

The Oceanic collections in the French public collections: An inventory

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After the heyday of the creation of the natural history museums in the second half of the 19th century, interest in the freshly assembled Oceanic collections declined until they were all but forgotten towards the 1930s. The colonial exhibitions together with those organized by the religious congregations would periodically revive this interest more or less anecdotally with, for example, exhibitions of “savages”, often accompanied by displays of objects, all of which spawned something of a popular craze.

But none of the collections actually benefited from a large-scale update of the presentations, with the exception of that mounted by Georges-Henri Rivière for the Musée de l’Homme. For the most part, the museography remained what it had been in the 19th century, despite the progressive abandonment of the theories of evolution that influenced all museum displays of the period.

The final throes of colonialism and the guilty conscience that pricked post-war intellectual circles promptly did the rest. Those of our collections that were not already derelict or in the process of falling to dust from neglect were left as they stood in museums with diminishing,

or in some cases non-existent, means. From time to time an unexpected donation would enrich one of the older collections, as was the case with the collection of Dr. Lhomme, given to Angoulême in 1934, or that of M. Bouge, given to Chartres in 1970, entirely by chance, as Louis-Joseph Bouge had no connection with the town. In other cases, it was the activity of an enthusiastic and dedicated curator that enabled the museum to add to its Oceanic collection: for instance, M. Loppé in La Rochelle¹, who inaugurated 14 new rooms in 1926 and acquired 2,000, primarily Oceanic, objects, from the Blin collection.

Only a few specialized anthropologists showed any interest in these collections, but these instances were entirely marginal. For example, Fritz Sarasin from the Basel museum visited the French collections outside Paris (La Rochelle, Le Havre, Toulouse, Bordeaux...) when editing his reference book (1929) on Kanak material culture, thus making it possible to publish major items of the Kanak cultural heritage. Speiser, his colleague, did likewise for the French collections concerning Vanuatu, which he published in the same year. In 1928 another anthropologist, Karl von den Steiner, published a book on the Marquesa Islands collections, based on collections in France (Caen, Douai, Boulogne-sur-Mer...).

But it was above all art lovers and collectors like Dr. Stephen Chauvet (1885–1950) who entertained the most active relations with the museums. Chauvet carried on his exchanges for the most part with the Museum d’Histoire Natuelle in La Rochelle. In his correspondence (1935) with Etienne Loppé, the museum’s curator, he stresses his interest in the collections of Douai, Rennes, Brest, Toulouse, Libourne.... In 1930, he even organized one of the first exhibitions of Oceanic art, in

collaboration with two other art lovers, F. Poncetton and A. Portier,² for which he brought to Paris treasures from the provincial towns.

La Rochelle, together with a few other rare examples, contrasts sharply with the rest of the museums holding works from the South Pacific, which were often satisfied, even in the prewar period, with recording the gifts (which flowed in continuously) and managing these collections as best they could. A few of these, among some of the most prestigious, would at this time be stored away and forgotten in some attic (University of Montpellier). The war, with its crating-up of artworks (Le Havre, Boulogne-sur-Mer) and its bombardments (Douai, Caen), did the rest to guarantee that these objects enjoyed a long sleep.

The public Oceanic collections in France (including Paris, which has five museums) are divided between over 78 establishments.³ A recent count⁴ gives 16 museums outside Paris holding a total of 7,261 objects (over 5,000 for the towns of Toulouse, La Rochelle and Lille alone); an estimate suggests that the other museums are in possession of a total of some 5,000 objects as well, but these figures remain to be checked and refined. A group of us is working on this at the moment.

The initial inventories and verifications were resumed immediately after the war at the initiative of Marie-Charlotte Laroche of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. She was a pioneer in this area, and in 1945 published an article in the *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, calling for a general inventory of all the Oceanic collections. In 1953, she published partial inventories of the Toulouse and Rouen collections and, in 1966, a list of the objects held in the Le Havre Museum d'Histoire Naturelle.

A few years later, Anne Lavondès, a well-known specialist on Polynesian cultures (anthropologist with the Office de Recherche

Scientifique pour les Territoires d’Outre-Mer, now entitled the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement) and former curator of the Musée de Tahiti et des Iles, inventoried the collections of Cherbourg (1976), those of the military hospital in Brest (1978) and those of the Société Polymathique du Morbihan in Vannes (1988). Next she published the inventories of other museums, and in particular of Lille’s Polynesian collections, as well as all of the collection of the museums of Grenoble (1990) and Perpignan (1993). In 1986, she strongly advised the Inspection des Musées de France of the need to set up a systematic program of inventories. Today she continues to act as an expert and advisor to several institutions.

