

Zeitschrift: Itinera : Beiheft zur Schweizerischen Zeitschrift für Geschichte = supplément de la Revue suisse d'histoire = supplemento della Rivista storica svizzera

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Geschichte

Band: 43 (2017)

Artikel: Between politics of memory and politics of art : the making of a New National Museum in France

Autor: Rogan, Bjarne

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1077817>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 26.03.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Between Politics of Memory and Politics of Art. The Making of a New National Museum in France

Bjarne Rogan

French museum policy has certain features that strike an observer from the high North. A prominent trait is the political will to establish impressive museums, even in times when recession is knocking on the door. A second trait is the centralized governance of museums, and a third is the priority given to fine arts – *les beaux-arts*, to the detriment of popular culture. A fourth is the conspicuous use of museums as tools for political goals.

The latter feature is of course not specific for France, but to a foreign observer it is easy to discern. Museums may be understood as power language; they are – among other things – ideological constructs that may support local or national identity building by emphasizing attractive aspects of one's own culture, just as they may create distance by presenting other cultures as strange or primitive.¹ The distance may be crudely stressed – as in some elderly anthropological exhibitions of exotic cultures. It may be transformed into neo-colonial ways of representation – as in the present permanent exhibition of le *Musée du quai Branly* (by some Anglophone critics called an «African Disneyland»), or it may be exerted in the name of French *laïcité* and Republican universalism – as in the *Louvre's* new museum of Islamic art.² The latter museum also offers a striking illustration of the authorities' use of museums as tools for foreign politics and international relations. Or the exertion of power may be present in more subtle forms under the cover of aesthetics – as in the *Louvre's* recent exhibition on German art.³ Power lurks everywhere in the museum and may take on different forms.

The somewhat personal character of this text is due to the fact that I have been a close observer and participant in the transition process from the *MNATP* to the *MuCEM*.⁴ For 12 years I was a member of the *MuCEM's* *Conseil scientifique*, of

1 See Bjarne Rogan, Towards a Post-colonial and a Post-national Museum. The Transformation of a French Cultural Landscape, in: *Ethnologia Europaea* 1/33 (2003), p. 37–50.

2 Cf. Bjarne Rogan, Louvre, Islam og det trehodete trollet. Om makt og politikk, sekularisme og annet i franske museer, in: *Tidsskrift for kulturforskning* 1/2013 (2013), p. 23–40.

3 The exhibition *De l'Allemagne 1800–1939, de Friedrich à Beckmann* in the Louvre (spring 2013) created a very harsh debate in Germany, especially in *Die Zeit* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, but also in French media, because of the way the curators used a French conception of aesthetics as a political weapon against Germany. Cf. Rogan, Louvre, Islam og det trehodete trollet.

4 The following discussion is informed by participant observation (meetings, seminars, etcetera) at the *Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires (MNATP)* / *Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MuCEM)* from 2001 to 2013, and by conversations with the staff of *MNATP* since

its steering group – *le Bureau du Conseil*, and of the acquisition committee, and I have assisted at most of their meetings.⁵ Furthermore, I have known the staff since the 1980s. This situation has advantages and disadvantages. I have had a privileged position as an observer to the process. At the same time, the closeness may imply biased interpretations and aberration of memory.

A comparative perspective

Museums may function as mirrors for national pride. The Scandinavian tradition offers a conspicuous contrast to the French case, and the present text is certainly colored by a Nordic bias. From the beginning of the 20th century, the ubiquitous type of museum in Norway has been the *folkemuseum*, literally the «museum of the people» or the «popular museum» – whether on the local, regional or national level. By the end of the 20th century, almost 80% of Norway's museums were classified as *folkemuseer*, that is museums of rural culture and normally with an open-air section. An important explanatory factor is Norway's colonial status under Denmark until 1814 and its subordinate status under Sweden until 1905. For the young, free country, these museums became the most important cultural tool in the nation building process, to the extent that the first half of the 20th century is commonly called the period of «the folk museum paradigm» in Norway.⁶ The national museum for French popular culture, however, has long since ceased to function as a mirror for national pride – that is, if it ever played that role. The museums that have filled this function in France are mainly museums of fine art, with the *Louvre* as the vanguard.

The French and the Nordic tradition have never been more explicitly contrasted than when the French *Annales* historian Marc Bloch paid a visit to Norway in 1929.

the 1980s and of *MuCEM* until 2015. A special thanks to Jean Guibal, Grenoble, for use of his press and newspaper archive.

