all over France in a wild species of plunder. Here are the intricately ornamented arches of a 12th-century church in Saintes; there, ornate 16th-century doors from the cathedral of Aix-en-Provence. Centuries of grotesque, open-mouthed

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Corentin Fohlen for The New York Times

The Cité de l'Histoire de l'Immigration in Paris traces the story of newcomers to France.

gargoyles are poised on a wall overhead, as if prepared to spew venomous rainwater.

You gaze in wonder at what seems to be intricately carved and worn stone. But, more remarkably, everything is made of plaster. It is a hall of casts chronicling some 700 years of French architecture on the ground floor of the Cité de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine.

Could two museums be more different? Both were unveiled during the last decade (the Quai Branly in 2006, the Patrimoine in 2007). Both evolved out of older collections and defunct institutions. But one displays authentic artifacts, the other reproductions; one focuses on non-Western cultures, the other on a quintessentially Western culture. One takes whole objects out of context, essentially turning them into fragments, while the other takes fragments out of context, essentially treating them as whole objects.

But both are also responses to issues that have been transforming museums in recent decades. And those challenges can seem more evident here in Paris, where so many museums are still staging places for the shaping of civilization. The European Enlightenment, born here, enshrined Reason as its deity. Museums became its temples. In them distractions were to be stripped away, and essentials revealed. In some ways the traditional museum is French in its origins, just as the modern encyclopedia is.

But in recent decades the ground has shifted. The Enlightenment vision of artifacts unveiling universal truths has fallen prey to skepticism. And the 20th-century disintegration of the European empires, accompanied by attention to their sins, has jostled the museums' foundations. The Enlightenment museum, after all, was often an "imperial" museum, its ambitions aided by the empire's global reach.

Natural history museums have felt the tremors as well. They began by gazing out confidently from the peaks of 19th-century Western civilization and claiming everything that was closer to nature than to culture as their domain, including fossils, wildlife and non-Western peoples. Now those ideas are undone.

Out of these conceptual ruins comes the Quai Branly. The 300,000 items in its collection are derived from an imperial museum (the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens) *and* a natural history museum (the Musée de l'Homme). The institution was created by the former French President Jacques Chirac as a form of post-colonial recompense. In a foreword in the guidebook he calls the $300 million museum "the debt we owe to the peoples and countries" of the former French empire. Their civilizations have "long been ignored or underrated," he writes, and the museum will help see "justice rendered."

He exaggerates. But as for the items on display, nothing in Chirac's homily prepares you for their stunning beauty. The evocations of the human figure, the artifacts that adorn the body, the vibrant headdresses, the solemn delicacy or horror of the masks — they all testify to what seems like a universal aesthetic impulse.

That also seems to be the intention of the displays. Masks of a region are exhibited together, no matter what their function or origin. The groupings are guided neither by chronology nor ritual, but by the desire to create a dramatic contemporary effect: You thought the only beautiful objects were Western artworks? Take a look at these!

1 | 2 NEXT PAGE »

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