During the same period, at the behest of Jean-Michel Tjibaou and the Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanake (Noumea), I undertook (in 1980) to locate the Kanak collections in Europe and metropolitan France. The aim was not to carry out exhaustive inventories, but to build a database of the principal museums holding this patrimony. Some 60 museums were visited. These on-site studies, conducted between 1980 and 1990, enabled many museums to draw attention to their collections, insofar as this was the first time that the initiative came from the people most concerned by this heritage.

This effort resulted in two publications by the Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanake: an illustrated album, *Objets Kanaks*, and a portfolio, *Sculpture Kanake*, in 1984. The purpose of these documents was to inform the public of artists, craftsmen and students in New Caledonia about their heritage. But above all, they paved the way for the exhibition *De Jade et de Nacre, Patrimoine Kanak*, presented in Noumea in 1990 and in Paris in 1991. The exhibition was

accompanied by a catalogue published by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux (unfortunately now out of print), featuring principally Kanak objects held in the regional museums of France. The exhibition of the Kanak objects loaned by 26 French and foreign establishments, among which 17 regional museums, was made possible by a collaboration based on these inventories and the database. This first-time temporary restitution of this heritage was exemplary for at least two reasons:

The exhibition was held first of all in New Caledonia and then in Paris, reversing the traditional well-established priorities. But above all it was realized in collaboration with the Musée Territorial de Nouvelle Calédonie and its curator, Emmanuel Kasarhérou. He and his team made the rounds of the Kanak territory to prepare and present the aims of the exhibition: the tour lasted two months and was constantly the site of a productive debate on the very notion of patrimony and heritage. And secondly it resulted in the loan of a dozen works to fill out the collections of the Noumea museum. This type of temporary deposit of works found in western collections has since inspired emulation, since the Centre Culturel Tijbaou now devotes one of its museographic spaces to such objects: some twenty (from Australia, Switzerland, France, Germany) have already been displayed for three years, followed by a similar loan of an equal number of works by the Musée de l'Homme.

In the same line, the Inspection des Musées de France helped (with Victor Beyer and Germain Viatte) by making it possible to carry out a more precise inventory and verification of all the Oceanic holdings, such as that undertaken for the whole region of Nord-Pas-de-Calais, with the support of the Association des Conservateurs, whose president Annik Davy mounted a traveling exhibition of these rich holdings, entitled:

*Océanie, curieux, navigateurs et savants.*⁵ This project took shape after my inventory of the Oceanic collections in Boulogne-sur-Mer. At the time, the collections were in such a state of neglect that the little information I had managed to collect, perhaps clumsily to be sure, suggested that Boulogne had no more than twenty or so pieces ... in the event the inventory revealed the number to be 370!

The research on the collection's history also yielded a wealth of findings. The collections of the Boulogne-sur-Mer museum are a digest of all of the types of Oceanic collections found in the provincial museums. Indeed these collections stem from a prestigious *cabinet de curiosity*, that of Isidore Leroy Debard, who was painter to the king, as well as from the collections of navigators (notably Dumont d'Urville), but also of mariners (like Dupetit-Thouars) and of course objects brought back by the missionaries of the public instruction service (like Maindron and Pinart) and finally the collection of a curator, Ernest-Théodore Hamy, who created the Trocadéro museum.

The contribution to this operation of Sylviane Jacquemin, from the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (MNAAO) was decisive. She undertook the onerous task of a total of eight exhaustive inventories, completing them with the indispensable historical research that testifies to the value of these collections. Among other things, she helped re-attribute several objects to the D'Entrecasteaux Expedition, most of the items from which had disappeared after falling into the hands of the British. ⁶ Her 1991 memoir for the École du Louvre, remarkable in its detail but still not published, entitled “Histoire des Collections Océaniques dans les musées et établissements parisiens, XVIIIe-XXe siècles”, enables us to reconstruct the turbulent history of

the Paris collections, from the Musées de la Marine at the Louvre, at Trocadéro, and in the Musée des Antiquités Nationales, at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, until the latter was merged with the MNAAO collection in 1991, and which she personally verified. This work paved the way for the exhibition she prepared for the MNAAO in 1992: *Rao-Polynesies*, which displayed the most important pieces of this prestigious series when it arrived at the museum.