- 5 Relevant works on the conception and reorganization of the museum are Denis Chevallier, Aude Fanlo (eds.), *Métamorphoses des musées de société*. La documentation française, Paris 2013.; Michel Colardelle (ed.), *Réinventer un musée: le musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée à Marseille*, Project scientifique et culturel, Paris 2002.; Camille Mazé, *Mettre l'Europe au musée: Une affaire de l'État? Ethnographie et sociohistoire du chantier 'des musées de l'Europe' (1980–2010)*. 2010 (Thèse de science sociale, EHESS-ENS.); Ibid., *Du MNATP au(x) MuCEM. Les vicissitudes du musée national français d'ethnologie*, in: *ibid.*, Frédéric Poulard, Christelle Ventura (ed.), *Les Musées d'ethnologie. Culture, politique et changement institutionnel*, Paris 2013, p. 177–203.; Ibid., *La fabrication de l'identité européenne: Dans les coulisses des musées de l'Europe*, Paris 2014.; Bjarne Rogan, *The Emerging Museums of Europe*, in: *Ethnologia Europaea* 1/33 (2003), p. 51–60.; Ibid., *Towards a Post-colonial and a Post-national Museum. The Transformation of a French Cultural Landscape*, in: *Ethnologia Europaea* 1/33 (2003), p. 37–50.; Martine Segalen, *Vie d'un musée 1937–2005*, Paris 2005; Ibid., *L'impossible musée des cultures de la France. Le cas du musée national des Arts et Traditions populaires*, in: Camille Mazé, Frédéric Poulard, Christelle Ventura (ed.), *Les Musées d'ethnologie. Culture, politique et changement institutionnel*, Paris 2013, p. 155–175.
- 6 Cf. Bjarne Rogan, *Norsk kulturhistorie i kontekst – et bidrag til genealogien*. Tidsskrift for kulturforskning 1/2015 (2015), p. 56–98, here p. 74–78.

He gave an enthusiastic account of the Norwegian *folkemuseer* and their exhibitions of material culture in context – presenting living and working conditions, the vernacular architecture of the farms, their buildings and rooms, dimensions and location in the terrain, the fireplaces, the furniture and the utensils of peasant farmers, their tillage tools, etc.⁷ Here we can read the social history, he proclaimed: «Correctly interpreted, and illuminated by other sources, they provide extensive knowledge about the family, about classes, feasting, the rhythm and structure of collective life»⁸. He regretted that even regional museums in France were preoccupied mainly with urban culture, that those covering rural culture were more interested in aesthetics and in using the peasants' objects as coulisses for creating ambiance, and that the staff in general lacked knowledge of the peasant culture. The Norwegian tie to the soil and to nature, Bloch writes, «was not an empty echo of Romanticism [...] but clearly [...] an expression of a deeply felt patriotism, sometimes also of a democratic disposition»⁹. Bloch deplored that this type of museums could not be transferred to France; partly for technical reasons (stone architecture), partly because of attitudes (the primacy of aesthetics), and partly for a lack of knowledge – in France unlike in Norway, he maintained, the traditional culture had already vanished.

Seven years later, in 1937, France actually got its national museum of popular culture, the *MNATP* or *le Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires* in Paris.¹⁰ Its profile, however, was not similar to that of its Nordic counterparts, and its trajectory would become very different. It came to a stop in June 2013, when a new national museum – the *MuCEM* or *le Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée* – was inaugurated in Marseille. But was it really a new museum? Yes and no. As for the collections and infrastructure, it was a continuation of the *MNATP* in Paris. However, its disciplinary profile and policy changed radically during the transition process.

The reorganization includes a physical displacement – from the center to the periphery, a change of geographical focus – from France to the Mediterranean zone, and a thematic turnaround – from yesterday's national popular culture to a blend of art and cultural history. Furthermore, there has been a transition from ethnology to a much more multidisciplinary approach. Finally, it means that France no longer has a *national* museum for popular culture – that is a *Volksmuseum* or *folkemuseum*, in the Germanic-Scandinavian tradition.

7 Cf. Marc Bloch, *Musées ruraux, musées techniques*. *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* 2/6 (1930), p. 248–251.

8 *Ibid.* p. 249.

9 *Ibid.* p. 249.

10 Sweden got its national museum of popular culture in 1873 (and its open-air museum in 1891), Norway in 1894 and Denmark in 1901.

What is the *MuCEM* then, as a cultural and political project? To what extent is it a result of internal, scholarly deliberations? Or is it rather a consequence of external, political governance – and of accidental events? My assertion is that the reorganization process during the last ten to 15 years was a combination of predictable and unpredictable events. As for the scholarly aspect, the present *MuCEM* is profoundly marked by the tug-of-war between high and low culture, but it is not less a result of France's positioning within the *European Union*.¹¹

Marseille 2013 – A starting point for a new life

On January 13th 2013 politicians and cultural celebrities, from France and from other European countries, swarmed in the streets of Marseille, France's largest city on the Mediterranean coast. The *EU* leaders were present, headed by the President of the *European Commission*. The occasion was the inauguration of Marseille as the European capital of culture for the year 2013. The main attraction was a new, impressive, but still empty building – the *MuCEM*. Marseille has never been known as a city of culture, and the *MuCEM* was meant to give Marseille its foremost cultural-political alibi.

