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“Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)” by Pablo Picasso, 1907

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Zones of contact

Art and ethnography in mid-century France

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French ethnology came of age in the fraught decade between the stock market crash in 1929 and the outbreak of the Second World War. In *Les Années folles de l'ethnographie*, edited by André Delpuech, Christine Laurière and Carine Peltier-Caroff, a team of scholars document an unlikely encounter between a new science, avant-garde movements in the arts, and the French overseas empire.

The National Museum of Ethnography was established at the Trocadéro Palace in Paris in 1878, but from the first it struggled for funds. By the end of the First World War it was in terrible shape. The staff was down to two curators and three guards, there was no heating, no catalogue, no library, and the galleries were open to the public only twice a week. A leading social scientist, Marcel Mauss, despaired. “It would be better to close the museum than to maintain it in its present state”, he judged. “It cannot be heated, it cannot be opened, it cannot be displayed to the public. It cannot be guarded. There have been serious thefts.”

Nevertheless, for half a century the museum represented the sole institutional foothold of ethnology in France. Courses in the discipline became available only in 1925, when Mauss set up the Institut d'Ethnologie, together with a philosopher, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (who had a theory about the prelogical “primitive mentality”). The administrator of

the new Institute was Paul Rivet, a medical doctor who had spent five years in Peru and become an expert on American antiquities. (He is the subject of an intellectual biography by Laurière, 2014.) In 1928, Rivet was appointed director of the Ethnographic Museum, and he set about turning it into a serious scientific centre. Mauss's Institute of Ethnology and Rivet's Museum of Ethnography at Trocadéro – students called them the “*Insti*” and the “*Troca*” – now drove the professionalization of French anthropology.

Thomas Hirsch contributes a compelling, at times hilarious account of Mauss's teaching. “Mauss savait tout”, said his colleague Lévy-Bruhl, and he seemed to expect his students also to know everything. According to a favourite student, Jacques Soustelle – “the great hope of his generation” – Mauss warned that there was no point in tackling ethnology without, at a minimum, a knowledge of the classical languages of antiquity, plus Sanskrit, Hebrew and Chinese, not to mention German, English and Dutch. Another student reported that after his first course with Mauss, “I was groggy. What had he talked about? I had never come across such a flow of jokes and allusions in a lecture”. But the message was austere empiricist. Mauss gave detailed instructions about collecting and documenting ethnographic objects, and told his students to record everything, because one can never be sure what might turn out to be important. “Pay attention to the latrines. That is where Griaule found some of his finest Dogon masks.” He also warned them not to pursue the chimera of “the pure indigenous society”. “A state of transition is as interesting as a state of stability.”

Mauss's keenest students got their first breaks mounting collecting expeditions for the museum. These are reviewed in fascinating detail by the three editors of this volume. There were around a hundred expeditions between 1928 and 1937, most famously Marcel Griaule's Dakar–Djibouti expedition (1931–3) and Claude Lévi-Strauss's collecting expeditions in the interior of Brazil. What objects were worth collecting? Art or ethnography? The Dogon were an agricultural people, but Griaule and his colleagues did not bring back a single hoe from West Africa. And although Lévi-Strauss's contacts with Indians took place almost exclusively in “zones of contact” maintained by missions or telegraph stations, he did not collect any of the hybrid artefacts that the Indians were busily improvising. Contrary to Mauss's advice, he turned his camera away from any evidence of what he took to be impurity and decline. (Remarkably, both these expeditions yielded landmark works of literature, *L'Afrique fantôme* by Michel Leiris (1934), and *Tristes Tropiques* by Lévi-Strauss (1955).)

The aesthetic bias was hardly surprising. Artists and collectors had come to value the decrepit old Museum of Ethnography as a gallery of exotic art. Picasso claimed to have had an epiphany there:

When I went to the Trocadéro it was disgusting. The flea market. The smell. I was alone. I wanted to get away. But I didn't leave. I stayed. I stayed. I understood something very important: something was happening to me, wasn't it?

