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Look on Our Works: Ethnography and Aesthetics at the Musée du Quai Branly

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between a museum and its visitors through an in-depth analysis of the recently opened Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. I argue that the Quai Branly facilitates discovery of its collections as works of art and as ethnographic objects, but that the global significance of the objects subverts the definition of the collections as unfamiliar and thus complicates the discovery that the museum encourages. I demonstrate that this complex duality of discovery and familiarity reflects the reality of the relationships between cultures in the globalized world.
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# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Situating the Quai Branly  
*Introduction*  
*Cultural Translation*  
*Self and Other*  
*The Colonial Past and the Quai Branly*  
*Research Methodology*  
*Thesis Outline*  

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background and Literature Review  
*Museums and Material Culture*  
*Primitive Art and Art*  
*The Social Power of Museums*  

Chapter 3: An Intellectual and Experiential Introduction to the Quai Branly  
*Jacques Kerchache and Exotic Art*  
*Maurice Godelier and Ethnographic Indicators*  
*The Quai Branly’s Space*  

Chapter 4: The Relationship between the Quai Branly and its Visitors  
*The Organization of the Quai Branly’s Collections*  
*Positive and Negative Reactions to the Quai Branly*  
*The Visitor as Explorer*  

Chapter 5: The Quai Branly as a Universal Museum  
*Complicating the Cosmopolitan Perspective*  
*The Movement of Museum Objects*  
*The Quai Branly as Universally Accessible*  

Chapter 6: Conclusion  

Endnotes  

Bibliography
Chapter 1: Situating the Musée du Quai Branly

In spring 1907, Pablo Picasso enters the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro. The museum is located on Paris’s Right Bank, overlooking the Seine. It displays a vast collection of objects from the world’s cultures. Picasso moves slowly through the museum, turning his head left and right as he studies the exotic forms that line the walls. He stops in front of a West African Fang mask that had been seized by French colonial authorities and shipped to Paris for the delight and wonder of the city’s public. Its form speaks a universal language to Picasso: the language of art. Its brows arch parabolically, descending into twin concavities along its oblong face. Its squinting eyes and gaping mouth are enigmatic. Picasso’s expression mirrors the mask’s. The artist glides through the rest of the museum in rapture. He returns to his studio and translates his experience across media and across cultures. The mask’s clean geometry and obtuse expression become the mystery and the power of the figures in Les demoiselles d’Avignon (Price 2007:ix). Ninety-nine years after Picasso’s epiphany, the Musée du Quai Branly opens directly opposite the Trocadéro’s building, on the other side of the Seine.

Introduction: In this thesis, I explore how the Musée du Quai Branly presents the objects in its permanent collections both as ethnography and as art in order to create a process of discovery for the visitor. I focus on three factors that contribute to this discovery. First, the procession from an aesthetic encounter to an ethnographic understanding characterizes a visit to the Quai Branly as discovery of the form and function of unfamiliar works. Second, the differences between Western culture and the cultures represented in the museum define these non-Western cultures as “other” and unfamiliar. Finally, the sense of the unknown created through the museum’s design, the arrangement of objects, and the use of contextualizing information support the exploration and discovery that the Quai Branly encourages.

I also discuss the ways in which visiting the Quai Branly complicates the process of discovery. I identify three reasons for this perspective. First, the museum’s global relevance renders its objects visible for individuals connected to or familiar with the cultures represented in the collections. For these individuals, the collections are not
ambassadors of unfamiliar cultures and thus do not need to be discovered. Second, objects take on new meanings as they move around the world. Visitors to the Quai Branly thus discover not simply an object, but an object and its colonial history, or an object and its status as part of a private collection. The interpretation of the objects on the part of the Quai Branly’s architect and curators contributes to the visitor’s encounter with an object and its context. Visitors thus discover an object, its context, and its interpretation. Third, the prominence of conceptions of non-Western material culture in French mass media renders the Quai Branly’s collections familiar in popular consciousness.

I argue that the Musée du Quai Branly facilitates discovery of its collections as works of art and as ethnographic objects, but that the global significance of the objects subverts the definition of the collections as unfamiliar and thus complicates the discovery that the museum encourages. I demonstrate that this complex duality of discovery and familiarity reflects the reality of the relationships between cultures in the globalized world.

As a museum, the Quai Branly creates an enclosed and concentrated world, whose cultures the visitor encounters while traveling across it. However, the Quai Branly’s position in the wider world renders the decisions of its curators and the experiences of its visitors meaningful beyond the museum’s walls. The museum’s slogan, “Là où dialoguent les cultures,” printed prominently on posters, brochures, and merchandise, expresses the Quai Branly’s view of its role of facilitating discovery of and exchange with diverse and unfamiliar cultures. The cultural dialogue that the Quai Branly seeks to facilitate becomes relevant in the contemporary globalized world. This relevance corresponds with museum studies scholar Susan Pearce’s assertion that “museums have
an obligation to try and understand themselves so that they can understand more clearly what messages they are giving and how these are received” (Pearce 1994:1). Applying Pearce’s statement to the Quai Branly reveals the museum’s role in encapsulating the world’s cultural complexity and in providing an environment for dialogue and reflection on this complexity. The thesis-antithesis relationship that I identify in the Quai Branly’s simultaneous support and complication of a process of cultural discovery both stems from and reveals the complex relationships between the world’s cultures historically and in the present day.

The Musée du Quai Branly is a museum devoted to the display of works from Oceania, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The museum opened in 2006. It displays 3,500 objects in its permanent collections and possesses an additional 300,000 in reserve (musée du Quai Branly: *L'établissement public*). The French architect Jean Nouvel designed the museum’s interior and exterior. In 2009, the museum received 1.5 million visitors, or over 4,800 per day (musée du quai Branly 2010a:90). 82 percent of visitors in 2009 were from France, and roughly half of these were from either Paris or the Ile-de-France region immediately surrounding the capital (94). Visitors from outside France comprised the remaining 18 percent of the Quai Branly’s public. The majority of foreign visitors were from neighboring European countries or from the United States (94). About 19 percent of visitors claim origins in one or more of the countries represented in the Quai Branly’s collections (113). The museum charges eight euros and fifty cents for admission (musée du quai Branly “Tarifs” 2010). The Quai Branly reported a revenue of about 63.4 million euros in 2009: roughly 50.9 million of this amount in government subsidy and about 12.5 million in the sale of tickets and merchandise, private patronage,
and space rental (musée du quai Branly 2010b:138). These statistics provide a foundation for my discussion of the Quai Branly’s relationship with its visitors throughout the thesis.

In order to clarify my exploration of cross-cultural encounters at the Quai Branly, I define several important terms that I use in this thesis. I define “material culture” broadly, as a concept referring to objects created by humans (Levinson and Ember 1996:747). I use the term “objects” synonymously with “material culture.” In this thesis, art and ethnography are two categories of material culture. I define “art” as material culture considered chiefly for its aesthetic interest. I also take into consideration “the elevation of the work of art to quasi-sacred status as a fetish object” that the concept of art embodies (Mitchell 2005b:6). This status corresponds with anthropologist Shelly Errington’s definition of art as “not a class of objects with fixed characteristics, but a set of historically specific ideas and practices that have shifted meanings in the course of the centuries” (Errington 1998:103). Aesthetics refer to the perception and evaluation of an object defined as art (Mitchell 2005a:1). The definition of an object as art is essential to an aesthetic interpretation of it, an interpretation that often entails a “pure” experience of the form of the work unburdened by cultural and historical context. I consider “ethnography” to be objects that allow the observer to gain insight into the cultures in which these objects were created (Levinson and Ember 1996:416). I position this concept in contrast with the category of art. In accordance with the perspective of one of the Quai Branly’s curators (personal communication December 15, 2009), I view the categories of art and ethnography as applicable to all objects in the museum’s collections. However, the museum often chooses to emphasize one category over the other, thereby fostering a conceptual distinction between the two.
The distinction between “the West and the Rest” (Sakai and Morris 2005:373) applies directly to the Quai Branly’s significance as a Western museum that displays non-Western material culture. I acknowledge the “slippery” nature of “the West” as a “mythical construct” (372), and apply the term to define a category of Euro-American socioeconomic hegemony. Colonialism and postcolonialism play central roles in the study of the Quai Branly’s significance on the world stage. According to anthropologist Nicholas Dirks, colonialism constitutes political and economic domination; historically, and most importantly for the Quai Branly, colonialism has manifested itself as European rule over non-European peoples (Dirks 2005a:42). Postcolonialism marks the lingering significance of colonial relationships (Dirks 2005b:267). Given the appropriation of many of the Quai Branly’s objects during the colonial era, Dirks’s definition underscores the museum’s postcolonial significance. I define the “global North” as a worldwide economic hegemony in opposition to the “global South.”

The relationship between museum and visitor is especially pertinent for the Quai Branly, as this museum displays objects with which the majority of the Western museum-going public is unfamiliar. Stéphane Martin, the museum’s president, states that the presentation of the Quai Branly’s collections “is intended ‘to transcend ethnological and aesthetic commentary,’ inciting a response based on ‘intuition, imagination and direct contact with the objects’” (Martin 2006:7, 9 in Levitz 2008:601). Martin acknowledges the power of the visitor to shape an experience at the Quai Branly. Philosopher Félix Guattari’s approach to art supports Martin’s position. According to Guattari, art is “a form of living matter” (Bourriaud 2008:88); its meaning depends on its relationship with the viewer (99). The visitor’s power corresponds with Percy Bysshe Shelley’s wonder at
the statue of Ramesses II at the British Museum in 1818 (MacGregor 2010:125). An adaptation of a line from Shelley’s poem *Ozymandias*, written in response to the statue, is the source of this project’s title. A visit to the museum thus constitutes a negotiation between the power of curators to contextualize the collections and that of visitors to discover and interpret them. Martin’s statement suggests that, in spite of the visitor’s lack of familiarity with the cultures represented at the museum, the collections hold universal interest and can be interpreted by everyone, regardless of prior cultural knowledge. I examine the issue of universality as it relates to the Quai Branly in Chapter 5. By presenting the works as art, the museum encourages visitors to react to the objects’ aesthetic qualities. By defining the Quai Branly’s collections as ethnography, the museum exposes its visitors to the cultural diversity of the non-Western world. The simultaneous valorization of the collections as art and as ethnography provides a foundation for the process of discovery that the museum fosters for its visitors.

The visitor attempts to view the Quai Branly’s collections as works of universal aesthetic power and as ethnographic indicators of non-Western cultures. However, one inevitably encounters the complex and evolving identities of the objects. These identities reflect the status of the works as products of their original cultural traditions, as colonial commodities, and, finally, as postcolonial indicators of a globalized world culture displayed in a visually striking museum. Strategies of presentation emphasize certain meanings over others and thereby influence the visitor’s understanding of the collections. This multitude of meanings renders the objects not only ethnographic ambassadors and *objets d’art*, but also reflections of the desires of the Western visitor, who has access to an encyclopedia of facts, dreams, and images of the world’s cultures. The Quai Branly’s
presentation of its collections challenges the traditional and exclusively scientific Western museographic interest in non-Western objects. However, it also continues to insist upon the cultural significance of these objects, thereby opposing an exclusively aesthetic appreciation of the collections. The Quai Branly’s relevance in the globalized and postcolonial world provides the framework for the visitor’s aesthetic and ethnographic interpretations of the museum’s collections. In this project, I focus on the Quai Branly’s permanent collections; I do not discuss temporary exhibitions. Although the issue of objects’ repatriation and that of Indigenous curatorial voice are important to a full understanding of the Quai Branly’s role in contemporary globalized society, these questions are beyond the scope of my analysis. Similarly, I do not discuss my informants’ prior familiarity with the cultures represented in the Quai Branly’s collections. In this thesis, I investigate the role of the museum and of globalized intercultural relationships both in emphasizing ethnographic meanings and in constructing artistic significance for objects from diverse cultures presented in one location.

In spite of the fact that the majority of visitors to the Musée du Quai Branly come from the Paris region, the museum has relevance as a global cultural institution. This aspect of the museum’s identity complicates the process of discovery that the Quai Branly encourages. Put simply, all of the cultures represented in the museum’s collections are not unfamiliar for everyone and therefore need not be discovered by everyone. As an anthropological museum in the contemporary globalized world, the Quai Branly must address questions of the presentation and interpretation of diverse material cultures and its relationship to communities around the world, as well as the legacy of colonialism. Pearce describes the problematic situation of museums today: “As audiences
become more varied, as notions about ‘culture’ become more complex, and as museums around the world achieve a higher profile, so issues about the appropriation of culture become more acute” (Pearce 1994:1). The Quai Branly cannot, as its ancestor the Trocadéro could, address itself solely to the Parisian community. The relationships between museums around the world have become too close and the ease with which we travel and receive information has become too great to allow museums to exist within an insular sphere of influence. Museums are now actors on the global stage; choices in their exhibition and interpretation of objects resonate around the world. As Pearce indicates, it is imperative that museums understand the impressions they impart upon their visitors. The global prominence and the cultural diversity of the Quai Branly’s collections render this understanding doubly important.