The museum is situated on a spectacular site overlooking the inlet to the city's ancient harbor. A modernist building in glass and concrete is linked to the medieval coastal fortress *le Fort St. Jean*, which has been successfully integrated into the museum. In short, another new, expensive museum project in France. Even in periods of economic crisis, culture and museums are given high priority.

On June 4th the same year, the *MuCEM* was formally inaugurated. President François Hollande conducted the formal although a bit pompous ceremony. His speech, which lasted for nearly one hour, was almost without references to culture and museums. It dealt mostly with unemployment and other political challenges, and with political invites to Jean-Claude Gaudin, Marseille's conservative mayor of long standing. On this point Hollande differs from most of his predecessors. French presidents of the Vth Republic have been personally interested and involved in cultural issues. But the *MuCEM* was not Hollande's project, nor did it represent his ambitions in cultural politics.

¹¹ See the contribution of Anja Früh in this volume.

The ministerial and presidential context – and high and low culture

Culture has always been an important asset of French politics and foreign policy. The *Louvre* museum is a case in point. Since its foundation three centuries ago, the museum has served as a showcase for the advanced position of France in matters of art, and indirectly for French supremacy and its international position.¹²

Globalization, changes in the geopolitical situation and a need to ameliorate relations to former colonies have had a strong impact on the policies of the *Louvre* and other museums up to the present. Almost all the Presidents of the Vth Republic have engaged in some museum project or other.¹³ The latest case of a conspicuously political use of museums is the recently established *Museum of Islamic Art* in the *Grand Louvre*.¹⁴ And the *MuCEM* is no exception from the rule.

It should also be noted that the French *Ministry of foreign affairs* has a section for *Affaires culturelles* that in size and budget far exceeds corresponding sections in other European ministries of foreign affairs. The section also includes a network of cultural institutions with functions that other countries have transferred to NGOs – another token of the political importance France attributes to culture.¹⁵

In 1959 André Malraux was appointed Minister of Culture. This was the first ministry of culture in post-war Europe. Most of his portfolio, including the museums, was inherited from the section of «les Beaux-Arts» of the *Ministry of education*. It is worth noting the designation of the section – *les beaux-arts* or the fine arts. Already in his inaugural speech Malraux announced a «democratisation of culture»; culture should no longer be the prerogative of the elites but be available to the French society at large. But «democratisation of culture» did not mean taking the people's own (popular) culture seriously. It meant culture *to (pour)* the people, not *by (par)* the people – a recurrent opposition in French culture politics up to the present. Malraux' philosophy, implying that people should meet and experience directly the great works of art, has been termed *l'Etat esthétique*, «the aesthetic State».¹⁶ There exists everywhere – probably – a fairly clear-cut distinction between high and low (or popular) culture. In the eyes of a Nordic observer, however, the strong priority given to art, whether *les beaux-arts* or so-called primitive art, is remarkable.

Actually, *popular culture* has experienced a varying status in the French cultural value hierarchy. During the 20th century there have been two or three short periods

12 Cf. Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origin of the Modern Museum*, Berkely 1999 (1994).

13 Cf. Georges Poisson, *La grande histoire du Louvre*, Paris 2013.

14 Cf. Rogan, *Louvre, Islam og det trehodete trollet*.

15 Cf. Philippe Poirrier, *L'État et la culture en France au XX^e siècle*, 3^e édition augmentée, Paris 2009.

16 Cf. *Ibid.*

when the common man's culture has been politically acceptable. The first was during the years 1936 to 1938, when a coalition of leftist parties – *le Front Populaire* – governed. And it was precisely in 1937 that Georges Henri Rivière (see below) grasped the chance to establish *MNATP* – «a Louvre for the people» in the eyes of the radical authorities. The succeeding French collaborationist government (Vichy 1939–44) also embraced popular culture and the museum. The next period of ascendancy for popular culture was from the late 1970s, and especially under the socialist governments of the Mitterrand epoch (1981–1995), when *le Patrimoine ethnologique* was institutionalized and the decentralized eco-museum movement had its heyday. Paradoxically, these events were not propitious to the *MNATP*.

The other conspicuous French trait during the Vth Republic is the active role of the presidents in the politics of culture. If de Gaulle left the initiatives to Malraux, his successors – Pompidou, Giscard d'Estaing, Mitterrand and Chirac – all had their great projects, museums included, which they supervised personally. In many cases the contacts went directly between the President and the *Ministry of Culture*, instead of passing through Matignon and the Prime Minister.¹⁷ A major problem for the *MNATP/MuCEM*, as we shall see, was that no president took any special interest in a museum of popular culture.

The MNATP – the brief version of a downward trajectory

The point of departure is 1937, when the collections of popular culture were split from the anthropological *Musée de l'Homme* (*MdH*) to found the new museum – *Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires*. The disciplinary field covered was *folklore*, corresponding to German *Volkskunde*. Due to the discipline's bad reputation after the war, the name of the discipline was changed to *ethnologie*.¹⁸ For 35 years the two museums shared house on the Trocadéro hill in Paris, but in 1972 the *MNATP* moved to a new modernist building in the Bois de Boulogne. Unlike its Nordic, Germanic and Slavonic counterparts it had no open-air collections. Another notable difference was the more aesthetic approach to popular culture.

