

EXHIBITIONS

Experiencing Ancient Human Diversity: *Néandertal* at the Musée de l'Homme, Paris

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The recently renovated Musée de l'Homme in Paris is currently hosting an exhibition on Neanderthals. Running from March 2018 to January 2019, *Néandertal* (in the singular form) presents original finds from excavations all over Europe alongside nineteenth and twentieth century artworks to discuss the rehabilitation of the image of the Neanderthal as a human species in its own right (Figure 1). In a nutshell, the message of the exhibition is “Neanderthals were people, too”. This message is well-delivered and the visitor leaves the show having learned about the many aspects of Neanderthals’ craft, life, and destiny. Given the recent advances in human evolution studies, we wonder if it would have been possible to place more emphasis on past human diversity echoing in some ways the theme of the permanent exhibition of the Musée de l'Homme.

The exhibition is located on the second floor of the building and spread over a gallery of 650 m². It is organized in three thematic areas: *le temps d'une journée*, *le temps d'une vie*, and *le temps d'une espèce*. In all areas, the same visual color code organizes the narrative and the objects on show into three interconnected sections. Blue-wall areas contain archaeological evidence and narrate the ways of life of the Neanderthals as well as their era. White-wall sections display and discuss the representation

of the Neanderthals in the media. Finally, orange stations house interactive games and activities for children (Figure 2). Additionally, small orange signs positioned at child’s length throughout the blue walls make simple yet strong statements summarizing the message of that particular exhibit unit.

The first area, titled *le temps d'une journée* – “within the span of a day” – focuses on a day in the life of a Neanderthal. A full-size diorama showing animals that coexisted with Neanderthals – among others, a mammoth and a cave lion – welcomes the visitor to the show. Immediately thereafter, a reproduction of the La Folie archaeological site in Poitiers, France, intends to show the visitor how Neanderthals lived in and made use of the environment around them. While this specific site reproduction leaves the visitor a bit confused as to where exactly the shelter was, a visiting scientist in turn searches for a presentation of the rare and tenuous evidence supporting the idea of a shelter. In this same area, the spread of flint chips on the floor as well as the refitted flakes game easily enable the visitor – including children – to start understanding flintknapping in an interactive manner that is not often used in museums with this type of materials.

