

This post was originally published in 2006, on the Alphapsy blog.

On visiting the brand new [Musée du Quai Branly](#) in Paris last Sunday, I was amazed to meet the ghost of one of the most outdated anthropologists of the Victorian Age.



The French Président de la République is probably the most monarchic head of state in any democratic constitution; it is customary that, once in his reign, he treats himself with a grand construction. The said construction is usually located in Paris, much advertised for, and preferably ugly (although François Mitterrand's Grand Louvre and Grande Bibliothèque are exceptions to that rule). This year, Jacques Chirac has offered Paris, and the amazed world, a museum of exotic art. I know I am not supposed to call it that; I know that it is all about anthropological science and respectful curiosity. But whatever the brochures might say, the spiritual father of the Musée du Quai Branly is not Claude Lévi-Strauss; it would rather be Guillaume Apollinaire, the poet who launched the "Art Nègre" fad in early twentieth-century Paris.

The Musée du Quai Branly was to be called "Musée des Arts Premiers" (Museum of First Arts), but its promoters recoiled when they saw how vacuous the concept of "first art" was. Obviously "primitive art" sounded far too colonial. Then the President's most philosophically-inspired counsellors came up with the label "Musée de l'Autre" (Museum of the Other) ; the concept of Otherness, sponsored by the works of [Jacques Lacan](#) and Emmanuel Lévinas, is currently enjoying, among the French intelligentsia, a favour which, in my view, can only be explained by its utter lack of content. Finally, the colourless "Musée du Quai Branly" was adopted, but not for long. Most probably it will end up being named after the President: "Musée Jacques Chirac". And how perfectly appropriate a name that is! The museum is Chirac's soul writ large: it is an uncoherent, amorphous mess; everything is welcome and nothing is judged, evaluated or even labelled; no directing principle, not the slightest sketch of a scientific project, but a handful of promising ideas, none of which is applied thoroughly enough to yield any result (see the press coverage [here](#) and [here](#)).

After three hours of painful confrontation with the Other, a confrontation made no easier by the scarcity of relevant and accessible documentation, I arrived in the area devoted to the Amazon peoples. I was dizzy, my brain cloyed with too much Otherness. I was looking for non-aesthetic objects, for a change. Plain useful artefacts which I could analyse without having to summon absent memories of a remote mythology. Then my eyes fell upon the showcase that caused this post; it

presented a collection of clubs and paddles. The artefacts came from very different regions (ranging from central Brazil to Eastern Columbia), and were roughly dating from the same XIXth century (if anything, the clubs were older). But they were arranged in a mock-genealogical order : first, the most paddle-like paddles, then the more club-like paddles, then the paddle-like clubs, and finally the club-like clubs. The cartel above read: “De la rame au casse-tête / From Paddle to Club”. It proceeded to explain (abundantly, for once), that the fact that the club had evolved from the paddle could be explained by their “structural similarities” (someone must have demanded that the word “structural” figure somewhere in the exhibition). You can use a paddle to push away the riverbank when leaving the shore and, likewise, you can use a club to repel your enemy, which, when you think about it, is a kind of pushing-away, and hence bears a (structural) resemblance to the action of leaving the shore.

It was impossible not to think of Pitt-Rivers. The late [Augustus-Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers \(1827-1900\)](#) founded the evolutionary anthropology of technology. His specialty was phoney genealogical trees of artefacts, in which a XIXth century aboriginal club begot a XVIIIth century Guayaki blowgun (see his book [“The Evolution of Culture”](#)). His [museum](#) is full of such arbitrary reconstructions; now, officially, the Pitt-Rivers style of evolutionary museography has been banned long ago with the demise of old-school Evolutionary Anthropology, remixed with Superior Civilisations, the Ladder of Progress and the whole Victorian paraphernalia.

I guess this showcase was the revenge XIXth century nonsense takes on XXIst century nonsense. One probably evolved from the other, anyway. Or they are structurally similar.

The post attracted this excellent comment from [Marie Guillot](#):
The Whale’s Womb and French « mauvaise conscience »

Sad diagnosis, but sadly deserved indeed !

I hope you also enjoyed seeing how the tabooed name « Musée des arts premiers » surreptitiously forced its way back in the scenography of the exhibition space. The inner architecture, with the stifling womb-like red curves of its corridors, recesses and benches, was apparently prompted by a uterine metaphor, with the (very tactful) view of depicting non-European arts as primaeval in the most literal and organic sense of the term.

Too bad it should finally inspire the visitor with a reminiscence, not so much of her own foetal past, nor yet of some obscure universal proto-esthetic matrix, than of the clumsy mimetic museography of pedagogical institutions from the sixties – remember the greenish ultramarine depths of the Cousteau Museum, and the pathway through the guts of the giant plaster whale?...

Another piece of phylogenetic irony: guess what happy fate has befallen the « Musée de la Porte Dorée », the building which used to house part of the present collections of Musée du Quai Branly? As its naive pro-colonialist façade could not decently keep sheltering a museum dedicated to arts and crafts from continents which have been prey to the greed of European economies, and a drastic reorientation was called for, the building has very ingeniously been destined to host a museum of... immigration. No need to say, immigration from those nations which have been prey to the greed of European economies.

You can relish the enthusiastic premises of this painful museographic return of the repressed [here](#).

Enjoy!