From the 1950s through the 1970s things went fairly well for the *MNATP*, under the leadership of Georges Henri Rivière (1897–1985), who has been seen as an innovator of museography in France.¹⁹ During these decades the *MNATP* played a decisive role for the development of ethnology as a scholarly discipline in France.

17 Cf. *Ibid.*

18 Cf. Denis-Michel Boël, Jacqueline Christophe, Régis Meyran (red.), *Du folklore à l'ethnologie*. Paris 2009.

19 Cf. Nina Gorgus, *Der Zauberer der Vitrinen: zur Museologie Georges Henri Rivières*. Münster 1999 (French ed. 2003).

Ethnology did not find an anchorage in the universities before the 1980s, and the museum and the discipline were for a long period an inseparable unity.²⁰ After the war the *MNATP* and the national research council (*CNRS*) instituted a close cooperation, and in the 1950s–60s the discipline was developed mainly through large-scale fieldwork and collection projects, where documentation, research, museum displays and publishing went hand in hand in relative harmony.²¹ In 1965 the *CNRS* established a research center at the museum – *le Centre d’Ethnologie Française* (*CEF*). The *CEF* was the largest and most prestigious ethnological research center in France until the end of the 1970s.²²

However, from the 1980s «*les trente glorieuses du musée*» – the 30 happy years – were over. The public failed to come and the researchers fled. The public’s abandonment of the *MNATP* was conspicuous, from about 160.000 visitors annually in the late 1970s to less than 50.000 in the 1990s.²³ This was reflected in the attitude of the authorities. The mighty *Direction des Musées de France* (*DMF*), which ruled the national museums with an iron hand, took little interest in the fate of a museum of popular culture.

Even the research center *CEF*, administratively independent and financed by *CNRS*, ran into problems. While the museum stuck to an ethnology where material culture, technology and preindustrial society were in focus, the *CEF* moved towards contemporary issues, the study of social relations and immaterial topics – like religion, kinship, urbanism, identity, etcetera. Around 1980 the *CEF* had a staff of around 60 researchers and technicians; it had grown bigger than the museum but had no formal responsibility for the museum’s activities.²⁴ Frictions arose between the few curators of the museum and the many free researchers of the *CEF*. The climate deteriorated, and one by one the researchers left the *CEF*, which was finally closed in 2005, the same year as *MNATP* closed its doors.

An inconsistency? The eco-museums and le Patrimoine

The 1980s – the era of the socialist Minister of Culture Jack Lang – was marked by a change in the French politics of memory, in the form of a new sensibility to popular culture. One was the eco-museum movement, the other the establishment of *le Patrimoine ethnologique*. Both would offer competition to the *MNATP*.

20 Cf. Segalen, *Vie d’un musée 1937–2005*.

21 Cf. Martine Segalen, *Un regard sur le Centre d’ethnologie française. La revue pour l’histoire du CNRS*, 2005b, <http://histoire-cnrs.revues.org/1683> (online 14.12.2015).

22 Ibid.

23 Rogan, *Towards a Post-colonial and a Post-national Museum.*; Segalen, *Vie d’un musée 1937–2005*.

24 Segalen, *Vie d’un musée 1937–2005.*; Ibid., *Un regard sur le Centre d’ethnologie française*.

While the Paris-based national museum strived hard, the 1980s represented a period of remarkable growth for *local* museums of popular culture, and especially the new eco-museums. France was the homeland of the so-called eco-museums, although the philosophy of these local institutions was largely based on the Scandinavian rural museum model. Between 1980 and 1986 the number of eco-museums in France rose from a handful to over 60.²⁵ This movement may be seen as a defence of local communities and their culture, especially in regions marked by depopulation and low employment. When the Parisian public turned their back to the past splendors of the peasant society, the eco-museums focused on the living culture in combination with local trade and tourism.

1980 – the official year of cultural heritage in France – was a turning point for both *MNATP* and the discipline. Until the late 1970s, the French word for «cultural heritage» – *le patrimoine* – had been used only for the fine arts, especially *les monuments historiques*, that is historical buildings, monuments and special objects, national or local, protected by legal measures.²⁶ This year however «the ethnological pack of cards was shuffled and dealt anew», to quote Martine Segalen.²⁷ Through a ministerial decision popular culture was included in an expanded concept of cultural heritage (*le patrimoine*). The *Ministry of culture* launched a new agency, *la Mission du patrimoine ethnologique*, with a generous budget.

Le Patrimoine, as it was called, became a success story for French ethnology. Over the years, it initiated and financed a series of projects on rural and urban culture, workers' and industrial culture, traditional fields of knowledge and savoir-faire, etc. Furthermore, it financed a series of scholarly monographs and anthologies as well as the journal *Terrain* (1983–2015). Through the 1980s–90s *le Patrimoine* offered considerable job opportunities to French ethnologists. At the same time it contributed effectively to the sufferings of the *MNATP*; it meant a dislocation of the total resources – that is both the political attention, the allocations and the research – away from the center and from the national museum in Paris, toward the districts.

