

A Heart of Darkness in the City of Light

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN



PARIS — The other day Stéphane Martin, president of the new Musée du Quai Branly, was in his wedge-shape office with the picture window overlooking the Seine. Dapper, charming, with the weary politeness of a busy executive who has better things to do, he fetched the latest salvo against his institution, a book by Bernard Dupaigne, and casually tossed it across the table.

The most ambitious museum to open in Paris in 20 years, dedicated to non-European cultures, Quai Branly provoked a ruckus from the instant President Jacques Chirac came up with the idea for it more than a decade ago. It was his monument to French multiculturalism and, perhaps, to himself.

Two beloved Paris institutions had to be dismantled, the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens and the ethnographic department of the Musée de l'Homme, France's sublime natural history museum. Anthropologists, not to mention more than a few people who loved going to those museums, were furious. The familiar aesthetics-versus-ethnology question came up: Will religious, ceremonial and practical objects, never intended as art in the modern, Western sense, be showcased like baubles, with no context?

Given the current political climate, Quai Branly's eventual opening, after years of delay, seemed almost as if it had been scientifically calculated to ignite the maximum debate.

I couldn't tell whether Mr. Martin was being helpful or if he actually enjoyed the fuss. What did he think of his museum? I asked. He thought it was a "neutral environment" with "no aesthetic or philosophical line." I thought he was kidding.

He wasn't. If the Marx Brothers designed a museum for dark people, they might have come up with the permanent-collection galleries: devised as a spooky jungle, red and black and murky, the objects in it chosen and arranged with hardly any discernible logic, the place is briefly thrilling, as spectacle, but brow-slappingly wrongheaded. Colonialism of a bygone era is replaced by a whole new French brand of condescension.

The dismay was obvious when I met museum directors, curators, anthropologists and art historians at a conference in Quai Branly, just before the museum's opening. For about an hour everyone on a panel talked about the need for better, more flexible museums,



which seemed to me an obvious euphemism for the problem here, which nobody mentioned — until a scholar, Christian Feest, smiled, raised his eyebrows and tilted his head slightly.

He couldn't help, he said, pointing out the elephant in the room: How would Quai Branly overcome the obstacle of its own design? That shifted the atmosphere, as if tension had been released, and during the break I intercepted several African and American curators and a French art historian who all shook their heads and confided, as if revealing a private embarrassment, that Quai Branly was a missed opportunity and an inexplicable enterprise. An Australian architecture critic then sidled over and nodded toward Jean Nouvel, the museum's architect, who had been mobbed the day before at the press opening. Now he was standing alone. Everyone was passing him by on the way to hors d'oeuvres. The place simply makes no sense. Old, new, good, bad are all jumbled together without much reason or explanation, save for visual theatrics. Quai Branly's curator of Asian collections, Christine Hemmet, who was furious about the dismantling of the Musée de l'Homme, took me to find a Vietnamese scarecrow, circa 1970's, on the back of which was painted an American B-52 dropping bombs. She said she had wanted to install a mirror in the display case, behind the work, so the scarecrow's back would be visible. But she was told it would spoil the *mise-en-scène*.

Think of the museum as a kind of ghetto for the "other," a word Mr. Chirac has taken to using: an enormous, rambling, crepuscular cavern that tries to evoke a journey into the jungle, downriver, where suddenly scary masks or totem poles loom out of the darkness and everything is meant to be foreign and exotic. The Crayola-colored facade and its garden set the stage for this passage from civilization.

After a couple of circuits around the galleries my heart sank. I also started to feel something else: that the debate has missed the point. The dichotomy between ethnology and aesthetics is too simple. It's not possible to draw a line between form and function, which are inseparably mixed in ways that constantly shift.

Museums, whether they call themselves art museums or not — and Quai Branly at least rejected loaded words like primitive or art for its title — classify what they show to give objects particular meanings, to fix their relationships to viewers. If you're in the Metropolitan Museum, you know that an Italian altarpiece or an African mask is supposed to be visually striking, beautiful even. If the same objects are across Central Park at the [American Museum of Natural History](#), they illustrate points about religion or ritual or handicraft or materials.

