

Review of: "Le Musée de l'Homme. Histoire d'un musée-laboratoire", edited by Claude Blankaert

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A revamped Musée de l'Homme opened its doors in the late 2015 after six years of being entirely re-worked. Outside of this event, the publication of an extensive history of the museum came as a necessity to accompany the reopening to the public of a controversial collection. As it turns out, the book serves more purposes than merely offering a look on the days gone by of the museum: it certainly does not fear wrestling with its colonial origins and ambiguous history, and provides ample facts and details to offer a comprehensive understanding of the past, so as to make a clear statement in favour of the museum's reopening. Considering the museum as a historical object is indispensable and disclosing '*la lourdeur de sa dimension mémorielle*' (p. 13), Blanckaert argues in the introduction, is the only way to counter the problem of institutional denial ('*révisionnismes de la mémoire institutionnelle*', p. 15).

The project takes the form of a beautifully edited book: high quality paper, full colour iconography, and smart and uncluttered layout in the vein of the books published in the 'Archives' collection of the Publications Scientifiques du Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle, which co-edited the piece. On top of that, the publication is enriched with hundreds of reproductions of archival material, posters and above all, photographs which, in association with film, were a key medium to the development of the museum and a symbol of its modernity (Pellé p. 235-237, De L'Estoile 244-245). To a certain extent, the book resembles a family album, dotted with memories of its numerous members: many papers reveal the sheer sense of community and bold attachment of the museum staff and researchers (esp. Laurière, p. 46-77). Also a publication designed for the wider audiences, as the plentiful appendices and biographical notices evidence, the book certainly reaches a very difficult balance in proposing an accessible format, while simultaneously offering accurate and in-depth knowledge.

As a matter of fact, the aesthetically successful outcome of the book should not overshadow the rich scientific content of a book resulting from the work of an acknowledged team of specialists in museum studies and history and philosophy of science. What's more, as a tribute to the institution they study, the team of contributors is interestingly multidisciplinary. The diversity of their backgrounds and functions gives way to an assortment of writing styles and viewpoints creating a pool of parallel histories of the museum: an efficient method against revisionism and attempts of setting an official, institutional history.

The many dimensions of the museum, its collections, its relations to other institutions, its locations, its people are thoroughly introduced throughout the various papers. Some reoccurring themes underpin the general reflection about the museum, and the debate around the link between the collection and the museum is one of them. The 2006 traumatic 'amputation' of the ethnographic collection, to be exhibited in the brand-new Musée du Quai

Branly, led the Musée de l'Homme to reconsidering and redefining its role since its obsolescence appeared manifest to many at the turn of the twenty-first century. Such an amputation raises the question of the museum's capacity to be adaptable and 'comply with' the latest evolution of a scientific field (Hurel, p. 122). Also, it recalls that the museum is the product of an elaborated set of scientific practices, social strategies and political discourses, in its own time, which give sense to the collection. The museum is never a timeless and unfailing object but belongs to its context (esp. Concklin p. 22-45).

The administrative and institutional dimensions of the life of the Musée de l'Homme are notably emphasised, to the point where the museum appears to have been in a state of permanent (re-)construction. Most papers allude to or insist on the role of the Musée as a place of making of institutionalised sciences, as well as its subsequent headquarters and shelter. The constant creation, naming, splitting, merging of chairs also testify how the science museum and the research influence one another, to the point where they were indissociable. In an only apparent paradox, the contributors' focus on institutionalisation in fact reveal that the museum and its scientific practices are never left as an unquestioned monolith: quite on the contrary, and even outside of major architectural moves, the museum ought to follow a trend of constant reinvention.

The focus of the book is undeniably set on the Musée de l'Homme, with only exceptional comparisons with other ethnographic museums or places of exhibit in general. Nevertheless, the remarkable nature of the museum is fairly convincing. In ways that sound at times all too celebratory, all papers insist on the way the Musée de l'Homme was the place where human science *à la française* was successfully developed, thanks to their multidisciplinary approach. For the most part, this was schemed by director Paul Rivet, whose administration of the Musée span from 1928 to 1949, starting in the then Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro subsequently transformed into Musée de l'Homme in 1937. A left-wing activist, Rivet thought multidisciplinary to be a way to counter the raciology developed by physical anthropology at a time of soaring fascist ideologies. The very naming of the field itself, '*les sciences de l'homme*' seems a French particularity, as it stands apart from the 'human sciences'. One could regret the rapid dismissal of the discussion of a more gender equal naming for its science - and of a brand-new museum - which could consider '*l'humanité*' rather than '*l'homme*' (L'Estoile, p. 257). Also disturbing is the persistent conception of French science circumscribed to Parisian institutions.

Additionally, multidisciplinary makes the Musée a valuable case to examine the practical modalities of cohabitation and scientific interactions of the several disciplines sharing the same premises (ethnography, anthropology, ethnomusicology, paleontology etc.). Especially, the long-standing relationship and influence of natural history, is efficiently discussed (Blanckaert p. 86-99, De L'Estoile, p. 238-259). Eventually, Rivet's humanist vision came to a close and the separation of the ethnographic collection enacted the end of the tension between the cultural and natural readings of the history of mankind: rather, the role of the present-day Musée de l'Homme is to set up a place where the existence of man can be scientifically guaranteed in

times of anxiety raised by arduous questioning of what separates the human from the non-human (De L'Estoile, p 256-257).

This engaging publication, to some degree, grapples with the Musée as a place. Grognet offers a compelling piece of writing which effectively takes the reader along the rooms and galleries of the disappeared versions of the museum (p.176-204). If it was not for his contribution alongside Rivoirard's essay on architecture (p. 160-175), the sense of place would have remained rhetorical though. Indeed, the different spatialities of the museum are occasionally presented: the changing architectural projects, evolving galleries or even the displacement of an off-site museum in the course of field work. However, one very interesting future development in the history of the museum would be to have it *situated*, together with its built-in scientific practices, within the urban setting of Paris, understood as a specific locale. Additionally, in a historiography decidedly prone to monographies on single museums, engaging with the transnational and the comparative would help grasping with more finesse where a museum stands in the map of other cultural institutions.

Le Musée de l'Homme operates as a link between the past and future of the museum. It offers rich material to reflect on the past of the museum, and offers new leads in the writing of the history of an individual museum by inviting a multidisciplinary team of its actors to write about their institution. Furthermore, the book will remain a *passage obligé* to anyone with an interest for Parisian museums. The book does not, however, negate the discontinuity with its past. One of its most convincing statement is precisely to invite its readership of wider public and museum specialists to think critically about the relevance of the museum institution, now and then.

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