However, the activities of *le Patrimoine* slowly took on the character of a rescue operation for a vanishing popular culture. The centrally organized projects often ran into conflict with a critical and reflexive trend in ethnology, where the heritage industry itself was questioned. Towards the millennium there was a debate on this

25 For a short genesis of the eco-museum movement in France, see i. a. http://www.larousse.fr/archives/journaux_annee/1999/181/les_ecomusees (online 14.12.2015).

26 Poirrier, L'État et la culture en France au XX^e siècle, p. 140.

27 Cf. Segalen, *Vie d'un musée 1937–2005*.

«state politicization» of the cultural heritage.²⁸ The activities of *le Patrimoine* – from 2005 reorganized as *la Mission à l’Ethnologie* – became considerably reduced.²⁹ During the same period, the *MNATP*’s other rival, the eco-museums, had lost much of its popularity. The volunteer spirit had faded away, they met hard economic realities, and it looks as if both the local populations and the tourists have become somewhat bored of the many identity representations, historical or contemporary.³⁰

On the road to Marseille

From around 1980 it was clear that the *MNATP* was caught in a negative trend. Also its two rivals, the eco-museums and *le Patrimoine*, experienced a downward course – mildly during the 1990s but more brutally after the millennium. It was once again obvious that popular culture did not hold high shares in the French public opinion.

During the 1990s the *MNATP*’s impending death seemed inevitable. The Directory (*DMF*) probably meant that the patient was so ill that a rescue operation could not be organized from within. During this decade the leadership of the museum changed five times.³¹ Several external persons were invited by the *DMF* to come up with a solution. The most radical plan came from the ethnologist Jean Guibal. Guibal wanted the *MNATP* to become more of a cultural meeting-place than a research institution, to keep a stronger focus on contemporary issues and to fuse again with the *MdH*, to become a museum for all the world’s cultures. Many have regretted that a fusion of the two museums did not take place. The *Musée du quai Branly*, which inherited the greater part of the collections of *MdH*, might have got another, interesting profile if the European material had been merged with the extra-European collections.

Other reports were produced and new directors came and left. But when Michel Colardelle, archaeologist with ties to several former socialist governments, was engaged (1994/1996), things began to move. His plan was grosso modo to create a museum that covered French cultures – in plural – from the Medieval Ages to the present, with a focus on contemporary society and with a strong research profile.³² And he wanted a more central site in Paris for the museum. From then on a tug-of-

28 Cf. Jean Louis Tornatore, La difficile politisation du patrimoine ethnologique, *Terrain* 42 (2004), p. 149–160. <http://terrain.revues.org/1791> (online 14.12.2015).

29 See f. ex. <http://pciich.hypotheses.org/tag/mission-a-lethnologie> (online 14.12.2015).

30 Segalen, *Vie d’un musée 1937–2005*, p. 304, 305.

31 Cf. Rogan, *Towards a Post-colonial and a Post-national Museum.*; Segalen, *Vie d’un musée 1937–2005.*; *Ibid.*, *L’impossible musée des cultures de la France.*

32 Cf. Michel Colardelle (ed.), *Le musée des civilisations. France, Europe, Méditerranée. Projet scientifique et culturel*, Tome 1/2, *Projet*. Paris 2001.

war that would last almost 15 years began – against a bureaucracy and labour unions, against a mighty directorate and disinterested politicians, and against parts of the staff that clung to the heritage of Rivière.

As a building site in Paris turned out unavailable, Colardelle proposed a solution that meant two radical ruptures with the past: to move the museum out of Paris and to transform it into a museum of French and European cultures. The choice finally fell on Marseille.³³ The transfer of a national museum from Paris to the province was an unprecedented proposal, in one of the most centralized countries of Europe. But a governmental decentralization project (2002/2003) made this solution possible.

The idea of turning a museum for national popular culture into one for European and French cultures, proposed as early as in 1998, may seem no less surprising. But there were precedents; Berlin had already decided to do it, Brussels was just then establishing a museum of Europe, and Italy was discussing the idea.³⁴ However, the choice of Marseille would have unexpected consequences. A museum for European cultures is in itself a complicated project, and a position on the outskirts of Europe would not make the task easier.

During this process a new museum law was passed in France (2002). In some ways it facilitated the process, but the strong ministerial control of the national museums was maintained. One of the watchdogs of the Ministry was *la DMF*. In 2009 the *DMF* was replaced by *le Service des Musées de France (SMF)*. The other one is *la Réunion des Musées Nationaux (RMN)*, which evaluates, confirms and finances accessions to the collections of the national museums. It is responsible for all temporary exhibitions and publishes the catalogues and scholarly editions of the museums. The *MNATP/MuCEM* would get first-hand experience with these authorities – and not least with how they prioritize fine art.

