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French Art for All!

Museum Projects in Africa 1912-1931 between Avant-garde and Colonialism

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Museums in Africa

In current post-colonial studies, transnationalization is understood to be the process of transcending the nation state and is regarded to be the pathway towards a future globalization of cultures.¹ In this sense, colonization is not a process of transnationalization. But transnational processes did nevertheless play a significant role at colonization's very core: the colony of Algeria, for example – paradoxically, in light of its painful history – had an important constitutive role in the development of the modern French *jus soli*-based concept of nationality.² From the African perspective, neither the idea of nation nor the concept of national boundaries in the European sense was known to that continent, which was not divided into “nations” until the Berlin Conference of 1885, when the colonizers undertook the division. The significance of “imagined communities” across national borders becomes clear when one considers Africa's migratory ethnic groups, its multitude of languages and cultures, and last but not least its history of slavery.

Museums have played and continue to play an important role in the above processes as an integral part of European material politics. A museum's unequivocally defined mission to preserve the collective memory³ turns into a complex issue in “transnational” history: the validity of the European museum's role as a “patrimoine” of cultural memory and its task of preserving symbolically freighted objects for visual reception are called into question when transposed into events of colonial history. In the light of current demands for restitution by today's African states, **which** objects are shown **where** is a politically touchy issue, whether here or there. From the conqueror's European perspective, the argument of preservation has been and still is one of the main arguments in justifying the massive appropriation of objects under colo-

¹ See for example Walter Goebel, Saskia Schabio (eds.), *Locating Transnational Idea(l)s*, New York and London: Routledge, 2010, or *The Global Contemporary. Kunstwelten nach 1989*, exh. cat. ZKM/Museum für Neue Kunst, Karlsruhe, 2011.

² Patrick Weil, *How to Be French. Nationality in the Making since 1789*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.

³ See Aleida Assmann, *Speichern oder Erinnern? Das kulturelle Gedächtnis zwischen Archiv und Kanon*, in: Moritz Csáky, Peter Stachel (eds.), *Speicher des Gedächtnisses. Bibliotheken, Museen, Archive, Part 2: Die Erfindung des Ursprungs/Die Systematisierung der Zeit*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2001, pp. 15–30.

nialism. From the African perspective it meant a “viol de l’imaginaire” – a cause of both the historical war and suppression and today’s lack of financial capacities.⁴ In 1931, when the future protagonists of the black solidarity movement *Négritude* – Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Gontran – met for the first time in Paris, France was going through an economic depression that made the colonies a pretentious political field of national pride.⁵ The 100-year jubilee of the Algerian colony was in 1930, celebrated for one last time with pomp and glory. The following year, 1931, the Colonial Exhibition took place in Paris, transforming the whole Bois de Vincennes into a colonial spectacle and endowing the city with the now still existing – at least as a building – Musée Colonial (Musée de l’Afrique et d’Océanie). Both events testify to the close connection between the founding of museums in the colonies and cultural politics in Paris.

Many museums in Africa belong to colonial history – but the memory of artefacts certainly not. Eight years after the French had annexed Algeria, in 1838, the Musée d’Alger was founded to house the numerous artifacts of antiquity in the territory. The many natural history museums⁶ founded in Africa in the mid-nineteenth century (for example in 1855 on La Réunion) mirror the geological, zoological, archaeological, and paleontological interests of both scholars and entrepreneurs in the colonies. The creation of African zoos followed a similar logic as well: zoos were essentially storage repositories for animals, kept on hand for exotic shows in Europe.⁷ The collection of the Paris Musée d’Histoire Naturelle and the then ethnological museum profited by over 3,000 objects from the “Mission Dakar-Djibouti” (1930–31), an expedition accompanied by Michel Leiris and Marcel Griaule. In 1936, the French set up the Institut Français d’Afrique Noire, which was renamed the Institut Fondamental de l’Afrique Noire after independence. In French West Africa (A.O.F.), between the Atlantic coast of West Africa and the area of today’s Sudan and the Congo in Central Africa, numer-

4 *Enjeux* (Bulletin d’Analyses Géopolitiques pour l’Afrique Centrale): *Le patrimoine culturel en Afrique Centrale* 15 (2003); Nathalie Heinich, *La Fabrique du patrimoine. ‘De la cathédrale à la petite cuillère’*, Paris: Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2009 as well as Aminata D. Traoré, *Le viol de l’imaginaire*, Paris: Librairie Fayard/Éditions Actes Sud, 2002.

5 Herman Lebovics, *The Seductions of the Picturesque and the Irresistible Magic of Art*, in: id., *True France. The Wars Over Cultural Identity 1900–1945*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992, pp. 51–97; Giles Manceron, *Marianne et les Colonies. Une introduction à l’histoire coloniale de la France*, Paris: La Découverte, Ligue des droits de l’homme, 2003.