The second area – called “within the span of a lifetime” – presents the cultural

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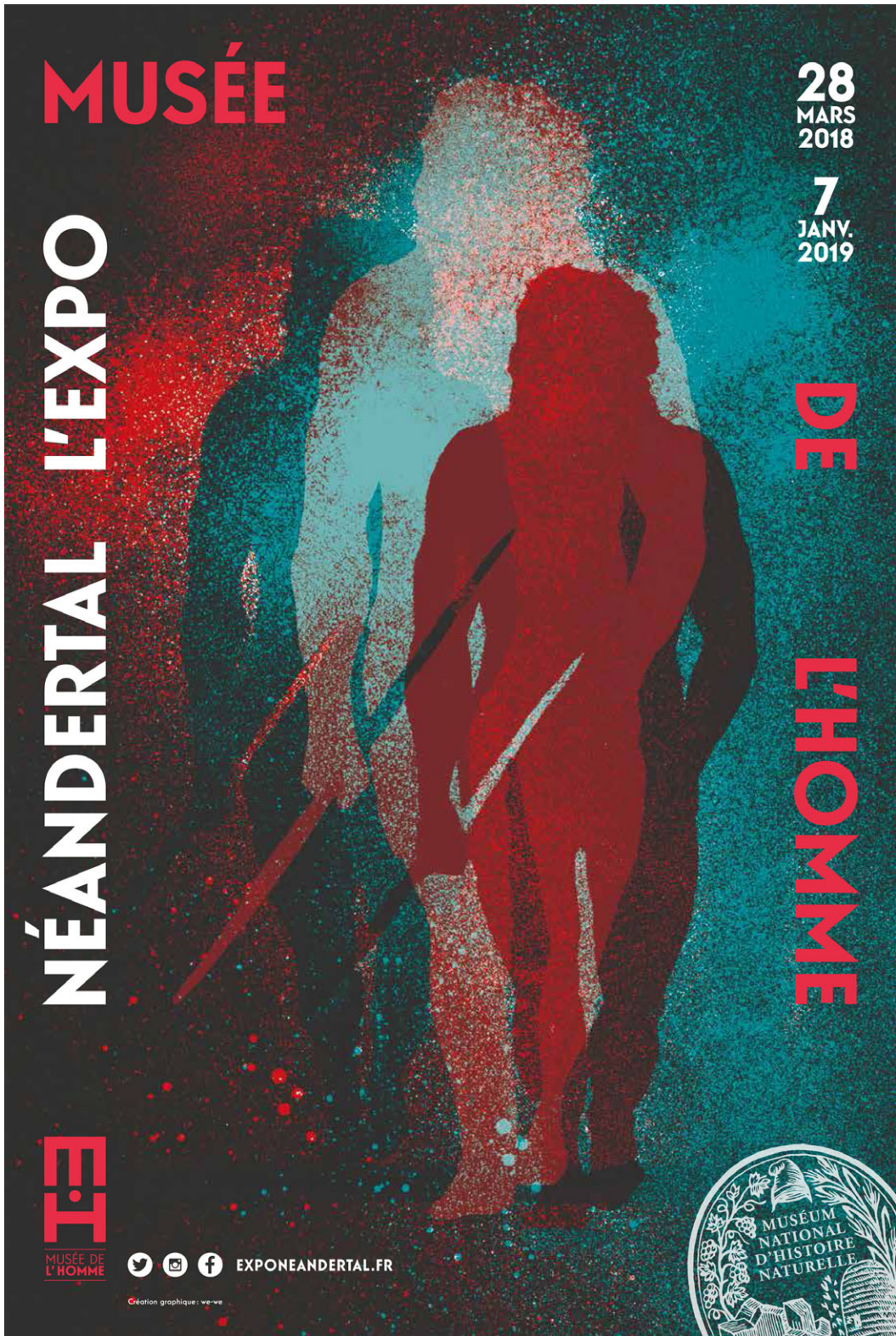


Figure 1. Exhibition poster Néandertal. Image by Musée de l'Homme. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

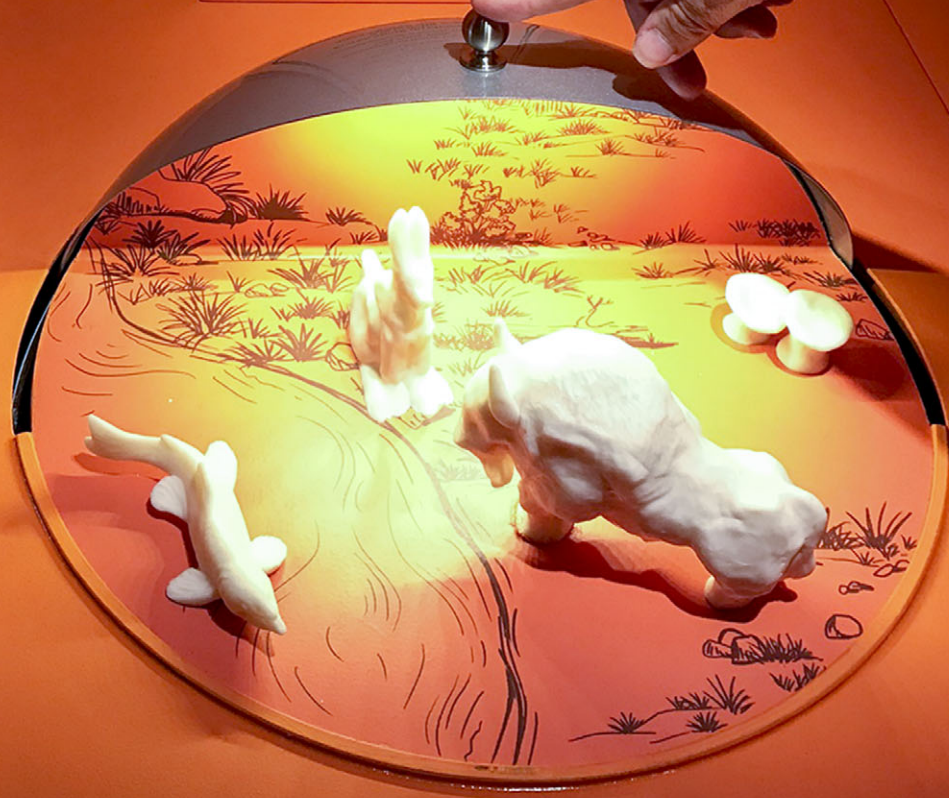
Saveurs des grands espaces
Flavors of the wide-open spaces