What were the political implications on the national level? During the presidency of the conservative Jacques Chirac (1995–2007), conservative and socialist governments alternated. This made the situation less transparent for the museum project. A periodic «*cohabitation*» between a conservative president and socialist governments complicated the situation further. Chirac was himself a collector of «*les arts premiers*» or «*primitive art*», and he initiated and supervised the founding of the *Musée du quai Branly* (2006) – the new museum for art from the third world.³⁵ As the planning of the *MuCEM* and the *Musée du quai Branly* were exactly

33 Cf. Colardelle, *Le musée des civilisations.*; Colardelle, *Réinventer un musée.*

34 Cf. Rogan, *The Emerging Museums of Europe*; Mazé, *Des musées de la nation aux musées de l'Europe.*; *Ibid.*, *Mettre l'Europe au musée: Une affaire de l'État?*

35 Sally Price, *Paris Primitive – Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly*, Chicago/London 2007 (French ed. 2011).; Rogan, *Tingenes transformasjoner i museet.*

parallel in time, the project of the *MuCEM* was – or was felt to be – in a non-transparent competition with the presidential project. The board members of *MuCEM*, and not least the former socialist politician Colardelle, paid close attention when governments changed or a shift took place in the *Ministry of Culture*.

It is difficult to assess the consequences of Chirac's preferences, except for the division of the world in Europe (+ northern Africa) and 'the rest'. Colardelle suspected political motives behind the budget problems and other deferments. Certainly the rapid implementation of the *Musée du quai Branly* and the delays and uncertainties around the *MuCEM* were indicative of the attitude of the Ministry of culture and the *DMF*. However, many of us who were close observers saw this primarily as a manifestation of the principle of giving priority to art. The fact that the *Branly* project more and more clearly turned away from traditional anthropology to aesthetics and art undoubtedly contributed to a more favorable attitude from the authorities.

Nicolas Sarkozy's conservative presidency lasted from 2007 to 2012. Sarkozy was the first president of the Vth Republic not associated with culture. He took no *personal* interest in museums in general (in spite of his launching of *la Maison de l'histoire de France*) nor in *MuCEM* qua museum. But the *MuCEM* would turn out an important tool for his political strategies, and his Ministers of Cultural Affairs took interest in the project – as a pawn in the president's geopolitical game of chess.

Years of uncertainty and coincidences

The first decade of the millennium was filled with uncertainty and reverses for the *MuCEM* project. The medieval *Fort St. Jean* belonged to the State, but the site on the wharf was the property of the city of Marseille. The local authorities were not enthusiastic about leaving the finest lot in town to a museum. An architect competition was launched in 2004 and a winner project selected – where the museum professionals had no say. Then a long standstill followed, partly due to the indifference of the local politicians. With so poor prospects, several of the staff chose to leave the project.

Due to several coincidences, the *MuCEM* managed to cling to the seaside lot in Marseille. In 2007, when the prestigious *America's Cup* in sailing was to be arranged in Europe, Marseille's politicians wanted to host the event and offered to construct a sailing harbor on the planned museum site, but lost for Valencia (Spain) – to the great relief of the *MuCEM* board.

In autumn 2008 the financial crisis hit hard and the French government used the emergency break, reduced the operating budget and froze the whole project. Bail out grants, which in other countries were used mostly to save banks from bank-

ruptcy, were also offered to some cultural institutions in France, among them the *MuCEM*, which staggered on.

The rescue came from Brussels the same year, when the *European Commission* chose Marseille for the *European capital of culture* for 2013. Lacking cultural institutions, Marseille needed an alibi – and the *MuCEM* was taken in from the cold again. The political tug-of-war was hard, but the government's strong support to Marseille was decisive. The Minister of Cultural Affairs had to guarantee that the *MuCEM* would be realized within 2013.³⁶ Or as one of the *MuCEM*'s staff put it: «Without the designation of Marseille to the cultural capital of Europe, there would never have been a *MuCEM*».³⁷ One of the curators put it this way: «It made them pick up the *MuCEM* from the rubbish bin».³⁸

Finally, another unforeseen event helped the *MuCEM* in the last phase. To counteract Germany's position in Northern Europe, Nicolas Sarkozy wanted a stronger French hegemony in the Mediterranean region. In 2008, when France held the presidency of the *EU*, Sarkozy launched *l'Union pour la Méditerranée* (*UpM*). The *UpM* is a continuation of the Barcelona process, an intergovernmental organization between the *EU* and the countries bordering on the Mediterranean. The *UpM*'s main domains are commerce, infrastructure, security etcetera. But French political hegemony implies culture, and France needed more than ever a prestigious institution of culture in the South.

We may conclude so far that a series of unforeseen events – from *America's Cup* to Sarkozy's political strategies – made the *MuCEM* more like a «yo-yo project» than a linear project.