Representations and conceptions of non-Western cultures in post-nineteenth-century French mass culture render the Quai Branly’s collections familiar for the museum’s visitors. I take examples from the popularity of African material culture in the French capital during the early twentieth century, from Tintin comics, and from the weekly news magazine *Paris Match* in order to support my assertion that the Parisian public’s awareness of non-Western material culture undermines the process of discovery of unfamiliar cultures that the Quai Branly fosters. Impressions of France’s African colonies provided inspiration to artists in Paris during the first three decades of the twentieth century (Blake 1999). Paul Guillaume, who began selling African objects in Paris in 1911, was “one of the first professional African art dealers in Europe” (Steiner 1994:6). Artists such as Picasso saw in African sculpture the antithesis of the art establishment that they wished to subvert (Blake 1999:35). *Les demoiselles d’Avignon*
exemplifies the impact of an “African” aesthetic on Western art. Through the appropriation of this form of non-Western material culture, “admiration for the ‘primitive’ was absorbed into the cult of modernity that emerged on the eve of the First World War” (38). The material culture of the African colonies was thus transported to France and was absorbed into the cultural fabric of twentieth-century Paris. This integration of African objects into French culture builds a foundation of familiarity for visitors to the Quai Branly in contemporary Paris.

*The Adventures of Tintin* is a series of Belgian comics that debuted in 1929 and concluded in 1983 at the death of its creator, Hergé (Farr 2002:8, 199). Tintin is a reporter and detective who regularly embarks on adventures in exotic locations. The comics enjoy continuing popularity in the Francophone world and thus remain an important window onto unfamiliar countries. The series has been translated into numerous languages and has wide readership around the world. *The Adventures of Tintin* thus has significance beyond the Francophone sphere and beyond the West. *Tintin au Congo* (1930) sees the hero visit Belgium’s vast central African colony (21). Hergé bases cultural details on information and objects collected through Belgian colonial channels. For example, the leopard skin clothing that appears in the comic was worn by members of the Aniota secret society and could be found on display at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, near Brussels (26-27). The paternalistic attitude that Tintin takes toward Congolese both reflects and reinforces the superiority that the Belgian authorities felt regarding the Congo. *Tintin au Congo* introduces readers to elements of Congolese material culture and portrays the official colonialist attitude toward the African colony. *L’oreille cassée* (1935) further exemplifies the role of Tintin comics in familiarizing
Francophone readers with non-Western cultures (68). Although Tintin visits a fictionalized South America in this adventure, Hergé’s portrayal of the locations draws from political, geographical, and ethnographic sources on the continent (62-67). The author models his depiction of the weapons of the invented Arumbayas on those of the Jivaros of Peru (67). Moreover, his rendering of an Arumbaya statue at the fictional Museum of Ethnography corresponds closely to a Chimu statue from Peru held at the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels (67). The Tintin comics thus present a fictitious hybrid of non-Western cultures that nonetheless offers glimpses of the reality of unfamiliar cultures. Hergé’s representation of non-Western material culture, as well as Tintin’s journeys to far-off countries, provides the European Francophone public with impressions of the diversity of the world’s cultures. Although Hergé’s interpretive and often exoticizing gaze transforms these impressions, the cultural importance of the images of non-Western cultures in Tintin comics renders the cultures represented at the Quai Branly more familiar to visitors. This familiarization complicates the process of discovery that the museum seeks to foster.

*Paris Match* acts as an accessible window onto world events for contemporary Parisians. The magazine mentions several enormous chocolate Easter eggs, describing in particular Patrick Roger’s creations as “une superposition grandiose de fèves de cacao plus vraies que nature, sculptées dans un chocolat noir d’exception. Digne des vitrines du musée des Arts premiers” (Paris Match 2010). The author uses the vocabulary of art to describe Roger’s work, evoking the chocolatier’s decision to “superimpose” the form of the cocoa bean in “sculpting” his chocolate eggs. Comparing the eggs to works in a museum of *arts premiers* suggests that the Parisian public has an impression of the
kinds of objects to be found in such a museum. The fact that the author assumes a basic understanding of non-Western objects on the part of Paris Match’s readers indicates the position of material culture from non-Western societies in Parisian cultural consciousness. The visitor does not enter the Quai Branly as a blank slate, but rather with a catalogue of images and impressions received from colonial history, from mass culture, and from the provenance of non-Western material culture in the collective imagination of contemporary Paris.

Having framed my overall argument and introduced the familiarity and unfamiliarity of the Quai Branly’s collections for the museum’s visitors, I now examine three issues that both support and complicate the definition of the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly as the discovery of unfamiliar cultures. I then discuss my research methodology and present an outline of the remainder of the thesis. The process of cultural translation that takes place when an object is removed from its original cultural context and displayed in a museum, the human fascination with the other, and colonial history both characterize and complicate the process of exploration that the Quai Branly’s curators seek to create at the museum. These three topics lead to a broader discussion of the Quai Branly’s significance within the literature on museum history and theory, which I undertake in the second chapter.

*Cultural Translation:* Visitors to the Quai Branly do not discover the collections as objects bearing only their original cultural significance, but as works that possess layers of meaning accumulated throughout their global history. Anthropologist Michael M. Ames’s definition of the museum object as a palimpsest that carries “social history […] from origin to current destination, including the changing meanings as the object is
continually redefined along the way” (Ames 1992:141) describes the identity of the Quai Branly’s objects under the gaze of the visitor-as-explorer. Similarly, anthropologist Igor Kopytoff asserts that, as objects move through cultural contexts, their “biographies” “reveal a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and even political judgments, and of convictions and values that shape our attitudes towards objects labeled ‘art’” (Kopytoff 1986:67). Questions of cultural decontextualization and recontextualization thus find themselves at the center of the study of objects’ meanings in the Quai Branly’s collections. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, “the very meaning and value of a cultural object varies according to the system of objects in which it is placed” (Bourdieu 1984:88). Objects transported to the Quai Branly’s permanent collections acquire new meanings during the process of recontextualization that accompanies their movement between cultures. This acquisition of meaning can take the form of a transition between ethnographic and aesthetic significance. Anthropologist Sally Price describes the distinction between displaying “art” and presenting “ethnography” in a museum:

For displays presenting objects as art, the implied definition of what should ‘happen’ between object and viewer is relatively constant; the museum visitor’s task-pleasure is conceptualized first and foremost as a perpetual-emotional experience, not a cognitive-educational one. [Price 2007:83]

Museums can choose whether to emphasize aesthetic or ethnographic qualities of the objects they exhibit “through a variety of cues ranging from lighting, spacing, grouping, and so forth, but most directly through label copy” (85). In the context of Western museums, this choice is apparent in the display of works from “exotic” and unfamiliar cultures. Because these objects are perceived to exist outside of the Western artistic canon with which museumgoers are assumed to be familiar, written information about
their creation and original significance can accompany their display with little controversy.

In contrast, objects displayed as art often go unaccompanied by explanations of original cultural significance. Art historian Craig Clunas writes that “Crucial to this way of categorising in European museum and academic practice is the strategy whereby notions of function must largely be removed from the objects of the exercise. In order to be an object of ‘decorative art’ a cup must no longer be drunk from” (Clunas 1998:43-44). The Quai Branly subverts the dominant Western museological practice of ascribing an ethnographic gaze to non-Western material culture. The museum seeks to educate visitors about other cultures through their objects while simultaneously valorizing the aesthetic qualities of these objects. The museum’s mission reflects the layering of significance of objects as the objects move from their original cultural context to the permanent collections. The fluidity of this significance complicates the discovery of the Quai Branly’s collections purely as ethnographic indicators of unfamiliar cultures.

In spite of the multitude of meanings of the Quai Branly’s objects, the necessity of ethnographic contextualization at the museum reflects the fact that visitors are largely unfamiliar with the cultures represented in the permanent collections. This situation defines a visit to the Quai Branly as a process of exploration. Violeta Ekpo, director of museums in Nigeria, describes the fundamental conflict between the aesthetic and the ethnographic at the Quai Branly:

Il devrait avoir plus d’informations sur l’interprétation des objets, en particulier les objets africains, afin que les gens comprennent la signification des objets et la place qu’ils occupent dans les sociétés qui les ont produits. Parce que si l’objet est exposé seul, il sera définitivement interprété pour son esthétique, en fonction de la compréhension qu’en a
Ekpo underlines the effect that aestheticized and decontextualized objects have on the uninitiated visitor in a museum context: the visitor remains unfamiliar with the culture of the creator of the object and is able to appreciate this work only for its aesthetic qualities. Alternatively, the visitor could situate the object within prior impressions of non-Western cultures, informed by Paris Match and The Adventures of Tintin. In his response to Ekpo’s statement, anthropologist Maurice Godelier, former director of research at the Quai Branly, asserts that one must leave room for the interpretation of original cultural significance in the ethnographic explanation that accompanies the object:

Dans un musée, vous devez donner la signification de l’objet produit par un sujet et par une société, une seule société, et en même temps […] On ne peut pas […] empêcher quelqu’un d’autre d’avoir une autre vision du même objet, parce qu’il s’agit d’un objet symbolique et tous les symboles peuvent être transférés, transformés, prendre un nouveau sens: ils sont vivants. [Godelier in Latour 2007:42]

Godelier’s argument supports the marriage of ethnographic and aesthetic interpretations of non-Western objects that the Quai Branly fosters. His view corresponds with that of the literature scholar Pierre Bayard, who argues that the reading of a book differs between individuals and across time. The latter author cites Montaigne’s inability to recall books he has “leaf[ed] through” (Montaigne 1957:296 in Bayard 2007:49), citing this as evidence of the existence of an infinite, perpetually fluctuating library of “screen books” constructed by one’s memories, experiences, and impressions. (Bayard 2007:44-45, 83, 160). Each individual’s screen book is therefore unique. If one extends Bayard’s argument to include cultural differences as influencing one’s reading of a book/object,
one arrives at Godelier’s insistence on the necessity of interpretive space in the Quai Branly’s collections.

Art historian John Mack argues that “sens devrait être au pluriel, pas du tout au singulier” (Mack in Latour 2007:40), suggesting that we cannot conceive of objects as possessing a unique meaning in the societies from which they have been removed. Bayard’s theory holds true across cultures: a Syrian shadow puppet has a different meaning for its Syrian creator than for the Syrian audience for whom it is intended. The puppet-maker views the puppet in the context of his artisanal knowledge, whereas the audience member understands the puppet within the framework of the puppet show. Moreover, the puppet’s meaning for the artisan twenty years after its creation differs from its significance on the day it was created. This fluctuation of meaning travels with the puppet from Syria to Paris, where its meaning for an eight year-old Parisian child with no Syrian heritage visiting the Quai Branly differs from that for the child’s parents. The puppet’s meaning changes for both the child and for his parents when they return to the museum six weeks later.

In spite of Godelier’s and Bayard’s assertion of the infinite personal readings of an object/book, Ekpo’s argument remains relevant. Ekpo indicates a crucial issue in the Quai Branly’s relationship with both its collections and its visitors: that of explaining the original cultural significance of an object to the museum’s visitors. The Quai Branly’s curators provide the Syrian shadow puppet with an exhibit label that explains the significance of the object in its original cultural context. The museum thus provides an ethnographic point of departure for the visitor’s interpretation of the work. Ethnographic contextualization is essential because the Quai Branly’s stated goal is to facilitate
intercultural dialogue. Indicating the original cultural significance of an object at the Quai Branly allows visitors to gain insight into unfamiliar cultures. This ethnographic perspective exists alongside the aesthetic focus that the Quai Branly applies to its collections. Art historian Christopher Steiner summarizes the questions raised by the aesthetic valorization of non-Western material culture in Western museums:

African art objects when displayed in the West are elevated to the category of art by denying them their former use or use value—baskets and calabashes are displayed on pedestals not balanced on the head […] it could be argued that an object’s aesthetic merit in the art world is heightened, or perhaps even made possible, by the very fact that its value transcends any practical function thereby shedding its former utility. [Steiner 1995:160]

Steiner’s discussion of the African object “transcending” its functional importance to achieve a purely aesthetic significance demonstrates the value placed on the aesthetic gaze in the context of Western museums. His argument corresponds with Clunas’s assertion that objects must shed their functions in order to become art in a museum context. The Quai Branly’s visitor who reacts to the alluring forms of the object produced outside of a familiar cultural context reinforces the power of the art museum gaze. Aesthetic emphasis and the presence of contextualizing ethnographic information comprise the visitor’s discovery of non-Western material culture at the Quai Branly.

A funeral pole from Madagascar displayed at the Quai Branly exemplifies the necessity of ethnographic context for the museum’s public and buttresses the discovery that the museum fosters. Removed from its original cultural context and presented in a museum before an audience that does not possess knowledge of this context, the funeral pole becomes an alluring sculpture. Recontextualized in this museum through an exhibit label, the pole assumes the role of an ambassador of an unfamiliar culture, educating a
curious public about the burial traditions of its native society. The display of the pole places value on it both as a work of art and as an ethnographic object. The presentation thus encourages the visitor to marvel at the object’s form and to appreciate its cultural significance in Madagascar. The funeral pole of Paris, formerly of Madagascar, is no longer used to mark burial sites, but rather to illustrate the cultural practices of the people of its original home. Its function has shifted dramatically along with its cross-cultural emigration. The ethnographic and aesthetic interpretations of the pole converge at the encounter with the work that curators hope to create for the visitor. At first struck by its form, the visitor subsequently gains insight into its cultural significance. Ethnographic appreciation of the work can proceed from the initial aesthetic encounter. This process defines the work as an object to be discovered and studied by the visitor at the Quai Branly.