6 For example, in Mozambique, Uganda, Angola, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia and Zimbabwe. See Anne Gague, *Les états Africains et leurs musées. La mise en scène de la Nation*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997; Claude Daniel Ardouin, Emmanuel Arinze (eds.), *Museums and History in West Africa*, Washington and Oxford: Smithsonian Institution, 2000 as well as Claude Daniel Ardouin, Emmanuel Arinze (eds.), *Museums and the Community in West Africa*, Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995.

7 See Julien Bondaz, *L’exposition postcoloniale. Formes et usages des musées et des zoos en Afrique de l’Ouest (Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso)*, thesis, Université de Lyon II, 2009.

ous further IFAN institutes were established in the 60s.⁸ The IFANs, with their ethnological focus, had a lasting influence on the museographical field in these places, where they sometimes combined their work with cultivating crafts and artistic traditions.⁹ But already before the European invasion, important family collections of objects existed, for example at the royal courts. Under colonization, the deposition of the kings and the musealization of their treasures went hand in hand.¹⁰

Between 1920 and 1960, European art teachers, and in Senegal President Léopold Senghor as well, initiated the founding of private and state art schools. These were of great importance for communicating the European concept of “art” in Africa.¹¹ Creative centers in African academies and studios not only adopted the traditional European arts, but also the newer artistic techniques used by photographers, painters and other artists of the era starting in 1900.¹² Whether such art would now still be considered a genuine “Euro-centric construction” or rather the *fait accompli* of an over 100-year history of decentralized, poly-perspectived global modernity, the fact remains that the contact sphere of art always has political significance.¹³ At the same

⁸ Abou Sylla, *Les musées en Afrique. Entre pillage et irresponsabilité*, in: *Africultures: Réinventer les musées* 70 (2007), pp. 90–101.

⁹ See for example the Museum of the Ivory Coast in Abidjan at <http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/edu/ViewLoitLo.do;jsessionid=AEF7DC01DEBD2238909BEB0CDC9059E3?method=preview&lang=EN&id=11363>.

¹⁰ In Abomey (Benin) the last king of the dynasty was removed from power. His royal palace with its five courts and an area of about 44 hectares was taken over for the museum in 1931. His collection's up to 200-year-old objects, which were closely tied to oral tradition, were made into exhibition objects. In 1944, it was put under the control of the new IFAN in Benin. See Léonhard Ahonon, Benin. The Living Consecration of the History of the Kingdom of Abomey, in: Claude Daniel Ardouin, Emmanuel Nnakenyi Arinze (eds.), *Museums & History in West Africa*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000, pp. 164–68; Franck Houndégla, Une expérience de maîtrise d'œuvre. Le réaménagement de l'exposition permanente du Musée Historique d'Abomey, in: *Africultures* 2007 (see fn. 8), pp. 71–74.

¹¹ For the subject of art schools, see Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow. Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal 1960–1995*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004; Simon Ottenberg (ed.), *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art*, exh. cat., Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C., Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2002; Chidum Onuchukwu, Art Education in Nigeria, in: *Art Education* 47 (1994), pp. 54–60. See also Bärbel Küster, Visuelle Kontaktzonen in der bildenden Kunst. Europa-Afrika, in: Marie-Hélène Gutberlet, Sissy Helff (eds.), *Die Kunst der Migration. Aktuelle Positionen zum europäisch-afrikanischen Diskurs*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2011, pp. 199–211.

¹² Sylvester Okwonodu Ogbachie, *Ben Enwonwu. The Making of an African Modernist*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008. For the history of photography, see Pascal Martin Saint Léon (ed.), *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography*, Paris, 1999; Tobias Wendl, Heike Behrend (eds.), *Snap me one! Studiofotografien in Afrika*, München: Prestel, 1998 as well as “In-Sight”. *African Photography 1940 to the Present*, exh. cat., Guggenheim Museum, New York, London: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.

¹³ See for example Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005; on the other hand: Karlheinz Kohl, „Der Kunstbegriff ist eine eurozentrische

time, the attempt is and has been made to stage art as a space for international understanding (today: globalization). The histories of the museum on La Réunion and the Musée National des Beaux-Arts in Algiers demonstrate how museums act as power apparatuses and, also, how greatly the concept of museum correlates with the respective concept of art.

The Musée Léon Dierx on La Réunion

In Paris of 1912, members of the European avant-garde discussed whether, in order to enhance the objects' value as art, they should be shown in the Louvre as *art primitive* (also *art sauvage*). Simultaneously, the founding of the museum on La Réunion, a former slave island east of Madagascar, provides a noteworthy colonial complement to the exodus of African art objects— metalwork, bronzes, woodcarvings, and textile arts – implemented by their transport on a grand scale to Europe at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴

The founding of the Musée Léon Dierx took place upon the private initiative of Marius-Ary Leblond, two cousins, George Athénas (1877–1953) and Aimé Merlo (1880–1958), publishing under the same pseudonym. They were both *Créoles*, as members of the white upper stratum of society on La Réunion were called. In 1989, they emigrated to Paris, where they made somewhat of a name for themselves as writers (Prix Goncourt 1909) and wrote for various journals. Their literary goal was to counter Pierre Loti's exotic reveries with a more realistic handling of colonial themes. The Leblonds also had close contacts with visual artists and in 1909 they published the anthology *Peintres de race*, in which creativity and sensitization (in spite of crude racial categorizations) were celebrated as the new artistic criteria surpassing national boundaries. Painting – in all its cultural diversity – was understood as a medium of communication between all races. “Une commune ferveur moderne pour la peinture est devenue universelle comme une religion”¹⁵ – the Leblonds assigned racial characteristics to certain artists, on the one hand, and, on the other, they pleaded the case of an “Internationalisme” in which even the most opposite of nations were united in brotherhood in the realm of art. Art became the harbinger of Internationalism, the people would find common ground in their admiration for certain masters – the ideality of art would thus be expressed: “une sorte de suprématie et de droits surnaturels.”¹⁶

Konstruktion“, in: Klaus Heid and Rüdiger John (eds.), *Transfer. Kunst-Wirtschaft-Wissenschaft*, Baden-Baden: [sic!], 2003, pp. 97–12.

¹⁴ See Bärbel Küster, *Matisse und Picasso als Kulturreisende. Primitivismus und Anthropologie um 1900*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 2003.

¹⁵ Marius-Ary Leblond, *Peintres de race*, Brüssel: G. van Oest, 1909, p. X.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Initially, in 1910, Marius-Ary Leblond established a committee for the museum on La Réunion. Its eleven members came from the Parisian circles of the “creole elite” and their organizations, as well as artists, critics and colonialists.¹⁷ The Leblonds enjoyed excellent contacts with the Symbolists of Mallarmé’s “Parnasse,” and had close relationships with the writer Léon Dierx (1838–1912) and the art dealer Ambroise Vollard (1866–1939) born in La Réunion. The well-known sculptor Emile-Antoine Bourdelle was appointed president of the commission.¹⁸ In November 1910, the Leblonds presented an acquisition list of paintings, graphics, and sculptures, and distributed it among potential patrons and donors, who could then either purchase one or more works on the list or fund the transport of the artworks.

In 1912–13, a total of about 40 works were donated in Paris. Of the more than 40 artists who presented the museum with their own works, almost all had been referred to in *Peintres de race* and many were also friends or acquaintances of the Leblonds: the most renowned of these were Odilon Redon, Theo van Rysselberghe, Jean-François Raffaëlli, Léon Frédéric, Edouard Diriks and Emile-Antoine Bourdelle. Four Parisian galleries donated paintings or sculptures: Ambroise Vollard, Bernheim-Jeune, Galerie Hébrard (the gallery that represented Bourdelle) and Galerie Blot.¹⁹ The most significant private donation came from Félix Fénéon, an anarchist, famous art critic, and a writer of Symbolist persuasion, who, together with Gustave Kahn, was one of the most important advocates of post-Impressionism in Paris. He donated a series of drawings by Maximilien Luce and a painting by Paul Signac, the leading Post-Impressionist of the time. That the Leblonds were closely involved with these circles only goes to confirm that Signac, Fénéon, Luce, and many of the artists who contributed their works (Raffaëlli, Le Sidaner, Rysselberghe, Diriks) were adherents to the Socialist movement in art, and even in some cases anarchists. Further members subsequently joined the honor committee: Jacques Doucet, Gustave Geffroy and Roger Marx added their names to the illustrious list of art critics.²⁰ Bourdelle’s contribution to the La Réunion museum consisted of a bust and a monumental fragment.

17 A. Jacquinet et al. (eds.), *Le Musée Léon Dierx*, Paris: Réunion des Musées nationaux, 2001, p. 14. On the history of the Musée Léon Dierx see also *Il était trois Réunionnais. Marius-Ary Leblond – Ambroise Vollard, Historique de la fondation du Musée Léon Dierx (1910–1913)*, Saint-Denis, 1981 as well as F. Cheval, *Essai de muséographie coloniale*, in: F. Cheval (ed.), *Souvenirs de Paul et Virginie. Un paysage aux valeurs morales*, Maison française du meuble créole, Saint-Louis et Musée Léon Dierx, Saint-Denis, exh. cat., Paris: A. Biro, 1995, pp. 20–51.

18 On October 8, 1910, the Leblonds wrote him a postal card: “Dear friend, If possible come on Friday the 14th around 10 o’clock so that you can preside over the first meeting of the La Réunion museum. Vollard, Lacoste, and a few Creoles will be there.” See Cheval 1995 (as fn. 17), pp. 21–22.

19 See *Il était trois Réunionnais* 1981 (as fn. 17).

20 The letter to Doucet requests the inclusion of his name in the Comité d’honneur and implies, between the lines, that he will donate works of art. That the letter, which Bourdelle only has to sign, was written by the Leblonds can be inferred from the handwriting as well as from a note on a further postal card from the Leblonds of November 1912, which refers to this letter: “Ci-joint une lettre pour le

Leblond – upon his departure for La Réunion in 1912 – assured him that these would be displayed in a place of honor.