Seigneur des rivières
Lord of the rivers

**Suivi d'un civet des steppes
à l'étouffée**
*Followed by a steamed stew
from the steppes*

**Accompagné d'une fricassée
des sous-bois**
Accompanied by a forest fricassée

**Et d'un sauté du chasseur
à la broche**
And a sautéed spit-roast



Neanderthal Top Chef

*Lift the cover to
discover the menu.*

Enjoy your meal!

Figure 2. Interactive exhibit Neanderthal Top Chef. Photo: M. François. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonline library.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

1. Lissoir
Os fossile
Combe-Grenal, France
Environ - 60 000
 2. Lissoir
Os fossile
Combe-Grenal, France
Entre - 130 000 et - 42 000
 3. Poignon
Os fossile
Combe-Grenal, France
Entre - 130 000 et - 42 000
 4. Lissoir
Os fossile
Combe-Grenal, France
Entre - 130 000 et - 42 000
 5. Poignon
Os fossile
Site de Pech-de-Dolh
(Boussignac), France
Entre - 45 000 et - 40 000
 6. Relouchoir
Os fossile
Combe-Grenal, France
Entre - 130 000 et - 42 000
- Collection du Musée national de Préhistoire, Les Eyzies-de-Tayac
- La besace du Néandertalien**
- 7 à 17. Onze silex
Silex
Site de «La Folle» (Pobert), France
Environ 60 000 BP
Dnieu Navetche, Leguaine, service régional de l'Archéologie
18. Oursin fossile (*Micraster coranguinum*)
Silex
France
Olivier Dupéchez
Collection du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris



19. Nudéus à édat préférentiel
Silex
Fitz-James, France
Entre - 71 000 et - 47 000
Dnieu Navetche, service régional de l'Archéologie
 20. Racloir épais
Silex
La Chapelle-aux-Saints, France
Entre - 55 000 et - 39 000
Collection du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris
 21. Racloir
Silex
Site de «La Quina» (Charente), France
Entre - 60 000 et - 40 000
Collection du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris
 22. Biface
Silex
Site de «Moustier» (Dordogne), France
Entre - 60 000 et - 40 000
Collection du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris
 23. Grattoir
Silex
Site de «Moustier» (Dordogne), France
Entre - 60 000 et - 40 000
Collection du Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, Paris
 24. Biface
Silex
Saint-Amand-les-Eaux, France
Environ 45 200 BP
 25. Pointe Levallois
Silex
Therdonville, France
Environ 176 000 BP
 26. Lame
Silex
Baillemont-Saint-Omer, France
Environ - 75 000
- Dnieu Navetche, service régional de l'Archéologie

Figure 3. Bone tools and bifaces collection presented at the first area. Photo: M. Françoze. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

practices of the Neanderthals, from funerary rites to cannibalism. In this section, some impressive artifacts and fossil remains are shown, such as the original Neanderthal skull, the Saint-Césaire and the La Ferrassie skull. The relatively large amount of skulls on show gives an interesting feeling of “abundance,” making the Neanderthal population even more real and close to the visitor experience (Figure 3).