Self and Other: The concept of the other saturates the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly. Cultural studies scholar Kevin Robins defines the other as a subjective concept: “The other is what eludes our consciousness and knowing, and it is what resides outside the sphere of ‘our’ culture and community” (Robins 2005:249). The differentiation of the other from the self at the Quai Branly reinforces the process of discovery of unfamiliar cultures that a visit to the museum is designed to facilitate. The exclusion of European cultures from the collections provides a clear indication of the conceptual distinction between self and other. Yves Le Fur, adjunct director of the French Department of Patrimony and Collections and responsable of the Quai Branly’s permanent collections, asserts that the self’s relationship to the other, the act of comparing and judging oneself relative to others, represents the “plus profond mouvement des hommes” (Le Fur
Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss writes that our tendency to view unfamiliar cultures as inferior to our own is a human practice that “repose sans doute sur des fondements psychologiques solides puisqu’elle tend à réapparaître chez chacun de nous lorsque nous sommes placés dans une situation inattendue” (Lévi-Strauss [1952] 1987:19 in Le Fur 2006:13). If Lévi-Strauss’s conclusion regarding the individual faced with an unfamiliar culture is held to be true, valorization of all cultures on equal footing runs counter to human nature. The intercultural dialogue that the Quai Branly intends to foster can serve as a vital instrument in demonstrating the value of all human cultures. Conversely, it can reinforce conceptions of non-Western cultures as bizarre and primitive. The Quai Branly represents a site devoted to the encounter with unfamiliar cultures and thus explicitly responds to the human desire to encounter the other.

The cultural dialogue at the Musée du Quai Branly implies the existence of distinct and differentiated cultures. A visit to the collections, an act that embodies the cultural dialogue, thus becomes the discovery of unfamiliar cultural traditions. During a series of academic roundtables organized at the opening of the museum, Stéphane Martin declared that “la quasi-totalité des pièces qu’il [le quai Branly] est chargé de présenter, de conserver et d’expliquer, sont entièrement étrangères au territoire d’implantation immédiate de l’institution” (Martin in Latour 2007:13). Martin’s assertion reveals a problematic issue that is central to the Quai Branly’s existence: the objects displayed in the museum are considered to be thoroughly other to the Western cultural tradition. However, the Quai Branly supports encounters with unfamiliar cultures through the definition of its collections as the “patrimoine de l’humanité” (Bertrand in Latour 2007:16). The concept of universal cultural patrimony seems to contradict the definition.
of the Quai Branly’s collections as representatives of the non-Western other, but universality does not negate the historical distinction between the familiarity of Western material culture and the unfamiliarity of non-Western objects. I discuss the concept of universality in greater detail in Chapter 5. Léon Bertrand, former French Minister of Tourism, states explicitly that “chaque héritage culturel est un patrimoine de l’humanité et ce, tant qu’il enrichit la connaissance de l’autre et permet à chacun de s’épanouir” (16). Bertrand thus reinforces the value that the Quai Branly places on the cross-cultural encounter through its collections. The exchange across cultures that the Quai Branly facilitates corresponds with the discovery of unfamiliar cultures designed to take place at the museum.

The position of the Quai Branly’s collections as non-Western objects facilitates their interpretation (on the part of the architect, curators, and directors who created the museum as well as by visitors) in two ways. The collections can be seen as irrevocably other, that is, as artifacts that bear witness to exotic cultures and faraway landscapes. The objects can also be interpreted as part of the patrimony of humanity, and thus as bound to the Western observer by the indestructible ties of human identity. This latter position corresponds with philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah’s theory of cosmopolitanism, which I examine in Chapter 5. Positioning the cultures represented at the Quai Branly as distinct from the self’s culture as well as connecting these cultures to the self’s culture through the web of humanity both support and undermine the definition of a visit to the Quai Branly as a process of discovery. I develop this point in Chapter 5. These two interpretive categories are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the Quai Branly’s discourse as developed through the exhibition of its collections as well as through its published
material advocates a simultaneous valorization of the objects as testaments to the universality of human creation and as manifestations of the great differences in systems of value and adaptation that exist between cultures.

*The Colonial Past and the Quai Branly:* The legacy of colonialism exerts a profound influence on the Quai Branly’s position in contemporary globalized society. French colonial authorities collected many of the objects that comprise the museum’s collections (Joubert and Vivier 2009:17), a situation that leads the visitor to consider the Quai Branly in relation to France’s colonial past. The colonial history that accompanies the Quai Branly’s objects defines the process of discovery that the museum facilitates as that of an object in addition to its changing significance produced by its changing cultural context. This definition of the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly undermines the process of discovery of objects as works unaltered from their original cultural significance. The museum’s place in the globalized world contains elements of both general accessibility and prohibitive exclusivity. The Quai Branly’s prominence in the global museum landscape and the availability of information on the Internet render curatorial decisions visible throughout the world. However, its location necessarily prevents many individuals from visiting the museum and evaluating the presentation of the collections firsthand. The Quai Branly cannot avoid this: specificity of place entails exclusion of individuals based on their relative geographical location. The museum’s position in Paris, the seat of power of the former French colonial empire, holds special significance for the exclusion of the inhabitants of ex-colonies. The Parisian public has access to material culture produced by individuals whose descendants, in large part, are unable to visit the Quai Branly. This access is foreshadowed by the representation of non-Western cultures and
objects in the “African” vogue of the early twentieth century and in *The Adventures of Tintin*. An object in the Quai Branly’s permanent collections can be seen as part of the cultural heritage of a former colony that has been appropriated by the colonizer and reinterpreted as belonging to a universal cultural patrimony. The significance of the colonial past for the Quai Branly permeates anthropologist Josette Shaje Tshiluila’s evocation of the anger of individuals from former colonies at seeing objects created in their culture on display in Western museums: “Souvent, le public qui vient a un sentiment de révolte: ‘Nous venons voir nos objets, mais pourquoi notre patrimoine se trouve-t-il ici? Comment est-il arrivé ici? On nous l’a enlevé!’” (Shaje Tshiluuila in Latour 2007:254). The object’s location at the Quai Branly therefore reinforces the colonial power structure. Contextualizing the Quai Branly in the legacy of French colonialism reveals the problematic relationship between the museum and the world. This relationship defines the visitor’s experience at the museum as one of the discovery of non-Western objects in addition to the colonial history that saw their transportation to the Quai Branly.

The Quai Branly has been criticized for failing to address the legacy of colonialism to a satisfactory degree. Questions of appropriate display lie at the heart of the Quai Branly’s complex postcolonial status. Specifically, the museum’s aestheticization of its collections is seen as ignoring the painful histories of the movement of these works from their original cultural contexts to the halls of museums in the West (Ruiz-Gómez 2006:425). The Quai Branly’s display of its collections can thus be seen to facilitate the discovery of non-Western objects without the colonial history that accompanies them. The visitor’s discovery represents an encounter with the object as a work of art and of ethnography, rather than as a palimpsest that bears the marks of
colonialism. According to this critical view, the Quai Branly subtracts the colonial context from its display of non-Western objects. I address the negative critical response to the Quai Branly’s perceived treatment of its colonial heritage in Chapter 4. Despite the critique of the Quai Branly as neglecting to address colonial history, one could argue that the museum’s intention to facilitate dialogue around its collections as works relevant to all human populations transcends the colonialis past. Germain Viatte, the Quai Branly’s former director of museology, asserts that the museum introduces a new cross-cultural discourse that moves beyond colonialism and postcolonialism (Quai Branly: La naissance d’un musée). This understanding of the Quai Branly’s global significance characterizes the museum as a means to achieve universal respect for all material culture and thereby to foster harmonious cultural exchange. In spite of the potential for the Quai Branly to create a new intercultural approach to the study of material culture, the legacy of colonialism lingers in the global museum dialogue and complicates any exchange between the cultures of the former colonizers and those of the ex-colonies. This complexity manifests itself in the contention over the Quai Branly’s aestheticization of its collections.

Research Methodology: This project is based on ethnographic, archival, and library research that I conducted at the Musée du Quai Branly between September 2009 and January 2010. I carried out approximately thirteen hours of interviews with museum staff. I followed the format of discovery ethnography through a series of five one-hour interviews with an agent d’accueil et de médiation charged with directing visitors and answering their questions in the Quai Branly’s collections hall. These interviews helped me begin to understand the museum’s organization and the ways in which visitors move
through the collections space. I interviewed a curator from each section of the Quai Branly’s collections (Océanie, Insulinde, Asie, Afrique, and Amériques) in order to learn about the museum administration’s conception of the objects and the messages that curators wish to communicate in displaying the collections. Speaking with a representative of each section allowed me to see the relationships between the different parts of the museum and to understand the ideas that unite the space. In addition, I interviewed a Quai Branly official who studies visitors’ responses to the museum and I spoke with two employees of the Musée du Louvre charged, respectively, with coordinating interdepartmental collaboration and with presenting explanatory texts during temporary exhibitions. These interviews gave me a broader impression of the issues involved in displaying objects in a museum and communicating with the public. I performed twelve hours of participant observation in the Quai Branly’s collections, studying the ways in which museum visitors move through the collections. I took note of such aspects of the relationship between the collections and the visitors as which objects appeared to attract the most attention, the manner in which visitors in groups moved in relation to one another, and the amount of time visitors took to arrive at the end of a section. During brief interviews with visitors in the collections (twenty-five interviews, five hours in total), I learned about visitors’ reactions to the objects and their impressions of the exhibition space.

I consulted the Quai Branly’s archives to study a collection of articles from the international press written at the museum’s opening. This research allowed me to better understand the global reaction to the museum. I examined archives of the museum’s guestbook to learn more about visitors’ reactions. I consulted several library sources
while in Paris and further supported my ethnographic and archival research with library research at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota.

I explained the academic purpose of my research to all of my informants before interviewing them and I acquired their consent. I use pseudonyms to refer to informants throughout my thesis. I also kept the Quai Branly informed of my project as it developed and I submitted a copy of the thesis to the officials I interviewed before the project’s final deadline. I include the inventory numbers, available in the Quai Branly’s online catalogue of its collections, of the objects I discuss in this thesis.

Thesis Outline: In the remaining chapters of this thesis, I develop my study of the discovery of the Quai Branly’s collections as works of art and as ethnographic objects. In Chapter 2, I review the academic literature relevant to the Quai Branly and apply theoretical perspectives to my analysis. This chapter provides an intellectual and historical foundation for my more specific discussion of the Quai Branly and its genesis in Chapter 3. In this chapter, I focus on two individuals in the Paris museum world who exerted particular influence on the Quai Branly as a site for cultural dialogue. I then describe the physical character of the museum and aspects of the collections space that influence the visitor’s encounter with the museum’s objects as art and as ethnography. In Chapter 4, I examine the relationship between the Quai Branly and its visitors through an analysis of curators’ goals and visitors’ reactions. In this section, I rely heavily on my ethnographic research with the Quai Branly’s visitors, curators, and other members of the museum’s staff. This discussion reveals key factors that influence visitors’ reception of the Quai Branly’s intended messages. In Chapter 5, I situate the Quai Branly in the larger
museum dialogue and I discuss the relevance of the museum in the globalized world. I analyze the Quai Branly’s mission of acting as a universal museum, that is, as an institution that transcends cultural boundaries in order to present its collections as holding relevance for all human populations. I conclude my argument in Chapter 6. In the remaining sections of this thesis, I develop and expand my argument that the Quai Branly fosters an experience of exploration and discovery in its permanent collections, but that the global significance of the objects complicates this experience for visitors.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Background and Literature Review

In this chapter, I situate my study of the Musée du Quai Branly within the relevant academic literature. I do this in order to discuss the theoretical context that accompanies the process of discovery of unfamiliar cultures that the museum fosters. I divide the scholarly work that applies to this project into three groups. The first category consists of comparative studies of material culture and considerations of the role of museums in facilitating these studies. Examining these sources illustrates the construction of the museum gaze, which is an essential foundation for the study of the perspective of discovery that the Quai Branly facilitates. The second group of scholars studies the relationship between the concept of primitive art and that of art proper. The opposition between these two concepts indicates the role of the self and the other in the discovery of unfamiliar cultures at the Quai Branly. Three examples of the social power of museums and museum objects constitute the third and final category. These examples draw on the work of anthropologists Alfred Gell and Kay Milton, and that of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Analysis of this category provides context for the visitor’s discovery of and reaction to the Quai Branly’s collections as works of art and as ethnographic objects.

Museums and Material Culture: Visitors’ discovery of the Quai Branly’s collections as ethnographic objects rests on the tradition of the comparative display of non-Western objects in Western museums of anthropology. In the nineteenth century, the ethnographers Hjalmar Stolpe and Augustus Pitt Rivers conducted extensive studies of the forms of objects, seeing similarities and sequences in their shapes. Stolpe asserts that artistic representation proceeds from a realistic rendering of the human form to a simplified and abstract figure (Severi 2007:48, 57, 59). Pitt Rivers exercised considerable
influence on the presentation of ethnographic objects in museums (McMullen 2009:75). His study of boomerangs and throwing sticks, “arranged to show ‘slow gradations’ from straight to curved shapes” illustrates his belief in the “connection of form” as well as the “functional affinity” of material culture (Chapman 1985:18). Historic preservation scholar William Ryan Chapman characterizes the work of Pitt Rivers as an “attempt to trace all mankind back to a single source and to reconstruct the human history of racial differentiation and interconnection” (39). Although the dominant discourse in contemporary anthropology collections does not advocate “racial differentiation,” the Quai Branly does display objects in its collections comparatively in order to encourage visitors to discover the commonalities that exist between cultures. The comparative work of Pitt Rivers finds an intellectual heir in Lévi-Strauss’s theory that material culture has meaning only in context with other, similar examples of objects (Lévi-Strauss 1982:12-13). Lévi-Strauss studied ceremonial masks of Indigenous peoples of the North American Northwest Coast, ascribing the objects’ similarity of form and use to the myths these cultures share (12-13). Charlotte, responsable des collections Amériques at the Quai Branly, cites the importance of Lévi-Strauss’s theory to the design of a comparative display in the Amériques section of the permanent collections. The ethnographer who designed this display “montre comment les formes se transforment et aussi derrière une idée se transforme du nord au sud de l’époque préhispanique à nos jours” (personal interview December 15, 2009). In this display, objects are presented in a geographic sequence to encourage comparison between their forms. The presence of cross-cultural comparison through material objects in the Quai Branly’s approach to the presentation of its collections illustrates the museum’s inheritance of the tradition of comparative studies
of material culture. Cross-cultural comparison corresponds with the experience of
discovery that the Quai Branly’s curators seek to provide for visitors.