Far removed from the art metropolis of Paris, and, from the Parisian perspective, more or less in a presumed cultural no-man's-land, a museum for contemporary and mostly non-academic artworks was in the process of being established – at a time in which such art had no museum presence to speak of in France itself. Back in the 1890s, the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris, under the rule of its director Léonce Bénédite, had kept its Impressionist paintings donated by Gustave Caillebotte, well hidden in the side galleries, fearing for the national reputation. Edouard Manet's scandalous *Olympia* of 1865 was only exhibited privately, upon special request. Many artists considered the state's one-sided, conservative funding of the arts to be autocratic, exclusive, and restrictive.²¹ Artists who produced non-academic art had little chance to exhibit their work and they organized their opposition: upon the occasion of a survey conducted in 1904, artists contributed many resolute articles on the subject in the magazine *Les Arts de la Vie*. Marius Leblond was the supervisor of this investigation (in his summary, he explicitly regrets the fact that the leading socialist politician Jean Jaurès had not expressed his opinions).²² And in a discussion of Roger Marx's book *L'art social* in the magazine *La Vie* published by the Leblonds the acquisition policies and the mediocrity of the Beaux Arts Commission's choices were criticized as well.²³ In contrast, a majority of the works forming the matrix of the Musée Léon Dierx on La Réunion were by Impressionist, Post-Impressionist or Fauve artists. The museum thus profited from the anger of the artists, for whom sending their works off to the other side of the planet was a demonstrative act against the lack of state funding of contemporary art in France and against conservative museum policies.

But the Leblonds had further ideas about the transnational value of art and about museums adapting the ideas of the socialist "art for all" movement in France and Belgium to colonial rule. They formulated their arguments and the mission of the colonial art museum in their magazine, *La Vie*, in May 1912. Their intent was to make the original works of French contemporary art accessible to people who were far from Paris and thus bring a bit of cultivation into the "creole life" of the island. They wanted to speak directly to the museum visitors' senses, to heighten their awareness of nature, of colors, of light. But the Leblonds did not only wish to cultivate the

Musée de la Réunion que vous auriez mettre à la Poste après l'avoir signé, merci", *ibid.* Musée Antoine Bourdelle, Paris, Dossier 103.

²¹ See Luc Alary, *L'art vivant avant l'art moderne. Le musée du Luxembourg, premier essai de muséographie pour l'art vivant en France*, in: *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 42-2 (1995), pp. 219–39 as well as Pierre Vaisse, Léonce Bénédite et l'impressionnisme, in: Rudolphe Rapetti et al. (eds.), *Monet. Atti del convegno*, proceedings, Conegliano, 2003, pp. 257–64.

²² *Les Arts de la vie: Enquête sur la séparation des Beaux-Arts et l'État* (September 1904), pp. 186–89, p. 189.

²³ T. Leclerc, *L'art social*, in: *La Vie* 17 (1913), pp. 97–99, p. 98.

senses. The museum was to communicate information, above all, about French art but also about the history of art in general: ‘epochs’ and works from ancient Greece, the primitive Italians (“essential pour notre idée de l’art”²⁴), Gothic casts, works of the French ‘Renaissance’ (Poussin, Watteau, Nattier, Prud’hon, Delacroix, Géricault), all the way to the contemporary Puvis de Chavannes,²⁵ supplemented by reproductions of the great masters from French museums.

The Leblonds imagined that their visitors on La Réunion would be not only white, but also people of color, of various ethnicities: “When choosing them (the works), we thought of the white children, who would become even more graceful as they marveled at the vision of beauty which the master painters of their race had imagined – the idyllic vision of *Arcadia* or *Ludus pro patria* by Puvis de Chavannes. We also thought of the black children, who tend to emulate: won’t the little kaffir or the little Indian gape in astonishment as he stands in front of a Poussin, or a Puvis de Chavannes?”²⁶

Puvis de Chavannes, alongside Signac, was considered to be a visionary of an ideal socialist society. In the words of Roger Marx: “The artist is a citizen of the world, and the artist’s language is understood worldwide. It is up to him to pave the way for a new era of peace, brotherhood, and love.”²⁷ The Leblonds transported these themes into the colonial situation: art would induce the young colored people to love France more and to become better patriots. The cousins proceeded to present a rough outline of art pedagogy, which was to accompany the democratic education, leading to free elections – art being a guarantee of harmony among all people.²⁸ This concept of a museum associated with democratic ideas was a weak but highly political reflection

24 Marius-Ary Leblond, La Réunion et son Musée, in: *La Vie* 12 (May 1912), pp. 371–74, p. 373.

25 Here, Renaissance means artists who had outstanding positions in French art: Poussin for French Classicism, Prud’hon as a representative of the socialist concept of art, Watteau and Nattier were included in the debate because of the topical writings of the Goncourts.