The masks weren't like other kinds of sculpture. Not at all. They were magical things ... I understood what the purpose of the sculpture was for the Negroes ... all the fetishes were used for the same thing. They were weapons. To help people stop being dominated by spirits, to become independent. Tools. If we give form to the spirits, we become independent of them. The spirits, the unconscious (which wasn't yet much spoken of then), emotion, it's the same thing. I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum, the masks, the Red Indian dolls, the dusty mannequins. *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* must have come to me that day, but not at all because of the forms; but because it was my first canvas of exorcism – yes, absolutely!

“Les Demoiselles d'Avignon”, with its five stylized, angular nude figures, two with African masks for faces, was painted in 1907. “Picasso became aware of African sculpture”, Matisse recalled. “It became something of interest for the group of advanced painters.” Collectors took note. Within a couple of years Paris became the centre of an emerging international market in “primitive art”.

In the 1920s, the Surrealists, now the pacemakers in the French avant-garde, promoted “exotic”, “primitive”, or “Negro” arts. Guillaume Apollinaire punned about a new cult, *la “mélanomanie”*. In 1921, Blaise Cendrars published an *Anthologie nègre*, featuring African folklore. Jazz from the United States was celebrated as “African”. In 1925, fashionable Parisians flocked to the *Revue nègre* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées to see the African American dancer Josephine Baker.

Two of the outstanding students at Mauss's new Institute of Ethnology, André Schaeffner and Michel Leiris, were themselves members of the artistic avant-garde. Schaeffner, a musicologist, co-authored the first French study of jazz (published in 1926). Leiris, a poet, was drawn to ethnology by his ties with the surrealist movement, "which represented for me the rebellion against the so-called rationalism of Western society and therefore an intellectual curiosity about peoples who represented more or less what Lévy-Bruhl called at the time the *mentalité primitive*. It's quite simple". Both Schaeffner and Leiris signed on for Griaule's African expedition. Soon after, they became curators at the Ethnographic Museum.

Rivet himself was ambivalent about the presentation of ethnographic objects as works of art, but he recognized that the Museum of Ethnography had to cater to rich and aristocratic patrons and collectors of primitive art. He recruited as deputy director of the Museum a flamboyant young dilettante, Georges Henri Rivière, precisely because of his connections to the beau monde and to the up-and-coming artists. Rivière was actively engaged with a breakaway surrealist magazine, *Documents*, edited by the dissident surrealist writer Georges Bataille ("and myself to do the work"). The young ethnologists Griaule, Leiris and Schaeffner were regular contributors. Ethnology and art played disruptive games together in the pages of *Documents*. "In its illustrations could be seen side by side a Zapotec urn and a scene from the Folies-Bergère", Rivière remarked.

Rivière operated with the same panache in the Ethnographic Museum. To raise money for the museum's first major collecting expedition, the Mission Dakar-Djibouti, he arranged a boxing match at the Cirque d'Hiver that featured an African American boxing champion, "Panama Al Brown". (According to legend, Mauss himself got up on stage and shadow-boxed with the champion.) For the opening of a new Oceania Hall at the museum "there was a parade of mannequins from the great fashion houses dressed in alluring pareos", Rivière recalled. "A combination of productive modishness and scientific policies went hand in hand to promote ethnology and primitive art." During the Colonial Exhibition of 1931, the Ethnographic Museum threw a party in the West African pavilion. African soldiers stood guard. Loudspeakers broadcast records of "la musique nègre authentique". Schaeffner introduced acrobatic masked dancers from the Ivory Coast. Among the invited guests were Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti and Ossip Zadkine, the authors Tristan Tzara, Paul Morand, Georges Bataille and Julien Green, and the composers Igor Stravinsky, Manuel de Falla and Sergei Prokofiev.

Rivière set up a Hall of Treasures within the Ethnographic Museum to display objects that were, in his own words, “remarkable from an artistic point of view”, “gathered purely for the pleasure of the eye”. This “small kingdom” enjoyed “extra-territorial rights” and was set “free of all [the] scientific and classificatory apparatus”. The sculptor Jacques Lipchitz designed the stage set. Alice Conklin notes in her book *In the Museum of Man* (2013) that among the objects on display, selected for their beauty, rarity and value on the current art market, there were “a Hawaiian feathered helmet ... a Tiki god statue from the Marquise Islands ... a golden pendant from Colombia ... a crystal skull from Mexico ... an Aztec feathered serpent ... two masks from pre-Columbian Mexico ... a Mexican pyrite mirror ... a great cloth from ancient Peru ... an obsidian block carved with a sign from the Aztec calendar”. Africa was represented by a sixteenth-century Bénin bronze, an ivory from the Belgian Congo, and a gold mask from the Ivory Coast.