This second area also tackles some controversial topics in Paleolithic archaeology, such as the production of art and symbolism by Neanderthals. Beads and personal adornments made

out of mammal teeth are presented. The use of claws and feathers from birds of prey and other birds is a recent discovery that complements more traditional/consolidated knowledge of Neanderthals having collected strange-looking object, “curios” like geological fossils. The bifaces (drop-shaped stone artefacts worked on both faces) from Fontmaure, however, are a more complicated case in point in this section. These are good pieces of craft made on an exceptionally colorful flint with red, yellow, and brown stripes on the same pieces. So far, scientific literature has not argued that those bifaces can be taken as art, considering that they have

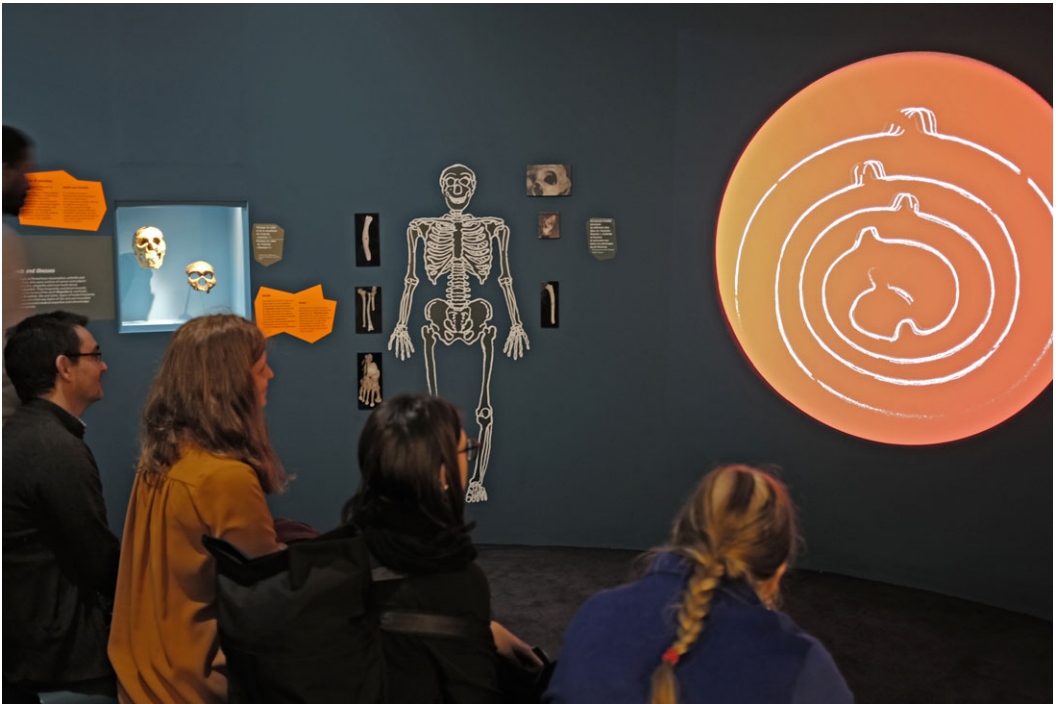


Figure 4. Exhibition video and public watching. Photo: J.C. Domenach. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

nothing special other than having been made with specifically beautiful material, which is abundantly available in that particular site. This critique notwithstanding, from an exhibition-making perspective these objects are an adequate choice to draw visitors' attention to the potential for art and symbolism in the deep past.

Potentially difficult topics such as Neanderthals' funerary practices and cannibalism are also addressed. Particularly the latter could have given visitors a negative impression of Neanderthals, playing against the exhibition's message that they were 'people like us'. Instead, the curators chose to add a funny, cartoon-like short film where the concepts of exo- and endo-cannibalism are explained, as well as the ritual aspects of such (Figure 4). This helps to soften the atmosphere and provide a somewhat easy transition into the next section.

The third and last area – named “within the lifespan of a species” – addresses some of the most pressing questions in the study of human evolution. This section of the exhibition starts with a variety of (original) artifacts displayed on a large map and showing the variety of Neanderthal material culture as well as the spread of Neanderthals all over Europe and up until the Altai mountains in central Eurasia.