With the back to Europe and an eye for art

Could the *MNATP* have been transformed into a museum of European cultures? The answer is probably yes. The bulk of the collections covered Central and Northern France, while Southern France was meagerly represented. But when le *Musée de l'Homme* was closed, the *MNATP* inherited its European collections. And much of the acquisitions during the early 2000s concentrated on Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, among the around 60 scholars of the *MuCEM's Scientific Council* (2000–2009), most of Europe was represented. So both the material and intellectual resources were available.

36 Exchanges with several persons of the *MuCEM* staff, autumn 2013.

37 Interview Bjarne Rogan with research director Denis Chevallier, October 16 2013.

38 Conversation Bjarne Rogan with curator Myriam Delledalle, October 18 2014.

However, after the choice of Marseille a stronger orientation towards the Mediterranean became a recurrent theme, and the members of the Council's Board and of the acquisition committee experienced a steadily stronger pressure. There came no clear orders from Paris before 2008. But with the designation of the *European capital of culture* and the plans for Sarkozy's *UpM*, the *Ministry of Culture* tightened the grip. In 2009 the Ministry unequivocally ordered a «reorientation» of the *MuCEM* to adapt to the plans for the *Union pour la Méditerranée*.³⁹ From then on the acquisition committee had to look to the south – to the Mediterranean, the northern fringe of Africa and the Middle East.

Concerning *the scholarly profile*, the project distanced itself steadily from ethnology. In the acquisition committee we handled more and more art objects, and we sometimes joked about competing with the *Louvre*. In 2010 the Minister explicitly wrote that art should have a considerable space in the museum's «interdisciplinary activities»⁴⁰, and soon after a curator of contemporary art was appointed. Most of the French national museums suffered from a low degree of autonomy. The larger part of the budget and approval of acquisitions were in the hands of the directorate (*RMN*), as was also the employment of staff. In 2013, however, the *MuCEM* got a more autonomous status.

Michel Colardelle had to swallow several bitter pills, and the communication with the ministry and the directorate was far from optimal. The situation was stressing, the staff divided, the pressure from above hard and the responses from Colardelle were perhaps not always adequate. In 2009 he was forced to leave the *MuCEM*. Refusing to take over a retreat position as responsible for the collections, he was offered a position as director of cultural affairs in French Guyana. The scholar and museologist Colardelle was replaced by Bruno Suzzarelli, a former student of the prestigious *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* (ENA). With Suzzarelli in the chair the Mediterranean profile was confirmed, art – and contemporary art – was acknowledged as one of the pillars, and from then on the process ran (relatively) smoothly.

Finally successful, but still controversial

What were the results of 15 years of uncertainty, of pressure, of periods of negligence from a mighty bureaucracy? First and foremost, an economic scandal, an administrative-political scandal – and a success with the visitors; furthermore,

39 Letter from the *DMF* to Thierry Fabre, quoted i. a. in Mazé 2013, p. 197. See also letter of July 28, 2010 from the Minister of cultural affairs to B. Suzzarelli, printed in Bruno Suzzarelli, (ed.) s.a., *Projet scientifique et culturel du MuCEM*, Marseille 2013, p. 109–11.

40 Letter of July 28, 2010, as the above note.

debated and debatable exhibitions, and a great perplexity as to what to do with the large collections, and uncertainty about the future.

La Cour des comptes (the national audit department) has levelled extremely severe criticism⁴¹ at the *Ministry of Culture* for the enormous costs of the project (ca. 350 million €), due partly to the length and ruptures of the process, partly to the fact that the Ministry kept ca. 100 employees with few or no tasks at the museum in Paris from its closure until 2011. The criticism of the «chaotic» steering and the lack of political control and support are no less severe. The audit report sheds light on the missing scientific orientation of the project, the lack of reflections in the Ministry on the role of *les musées de société* in French cultural politics and of the division of labor and cooperation between them. Finally, the museum's own lack of reflections on its scholarly course and the role of the French collections in a European and Mediterranean context are questioned, in this report entitled *Le MuCEM: une gestation laborieuse, un avenir incertain*. The *Cour des comptes* lets the question of *MuCEM*'s future to be up in the air.

It was not obvious that the *MuCEM* would become a success with the public. The first test was in 2007, with the exhibition *Trésors du quotidien* – «Treasures of everyday life» – at the Fort St. Jean in Marseille. This traditional ethnographic exhibition of the masterpieces of the *MNATP* collections – mostly popular costumes and folk art – marked a turning point as it was a total failure and a clear warning about which course the museum should not take. But after the opening in June 2013 the public invaded the museum. During the first six months the outdoors area and the fortress received 1,5 million visitors; one third were paying visitors to the exhibitions. In 2014 1,5 million persons visited the park and 650.000 the indoors exhibitions. However, two important reasons for the afflux are the magnificent site, overlooking the harbor and the blue waters of the Mediterranean, and the building itself, a modernist construction in glass and concrete designed by Rudi Ricciotti.