However, André Breton condemned the objective, cold gaze of the ethnologists, who knew everything about their objects except what he thought the important part, the fusion of the heart and spirit with the work. For their part, the ethnologists distrusted the aesthetes. “On no account become *un amateur d’art*”, Mauss warned his students. Some curators “didn’t want to hear any talk of *art nègre*”, Leiris recalled, “it had become too fashionable”. Dealers and collectors were criticized for ignoring the use and the meaning of the pieces they bought and sold. Griaule ridiculed connoisseurs who questioned “the authenticity of a Baoule drum because the figure carved on it is holding a rifle”. In 1930, in the maverick art magazine *Documents*, he wrote that ethnographers tend “to be suspicious of the beautiful, which is rather often a rare – that is monstrous – occurrence in a civilization. Ethnography is suspicious, too, of itself – for it is a white science, i.e. stained with prejudices – and it will not refuse aesthetic value to an object because it is up-to-date or mass produced”. When Jacques Soustelle took over from Rivière as director of ethnology in 1936, he closed the Hall of Treasures.

There was also a political edge to ethnology. Mauss, Lévi-Bruhl and Rivet were members of the Socialist Party and they were closely associated with the left-wing Popular Front government that came to power in 1936. Soustelle, in those days a fiery leftist, had plans to make the museum a popular institution, serving the young and the working class, on the model, so he believed, of Soviet museums. But ethnology was obviously tied up with French colonialism, and this is an aspect of the story to which the editors might have given more attention. Both the Institute of Ethnology and the Museum of Ethnography were dependent on funding from the Ministry for the Colonies. The Ethnographic Museum was

regularly replenished from Colonial Exhibitions mounted by the Ministry. To mark the launch of the Musée de l'Homme in 1937, Rivet arranged for a parade of colonial troops, because “our museum is first and foremost [*avant tout*] a colonial museum”.

Leiris noted that Lévy-Bruhl encouraged ethnographers to emphasize the worth of African civilizations in order to promote a more tolerant colonial policy. This was, he remarked, “given the time, an advanced idea”. Mauss warned students not to criticize colonial policies, and particularly not to question colonial capitalism, but privately he was scathing. French science had done nothing for “the Canaques of New Caledonia, whom it abandoned to alcoholism, syphilis, massacre, servitude, beastliness, in a word, Europeanization, while offering only the attention of laboratory clinicians”. Yet the way in which the Ethnographic Museum arranged its displays – sometimes in an evolutionary framework, sometimes by culture area – sent an ambiguous message. Was there is a single human civilization, if unequally developed in different parts of the world? Or are human cultures radically different, yet all (perhaps even equally) valuable? The views of Picasso and the Surrealists were also acknowledged: primitive art conveyed spiritual insights that had been lost in the West. These messages fitted in with different justifications of colonialism. In the interwar years the ideal of civilizing a world of savages, France’s *mission civilisatrice*, was challenged by those who urged an appreciation of difference and a respect for local traditions.

There was also the unresolved question of whether the folklore and traditions of France and more broadly of Europe should be treated as equivalent to those of “primitive peoples”. The Museum of Ethnography had included both “primitive” and European folk collections, but when a museum of French ethnology – the Musée national des Arts et Traditions Populaires – was founded in 1936, the French Hall in the Ethnography Museum was closed. (Rivière became the director of the new museum of French ethnology. He asked Lévi-Strauss to sketch a layout for the exhibition hall. “I had an exotic flower in my office, and that inspired the form”, Lévi-Strauss recalled.)