Early anthropologists, Franz Boas notable among them, placed great emphasis on
objects as means to study non-European cultures (Forge 1973:xiii). Boas’s approach to
the display of non-Western material culture in museums differed drastically from that of
Pitt Rivers, the former believing that the best method of exhibition consists of a “tribal
arrangement of collections” (Boas 1887 in Stocking 1975 in Jacknis 1985:79). Boas
advocated an emic display of museum collections, one that would provide insight into the
original meanings of the objects. However, by 1907 Boas had become disillusioned with
museum anthropology, asserting that

the psychological as well as the historical relations of cultures, which are
the only objects of anthropological inquiry, can not be expressed by any
arrangement based on so small a portion of the manifestation of ethnic life
as is presented by specimens. [Boas 1907 in Science in Jacknis 1985:108]

Boas thus “attempt[ed] to move anthropology from an artifact-based utilitarianism to a
more contextual, relative, and psychological stance” (Jacknis 1985:108). Boas’s move
away from museum anthropology contributed to the rise in first-hand contact with
cultures themselves as the most productive form of ethnographic study. The relative ease
of travel and communication in many contemporary societies has made fieldwork more
accessible for anthropologists, who no longer rely exclusively on specimens brought back
from unfamiliar cultures in forming their understanding of these cultures. The process of
discovery through material culture that the Quai Branly seeks to create for the visitor thus
operates in a globalized world, in which images of formerly unfamiliar cultures have
permeated Western mass culture. Boas’s influence in the field of museum anthropology
indicates the tempestuous genealogy of the Musée du Quai Branly.
The work of scholars such as Boas and Pitt Rivers gave rise to the ethnographic museum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Anthropologist George Stocking defines the “Museum Period” of anthropology as lasting from the 1840s until 1890 (Stocking 1985:7). Early ethnographic museums emphasized the functional use and social significance of the objects they exhibited. Paris’s Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, established in 1880, exemplified the new institution devoted to the study and display of the objects of foreign cultures, in which the practice of classification dominated: “Il faut donner un ordre à ce que l’on veut montrer, il faut donc classer les matériaux, et les sociétés qui les ont produits!” (Bahuchet 2004:65). Sociologist Tony Bennett, citing an anecdote related in 1927 by George Sherwood, a curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, dubs the early museum of anthropology and natural history the “Dead Circus” (Bennett 2004:12). Bennett explains that “in ethnological collections, the metaphorically and the literally dead confusingly collided as the artefacts of colonised peoples, contextualised as the remnants of dead or dying peoples, were displayed side-by-side with their physical remains” (12). The ordering and cataloguing of objects in ethnographic museums demonstrate the tradition of museum anthropology that the Quai Branly inherits and endeavors to revolutionize. I discuss the organization of the museum’s collections in Chapter 4. By displaying the collections according to particular organizational principles, the Quai Branly’s curators construct a process of discovery for visitors. This discovery builds on the foundation of museum anthropology as developed by Pitt Rivers and Boas.

*Primitive Art and Art:* The conception of scientific study of “ethnographic objects” as distinct from aesthetic appreciation of “primitive art” applies Western
interpretive categories to non-Western material culture and thereby complicates the
discovery of unfamiliar cultures at the Quai Branly. This distinction has roots in the
genesis of the museum in Europe in the nineteenth century amidst widely held beliefs in
the inherent differences between “civilized” and “primitive” societies. Sally Price
develops a collection of definitions for “primitive art” that illustrates the term’s nebulous
character (Price 1989:2-3) and that suggests that the categories of art and ethnography
can refer to the same objects. I define “primitive art” and “ethnographic art” as the art of
the non-Western margins, viewed from a Western perspective of ethnocentrism. The
experience of non-Western material culture as both primitive art and as art proper
indicates the meanings that Western observers apply to unfamiliar objects. These
meanings both support and undermine the discovery of the Quai Branly’s collections. For
example, curators’ definition of a Fang mask\textsuperscript{xxii} as a legitimate work of art encourages the
visitor to discover the aesthetic qualities of the mask and then to study its significance in
its original cultural context. However, the visitor’s knowledge that this mask inspired
Picasso to paint \textit{Les demoiselles d'Avignon} means that one discovers not the object in
itself but the object accompanied by its cultural history in the West. The categories of
primitive art and art proper illustrate the difficulty of applying the lens of exploration and
discovery to an experience of the Quai Branly’s collections.

Dillon Ripley, former director of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.,
writes that “an unspoken schism existed in scholars’ minds about the history of mankind.
Art and culture were an obvious near-monopoly of the Western world and the highest
civilizations from which our Western world derived- the Greeks, Egyptians, Jews and
Babylonians” (Ripley 1982:78). He characterizes the separation of this Western tradition
from those societies considered external to the civilized world: “Anthropologists were not supposed to be interested in the Greeks or the Bible, but rather to concern themselves with Red Indians, noble savages, and, of course, Stone Age man” (79). Ripley’s discussion of the West-is-art, non-West-is-anthropology dichotomy signals the distinction between aesthetics and ethnography that occupies a central position in the experience of unfamiliar cultures at the Musée du Quai Branly.

A colonialist framework supports the definition and legitimation of non-Western material culture as art by Western observers. Colonial history subverts the definition of a visit to the Quai Branly as a process of discovery of the objects and insists upon the experience of the colonial context as woven through the collections. The academic work undertaken by researchers such as Pitt Rivers contrasts with the artistic epiphanies felt by European artists in the first half of the twentieth century. The anecdote of Picasso’s visit to the Trocadéro suggests that, for him, the soul of art shone through “the dust and clutter” (Price 2007:ix) of this traditional ethnographic museum. The story hints at the dual character (ethnographic and artistic) of non-Western objects in a museum for a Western public.

The colonialist context in which anthropological studies of non-Western material culture were situated remained largely unproblematized until the appearance in 1978 of literary theorist Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, which “laid the foundations for an enquiry into colonial culture which has had wide repercussions across the humanities” (Barringer and Flynn 1998:2). Although Said in this work “was concerned with academic writing and literature rather than visual art, the vigorously anti-imperial spirit of his book made it inevitable that positive assessment of modernist interest in tribal art would give way to
contention” (Thomas 1999:7). Said asserts that “the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 1994:1). Said thus emphasizes the power of the Western gaze in creating an exotic understanding of unfamiliar cultures. This exoticism contributes to a romantic and artistic interpretation of non-Western material culture in museums. Said’s characterization of the imagined Orient recalls Hergé’s portrayal of invented cultures in *The Adventures of Tintin*. Anthropologist Nicholas Thomas asks: “Were [European artists’] interest in tribal culture merely projections of Western fantasies that reflected no deep understanding of any particular non-European tradition?” (Thomas 1999:7). Thomas’s question leads one to ask whether Picasso appreciated the original cultural significance of the masks that so inspired him or whether he was moved only by their seductive forms and mysterious aura, that is, by their subjectively defined aesthetic value. This application of a Western system of aesthetic evaluation indicates the limits of the process of discovery of the Quai Branly’s collections as concerning exclusively the objects in themselves.

The categories of primitive and ethnographic art, as well as the French term *arts premiers* exemplify the role of the Western gaze in defining the non-Western object at the Quai Branly and thus in influencing the encounter with the museum’s collections. These categories illustrate the confluence of ethnography and art in the contemporary museum world. Nevertheless, museums distinguish between these definitions and “art,” a term that encompasses Western aesthetic production. Distinction between art and ethnography renders the definition of the Quai Branly’s collections as *arts premiers* complex. The fact that this distinction arises from the conception of the art of the Western self in contrast to
that of the non-Western other defines the discovery of the Quai Branly’s collections as the discovery of the object and its definition as constructed by Western observers, rather than of the object in itself.

Philosopher and anthropologist Raymond Corbey writes that, from the perspective of anthropologists involved with the genesis of the Quai Branly, “arts premiers- a neologism apparently coined by one of [Parisian art dealer Jacques] Kerchache’s writer-friends- still sounded too much like art primitif” (Corbey 2000:4). I discuss Kerchache in detail in the following chapter. Primitive/ethnographic art and arts premiers refer to objects created in “traditional” non-Western societies and interpreted within an aesthetic framework. “Traditional” stands in opposition to more complex means of social organization, such as the Asian empires represented by the objects at the Musée Guimet in Paris. The Western observer defines the primitive in contrast to the civilized and considers the primitive object as a work that “does not even possess consciousness of itself, its own past, present, and future. It is the victim of its own timelessness, a static condition characterized by and contained by ethnic, tribal, communal, irrational, unconscious, traditional… modes of existence” (Araeen 1992:160). In other words, the primitive object in a museum is located in a perpetual “ethnographic present” (McMullen 2009:69). Price defines the ethnographic present as a tradition, established by early anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and E. E. Evans-Pritchard, that removes temporal progression from ethnographic description and thus presents cultures as unchanging (Price 1989:57). By this logic, “primitive” material culture is the manifestation of a primitive mode of thought and of a primitive people. Even when understood as works of art, this form of non-Western material culture retains an aura of
unfamiliarity for the Western visitor, who places it in an ethnographic category distinct from the realm of Western art. The conceptual divide between art and ethnography defines the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly as one of the discovery of non-Western objects in addition to their meanings established in the West. This process undermines the experience of exploration that the museum endeavors to create for the visitor.

In spite of the conceptualization common in museums of the distinction between Western and non-Western material culture as that between art and primitive art, the visitor’s experience of objects as works of art can create a sense of the equality and universal validity of aesthetic experience. The Quai Branly’s emphasis on non-Western objects as works of art exemplifies the valorization of *arts premiers* as works that should be encountered in the same manner as works that occupy a solid position within the Western artistic canon. The display par excellence of *arts premiers* can perhaps be found at the Musée du Louvre’s Pavillon des Sessions (Price 2007:170). The Pavillon opened in 2000 and is the brainchild of Jacques Kerchache. It displays “masterpieces” of *arts premiers*, that is, material culture from non-Western cultures decontextualized and presented like Picassos at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The Pavillon’s white walls and minimal ethnographic contextualization encourage an aesthetic appreciation of the works. The exhibition’s location within the Louvre is intended to place the objects on equal footing with the acknowledged masterpieces of the Western canon (Corbey 2000:3). This relationship between Western and non-Western material culture can be perceived as urging the visitor to study a moai from Easter Island in the same manner that one gazes upon Michelangelo’s *Dying Slave*, displayed elsewhere in the Louvre’s
galleries. However, the Pavillon is spatially isolated from the rest of the Louvre’s collections in a remote wing of the museum, and one can understand its position conversely as symbolizing the conceptual gulf that separates Western and non-Western material culture in the mind of the Western observer. The Pavillon des Sessions exemplifies the problematic relationship of non-Western objects defined as *arts premiers* with the accepted works of the Western artistic canon. This relationship manifests itself in the Quai Branly’s valorization of non-Western material culture as legitimate works of art, but as objects that belong to cultures distinct from the Western culture in which they are exhibited.

Ghislaine, *responsable des collections Asie* at the Quai Branly, expresses a narrower definition of the concept of *arts premiers*. She describes the Quai Branly’s Asian objects explicitly as ethnography and eschews the category of *arts premiers* (personal communication January 13, 2010). Moreover, Ghislaine contrasts the living cultures in *Asie* with the collection of objects from extinct cultural traditions at the Musée Guimet, a Parisian museum devoted to ancient Asian objects (personal communication January 13, 2010). Ghislaine defines *art premier* from Asian cultures as

> un art de petites cultures qui sont restées relativement autonomes […] Donc on ne peut pas avoir ça dans des lieux où il y a d’énormes civilisations extrêmement puissantes qui ont, en fin de compte, éradiqué depuis très longtemps toutes les petites cultures. C’est le cas de l’Europe. C’est le cas de l’Asie avec l’Inde et la Chine. [personal communication January 13, 2010]

For Ghislaine, the category of *arts premiers* does not encompass the entirety of Asian material culture. In her view, the Quai Branly’s collection of Asian objects indicates the continued use of material culture in contemporary Asian societies. For example, a Vietnamese textile that bears images of aircraft illustrates the cultural significance of
the Vietnam War translated into material culture (personal communication January 13, 2010). *Arts premiers* defined as the products of artisans working in relative isolation from grand, homogenizing cultural traditions suggests the limitations of the term as applied to all material culture created outside of the Western tradition. The discovery of the entirety of the Quai Branly’s collections as objects belonging to the category of *arts premiers* encounters difficulty with Ghislaine’s narrower definition of this category.