To these different inventories must be added the contribution made by the curators of the museums concerned by the Oceanic collections who, motivated by plans for the renovation of their establishments, initiated inventories under the supervision of qualified specialists. At the end of their labors, in 1998, Paul Matharau, from the Musée d'Aquitaine in Bordeaux⁷, and Véronique Merlin- Anglade, from the Périgueux museum, organized the exhibition *Terres d'échange, les collections publiques océaniques en Aquitaine*.

The renovation projects of the last ten years were the best motivation for carrying out this kind of research, and the inventories have shown renewed interest in these collections, predating by a few years the new dynamism sparked by the Musée du Quai Branly project.

Among such renovation projects we can mention the museums of Alençon, Avignon, Bordeaux, Boulogne-sur-Mer, Grenoble, Issoudun, Marseilles; other projects are still in progress and are making it possible to carry out the much-needed tasks of inventory and documentation, for example at Pithiviers, La Rochelle, Rochefort, Angoulême, Langres, Lyon or Nîmes.

In addition to the simple inventories and verifications that are normally the basic work of the public institutions, this research on the

regional Oceanic collections should attempt in most cases to clarify two essential areas: that of the ethnographic and material documentation of the objects themselves, and that of the historical documentation of the collections.

First of all an inventory supposes accurate identification of the object. Many Amerindian, African and East-Indian interlopers figure in the Oceanic collections, often attributed in good faith on the basis of old inscriptions in the inventory lists. The source of these errors very often lies in the designation of the objects as “from the Indians”; these should remain “Oceanic”, as this is how Oceanic objects were designated in the early collections. Some types of objects demand a particularly fine-grained identification, which is made difficult by the absence of reference works and by the uniformity of the specimens throughout the South Pacific (this is the case of the arrows, spears and assagaies, basketry and fish hooks, for example).

We also need to refine the way objects are identified and attributed if possible so as to mention the island of origin (e.g. Malékula is preferable to simply New Hebrides, as is often found).

Of course it is indispensable to use the present-day toponyms; this is often the best way simply to acknowledge the new status of sovereign states or the reclaimed identity of a whole people: Kanak instead of the French *canaque*, Kiribati, instead of Gilbert Islands, Vanuatu instead of New Hebrides, etc.

As for identifying the materials the object is made from, French anthropology has admittedly suffered from a traditional deficit in work on materials and their use as well as on techniques of manufacture. There are therefore few sources, all too often scattered throughout the

more general discourse on the society. This information is very rarely noted in the field except for what can be found in the descriptions made by linguists.

As the identification of the woods used is scarce and expensive, few objects have benefited,⁸ but the few that have been published⁹ have proven most useful not only for the simple authentication of the object, but also for furthering our knowledge of the varieties used in the social and symbolic tradition that dictate their choice (for instance the work of P. Lemonnir, Marie-Claire Bataille, C. Orliac¹⁰, on rituals and various aspects of everyday life; or C. Coiffier, R. Boulay and C. Orliac, for architecture and sculpture). The same can be stressed for the shells, seeds and fibers used in the composition of many objects.

This scarcity of information explains the relative poverty of the descriptive notes, which are often limited to elementary observations: hardwood, shell, vegetable fibers, etc. A huge task lies before us, begun long ago by German researchers and continued by their Swiss colleagues (work in the context of Basel's Museum der Kulturen). It is interesting to note that the considerable if recent efforts at the preventive conservation of this type of objects has sparked a strong demand: what juices, what colors, what binders are used? The answers to these questions will lead to improved conservation and restoration of this type of object. Here we must salute the considerable work undertaken in this area by Denis Ruillemand,¹¹ first in the MNAAO restoration laboratory and then in his courses at the Centre Universitaire de Tolbiac.

The questions that have been raised here could be addressed in a complete program on the identification of woods, for example, which could be completed by studies on the states of surfaces and on micro-

traces, by analyses of the deposits and coatings present on the objects. Dating of such objects could be done under the supervision of specialists, taking samples in what are known to be reliable zones and on woods for which we actually have samples for comparison; above all, these datings should be performed on a sufficient number of objects to make comparison truly possible. This kind of program should be preferred to the occasional “expertises” that are practiced in some places. Expert reports do not produce completely reliable chronological references for several reasons: first of all they are often done for commercial reasons, which is prejudicial to their impartiality, secondly, they yield unreliable results insofar as they bear on isolated objects and, thirdly, they often advance dates prior to 1650 EC, which makes their dating highly approximate.¹²

It is clear today that the creation of coherent programs of identification of woods and materials would be thoroughly justified and of great use.