26 Leblond 1912 (as fn. 24), p. 373: “En les choisissant, on a pensé aux enfants blancs qui deviendront plus gracieux et plus actifs à admirer, dans la précision de leur forme, le rêve de beauté des maîtres de leur race, les visions idylliques de société inscrites dans une Arcadie ou un Ludus pro patria. On a pensé aux enfants noirs, flexibles à l’émulation: quelle est la surprise devant un Poussin, un Puvis de Chavannes, d’un petit Cafre, d’un petit Indien?”

27 Roger Marx: “L’artiste est le citoyen du monde, dont le langage se fait comprendre de toute part et auquel il appartient de préparer l’avènement d’une ère de paix, de fraternité et d’amour.” Cited from Camille Morineau, *Roger Marx et art social*, Thèse de doctorat, Université Paris I, 1988, p. 211.

28 Across-the-board enfranchisement did not exist in the colonies, as a result of the French “Indigénat” policy, in which the private person was subject to a hierarchically organized assignment of legal status. <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigénat> (accessed May 3, 2012). People born on La Réunion had the status of “Indigène citoyen français”.

of the European socialist art education concepts. In its colonial form, its slogan might have rung: “French art for all!”²⁹

The 16 plaster casts which arrived in 1913 from the Parisian Musée de Sculpture Comparée – sculptural ornaments from the great French cathedrals – fit perfectly into this line of thinking.³⁰ The Leblonds also initiated a collection among the Creoles of cultural-historical objects, mementos, and personal effects from people of French culture on La Réunion. Military trophies and weapons, photographs and graphics, caricatures, portraits, clothing, grandmothers’ wedding stoles, medallions and furniture of the eighteenth century all together created a French past and present – a “mémoire” that not only supplanted all other cultures on La Réunion but also eclipsed the history of slavery, a history of which the Leblonds were well aware.³¹ On the one hand, this was a colonial gesture, on the other hand, it was modern museology from below, fostering a personal relationship with the museum’s visitors.

The cultures of the Malaysian, Indian, or Chinese immigrants or the descendants of slaves living on La Réunion, however, were shut out; there was also no history of the British on La Réunion or of the Portuguese explorers. Only outside, on the veranda of the museum, there seem to have been a few “Madagascan objects”, but the individual pieces have not as yet been identified.³² In the seventeenth century, the first slaves came from Madagascar, where there was, in contrast to La Réunion, an indigenous population. The Leblonds’ focus on French culture resulted in the exclusion of these objects spatially: they were physically banned to the veranda, safely away from the institution’s inner sanctum. In 1912, the museum moved into the Villa Manès (built 1843–46), the onetime home of an influential citizen and one of the most prestigious buildings in the capital city of Saint-Denis. It was opened to visitors in 1913, welcoming people to the sculpture gallery, where among other items, the works of Bourdelle were displayed. Later, the “section historique” was arranged in the central room, encircling which were galleries for modern painting and photographic reproductions, as well as the gallery for the contributed furniture and clothing (fig. 26).³³

29 Leblond 1912 (as fn. 24): “Qu’ils sentent qu’ils ne doivent pas seulement à la France les élections où le civilisé redevient barbare! – dont nous ne voulons d’ailleurs ici médire car elles sont utiles à l’éducation civique, mais qui sont exécrables si on n’équilibre point celle-ci par une éducation artistique, maitresse d’harmonie.”

30 The Leblonds donated writings by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, whose *Paul et Virginie*, according to them, ideally envisioned the French colonization in the Indian Ocean. See Cheval 1995 (as fn. 17), p. 37.

31 See Leblond 1912 (as fn. 24), p. 374. Here Leblond refers also to Indian woodcarvers, immigrants from the Moluccas, and Arabs. The library of the Musée Léon Dierx has photographs taken by the Leblonds, among these “type photographs” like “Indien assis au pied d’un jaquier”. On the suppression of the history of slavery, see Françoise Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries. Colonial Family Romance and Métissage*, Durham (N.C.): Duke University Press, 1999, here pp. 109–35.

32 Jacquinet 2001 (as fn. 17), p. 30.

33 Ibid., p. 27.



Fig. 26: Exhibition view in the 1930s, Musée Léon-Dierx, La Réunion

Subsequent to another donation by Vollard, the museum continued in its adherence to the European point of view.