Non-Western material culture has had great impact on the development of Western art movements, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century. This impact indicates the process of discovery that Western artists undertook as they encountered non-Western material culture. However, the relationship that Western observers see between non-Western objects and Western artists reveals the culturally specific framework in which these observers define non-Western material culture as works of art. Discussing the sculpture of the Dogon people of eastern Mali, art collector Lester Wunderman writes that it “had striking similarities to Picasso, Modigliani, Giacometti, and the German Expressionists. Was this simply accident or coincidence? How did it manage to be geometric, abstract, and naturalistic all at the same time?” (Wunderman 1973:12). Wunderman reacts to non-Western material culture within a Western artistic framework. His further questions, “Why was Dogon art called primitive or ethnographic? What was primitive- the art, the artist, the society he lived in? (Who decides what is primitive anyway?)” (12), suggest the problematic relationship between non-Western art objects and the works of artists acknowledged to be firmly entrenched within the Western art canon. The observer can consider the products of unfamiliar cultures on the same level as that of the works of Picasso and Max Ernst. Wunderman’s association of Dogon
objects with Picasso’s work recalls Picasso’s own “discovery” of the Fang mask as an *objet d’art* and illustrates the “discovery narrative” that Errington proposes as characterizing the initial encounter between non-Western material culture and the Western art world (Errington 1998:49, 54-56). This cross-cultural comparison of form within a Western framework “led to the category of ‘slippery ‘ethnographic surrealism,’ or crossing over of ethnography, popular culture, and surrealist aesthetics” (Levitz 2008:605). The observer encounters the limitations of such categories in realizing ignorance of the cultural context in which these supposed masterpieces of non-Western art were produced. At the Quai Branly, the historical impact of non-Western material culture on the development of Western art corresponds with the discovery both of unfamiliar cultures and of the collections as cloaked in layers of meaning constructed by Western observers themselves.

Art historian Benjamin Rowland, Jr. succinctly characterizes the perceived contrast between Western and “primitive” art as a distinction between nontraditional and traditional art, respectively: “whereas traditional art is almost invariably anonymous, and the painter or sculptor a dedicated craftsman, the nontraditional artist is an individual who uses art as an expression of his own personal moods or as a means for displaying his own technical virtuosity” (Rowland 1966:2). The author’s definition of traditional art fits the ethnographic presentation of objects at the Quai Branly. Moreover, the distinction between these two categories reveals the interpretive context that museums apply to non-Western objects and thus subverts the encounter with a work as the discovery of an object in itself, unencumbered by categorizing gazes. Rowland writes that nontraditional art emerged in the West during the Renaissance (2). Defining non-Western material culture
with a category that Western creation has supposedly long abandoned positions non-Western cultures as less developed, that is, as primitive. This definition changes the experience of discovery for the visitor at the Quai Branly.

The Quai Branly’s display of works by John Mawurndjul, a contemporary Aboriginal Australian artist, demonstrates the artificiality of the dualism between “primitive” or “ethnographic” art and art proper. Mawurndjul’s works are displayed in both art and anthropology museums: the Museum Tinguely in Basel hosted a retrospective of his career in 2005 (Perkins and West 2007:93) and he painted the ceiling of the Quai Branly’s gift shop in time for the museum’s 2006 opening. Moreover, Mawurndjul’s work is represented in the Quai Branly’s permanent collections with his name written on the accompanying information card. At the Quai Branly’s opening, President Jacques Chirac introduced Mawurndjul as a “maestro” (Perkins 2007:20). In Rowland’s definition, John Mawurndjul occupies the role of the nontraditional artist. This role subverts the categorization of his work as “primitive” or as “ethnographic.” The Western museum world’s definition of Mawurndjul’s paintings as contemporary art rather than as ethnography reveals the extent to which the distinction between aesthetics and anthropology is arbitrary. The addition of a name to the information card accompanying the display of a museum object as well as knowledge of the object’s creator as an individual with an evolving artistic style distinguish aesthetics from ethnography. The aesthetic and ethnographic qualities of every object can be emphasized or neglected through contextualization. The ability of museum presentation to influence the definition of an object indicates the role of the curator’s interpretation in influencing the visitor’s discovery of this object.
The questioning of Western academic and artistic conceptions of non-Western art manifested itself in the museum world in the late twentieth century. Art historians Tim Barringer and Tom Flynn situate the beginning of the critical reevaluation of the museum at art historian “Peter Vergo’s announcement of a ‘new museology’ (1989)” (Barringer and Flynn 1998:4). In Vergo’s view, museums must reflect critically on their messages and on their relationships with visitors (Vergo 1989:43). He describes the importance of exhibition design in determining visitors’ aesthetic and “contextual” interpretation of objects (48-52). Vergo’s use of the term “contextual” corresponds to the definition of ethnography in this thesis. This statement suggests the power of the Quai Branly’s curators in creating context for the museum’s collections and in influencing the visitor’s discovery of the works. Following Vergo’s work, “critical studies both of museums in general […] and of fine art in particular […] have proliferated, informed by critical theory and by ideas drawn from such disciplines as anthropology, sociology and archaeology” (Barringer and Flynn 1998:4). Critiquing the politics and identities of museums has particular importance for the Quai Branly, which presents objects that are unfamiliar to the majority of its public. In such museums, both the ethnographic contextualization and the aestheticization on the part of the museum play pivotal roles in facilitating visitors’ understanding of material culture.

Sally Price studies issues of cultural communication in the presence of “ethnographic art” in Western societies. In her 1989 work *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Price explores the construction of the categories of art and ethnography for non-Western material culture on display in the West (Price 1989:82). She asserts that the Western observer expects an object displayed as art to communicate its message through
inherent and immediately apparent aesthetic power, but that this observer views ethnographic objects as requiring a degree of cultural and functional contextualization in order to be appreciated (82). Price defines “primitive art” as moving flexibly between the categories of art and ethnography depending upon the methods used to present it (82-83). She stresses the inseparability of artistic and ethnographic perspectives, asserting that the artistic “eye” “views art through the lens of a Western cultural education” (93). The aesthetic perspective thus constitutes not a “pure” aesthetic experience, but a gaze influenced by the social framework within which it operates. Price cites Distinction, Pierre Bourdieu’s 1979 sociological work, as a foundation for her assertion that the aesthetic gaze cannot be divorced from its social context (20). I return to the relevance of Bourdieu’s work later in this chapter. Price’s characterization of the interdependence of the categories of art and ethnography resonate with curators’ interpretations of the Quai Branly’s collections, which I analyze in Chapter 4.

Price’s treatment of the privileged gaze of the Western aesthete (7-22) explains the cultural capital of art dealer Jacques Kerchache, which I discuss further in Chapter 3. In her 2007 book Paris Primitive, Price focuses on the Quai Branly. She places the museum in its historical and cultural context and identifies key issues that confront it. Price examines the definition of the Quai Branly’s collections as art and as ethnography and analyzes the role of the museum’s design on the visitor’s interpretation of the objects. The scope of her 2007 work is thus in line with my own unit of analysis in this thesis. I extend and reinforce Price’s study of the aesthetic and ethnographic presentation and interpretation of the Quai Branly’s collections with data that illustrate the goals of curators and the reactions of visitors. Moreover, I apply Price’s study of the role of the
museum in creating context for the visitor in my analysis of the discovery of the Quai Branly’s collections.

*The Social Power of Museums:* The Quai Branly’s collections possess social agency, in anthropologist Alfred Gell’s definition, as art and ethnography for curators and museum visitors. I use the term “spectator” in my discussion of Gell’s theory to refer to visitors and curators as a single unit of analysis. Although I make this choice for the purpose of this discussion, I note that curators’ interpretation of the collections profoundly influences that of visitors. I briefly revisit this distinction later in this section, and in Chapter 3. In Gell’s theoretical framework, agency is a force that creates “inferences, responses or interpretations” (Thomas 1998:ix). The agency that exists at the Quai Branly defines the museum as an art nexus, that is, as a place at which individuals exercise social relations through the intermediaries of art objects (Gell 1998:27, 68). In his discussion of the social power of art, Gell asserts that material culture contains and transmits agency. In Gell’s model, the art nexus consists of four elements, all of which possess agency in relation to each other (27). These elements are the index, the recipient, the artist, and the prototype (27). Although all four of these terms are essential to a thorough understanding of Gell’s theory, I apply only the categories of the index and the recipient to my study of the visitor’s experience of discovery at the Quai Branly. The objects at the Quai Branly (as indexes) derive their primary significance in the museum context insofar as spectators (as recipients) understand and interact with them.

The object in the Quai Branly’s collections acts as an index. Gell’s use of the term “index” builds upon semiotician C. S. Peirce’s discussion of logic and interpretation (13). Peirce explains the index as a quality that leads the viewer to a conclusion about the thing
to which it belongs (Peirce 1932:160-161). He gives the example of a weathervane’s position as an index of the wind’s direction (161). Gell defines the index as an “art object,” that is, as an entity (animate or inanimate) that occupies a position in a “social-relational matrix” (Gell 1998:7). With this broad definition, Gell allows the cultural context of each index to determine its character: he states that the index “has no ‘intrinsic’ nature” (7). The object at the Quai Branly acts as an index in the context of its relationships with spectators, relationships that constitute a specific set of interactions at the museum.

The object-as-index emits and receives agency, a process that Gell defines as “abduction,” borrowing the term from the field of semiotics (Eco 1984:40 in Gell 1998:14). Semiotician Umberto Eco describes abduction as “the tentative and hazardous tracing of a system of signification rules which will allow the sign to acquire its meaning” (Eco 1984:40). Eco uses Peirce’s definition of the sign as “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce 1932:135). An index is a kind of sign (170). The “something” for which the sign stands is the “object,” in Peirce’s terms (135). I make a careful distinction between Peirce’s logical “object,” Gell’s “art object,” and my own definition of “objects” as “material culture.” For the purpose of this discussion, I refer to Peirce’s “object” as a “concept.” Put differently, then, abduction is the process by which an observer understands a concept through viewing something that represents this concept physically. In Eco’s semiotic framework, abduction leads the spectator first to draw a conclusion about the sign, then to understand its meaning, and finally to understand the concept (Eco 1984:40). In Gell’s discussion of the agency of art objects, abduction occurs when the spectator reacts to the index and
arrives at a conclusion about the significance of this index. In the context of the Quai Branly, abduction of the index takes place when spectators appreciate the aesthetic and/or ethnographic meaning of a work on display. According to anthropologist Robert Layton’s analysis of Gell’s theory, “aesthetic values vary from culture to culture and are always embedded in a social framework” (Layton 2003:449). Aesthetic and ethnographic abduction are therefore embedded within each index. This assertion presents art and ethnography as two identities that can be emphasized or muted by abduction on the part of the curator and the visitor. The museum object’s role as an index illustrates its central position in the network of agency that shapes the interpretation of the Quai Branly’s collections. Visitors encounter the objects as entities with ethnographic and aesthetic significance, a process that corresponds with the museum’s mission of fostering the discovery of and dialogue with unfamiliar cultures.

Although the identity of “index” applies to the object at the Quai Branly insofar as the object provides insight into the concept it represents, Peirce’s definition of a symbol encapsulates the role of the museum’s curators in facilitating the discovery of this concept. This distinction between index and symbol is a departure from Gell’s theory; I include it in order to illustrate the full complexity of interactions between curators and visitors. A symbol is another kind of sign, one that makes an association between itself and the indexes “attached to it” (Peirce 1932:167). Peirce gives the example of a man, in the presence of an onlooker, pointing his arm towards a balloon and saying, “There is a balloon” (166). In this situation, the balloon is an index, but the balloon-plus-pointing arm is a symbol (166). The man’s act of indicating the balloon becomes a part of the onlooker’s experience of the balloon. In the context of the Quai Branly, the pointing arm
is analogous to the exhibit label that accompanies the object and the spotlight that illuminates it. The role of the Quai Branly’s curators in presenting an object in a certain way and in including contextualizing information transforms the object-as-index into an object-plus-context, that is, into an object-as-symbol. Peirce’s statement that the index is “physically connected with” the concept (168) supports the definition of the visitor’s experience of the Quai Branly’s collections as a process of discovery of cultural concepts embedded within the works. The role of curators in influencing this experience presents the museum object plus its interpretive context as a symbol and thereby complicates the process of discovery that the Quai Branly seeks to foster.

I now return to the framework of Gell’s theory. The spectator at the Musée du Quai Branly acts as a recipient (Gell 1998:27). The recipient abduces the index, imposing meaning on it or allowing the index to impose a perceived intrinsic meaning (31, 33). The index as mediator between its creator and the recipient becomes necessary when the two individuals do not meet (Layton 2003:452). Curators abduce the artistic and ethnographic significance of the Quai Branly’s collections through contextualizing information on text panels and multimedia tools. Visitors may view and interpret the objects, creating meaning for them through their ethnographic and aesthetic impressions. The application of interpretive categories to the Quai Branly’s collections represents the recipient’s agency over the index (Gell 1998:33). However, the spectator may consider that the objects displayed at the Quai Branly possess certain inherent aesthetic and ethnographic qualities. Visitors thus receive the artistic and cultural messages that the objects impart. Gell defines two varieties of the index-recipient relationship with the roles of agent and patient (22). “Agent” (A) designates the individual or object exercising agency on
another individual or object, called the “patient” (P). According to Gell, the two index-
recipient interactions are: Index A→Recipient P and Recipient A→Index P (31, 33). The
unanimous declaration of the Quai Branly’s objects as magnifiques\textsuperscript{xxvii} on the part of the
spectators whom I interviewed represents an abduction in which the index exerts agency
over the recipient, as a patient. I discuss this designation in greater detail in Chapter 4.
According to Sophie, responsable des collections Insulinde, the collections transmit “une
inventivité de formes et une beauté de toutes ces œuvres qui est inimaginable\textsuperscript{xxviii},”
(personal communication December 18, 2009). For Sophie, the aesthetic qualities of the
objects influence the spectator’s response to them. Sophie’s reaction to the collections
exemplifies the agency of the objects as indexes over spectators, who act as patient-
recipients.