The most difficult task, though, is the historical documentation of the collection. We usually have only a very few sources, but some recent studies show that ,with a bit of tenacity, we can successfully trace some “genealogies”. In particular the Navy’s sources have barely been put to use, even though Anne Lafondès’ and Sylviane Jacquemin’s work has shown how rich they are. Homely objects like everyday clubs, when illuminated by certain documents, can take on a whole new dimension: for instance, Martine Lainé, working on the Varzy collection, was able to connect the museum’s objects with the Dumont d’Urville expedition; or Bertrand Guillet, in Nantes, who reconstructed the Gustave Glaumont

collection, whose pieces, modest in themselves, illustrate a page of Caledonian history and the history of museums.

A few revelations for the history of Oceanic art and its collections have marked the last few years. The objects of D'Entrecasteaux and Vivant Denon were re-attributed by Sylviane Jacquemin, Anne Lavondès' work on the *Rhin* trip and Bérard made it possible to reconstitute a collection that had until then been dispersed, and the pieces of the Tarragon collection in Châteaudun documented by Claude Stéfani were restored to the public, while Sylbiane Jacquemin's work at the Boucher de Perthes museum in Abbeville on the Lefebure de Cerizy panoply was brought to public awareness. Finally, very recently two important pieces were located in the course of this type of inventory that has called on Oceanic art specialists: the discovery of a statue from the Gambier Islands by the curator Laurent Guillaut in collaboration with Claude Stéfani (this is the seventh known object of this type in the world) and a carved pole from the Cook islands discovered in Angoûleme in the course of a museum renovation project in which I took part (this object is the only one to date in a western public collection).

Each of these discoveries or re-discoveries was possible only through a painstaking search for documentary sources like that carried out by Claude Stéfani and Hélène Guiot (2003) for their latest catalogue of the Polynesian collections of the Musée des Beaux-Arts at Chartres.

All of this material and historical research that governs the realization of inventories must also be looked at in relation to its final goal: who are these inventories for? The question prompts us to see our action as less ordinary than it might seem. Beyond the simple jobs of conservation and recording which are indispensable to the task of

preserving heritage that is incumbent on all museums, and which must be continued and extended, since we see daily proof that the job is far from finished, another objective has gradually taken shape over the last few years.

The work I have been able to do with the representatives of Kanak cultural life since 1979 marked the beginnings. Indigenous (or native, according to the terminology adopted by the international agencies) peoples are taking a growing interest in their heritage. Their first concern is with how this heritage can be preserved. In many cases, as far as Oceanic cultures are concerned, certain objects are unique, and one of the few material traces of the life of the earlier generations and the irreplaceable evidence of their artistic and intellectual genius. History has led our museums to come into possession of them. We are therefore the depositories of these objects and consequently must be able to provide reliable documentation and make it available to the peoples concerned. Today most peoples also want to review with us the way we “talk” about them in our museography, and what image we give of them, what discourse we hold on the objects that concern them first of all.

Once again, the simple production of a more complete descriptive note will lead to a more thorough reflection on the object. Experience has shown that native peoples could themselves be involved in the study of these pieces: collaboration with local researchers and with informants designated by the representative institutions yields concrete results in the identification of plant and animal species, and in their designation and transcription into the vernacular. Exchange can be extremely fruitful in this area.

This exchange, this dialogue around the collections of our museums will also help us change the way we see these peoples and their cultures.

¹ Elisé Patale-Edoumba and E. Desramant

² F. Poncetton and A. Portier, *Les Arts sauvages. Océanie*, Paris, 1930.

³ Inventory by Boulay, 2003, in progress.

⁴ Roland Bertrant, 2000.

⁵ Paris, Editions Somogy, 1997.

⁶ See *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 1995.

⁷ *Terres lointaines*, Bordeaux, Musée d'Aquitaine, 1991.

⁸ The only scientific identifications carried out to date were done by Catherine Orliac between 2000 and 2002 on objects belonging to the Musée de l'Homme, the MNAAO, the Hôpital Maritime in Rochefort, the Musée Calvet in Avignon, the Musée Vivenel in Compiègne and the Museum d'Histoire Naturelle in La Rochelle.

⁹ Catherine Orliac, Hélène Guiot.

¹⁰ In *Technè*, CNRS, 2000.

¹¹ *La Conservation préventive, une alternative à la restauration des objets ethnographiques*, **VILLE**, Editions du Septentrion, Presses Universitaires **DE ?**, 1995.

¹² Cf. studies by Michel Orliac.