The exhibitions have had a mixed reception. Typical for many of them is the dependence on borrowed works of art. A main headache, for the museum as well as for the *Cour des comptes*, is the fact that almost all of the rich collections from the *MNATP* – circa one million objects – remain in the reserves. The Mediterranean profile of the *MuCEM* does not match its collections, with their focus on Central and Northern France. It is strange to see a large museum almost without relevant collections, relying heavily on loans. As I see it, this is the Achilles' heel of the *MuCEM*.

41 *Cour des comptes*, Rapport public annuel 2015 – février 2015, *Le MuCEM: une gestation laborieuse, un avenir incertain*, *Cour des comptes* – www.ccomptes.fr – @Courdescomptes (online 14.12.2015.); See also *Le Figaro*, July 21, 2014.

On the communication and outreach side, the *MuCEM* can boast of a high level of activity, with conferences, films and other public events. The museum acknowledges its debt to the model of the *Musée du quai Branly*. Both museums prefer to talk less *to* and more *with* the public, defining themselves as centers of dialogue (*le musée hybride*). All in all, the flow of visitors during the first two years is overwhelming. Marseille's population has moved from indifference to enthusiasm, and the local politicians from scepticism to approval. According to the local business community, the *MuCEM* has produced a certain *Bilbao effect*. But does that counterbalance the fact that France has no longer a national ethnological museum?

Politics of memory, culture, art, aesthetics ...

The tendency to prioritize art and to tone down popular culture has a long tradition in France. On the other hand, it should not be exaggerated. When the *Louvre*'s former director proposed to take over the *MuCEM* project to establish a branch – a «Louvre-Marseille» as a parallel to *Louvre-Lens*, the Minister of Culture Frédéric Mitterrand declined the proposal.⁴²

The *MuCEM*'s problem is more deep-rooted than the traditional opposition between fine arts and popular arts. One should also take into account the post-colonial insight that a holistic representation of any culture – one's own included – is a mission impossible. The two parallel and competing museum projects *Branly* and *MuCEM* offer an interesting comparison. Just as the *MuCEM* was borne out of the *MNATP*, the *Branly* descended in the main from the *MdH*. Neither the *MNATP* nor the *MdH* were originally intended as exhibiting institutions. They were both late representatives of the 19th century encyclopaedic museum paradigm; through systematic collection they should document the (material) memories of France and of the world respectively. They should accumulate and store data with documentation in view, and not primarily be centers of dissemination and contact with the public. The *Musée du quai Branly* broke explicitly with the old ideology of the *MdH*, just as the *MuCEM* broke with the conception of French culture as a delimited unity.

An alternative to the encyclopaedic and contextual paradigm is the aesthetic, which both the *MuCEM* and the *Branly* have chosen. The *Branly*'s main strategy is to tone down the context and to define the objects as isolated objects of art. The *MuCEM* has stuck to more contextual narratives in its exhibitions, but they depend heavily on fine art objects – like paintings, installations, sculpture and art photographs. The *MuCEM* has become not a branch of the *Louvre*, but rather a client begging for loans. With an art historian as director, the *Branly* was quick to change its

42 Oral information from the staff of the *MuCEM*, spring 2014.

modus operandi, while the *MuCEM* was forced to think art in a late stage of the re-organization process.

Another common trait for the new museums is their multi-disciplinary approach. The *MdH* was once the cradle of anthropology, while the *MNATP* had the same function for ethnology. Today the *MuCEM* claims to be open for anthropologists and sociologists, archaeologists and historians, art historians and – artists.⁴³

A final question: What is *atypical* about the *MuCEM*? One of the museum's directors gave the following succinct answer:⁴⁴

«It was difficult to know who were for and who were against us in the administration. The *MuCEM* lacked a 'godfather' high up in the system – like President Pompidou for *Beaubourg*, President Mitterrand for the *Grand Louvre*, or President Chirac for *Branly*.»

On reflection ...

While attending the inauguration on June 4th 2013, I reflected upon my own role in this project, an assignment that was originally based upon my competence as an ethnologist, my knowledge of Northern Europe, and my experience with museums of popular culture. During the long decade that I had followed the project, popular culture had been replaced by art and culture in a wide conception, ethnology had been reduced to only one among many disciplines – and not even the most important, and Europe had become a passive spectator to a Mediterranean circus.

There was one more thing that preoccupied me. As invited to the ceremony, I was standing only a few meters away from the newly elected president François Hollande and Marseille's mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin, listening to their speeches. To the President, who talked about everything except museums and culture. And to the mayor Jean-Claude Gaudin, who responded in more or less the same way. None of them thanked the main actor Michel Colardelle, who had had the ideas – about a museum dislocated from Paris, a museum that comprised more than French culture, a museum in dialogue with the present, in short: a modern *musée de société* – and who for more than ten years had worked untiringly for the realization of the *MuCEM*. His name was not even mentioned. The mayor knew. But the President? What had his administration told him? Probably nothing.

43 Cf. Suzzarelli, *Projet scientifique et culturel du MuCEM*.

44 Interview Bjarne Rogan with Denis Chevallier, October 16 2014.