The recipient acts as the agent and the index as the patient when the spectator
defines the object as ethnography and as art. Gell writes that “many members of the
contemporary art public have actually internalized the view critics take of their agency as
recipients of art, that is, they attribute creativity to themselves as spectators, who can
‘make something’ out of the raw material presented to them” (Gell 1998:34). Spectators
at museums assert their ability to appreciate and interpret the works that they view,
thereby establishing their position as agent-recipients over the patient-indexes. These
spectators exercise agency over the objects. The decision of the Quai Branly’s curators to
emphasize the aesthetic or ethnographic aspects of an object in the museum’s collections
illustrates the recipient’s agency over the index. Ghislaine chooses to display a
Vietnamese agricultural blade\textsuperscript{xxix} as an “objet agricol\textsuperscript{xxx},” in a traditional ethnographic
sense, as well as “comme un tableau\textsuperscript{xxxi},” that is, at a distance from neighboring objects
(personal communication January 13, 2010). Ghislaine interprets the blade as a work of art and as an ethnographic object and thus constructs significance for it. Her choice of exhibition style demonstrates her agency as a recipient over the index. The agent-patient relationships between objects and spectators at the Quai Branly illustrate the role of spectators in discovering the aesthetic and ethnographic qualities of the collections.

In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu analyzes cultural capital in French society. He asserts that individuals define their tastes in order to distinguish themselves from categories of people with whom they do not wish to be associated (Bourdieu 1984:170, 172). In other words, the sophisticated Parisian oligarch who regularly visits museums does so to create a distinction from the crass nouveau-riche person who prefers the movie theatre. Applying Bourdieu’s analysis to the Quai Branly, a visit to the museum constitutes not a discovery of unfamiliar material culture, but an encounter with objects that contribute to the visitor’s social power and cultural cachet. Bourdieu establishes the categories of cultural and economic capital as contributing to an individual’s tastes (176). The aforementioned wealthy sophisticate possesses high levels of both kinds of capital, whereas the second person has high economic but low cultural capital. The distinction between “kinds of people” in the broadest social sense resonates within the museum world. Free admission to a museum does not necessarily mean that a large segment of society will visit it. Self-selection plays an important role in determining museum attendance. Curator Erin Haney observed this phenomenon during the Bamako Biennale Festival of African Photography at the Musée National du Mali in 2008. The festival attracted members of the art world, but many Bamakois felt that the event was, to
paraphrase Director of the Manchester Museum Nick Merriman, not for them (Merriman 1989:164) (Haney, personal communication May 21, 2010).

Although the Quai Branly charges admission to the permanent collections, an aura of exclusivity may nevertheless contribute to the museum’s actual exclusivity. In his application of Bourdieu’s theory to the museum world through sociological data on museum attendance in Britain in 1985, Merriman concludes that cultural factors such as interest outweigh structural considerations such as admission price in determining museum attendance (Merriman 1989:157). In Bourdieu’s analysis, cultural capital permits an individual to appreciate museum objects and instills an interest in visiting museums. Essentially, one visits the museum because one believes that one is the kind of person who visits museums, and not the kind of person who goes to the cinema to watch slapstick comedy (Bourdieu 1984:250). The inverse of this statement is also true. Bourdieu’s sociological analysis positions museums as sites of social capital. The museum thus contributes to social identities and reinforces distinct positions within the cultural and economic hierarchy. I expand the scope of inequality in museum accessibility to a global scale in Chapter 5. The display of social power that characterizes a visit to the Quai Branly undermines the definition of the visit as an exploration of unfamiliar cultures as an end in itself and renders the visitor’s experience at the museum more socially nuanced.

Bourdieu introduces the figure of the informed observer as possessing an ability to interpret material culture. According to Bourdieu, “a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (2). This definition of the museum visitor corresponds with the
process of discovery that the Quai Branly endeavors to foster. Knowledge of the significance of the objects at the museum constitutes the second step in the encounter with the collections as facilitated by the Quai Branly’s curators. Although Bourdieu studies contemporary French society, his distinction between the informed and the uninformed observer resonates within the Quai Branly’s collections space. A visitor lacking the cultural vocabulary of the community in which a work was produced “feels lost” (2). Bourdieu’s assertion that information is a necessary precedent to artistic appreciation supports the Quai Branly’s emphasis on both ethnographic and artistic interpretations of the objects in the permanent collections. However, Bourdieu’s model inverts the procession from “the joy of seeing to the joy of knowing” (Price 2007:50) that the Quai Branly intends and thus complicates the process of discovery that the museum facilitates. Bourdieu writes that “the encounter with a work of art is not ‘love at first sight’ […] and the act of empathy […] which is the art-lover’s pleasure, presupposes an act of cognition” (Bourdieu 1984:3). The Quai Branly provides ethnographic context to visitors in order to allow for a deeper appreciation of the objects and of the cultural contexts in which they were produced. This ethnographic context builds upon the visitor’s aesthetic encounter with the objects and continues the process of discovery of unfamiliar cultures at the museum.

The visitor’s initial encounter with the Quai Branly’s collections as works of art can produce impressions of the grace and beauty of the object in the eyes of the visitor. The anthropology of emotions applies to a study of visitors’ reactions to the aesthetic qualities of the objects on display at the museum. According to anthropologist Catherine A. Lutz, emotion is often placed in opposition to thought (Lutz 2007:21). The contrast...
between emotion and thought corresponds with the distinction that many observers draw between art and ethnography in museums. However, anthropologist Kay Milton asserts that an individual’s felt reaction to a situation results from this individual’s acculturation (Milton 2007:72). Milton develops philosopher William James’s theory that emotion consists of a physical sensation followed by a “subjective experience” (63-64). In her words, “the tightening of the stomach when we encounter something we consider dangerous is a learned response […] and comes before the perception of it, which is the feeling of fear” (72). According to Milton’s theoretical framework, culture influences one’s feelings as well as one’s thoughts. An emotional response to the objects on display at the Quai Branly as works of art thus depends on the visitor’s culture. This moves the categories of ethnography and aesthetics closer to one another and complicates the process of discovery that curators hope to facilitate for visitors. The transition from seeing to knowing (Price 2007:50) falls entirely within a learned cultural context and does not support the existence of an innate or a universal reaction to the objects. Milton’s argument corresponds with Bourdieu’s assertion that “love at first sight” (Bourdieu 1984:3) does not exist for the museum visitor. Viewed through the lens of Milton’s study of emotion as a learned phenomenon, the transition from artistic discovery to ethnographic experience intended for the Quai Branly’s visitors collapses. Milton’s argument complicates the process of discovery that the museum’s curators seek to create for visitors.
Chapter 3: An Intellectual and Experiential Introduction to the Quai Branly

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the genesis of the Musée du Quai Branly and to describe the museum’s physical character. This introduction provides a setting for the experience of discovery that the museum seeks to create for its visitors. I approach the Quai Branly’s aesthetic and ethnographic character through the figures of art dealer Jacques Kerchache and anthropologist Maurice Godelier. Analysis of the perspectives of these two individuals as representative of broader trends within the milieus of art and anthropology serves as a transition to a discussion of the Quai Branly itself. The intellectual approaches that Kerchache and Godelier take to non-Western material culture contrast, but both rest on a foundation of discovery of cultures through objects. Their diverging perspectives thus converge at the Quai Branly as a site for the discovery of non-Western cultures.

The Quai Branly’s complex genesis contains the germ of the museum’s effort to both aestheticize and contextualize its collections. The museum’s existence can be traced to two traditions of understanding non-Western material culture: that of art dealers and that of museum anthropologists, both of which have a particularly strong presence in Paris. The vibrant and occasionally vitriolic debate between these two approaches to the appreciation of non-Western material culture informs the conflicting reactions to the Quai Branly. Yves Le Fur writes that the Quai Branly opened “dans le contexte de la queue de comète des polémiques sur l’esthétique et l’ethnographie, les changements et la relativité de notre manière de considérer d’autres arts” (Le Fur 2006:12). I first examine the influence of Jacques Kerchache, a prominent dealer of non-Western art, on the construction of the Quai Branly as a space to discover and experience the aesthetic
qualities of the objects on display. I then discuss the importance of Maurice Godelier, an anthropologist and the former director of research at the Quai Branly, to the ethnographic lens that the museum applies to unfamiliar material culture. Examination of these two figures is not meant to simplify the complex development of the Quai Branly as an institution that values anthropological and aesthetic perspectives, but rather to illustrate both the disparities and the commonalities that exist between the two influential traditions and the ways in which they shape the process of discovery that the museum fosters.

Jacques Kerchache and Exotic Art: Jacques Kerchache, whose friendship with then-president of France Jacques Chirac was instrumental in the genesis of the Quai Branly (Price 2007:3), advocates an aesthetic approach to non-Western material culture. In their discussion of the debate between the aesthete and the anthropologist on how to view African sculpture, Kerchache, and art historians Jean-Louis Paudrat and Lucien Stéphan write:

L’objet au musée, défonctionnalisé et parfois mutilé, s’oppose à l’objet en usage, dans son contexte d’origine. […] Extrait de son contexte, il perd sa signification fonctionnelle et est regardé comme une forme pure. L’ethnologue reproche alors à l’esthète son ignorance du contexte et du sens, et son ethnocentrisme qui lui fait prendre en face d’une sculpture africaine la même attitude qu’en face d’une œuvre d’art créée dans sa propre culture. [Kerchache et al. 1988:277]

Kerchache acknowledges the criticism of the exclusively aesthetic approach as an essentializing and ethnocentric perspective that denies agency to the individuals who produced the works on display. He nevertheless supports the aesthetic gaze as a powerful perspective on unfamiliar objects. Kerchache bluntly criticizes what he views as the reluctance of the Parisian anthropological community to consider non-Western art on an equal footing with work produced in the West: “Les ethnologues n’envisagent pas du tout
la dimension artistique des arts des sociétés sans écriture. L’Afrique, l’Océanie et l’Amérique restent toujours exclues de la grande légitimité muséale (Les Aventures de l’art 1991:50 in Dupaigne 2006:17). Kerchache est caractérisé, both by himself and by others, as having an innate ability to appreciate “primitive” art. This ability demonstrates the importance to Kerchache of experiencing non-Western objects from a purely aesthetic standpoint, excluding contextualizing ethnographic descriptions and allowing the objects’ forms to appeal to one’s artistic sensibility. This approach brings to mind Violeta Ekpo’s assertion of the necessity of providing museum visitors with cultural context, as well as Nicholas Thomas’s question regarding the understanding of non-Western cultures on the part of Western observers who praise their forms. In her discussion of the “mystique of connoisseurship” (Price 1989:7), Price cites the art dealer Henri Kramer’s statement on the appreciation of African art: “To feel the quality of an object is to have a sixth sense… It is possible to learn to recognize the styles… through books which have been published on the subject, or better yet, to study them in the field. But taste and a feeling of quality are never acquired. This is innate” (Kramer 1974:38 in Price 1989:11). Kramer implicitly describes a breed of sophisticated aesthetes, whom Price defines as “connoisseurs” (Price 1989:7). Price describes Kerchache’s supposed childhood ability to determine the quality of “primitive” art:

Jacques’s mother handed him a package containing an object his father had just brought back from a trip abroad. The young Kerchache is said to have taken it in his hands and, without even needing to remove it from its wrapping, declared with perfect confidence that it was “de la merde,” a lowly piece of airport art. Once unwrapped, the object of course bore out the assessment he’d been able to make effortlessly with a quick touch of its form. [Szafran in Bethenod 2003:154 in Price 2007:16]
In this account, Kerchache demonstrates a highly distinguished and razor-sharp taste, placing him firmly within the category of kinds of people, in Bourdieu’s definition, who can and do appreciate museum objects. Kerchache’s supposed preternatural ability to appreciate objects from “exotic” cultures is described as so fundamental as to provoke intense emotional and physical responses from the art dealer. Kerchache insisted that “with African sculpture, you need to allow yourself to be invaded; you have to come close to it, frequent it, appropriate it, love it, give it time, open your sexuality to it” (Kerchache in Bethenod 2003:185 in Price 2007:16). Kerchache’s approach to African sculpture rejects an exclusively intellectual appreciation of the objects and their uses. He experiences an immediate discovery of the meaning of the works through aesthetic and emotional communion with them.

Kerchache’s declaration of the ability of individuals to “feel” African art in a kind of primal state, absent cultural contextualization, influenced the presentation of the Quai Branly’s permanent collections as works of art. The reliable aesthetic compasses that connoisseurs such as Kerchache and Henri Kramer seem to possess suggest humanity’s capability (to varying degrees) to “connect” with art irrespective of one’s education, experience, and familiarity with the subject on display. The principle of an aesthetic sensibility common to all humans manifests itself in the Quai Branly’s dramatic presentation of its collections. In the museum’s darkest room, behind a display case partly obscured by three sinuous columns, sit two roughly-hewn shapes. These are *boliw*, objects that play a central role in the Kono cult of southeastern Mali and western Burkina Faso (Colleyn 2009:50). According to anthropologist Jean-Paul Colleyn, the *boli* (the singular of *boliw*) “fascina immédiatement les artistes et notamment les surréalistes. Son
caractère provocant, mystérieux, fétiche, chosifié, sorcier, hanté par les thèmes du sacrifice n’y est sans doute pas pour rien: c’est un objet fée, qui se donne comme intéressant, voire conceptuel, sans que l’on doive forcément en expliquer les raisons xxxvi.