The Musée National des Beaux-Arts in Algiers

In many ways, the history of the National Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers complements the above sequence of events and also provides a continuation. When, in 1908, the museum was founded as the Provincial Museum for Fine Arts, there were already quite a few museums (especially for finds from antiquity), in the Algerian colony, where the arts and also tourism were already quite “developed.”³⁴ In this same year, the governor and Léonce Bénédict of the Musée du Luxembourg inaugurated the provincial museum housed in a former military building in Algiers. Since 1897, the plans for the museum had been spurred on by people associated with the French Orientalists and the artist community of Abd-el-Tif (government grants for a residency at

³⁴ Roger Benjamin, Colonial Museology in Algiers, in: id., *Orientalist Aesthetics. Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa 1880–1930*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 249–73 as well as Nabila Oulebsir, *Les usages du patrimoine. Monuments, musées et politique coloniale en Algérie (1830–1930)*, Paris: Ed. de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 2004.

the Villa Abd-el-Tif were awarded at the Paris Academy from 1907 to 1962). As in the case of the *Société Française des Peintres Orientalistes*, Bénédite was a co-founder. In the 1911 catalogue of the Provincial Museum of Algiers, the founders expressed their regret about the conservation conditions and the disadvantages which these entailed: it was not possible to procure artworks from the annual Parisian state art acquisitions, works which were usually distributed among French provincial museums. Nevertheless, they were able to display about 110 works, including older paintings by Paris Bordone and Claude Lorrain, works by the Barbizon painters and academic Orientalists – the contemporary avant-garde was explicitly avoided.

In Algeria, too, museum policies were colonial policies. Up until the end of the 1920s, the focus was still largely on reaching an understanding with the natives. The French painter Etienne Dinot, who had lived in Algeria many years, converted to Islam and became involved, along with the governor, Maurice Violette, in advocating for the rights of the indigenous people. Violette was discharged in 1927. Jean Alazard, the renowned art historian at the Paris Institut français, who had been an instructor at the University of Algiers since 1922, was able, as the new director of the museum, to mobilize the French Orientalists, who maintained an active network in Paris and Algiers. He involved them in the planning of the new museum building for the upcoming 1930 centennial commemorating the founding of the French colony of Algeria.³⁵

The jubilee, celebrated with military parades and much pomp and splendor, raised the provincial museum to its new status as a national museum. The new building, by Regnier and Paul Guion, proudly flaunted its pretentious architecture reminiscent of an Italian art gallery on a hill above the Bay of Algiers (fig. 27). Jean Alazard expanded the collection – with a sizable budget – to include the French *Latinité* and the Roman-antique heritage of the Mediterranean, more than half of the budget being spent on orientalist paintings. The Impressionists, who by this time had been given due recognition, a few Post-Impressionists and some sculptures by Bourdelle were added, but nothing representing the more current art movements such as the Fauves or even the Surrealists. The collection did include miniatures by Mohamed Racim and paintings by Azouaou Mammeri, Orientalists born in Algeria. The National Museum staged the School of Algiers as the art of a special orientalist ‘local style.’³⁶ The character of the collection was patterned after that of the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris, and was meant to symbolize the dominant culture – shaped by the French leading culture expanded into Algeria. Orientalism – successfully institutionalized – was meant to give visual proof of a thriving culture of “La plus Grande France.”

³⁵ See Benjamin 2003 (as fn. 34). Alazard composed a definitive work on Orientalist painting: *L’orient et la peinture française au XIXe siècle. D’Eugène Delacroix à Auguste Renoir*, Paris: Plon, 1930.

³⁶ Also, for example, Albert Marquet, see Benjamin 2003 (as fn. 34), p. 269 and *Ecole d’Alger 1870–1962. Collection du Musée National des Beaux-Arts Alger*, exh. cat., Musée des Beaux-Arts Bordeaux, Bordeaux: Pujol, 2003.

