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The *Balancier du Goût* or: “With what sauce should we sample the exotic arts?”

Pascal Mongne

Translator: Simon Pleasance



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The *Balancier du Goût* or: “With what sauce should we sample the exotic arts?”

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Geoffroy-Schneiter, Bérénice. *Arts premiers : indiens, eskimos, aborigènes*, Paris : Assouline, 2006

- 1 June 21st, 2006, saw the birth, in Paris, of the Quai Branly Museum. This brand new Seine-side institution houses the national collections from Africa, Oceania, the Americas, and part of Asia. Some of the ensembles-treasures, no less-have been in Parisian collections for several centuries.
- 2 The opening of this museum has, once more, bestirred the issue-the quarrel-of how we, in the West, approach the “primitive arts”, so-called. On this subject there has been many a publication, ranging from summary works targeting the general public (Bérénice Geoffroy-Schneiter) to the most brilliant of essays, like the one by Sally Price, where the survey carried out among both curators and art dealers reveals the slow development of attitudes in the art world towards “distant” forms of art. Recently reissued and fleshed out, this important work raises many a question about the way we view “exotic” worlds, and inevitably resituates the opening of the new museum in its cultural environment.
- 3 The Quai Branly Museum has been spawned by various prestigious institutions-the Musée de l’Homme and the Musée des Arts africains et océaniens (formerly and respectively the *Musée d’ethnographie du Trocadéro* and the *Musée des Colonies*). It thus replaces, but is also

heir to, a vast museographic past, thick with meanings, rebukes and obligations and, as is only to be expected, no simple thing to manage.

- 4 So material evidence of societies from a large swathe of the world have been brought together in one and the same place: ceremonial and household objects, artefacts of war and peace, trappings of power and faith. An improbably varied range of objects, in a nutshell, in terms of both their provenance and their age, their forms and materials, and the visible or hidden function which informs them. Briefly put, objects coming from worlds with no linkage between them but here associated, because they "belong" to a faraway, non-western exoticism, which is primary, if not primitive... It is thus understandably impossible to assign a name to what is, in truth, the Museum of Otherness and Elsewhere. The quarrel over its title, which has now eased, was not the least of tiffs.
- 5 It was during the museum's rapid but painful gestation that a clash occurred between the advocates of two museographic principles apparently at loggerheads. The "anthropological" vision, which can be said—somewhat caricaturally—to favour meaning and function while overlooking the object itself, lost out—why deny it?—to an "aesthetically-oriented" vision, in which its detractors vehemently disapprove (with like exaggeration) of the splendid casket masking the absence of any cultural context.
- 6 By training I am an art historian specializing in things American, and an archaeologist, rocked by the rhythm of rival Schools and theories, so it was only right that I should favour the former. Yet it was the latter that I championed during my participation in the *Mission de Préfiguration* or Pre-Planning Thinktank for the future museum, which convened in 1998 and 1999. I do not regret this choice, and will even attempt to justify it in these few lines.
- 7 Whatever the areas of knowledge broached, museum presentation must traditionally be accompanied by an informative apparatus whose form and content may be very diverse (ranging from the simple exhibit notice to the most sophisticated of computer systems). This principle, which may seem obvious, nevertheless comes up against various restrictions peculiar to the objects and themes which nowadays hallmark the Quai Branly Museum collections.
- 8 The diversity of the cultures and civilizations on display and their sheer number is probably the weightiest such restriction. In a space which, when all is said and done, is quite limited, their presence is actually the result of a drastic choice, heart-rending for scientists and museographers alike, which, in the end of the day, inexorably cramps any claim to an exhaustive explanatory apparatus. Inevitably associated with this are the vast fields of symbolisms, the visible and hidden functions, and the spiritual and material domains illustrated by these objects. By dint of their rich and specific qualities, they are paradoxical obstacles in the way of their own succinct presentation to the public.
- 9 So how is the claim to be made that the infinite complexity of remote or vanished societies can be explained to people discovering this museum's contents—societies, what is more, that are essentially unknown quantities to the general public—without the inevitable excess of documentation which would turn any museum into a library? "Now, a museum is not a book that you affix to the walls."¹
- 10 In a word, are we to scare away the visitor, who in many instances is no more than a passer-by? or should we comply with Paul Valéry's dictum, carved on one of the pediments of the Musée de l'Homme: "Friend, enter not without pleasure"?

- 11 The aesthetically-oriented vision, as accepted by certain researchers, out of constraint and as the lesser of two evils, is no more than tolerated, in the most limited sense of the term. For most people, however, it will remain a scientific heresy, clad in the gloomiest uniforms of ethnocentrism, not to say post-colonialism, which is as ill-regarded as the opposite vision which perceived nothing other than savagery, precisely where we see a work of art... Word is out. And as is only to be expected, there are rumblings of revolt.
 - 12 To be sure, it is indisputable that this notion of "art", which is thoroughly subjective and beyond qualification (in the literal sense of the word), is subtly adaptable outside the boundaries of the so-called "western" world. And it is also indisputable that it is legitimately possible to question and challenge the meaning to be given it within cultures that are faraway and/or "culturally remote" from ours.
 - 13 Yet is it inconceivable to regard as "art" the objects that we admire, and which, in its own way, the West pays tribute to? Does the 14th century Flemish wooden Madonna shed all its cultural and historical values (or even its religious function) by being appreciated as a work of art set cold on its pedestal? Can the same be said of the Aztec Quetzalcoatl, the *tiki* post from the Marquesas Islands, and the Tshokwe seat from Angola? Is it so disastrous to see the Other through our eye, if this will help us to start to understand and grow fond thereof?
 - 14 In a word, this line of thinking inevitably calls to my mind a few lines written in 1520 in front of the Aztec treasures put on display in Brussels by Charles V: "[...] And in all my life, I have seen nothing that so delights my heart as these things; for I saw among them amazing works of art, and I marvelled at the subtle skill of the people from foreign lands [...]". Those lines were written by Albrecht Dürer. Down five centuries, what he saw and what he wrote has never stopped fuelling one of the greatest controversies in the history of taste.
 - 15 The aesthetic vision is not an end, it is a stepping stone.
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NOTES

1. Godelier, Maurice. "Preface" in Price, Sally. *Arts primitifs: regards civilisés*, Paris: Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2006, (D'art en questions), p. 12