(50). Colleyn’s insistence that the boliv possess an inherent allure that can be felt immediately, without any knowledge of their original cultural significance, demonstrates the ethos of aesthetic discovery that guides the presentation of the Quai Branly’s collections. Moreover, Colleyn emphasizes that one need not explain the reason for the rapture one feels when gazing upon this unfamiliar work. Colleyn advocates a presentation of the boliv that places their dramatic, foreign forms at the fore and offers ethnographic context as a supplement to the aesthetic wonder felt in their presence. This reinforces the category of primitive art in Sally Price’s definition, which I analyzed in Chapter 2, as something to be discovered by Western museum visitors.

The power of the boliv to impress visitors to a Western ethnographic museum illustrates the new identity that the Musée du Quai Branly has created for them. (Admittedly, however, the rapturous tone that Colleyn takes in his written description of the boliv was not fully reproduced by the visitors I interviewed on the subject). No longer the recipients of sacrifices as part of the Kono cult, the boliv have gained new influence, according to the artistic discourse that guides the principles of exhibition at the Quai Branly, as manifestations of the aesthetic sensibility that unites humanity. The presence of a glass case that separates the boliv from museum visitors demonstrates that humans do feel physically drawn to objects whose value has been culturally defined. Charlotte and Guy, agent d’accueil et de médiation, describe the tendency of visitors to touch certain objects. Charlotte states that the decision to place objects behind glass
contradicted Jean Nouvel’s vision of a museum that would bridge the distance between observer and object, that is, between self and other, through the absence of display cases. However, the museum’s administration concluded that display cases were a necessity because “les gens, ils ne résistent pas” (personal communication December 15, 2009). Although they have been decontextualized as a result of their distance from their original cultural significance, the *boliw* of the Quai Branly exert a strong influence over museum patrons as indications of the artistic beauty of the universal patrimony of humanity (Bertrand *in* Latour 2007:16) waiting to be discovered at the Quai Branly.

Colleyn’s statement of the universal attraction of the *boliw* counters Bourdieu’s denial of the “being” of an object to act as sufficient justification for its appeal (Bourdieu 1984:3). Put differently, Bourdieu, as a social scientist, does not permit “inherent” or “universal” beauty to explain the popularity of a work (of art) in a specific cultural context. In Bourdieu’s view, social values determine this work’s popularity (42). Through his study of the manifestations of taste amongst a Parisian museum-going public, Bourdieu asserts that those with social capital dictate what is tasteful, that is, what is worthy of attention in the realms of art, music, theater, et cetera. What these social elites consider beautiful exerts an influence over the definition of high culture (47, 55). Following Bourdieu’s analysis, we see prominent artists such as Picasso and Ernst as the dictators of taste. The *boliw* thus have aesthetic value in Paris not because of an inherent beauty, but because of the cultural capital they have accumulated as a result of their exotic origins, their storied arrival to the West, their popularity with highly regarded artists, and their aestheticization at the Quai Branly. These reasons reveal the layers of meaning that objects at the Quai Branly possess. Aestheticization of the *boliw*
demonstrates the dual construction of an aesthetic interpretation of the objects as part of a museum collection. The Quai Branly’s architect and curators perceive the artistic merits of the collections and present them in a manner that accentuates their forms and craftsmanship. This aestheticization contributes to the understanding of the objects as works of art on the part of the museum’s visitors. As I discuss later in this chapter, the Quai Branly’s presentation of its collections as art as well as the museum’s daring architecture facilitates the visitor’s aesthetic appreciation of the objects. Elements such as the display distance of the objects from one another and the dramatic lighting contribute to the discovery of the works as artistic masterpieces.

The context of postcolonialism renders Kerchache’s aesthetic perspective problematic. Those close to him often considered Kerchache as “himself the sculptor… I never considered him a dealer, but rather a creator” (Price 2007:16). This statement denies agency to the actual sculptor of the work and indicates the contemporary reality that, as Price notes in her dedication in *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, the names of the creators of the objects on display are rarely present in ethnographic museums (Price 1989). Although many of these names may be unknown, the above quotation nonetheless emphasizes the interpretive power of Kerchache as a connoisseur over that of the creator of the object he evaluates. Kerchache’s singular career reveals the often uncomfortable history of non-Western museum objects. His role in both acquiring objects from societies formerly under French colonial dominion and in designing exhibition spaces for them illustrates what Susan Pearce defines as a duality inherent in museum collections. While exhibition represents the “light” aspect of such institutions, that is, the “presentable motives and intellectual and aesthetic rationales” of curators, collecting is the dark,
“inward and private side” of museums (Pearce 1993:89). Kerchache’s travels around the world in search of exotic objects to bring back to the former capital of the French colonial empire demonstrates the heavy baggage of postcolonialism that influences the relationship of the Quai Branly, as a museum that displays objects from non-Western societies in a Western context, with the world. The legacy of colonialism defines the visitor’s experience of the Quai Branly’s collections as that of the objects in addition to their colonial history. This experience complicates the process of discovery that the museum facilitates.

Maurice Godelier and Ethnographic Indicators: Maurice Godelier brought an ethnographic focus to the interpretation of the Quai Branly’s collections, while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of their aesthetic appreciation. Raymond Corbey writes that Godelier “was to act as a counterweight to the dominance of the aesthetic approach, championed by Kerchache” (Corbey 2000:4). Godelier’s vision, according to Price, was that “visitors to the museum could ’pass from the joy of seeing to the joy of knowing’” (Price 2007:50). This statement portrays Godelier’s mission of ethnographic contextualization as a natural progression from the initial discovery of an object’s form. His discussion of the Pavillon des Sessions exemplifies his understanding of the roles of ethnography and aesthetics in the context of an ethnographic museum:

Quatre-vingt-trois de ces objets étaient liés au pouvoir: au pouvoir des chefs, des chefs africains, des êtres humains, des dieux, des esprits. Alors, d’une certaine manière, outre leur beauté, il s’agissait véritablement d’objets ethnographiques! Ils avaient été dans une société, ils avaient une signification sur le plan ethnographique et en même temps ils étaient superbes, parce qu’ils portaient le sens du pouvoir, le lien entre les êtres humains et le monde invisible, avec les forces de la nature, etc. Il faut que nous réalisions que les frontières, les limites entre l’ethnographie et l’art sont floues xxxviii. [Godelier in Latour 2007:27-28]
Godelier’s statement develops John Mack’s assertion that “un objet ethnographique est un objet auquel on pense ou que l’on considère d’une manière ethnographique; mais le même objet pourrait tout aussi bien être traité de manière esthétique” (Mack in Latour 2007:22). Godelier’s skepticism of the opposition between a purely aesthetic and a purely ethnographic object finds echoes elsewhere in the Parisian anthropological community. Bernard Dupaigne, formerly of the Musée de l’Homme, states bluntly that “le débat entre connaissance et émotion esthétique semble pour les ethnologues totalement incompréhensible. Il n’existe pas d’objet seulement utilitaire. […] Les notions de l’esthétique et de l’efficacité sont inséparables” (Dupaigne 2006:18). This discussion reinforces Sally Price’s assertion of the fluidity of the categories of art and ethnography, which I examined in Chapter 2. Charlotte similarly advocates a deconstruction of the “fausse question” (personal communication December 15, 2010) of the necessity of choosing between an artistic and an ethnographic gaze in designing a museum exhibit. Giving the example of a display of feathers in the Amériques section of the collections, Charlotte asserts that the aesthetic success of the display is inseparable from the functionalist understanding of the objects exhibited. A successful display thus satisfies both the aesthetic sense and the ethnographic understanding of the objects’ uses and cultural significance, possessing “des liens culturels […] des liens fonctionnels [et] […] des liens iconographiques” (personal communication December 15, 2010). The idea of creating continuity in museum displays reveals the influence of the legacy of Pitt Rivers, discussed in Chapter 2. The characterization of aesthetics and ethnography as overlapping categories empowers the gaze of the visitor and the cultural context that shapes it. As Marcel Duchamp demonstrated to the Western art world, anything is art if it is viewed as
such, even a urinal (Errington 1998:103) or a bicycle wheel. In the discourse of the Quai Branly’s organizers, one sees a similar demonstration for the world of “ethnographic museums.” The Quai Branly displays its collections both as art and as ethnography because they carry the potential for aesthetic and ethnographic discovery for the visitor.

Godelier’s rejection of the conflict between aesthetics and ethnography in museum displays opposes Kerchache’s position in *L’art africain* (1988). In this volume, Kerchache and his co-authors define a functionalist “path” as excluding an aesthetic approach to an appreciation of non-Western objects and thus necessarily limiting the appreciation of these objects on the part of the Western museumgoer (Kerchache et al. 1988:316). The authors undertake an aesthetic study of African art, both in the original African context and with the vocabulary of Western aesthetics. For example, in their discussion of Yoruba art, Kerchache et al. identify aesthetic criteria particular to Yoruba culture, such as roundness, pleasing angularity, and relative rectitude (280-283). The authors then apply a Western aesthetic gaze to Yoruba art, invoking such concepts as symmetry, expressivity, and monumentality (316-329). This cross-cultural aesthetic analysis fits within the cultural dialogue that the Musée du Quai Branly advocates. Although Kerchache and Godelier would agree that aesthetic values exist in every culture, the art dealer’s conception of the relationship between an artistic perspective and an ethnographic understanding differs dramatically from that of the anthropologist. The argument of Kerchache and his co-authors suggests that the aesthetic qualities of a work in a museum must be emphasized not only because they are inseparable from the object as a whole, but also in order to act as a counterweight to the exclusive ethnographic
analysis that has dominated the study of such objects in Western museums. In contrast, Godelier views the mutual exclusivity between ethnography and aesthetics as an illusion.

Godelier explains the indivisibility of aesthetic interpretation from ethnographic understanding: “Nous sommes toujours devant le mystère de l’objet, mystère d’un sens qui est nécessairement attaché à une forme, alors que la forme peut se détacher de son sens. Le musée est le meilleur lieu pour approfondir la réflexion sur ce mystère” (Godelier in Pomian 2000:88 in Ruiz-Gómez 2006:425). Despite sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s dismissal of Godelier’s support for an object’s mystery as “the oldest cliché of ethnography” (Pieterse 2005:166 in Ruiz-Gómez 2006:425), Godelier’s claim calls into question our understanding of “familiar” and “unfamiliar” objects. It is perhaps easy for a Western museumgoer with no prior knowledge of Hmong textiles to marvel at the “mysterious” designs that adorn the garments presented at the Quai Branly. It is surely also with ease that this same visitor exits the museum and dons a coat. One is happy to wear the coat for two reasons: it keeps one warm and one thinks it is beautiful. The coat thus fulfills both practical and aesthetic functions. The visitor’s view of the garment differs from this individual’s view of the Hmong cloak only due to a lack of familiarity with Hmong culture. However, if one considers “our” (Western) objects as ethnographic representatives of “our” culture, one injects the mystery that lies between the visitor and the object in an anthropology museum into “our” own cultural setting. The “absolute ethnography” advocated by art historian Michel Thévoz (2004) facilitates a gaze on heretofore familiar objects as if they were utterly foreign. Applying an ethnographic distance to familiar surroundings “nous engage à tenir un discours ethnographique sur ce mythe propre aux Blancs qu’on appelle l’esthétique; et, dans la
foulée, à considérer globalement le Louvre, le Prado ou la Collection Ludwig comme une section du *Musée d’ethnographie absolue* consacrée à l’‘art des blancs’ (Thévoz 2004:245). By viewing the *Mona Lisa* not as an artistic masterpiece but as a window onto the culture of Renaissance Florence, and by marveling simultaneously at the sophisticated craftsmanship and captivating designs on the winter coat, the visitor arrives at the “mystery” which, according to Godelier, cloaks every object created by human hands. As a visitor, one “discovers” one’s own culture in the same way one does the non-Western cultures at the Quai Branly. There is thus room for both an ethnographic and an aesthetic interpretation of the Quai Branly’s collections. Indeed, it is impossible to divorce our aesthetic reactions from our interest in the social contexts that produced the works on display in the museum. At the Quai Branly, “Godelier fought […] for what he calls a resolutely post-colonial museum, which, in a multicultural society, provides for reflection not so much about others as with and for others” (Corbey 2000:4). A relativistic universal ethnography facilitates an understanding of human cultures as universal in their adoption of strategies to negotiate challenges and to respond to questions that confront us all. This perspective allows the Western visitor to discover Western culture in the same way that one does the non-Western cultures represented at the Quai Branly. It also dissolves the distinction between primitive art and art proper, which I outlined in Chapter 2.

*The Quai Branly’s Space:* The aesthetic choices of Jean Nouvel, the Quai Branly’s architect, play a central role in the reception of the museum’s collections on the part of the visitors.
As the objects are foreign to the cultural tradition of the majority of the Quai Branly’s visitors, Nouvel’s choices have dramatic consequences for the cross-cultural translation that accompanies the objects on display at the museum. The relationship between the objects and the museum space strongly reinforces an aesthetic perspective. Nouvel, “a master of emotionally charged space” (Rochon 2006:1), creates a dramatic exterior and interior space that encourages the visitor to discover and appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the objects on display. According to art historian Natasha Ruiz-Gómez, “one of the architect’s imperatives in the Musée du Quai Branly’s design is to nurture the interaction between viewer and object in order to intensify the emotional tenor of the experience” (Ruiz-Gómez 2006:421-422). Nouvel himself states that “everything is done to stimulate the blossoming of emotions aroused by the primary object, […] everything is done to
protect it from light and to capture that rare ray of sun needed to set vibrations in motion, to spark off a feeling of spirituality” (Nouvel 2000:27 in Ruiz-Gómez 2006:422).