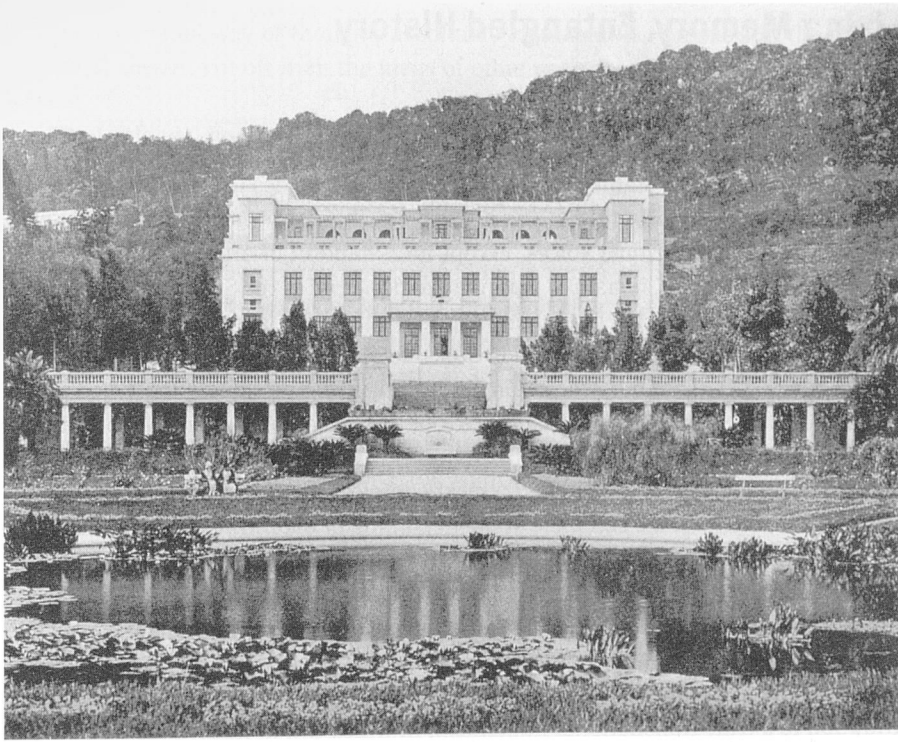


Fig. 27: National Museum of Fine Arts Algiers, c. 1930

Nabila Oulebsir has pointed out that the concept of “patrimoine” already existed before in the Berber and Arabic cultures, but that under French colonization the idea shifted from intangible traditions to ancient monuments.³⁷ From here on, Orientalist painting was propagated as a transnational French art. Though, in considering the musealization of the visual arts in Algeria, it is important to bear in mind that the majority of the population was of Islamic faith, which more or less lacked any rights under colonialism,³⁸ and that Orientalist painting, with its sensuous vision of the East and all its naked odalisks stood in stark contrast to Islamic aniconism and visual traditions.

³⁷ Oulebsir (as fn. 34), pp. 13–17.

³⁸ Weil 2008 (as fn. 2), pp. 207–27.

Living Memory, Entangled History and Transnational Art

That “France brought peace and prosperity to the colonies,” as the title of the gold-plated, larger-than-life statue setup in front of the Palais des Colonies for the World Fair in Paris in 1931 proclaimed,³⁹ was an ideology that few were able to counter with concrete arguments. Critical voices, except for a handful of articles in the Socialist newspaper *L'Humanité*, remained marginal, and the call of the Surrealists “Ne visitez pas l'exposition coloniale” fell largely on deaf ears.⁴⁰ To this day, the myth of the “bringers of civilization” contains an irrevocable gesture of devaluation.

In 1935, Marius Leblond, who could hardly be said to have sought out the company of Socialists anymore, became the director of the *Musée permanent des Colonies*, a museum which above all considered itself to be an active forum for colonization.⁴¹ While French society in general had almost completely stopped questioning colonization, students from the colonies, at the beginning of the thirties in Paris, formed a movement which attempted to counteract racism and the assertion of black inferiority. The concept of *Négritude* emerged along with periodicals like *Légitime Défense*, *La Revue du Monde Noir*, and *Etudiant Noir* that came into being in contact with surrealist poets.⁴² As racism with a positive twist, in which poets from the Antilles, Africa, and the Americas joined forces, the idea developed into a demand for a black contribution to a truly transnational humanism, in which art, in turn, was given central importance.⁴³

Was art, and its presumed universality or internationalism, an attempt to establish transnational or humanistic ideas to counter the forceful power apparatus of imperialism or to escape it? In a first draft for a letter, in 1914, Antoine Bourdelle expressed his criticism of the nationalizing and racist tendencies of the art and artists which formed the basis of the Leblonds' *Peintres de races* in 1909: “I am completely against the idea that each ethnic group has a particular style shaping its idea of art

39 Léon Ernest Drivier, *La France apportant la Paix et la prospérité aux Colonies*, bold-plated bronze, 1931 in front of the Palais des Colonies, whereabouts unknown.

40 Jody Blake, The Truth About the Colonies, 1931. Art Indigène in Service of the Revolution, in: *Oxford Art Journal* 25 (2002), pp. 35–58; Jean-Paul Clébert (ed.), *Dictionnaire du surrealism*, Paris: Editions Seuil, 1996; on critique see also Brigitta Kuster, ‘If the Images of the present don't change, then change the images of the past’. Zur Exposition Coloniale Internationale, Paris 1931, in: Belinda Kazeem, Charlotte Martinz-Turek, Nora Sternfeld (eds.), *Das Unbehagen im Museum. Postkoloniale Museologien*, Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2009, pp. 77–109.

41 See Catherine Fournier, *Marius-Ary Leblond. Ecrivains et critiques d'art*, Paris: Harmattan, 2006, pp. 303–39 and Dominique Jarassé, *Le palais des colonies. Histoire du Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie*, Paris: Germain Viatte, 2002.

42 See Lilyan Kesteloot, *Histoire de la littérature négro-africaine*, Paris: Karthala Editions, 2001.

43 Léopold Sédar Senghor, L'humanisme et nous: Renée Maran, in: *L'Étudiant Noir* 1 (1935).

[...] like a national way of thought, absolutely insulated like an oasis in the middle of endless desert, cut off from the ideas of other nations – that *never, never, never* existed.”⁴⁴

The Leblonds, however, were simultaneously convinced – similar to Bourdelle – of the existence of a universal perception of beauty, and they aimed their colonial undertakings towards this idea. Art could, and still can, be draped with the cloak of humanism in a multitude of ways.

