

# The Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro: a colonial museum ?

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## ABSTRACT

On December 24, 2020, French president Emmanuel Macron instituted a new law n°2020-1673 for restitution of cultural items to the Republic of Benin (*Journal Officiel* n°312, December 26, 2020). These art works (twenty-six in total) had been seized by General Alfred-Amédée Dodds during the conquest of Abomey and donated as war trophies to the Musée d'ethnographie du Trocadéro (MET) between 1893 and 1895. This example reveals the ways in which the colonial situation structured the formation of museum collections and shaped the representations of otherness throughout the second half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. Asymmetrical power relations casted the production and exhibition of knowledge, the museum being part of a wider effort to legitimate colonial domination.



Postcard of the *Palais du Trocadéro* during Paris 1900 World's Fair.

Source : [Library of Congress](#).



The entrance of the Musée ethnographique du Trocadéro, in 1882. Engraving from the *Monde illustré*, May 6, 1882. Source : [Gallica](#).

## From racial difference to cultural diversity

The MET's foundation was closely associated to two related events: the *Muséum ethnographique des missions scientifiques* (1877), which displayed collections brought mainly from Mexico and Peru within the framework of archaeological and ethnographic missions funded by the Ministry of Public Instruction - and the 1878 Exposition Universelle, which took place at the Trocadéro Palace. The specificity of this museum, opened in 1882, resided in bringing together - at a single location and within the same conceptual framework - non-European objects and objects from traditional European societies, including the French society. According to Ernest-Théodore Hamy, the museum's first director, ethnography encompassed "the study of all the material manifestations of human activity." This broad conception of ethnography was in accordance with the theoretical framework of evolutionism in anthropology, which sought to explain the origin and evolution of cultures and societies by means of the comparative method. Material productions, namely objects, were considered as evidence of stages of development as well as testimonies of presumed endangered ways of living. The notion of race (conceived as a set of permanent physical characteristics - including anatomical features - and intellectual abilities embodied in culture) was deployed to explain both cultural differences between peoples and within humanity itself. The display of ethnic types and material objects visually demonstrated the intermingling of race and culture. Thanks to the double classificatory system by geographical origin and by functional order, the arrangement of the collections in sequential order allowing the establishment of series and the museography (show cases, panoplies and mannequins), the MET made visible the progress of humanity and the march towards Western civilization.

Opponent to racial and cultural hierarchy, Paul Rivet, director of the MET in 1928 and of the Musée de l'Homme in 1938, promoted the notion of cultural diversity with the aim of demonstrating the simultaneity of cultures rather

than the succession of cultures. This shift entailed, in museological terms, replacing the universal diachronic history by a synchronic and territorialized perspective of cultures within which material productions—accompanied by descriptive posters including text and images—contributed to the project of creating a “total archive of humanity.” The MET’s scientific and political mission, according to Rivet, was to emphasize the unity of humankind through its diverse cultural forms, and to challenge the presumed racial and cultural inequality, at a time of emergent fascism.

## **The growth of the collections during the colonial period**

American collections (mostly from pre-Colombian civilizations and central America) followed by European collections constituted the bulk of the MET’s collections, though the museum also displayed, in the wake of colonial expansion, artifacts from Western and Equatorial Africa as well as from Oceania. Due to the lack of funding either to purchase objects and/or to organize collecting missions, the museum mainly relied on exchanges and transfer of collections from various national institutions, as well as on gifts from individuals pertaining to the colonial sphere, such as the administrator François-Joseph Clozel and Antoine Mattei from the Compagnie française de l’Afrique équatoriale. Those gifts, obtained mostly through plunder and conquest, as well as the ways in which collections were organized, classified and ordered, reflect the asymmetric power relations intrinsic to the colonial period. It was from 1920s onwards that the MET became an instrument of knowledge for colonial policy makers. Its main goal was to fill the “gaps” in the museum’s collections (especially those related to South-East Asian and West African colonies), and to organize collecting missions in the field. Furthermore, the assumption that cultures should be valued for their diversity entailed a deep understanding of these cultures that only fieldwork could provide. Thus, an institutional and intellectual network was set up connecting the museum with fieldwork missions and the colonies.

## **A colonial museum?**

The creation of an ethnographic museum in France was supported by politicians as well as by scientists in order to catch up with the other European countries. However, the MET’s state of decay over the years due to the lack of financial support from public authorities, calls into question its actual contribution to the colonial propaganda effort. In a paper published in the *Tribune des colonies et des protectorats* (1898), the author lamented the way peoples from Central America and Mexico were given primacy over “the natives from our colonies” and hoped that the museum would “contribute to the colonial idea.” While the MET did not directly impact on French colonial policies, it nevertheless conveyed information regarding colonized peoples and societies to the metropolitan public as well as to the colonial agents. It also contributed to promote French metropolitan imagination about colonization thanks to its scenography offering a visual account of the political and social order inherent to colonial rule. From the 1920s onwards, the relationships between a disciplinary knowledge and the legitimization of colonial rule became more concrete, as new modes of governance were implemented in the colonies. While endowed with a critical function, ethnology was deemed to, according to Rivet, guide and foster humane colonial policies. Thus, the MET was due to become an instrument for the *mise en valeur* of colonial societies by fostering in colonial administration respect for cultural diversity (as demonstrated at the African and Asian departments, where objects were classified first by colonies, then by ethnic groups within each colony). The museological emphasis on cultural diversity –both regional and colonial–was in line with the project, underpinning colonial policy, of a “Greater France.” Created within a colonial context, the MET, which became the *Musée de l’Homme* (Museum of Mankind), survived the decolonization process and the postcolonial period. However, the *Musée de l’Homme*’s history is not a continuous one. On the contrary, in the 1990s, the Museum underwent a period of several transformations—if not a complete reorganization—leading to the dismantle of the institution, the reorganization of its collections and to the projects of redesigning the museums of ethnography in France with subsequent changing names. The transformations that occurred in the museum landscape since the second half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century reflect the change in perceptions of Otherness. While the MET identified Otherness with exotic societies and popular

traditions, the *Musée de l'Homme* equated Otherness with exotic societies and with so-called traditional European societies (excluding the French one); Otherness was associated at the *Musée des Arts et Traditions populaires* (Museum of Folk Art and Popular Traditions) with presumed traditional French societies, at the Musée du quai Branly with non-Western arts and civilizations and, finally, at the MUCEM with European and Mediterranean civilizations. It is worth noting that the new refurbished Musée de l'Homme, opened in 2015, kept the 1930s designation as a means of reconnecting with Paul Rivet's intellectual legacy emphasizing the unity of humankind as well as the diversity of cultures and societies.

Regardless of the changing and varying names, the dismantling of the collections and the redesigning of the museological programs, the embeddedness of the MET's collections in the colonial past requires an awareness of the diversity and of the complexity of colonial situations.

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