Les Années folles de l'ethnographie takes the story to 1937, when the shabby old Trocadéro Palace was gutted and replaced by a new exhibition centre, the Palais de Chaillot. It was here that Rivet relaunched the Musée d'Ethnographie as the Musée de l'Homme, the Museum of Mankind, which he wanted to make into a museum of human evolution. Ethnographic objects were now sorted into functional types and exhibited alongside prehistoric tools and human skeletons and skulls taken from the Natural History Museum.

Three years later, France was occupied. Rivet was president of a group of anti-fascist intellectuals. Some young ethnologists formed perhaps the first resistance cell in Paris and published an underground newspaper, *Résistance*, operating from the basement of the Musée de l'Homme, presumably with Rivet's knowledge. In 1942 the members of the cell were rounded up. Several were executed. Rivet went into exile. Rivière kept his head down and carried on with the development of the new museum of French ethnology, a field of study that was, however, profoundly compromised by Vichy's embrace of a German-style nationalistic ethnology. Griaule became director of the Musée de l'Homme. In 1941 he was appointed to the first chair in ethnology at the Sorbonne. After the Liberation Schaeffner formally charged him with collaboration, in a letter co-signed by Leiris and other colleagues. Griaule was cleared by a commission of enquiry. He did not return to the museum, but the ethnologists who were reunited in the Musée de l'Homme after the Liberation had lost their old élan. The new director was a physical anthropologist, Henri Vallois. The ethnologists were sidelined. Lévi-Strauss served briefly on the staff, but in 1960 he set up his own laboratory at the Collège de France. Embracing the British term for his vocation, he named it the laboratory of "social anthropology". During the war Soustelle, the former radical, became a close ally of de Gaulle. He was appointed governor of Algeria, but in the turmoil of the Algerian revolution he sided with the *colons* and he was forced into exile.

France's most ambitious museum of ethnology, the Musée du quai Branly, was still far in the future. It burst onto the scene at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Jacques Chirac, President of France from 1995 to 2007, had been a collector of African art since doing his military service as an officer in Algeria. For his *grand projet* he planned a museum of "primitive art". On the face of it, this was a surprising choice, but Chirac's museum was intended, among other things, as a tribute to the French ideals of fraternity and equality, and a gesture of reparation for the sins of colonialism. "There is no hierarchy among the arts just as there is no hierarchy among peoples", Chirac asserted. "Every people has a particular message to deliver to the world ... which can enrich humanity and contribute its portion to beauty and to truth."

The new museum commandeered the ethnographic collection of the Musée de l'Homme. In his contribution to this book André Delpuech notes that the expeditions undertaken in the 1930s on behalf of the old Museum of Ethnography were to provide some of "the most beautiful objects in the quai Branly". But at the quai Branly they are presented as works of art. Benoît de L'Estoile, author of *Le Goût des autres: De l'Exposition coloniale aux arts premiers* (2007), comments that where

ethnologists had ruled at the Musée de l’Homme (“a museum of anthropology created by a staff of art lovers”), the quai Branly museum is controlled by alumni of the Louvre. The ethnologist is simply “the specialist who can identify and authenticate the artefact, so allowing it to be placed in the correct slot”.

The Musée de l’Homme, though stripped of its ethnographic collections, struggled on, re-dedicating itself as a museum of human evolution. This was in striking conformity to de L’Estoile’s thesis that there are just two prototypes of a museum of the Other: an art museum or a natural history museum. The tensions between art and science that became evident in the old Ethnographic Museum in the 1930s are still unresolved, but it must be admitted that the quai Branly is wildly popular, and not least with visitors whose parents came to France from the former colonies.

Nevertheless, the quai Branly now confronts an existential challenge. In August 2016 the newly elected President of the Republic of Benin, Patrice Talon, demanded the return of some of the museum’s most prized exhibits, including thrones and royal regalia that were donated to the French state by General Alfred-Amédée Dodds, who led the conquest of the kingdom of Dahomey in 1894. The French Foreign Ministry responded that these were inalienable national possessions. In November 2017, however, the new French President, Emmanuel Macron, tweeted: “African heritage cannot be held prisoner by European museums”. Restitution was a priority. The director of the quai Branly is now floating the idea of a French museum in Africa, on the model of the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

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