But, paradoxically, colonialism, soaked to its bones with nationalism, also laid the groundwork for the today’s situation, in which sharply drawn national cultural boundaries have become unthinkable. Colonial history resulted in the debunking of the idea of art as a universal or transnational means of communication, and exposed this notion as an ideology. How little such presumably universal art helped in finding a way out of the colonial-political discussion about “assimilation” – the question as to whether it would be better to force the French way of life onto the autochthonous population or to leave it with some of its traditions – has already been shown.⁴⁵

The production of identity within a material or immaterial cultural heritage is one of the most important missions of a museum.⁴⁶ But it does not necessarily have to be a national issue or follow a historic approach. A comprehensive history of the museum from the perspective of African researchers has yet to be written.⁴⁷ The examples of La Réunion and Algiers show that museums as such are no more universal than art itself, and that, in fact, they may not even be transnational. The discussion of colonial perspectives had led to new concepts: the museum as a contact zone, in which the performative aspects of ritual objects are given more space.⁴⁸ In 2006, the project *Maison des civilisations et de l’unité réunionnaise* (MCUR), a space for all cultures, was initiated on La Réunion.⁴⁹ In Mali, the museum as an institution was created

⁴⁴ See Bourdelle, draft of a letter to Marius-Ary Leblond, May 9, 1914, Musée Bourdelle, Documentation, Dossier 103.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. XI. On the assimilation discussion, see Weil 2008 (as fn. 2).

⁴⁶ UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, Paris, October 17, 2003 at <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00006> (accessed May 6, 2012).

⁴⁷ On particular historiographic forms beyond European methodologies, see Steven Feierman, *Afrika in der Geschichte*, in: Sebastian Conrad, Shalini Randeria (eds.), *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Frankfurt, 2002, pp. 50–83.

⁴⁸ James Clifford, *Museums as a Contact Zone*, in: *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, pp. 188–219.

⁴⁹ As in 1912, this initiative of Françoise Vergès and Carpanin Marimoutou was once again patterned after the ‘museology from below,’ but this time including all cultures. See the interview with Vergès: *Postkoloniales Ausstellen. Über das Projekt eines ‘Museums der Gegenwart’ auf der Insel La Réunion*, in: Kazeem 2009 (as fn. 40), pp. 143–65 (online at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0708/martintzurekverges/de> and the website: http://www.mi-aime-a-ou.com/maison_des_civilisations.htm (accessed May 14, 2012). For political reasons, however, the project is now being called into question.

anew – as a “cultural bank” – to accommodate the needs of an agricultural population: in exchange for the contribution of ancestral figures and ritual objects no longer in use, the donors receive microcredits and literacy classes at the museum.⁵⁰ Not only in Africa are museum concepts now oscillating between the entangled history of colonization and independence, between living, transmuted memory forms and traditions.⁵¹ Thus, for European museums, too, colonial history and its aftermath are demanding fresh conceptualizations – new, but genuinely transnational in a more radical way.

Translated by Catherine Framm

50 Aldiouma Baba Mory Yattara, *Les Banques culturelles du Mali. Une expérience porteuse d'espoir*, in: *Africultures* 2007 (as fn. 8), pp. 174–79. The National Museum of Mali in Bamako in addition is celebrated as having one of the most distinguished museum displays in Western Africa. The crisis of the state and terror that migrated from the North of Mali since winter 2012/13 pinpointed once more the value of cultural goods as political symbols.

51 Kenji Yoshida, John Mack (eds.), *Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Africa. Crisis or Renaissance?*, Woodbrige, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2008. On entangled history, see Sebastian Conrad, Shalini Randeria, *Einleitung. Geteilte Geschichten – Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt*, in: Conrad, Randeria 2002 (as fn. 47), pp. 9–49.

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- Fig. 4: Otto F. Lindheimer, *Venus de Milo* in a niche of the Apollo Hall, watercolor, 1863, Stiftung Stadtmuseum Berlin, from: Gertrud Platz-Horster, '... der eigentliche Mittelpunkt aller Sammlungen...'. Die Gipsammlung im Neuen Museum, 1855–1916, in: Ellinoor Bergvelt, Debora J. Meijers, Lieske Tibbe and Elsa van Wezel, *Museale Spezialisierung und Nationalisierung ab 1830. Das Neue Museum in Berlin im internationalen Kontext* (Berliner Schriftenreihe zur Museumsforschung, vol. 29), Berlin: G+H Verlag, 2011, p. 195.
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- Fig. 10: Ground-plan of the top floor with inscriptions by Ivan Tsvetaev and Georg Treu (pencil). From Erhard Hexelschneider, Alexander Baranov, Tobias Burg (eds.), *In Moskau ein kleines Albertinum bauen. Iwan Zwetajew und Georg Treu im Briefwechsel (1881–1913)*, Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2006, p. 391.
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