But more than the geographical distribution of Neanderthal settlements or their demise, this section also accommodates a relatively timid attempt to talk about human diversity in the past. Within the last decade, studies on human evolution have taken a fundamental turn with several discoveries of human remains belonging to unknown groups and with the development of ancient DNA studies. It is now clear that several human populations including



Figure 5. Hominin diorama. Photo: M. Françaço. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Neanderthals, Denisovians, the Flores group, Early modern humans and the so-called X-men once peopled Eurasia. Likewise, ancient DNA studies have shown that Neanderthals, Denisovians and *Homo sapiens* interbred. While the exhibition at the Musée de l'Homme acknowledges and mentions some of these recent discoveries – a diorama of a Flores hominin is provided (Figure 5), it fails to emphasize the importance and the broader meaning of such. Instead of doing so, the exhibition narrative insists on the rehabilitation of the Neanderthal – so much so that the last room of the visit has a large, white wall with a number of statements taken from the press, from dictionaries, or from popular sayings, in which Neanderthals are either portrayed as inferior, uncivilized or positively as fully-fledged humans “like us”.

Just before the end of the exhibition, the question of the demise of Neanderthals is addressed. A nice interactive installation allows visitors to take a seat in individual dark and quiet cubicles to listen to scientists talking about the different hypothesis on the demise of Neanderthals. The quietness of the setting as well as the direct intervention of scientists is a welcome way of underscoring the still uncertain explanation for the demise, considering that such a question has not yet received a consensual answer from the experts.

Interestingly, the title of the exhibition is in the singular form. In fact, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the archetype of the ancient hominin was researched and “The Neanderthal Man” was indeed described using a singular archetypal form. It was only by the turn

of the second part of the twentieth century that the plural form as in “The men using ancient stone” (following *Les Hommes de la Pierre Ancienne* by H. Breuil, 1951) started to be used in textbooks. Science has currently taken this one step further by showing that not only groups like Neanderthals were diverse across time and space, but also that there were several human groups living at the same time.

Towards the end of the exhibition, quotes by Claude Lévi-Strauss are used to insist on the positive but non-hierarchical relationship between different human populations. It is interesting to note that Lévi-Strauss did not write about Neanderthals or Paleolithic history, but about race. In fact, some of the quotes used in the exhibition are part of an essay (“Race et Histoire”) that he wrote in a post WWII context, specifically for his speech for the foundation of Unesco. In that essay, he argued and rightly insisted that the idea of ‘primitive man’ (note the singular) was a flawed a-posteriori static vision of History. Here at the Musée de l’Homme, human diversity in the deep past could have been used to reflect on our unity within diversity. Exploring Neanderthals (plural) within their own diversity as well as elaborating more on other contemporary humans (Denisovians, X-men, Flores or early modern humans) could have echoed the permanent exhibition in the same museum. We acknowledge, however, that this would be a challenging endeavor, and perhaps could be the topic for a future exhibition. Still, the *Néandertal* exhibition is a fitting counterpart to the museum’s permanent galleries, aptly named Galerie de l’Homme.

Both the temporary and the permanent exhibitions engage in a clever way with the modernized architecture of the Palais de Chail- lot, originally built for the Universal Exhibition of 1937. The high windows bring natural light

to the interior of the building and allow visitors to escape from the museum experience at regular intervals, thereby providing respite from what could otherwise be an overwhelming sequence of information and visual *stimuli*.

After welcoming almost 120,000 visitors since its opening at the Musée de l’Homme in March 2018, *Néandertal* is scheduled to travel to Montpellier in 2019 and to Gatineau, Canada, in 2020. International audiences will have their chance to see a well-planned and well-executed show, which combines an easy-to-follow narrative with the possibility of gaining more in-depth information. For those who want to delve deeper into the topic, there is an exhibition catalogue available for purchase (in French only). More importantly, visitors will see carefully selected, authentic artifacts from all over Europe telling a compelling story about human evolution and making a much-needed case for understanding and unity. **END**