Figure 2: Interior of the Quai Branly’s collections plateau, Insulinde (photo by author)

This “feeling of spirituality” recalls Kerchache’s insistence on the importance of physicality in establishing a relationship between object and observer, as well as the discussion of the anthropology of emotions in Chapter 2. Nouvel’s vision of a spiritual and emotional experience defines the aesthetic character of the Quai Branly’s permanent collections space.

The visitor is struck by the dramatic presence of the museum and its grounds while passing from the city sidewalk behind a glass wall insulating the garden that it
contains from the noise of the busy street. Architecture critic Lisa Rochon views this façade as possessing a symbolic as well as a practical use for the museum, asserting that it “clearly announces that a major cultural institution lies beyond the glass gate that has nothing and everything to do with the rest of the elite neighbourhood” (Rochon 2006:2). To interpret Rochon’s understanding of the façade as a metaphor, the museum has no link with its Left Bank environment because it presents objects produced outside of Western culture in general, and the culture of Parisian privilege in particular, that exist outside its transparent walls. The museum is also inextricably tied to its neighborhood, as it simultaneously represents the power of Paris to host works from around the world and responds to the middle and upper class pastime of visiting museums. Moreover, the Quai Branly responds to historical French interest in non-Western cultures, as *The Adventures of Tintin* and the early twentieth-century African art vogue illustrate. Having passed through the glass partition, the visitor arrives at a dense, tranquil garden that initially obscures the view of the museum building. The visitor follows a winding path through the greenery before gazing up at the imposing structure on stilts that houses the Quai Branly’s collections. Nouvel’s desire to create a process of exploration and discovery for the visitor has been evoked in analysis of the act of entering the museum through the garden, which was designed by landscape architect Gilles Clément (Ruiz-Gómez 2006:423). Ruiz-Gómez views the garden as alluding to the other as wild and uncivilized (423). The voyage of discovery is necessarily an emotional journey, and the excitement of this discovery is heightened by the desired objects being hidden from view. The visitor’s encounter with the museum’s exterior thus constitutes an enticement and an
invitation to “discover” the collections and establishes the aesthetic approach to these objects that permeates the plateau.

According to Sophie, Nouvel “avait cette volonté que le visiteur se perde” (personal communication December 18, 2009). Once inside the museum, the visitor climbs a winding ramp to the collections plateau. The white ramp contrasts sharply with the somber colors that dominate the plateau. The abrupt transition from light to dark plunges the visitor into an unknown environment and encourages the discovery of the objects arranged throughout the plateau. The visitor exits the rampe and arrives in a large, dark exhibition hall. This is the collections plateau. One faces a wooden sculpture, crafted in the tenth or eleventh century by a Dogon artisan from eastern Mali (Leloup and Leloup 2009:28). Looking upward, one sees lights that illuminate certain parts of the plateau hanging from the lofty ceiling. Venturing further into the plateau, one arrives at a circular map that describes the organization of the Quai Branly’s collections into four continents. Multilingual agents d’accueil et de médiation stand nearby to explain this organization and to answer specific questions. The floors of each continent are color-coded to distinguish them from one another: Océanie (including Insulinde) is red, Asie is orange, Afrique is yellow, and Amériques is blue. The visitor is now faced with a choice, the first of many in the discovery of the objects on display: one can choose to follow the red path into the Océanie region, the blue path to enter Amériques, the staircase to visit one of the temporary exhibitions, or the beige rivière, which would lead to the Insulinde section at the central court. Louise, responsable des collections Océanie, stresses that there exists no ideal way of visiting the collections, and that one is free to explore them as one chooses (personal communication December 30, 2009). Nevertheless, the collections are
organized so that the visitor begins with *Océanie* and ends with *Amériques*, thereby arriving once more at the *rampe* and the *plateau’s exit*.

If the visitor chooses to enter *Océanie*, one traverses the collections from Melanesia to Australia, electing to investigate or ignore certain enclosures, the Polynesian objects at the extreme end of the hall, and the objects from Maritime Southeast Asia that occupy the central court. At the court, one may climb another set of stairs to a temporary exhibition mezzanine, follow the path into *Asie*, or visit one of two *boîtes de musique*. The *boîtes de musique* consist of audiovisual presentations of music from the regions represented in the Quai Branly’s collections, in a darkened atmosphere similar to that of a cinema. *Asie* is smaller than *Océanie*. Here, objects are displayed in small rooms opening out of the plateau, as well as in the plateau itself. The rooms, or *boîtes*, as Nouvel dubs them, are visible from the exterior, jutting out from the museum’s northern façade. *Asie* begins with the Pacific (linking to the nearby objects from *Insulinde*) and concludes with works from the Middle East. This section transitions smoothly into *Afrique*, which is the largest part of the Quai Branly’s collections. The visitor begins in North Africa and arrives ultimately in Madagascar. As in *Asie*, many of the African objects are displayed in *boîtes* separated from the plateau proper. The African continent concludes with another *boîte de musique* and deposits the visitor in *Amériques*, with no obvious geographical transition. The visitor moves from the Arctic to the Amazon in the final continent, faced with the choice of which side of the display cases to walk along. *Amériques* slopes gently toward the beginning of *Océanie*, at which point the visitor may choose to follow the *rampe* back to the lobby.
The diverging routes that the visitor encounters at the Quai Branly facilitate a process of discovery. Comparing the Quai Branly with other museums leads to a questioning of the role of museums in imposing a path and therefore a particular way of interacting with objects. In many museums, one has the freedom to traverse the exhibition space as one chooses, following no recommended route but rather one’s own interest. This complete freedom is often a result of the vastness of the collections. The Musée du Louvre exhibits such a massive array of works from such a diversity of cultures and historical periods as to render ludicrous any path leading the visitor through the collections in a certain order. The visitor to the Louvre must thus choose which objects to see and the order in which to visit them. The International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C. constitutes an extreme example of a controlled visit. The visitor enters the exhibition at a set time with a group of other visitors. One then traverses narrow corridors, stopping at displays along the linear path of the museum visit. One finds it much more difficult here than at the Louvre to revisit objects, to study them leisurely, and to stroll through the exhibition space. The Quai Branly occupies an intermediate position between the constraints of the International Spy Museum and the liberty of the Louvre. The visitor is encouraged to design an individual visit, but one may find it difficult to experience the same feeling of serenity as one does in certain silent, empty rooms at the Louvre.

The freedom of movement afforded the visitor at the Musée du Quai Branly lies at the heart of the process of discovery that defines the encounter with the collections. One chooses which objects to investigate, as one does at the Louvre. However, the experience of discovery at the Quai Branly differs from that at the Louvre in two ways. First, the
Louvre’s objects are construed as belonging to the Western tradition and do not carry the baggage of postcolonialism to trouble the visitor’s experience of viewing them.\(^1\) Second, the Louvre’s collections are not “hidden” in the sense that the Quai Branly’s are. Although it is certainly possible for the overwhelmed visitor to unknowingly rush past the very statues and paintings that this visitor came to the Louvre to see, this museum presents its objects in a traditional sense, that is, clearly lit and in plain view. In contrast, many of the Quai Branly’s objects are positioned in ways that render them more difficult to notice. A scarecrow from Vietnam in the form of a snake\(^{li}\) hangs from the ceiling in Asie and bird sculptures from Papua New Guinea\(^{lii}\) are mounted on columns in Océanie, far above visitors’ line of sight. Noticing these objects requires careful attention and a thorough exploration of the collections. This method of display accentuates the mystery that cloaks these unfamiliar objects and supports the process of discovery that the Quai Branly fosters for its visitors. In Chapter 4, I develop the discussion of the arrangement of objects as supporting the process of discovery at the museum.

The placement of objects inside or outside of glass display cases has profound effects on the ways in which visitors encounter and relate to the Quai Branly’s collections. At the museum, certain objects are encased in glass, whereas others stand in the open. The simultaneous presence of these two museological choices reinforces the visual diversity that characterizes the museum’s design. The Quai Branly’s administration made the decision to encase objects or to leave them in the open for reasons of aesthetics, ethnographic communication, and conservation. I analyze conservation in the context of global museum relationships in Chapter 5. Charlotte admits that allowing the collections to remain free from display cases creates a more powerful
aesthetic experience for the visitor, but that doing so is not advisable for every object in the Quai Branly’s collections. Referring to the temptation to touch objects that are not separated from the visitor by glass, Charlotte states: “L’architecte, je comprends, pour des raisons esthétiques de son musée, ne voulait pas que les pièces [soient mises en] vitrines et mises à distance. Mais on va le faire, parce que les gens, ils ne résistent pas” (personal communication December 15, 2009). Charlotte cites an object’s size and the material from which it is made as important factors in determining whether to place it inside a display case. Guy mentions a specific challenge posed by the presence of objects free from display cases: “Il y a un seul problème vraiment que ça pose par rapport aux objets qui sont en dehors des vitrines, c’est quand par exemple tu as des gigantesques tambours d’Océanie qui sont- Ou de Mélanésie plutôt- [...] -qui sont allés à libre et que les gens essaient de, voilà. Tam-tam” (personal communication December 10, 2009). Guy’s reflection complicates the efforts on the part of curators and the architect to create an experience of discovery for the public at the Quai Branly through unmediated visual contact with the collections. According to Sophie, works presented in the open create a strong rapport between object and visitor. She believes that the presence of an impressive work displayed free from any display case encourages the visitor to respect the object.

Moi, je suis partie du principe que si tu mets tout sous verre, tu as induit un comportement qui est juste un comportement de spectateur. Si tu sors l’objet de la vitrine, tu as un autre perception de l’objet. C’est complètement personnel ce que je te dis, je ne sais pas si c’est vrai ou non, mais c’est comme ça que moi, je le vis. Tu peux faire confiance aussi aux visiteurs. Ils savent qu’ils sont dans un musée et qu’à la limite, ils sont presque plus respectueux quand l’œuvre n’est pas dans la vitrine”. [personal communication December, 18 2009]
Sophie’s assertion characterizes a visit to the Quai Branly as an encounter with the collections. In her view, this encounter is more easily achieved if the objects are left in the open.

The contrast between Guy’s observation and Sophie’s curatorial approach illustrates the complex effects created by displaying museum collections outside of glass cases. In one sense, a direct visual rapport between the visitor and the object fosters a more direct ethnographic and aesthetic understanding of the object. However, a physical breach in the invisible barrier separating object and public can accompany this relationship. In addition, the open air has detrimental effects on certain materials. The complex question of whether to encase an object alludes to the larger issue of conservation and exhibition of material culture in museums (Clavir 2002:27-29). Conservation of its collections is at the heart of the mission of every museum, but one could ask whether conservation for its own sake is a worthwhile endeavor. If, in order to be conserved, objects are locked in a climate-controlled vault for the majority of their lives as members of a museum’s collection, does the public fully benefit from the cultural and artistic knowledge that these objects can impart when put on display? Although this is an extreme example, the actions taken by the Quai Branly to prevent the deterioration of its collections (encasing them in glass) and to encourage a direct relationship between object and visitor (displaying the objects in the open) indicate the struggle between conservation and education that occupies a prominent position in contemporary museology.

The darkness of the Quai Branly’s collections plateau is a defining characteristic of a visit to the museum’s permanent collections. Darkness is often seen as characteristic
of the mysterious and the sacred, two categories which do not conform to the traditional study of museum objects. However, this aura of the unfamiliar buttresses the definition of a visit to the Quai Branly as a process of discovery for the visitor. According to critics of the Quai Branly, a darkened atmosphere, in which the visitor must sometimes peer into obscurity in order to glimpse the form of an object, inhibits an ethnographic appreciation of the object (Kimmelman in Price 2007:150). The darkness of the plateau can be seen to contrast with the museological choice to display objects outside of their cases. Physical proximity and visual obscurity indicate the Quai Branly’s often apparently conflicting methods of presenting its objects and illustrate the negotiation of conservation, education, and aesthetics that marks the museum’s identity. Pierre, responsable des collections Afrique, explains the reaction of the press to the striking darkness of the plateau:

Effectivement le côté sombre, ce que beaucoup de la presse anglo-saxonne ont appelé le côté ‘Dark Africa,’ a été reproché au musée mais en fait ça ne concerne pas que l’Afrique, donc ce n’est pas que ‘Dark Africa’ et puis, bon, c’est- Je pense qu’il y a un double jeu. Je pense que l’architecte aussi a beaucoup joué sur le mystère de l’objet, ce qui n’est pas du tout bien sur l’opinion du côté scientifique, du projet scientifique du musée en la conservation. On souhaiterait que les cartels en particulier soient plus éclairés. Et puis, bon, les objets, on les éclaire au maximum, mais pour certains d’entre eux on est déjà un petit peu au delà de la limite [personal communication January 6, 2010]

In Pierre’s view, the lack of illumination conforms to a theatrical understanding of the cultures represented at the Quai Branly, cultures with which the Parisian population is largely unfamiliar. Pierre implies that accentuating the mystery of the collections opposes the museum’s mission of encouraging cross-cultural communication and understanding. However, the darkness also stems from a desire to conserve the objects. Philosopher Catherine Clément characterizes the lighting and design of the Quai Branly’s collections as indicative of a “sacralité laïque” (Clément in Latour 2007:146). This sacredness
contrasts with a scientific view of non-Western material culture. The darkness of the Quai Branly’s collections plateau demonstrates the role of the museum as a physical entity in influencing the manner in which visitors discover and interpret the objects. In Chapter 4, I position the critique of the darkness of the Quai Branly’s collections plateau in the context of colonialism.
Chapter 4: The Relationship between the Quai Branly and its Visitors

In this chapter, I analyze themes of the Quai Branly’s relationship with its visitors as identified by my informants. This analysis illustrates the ways in which the visitor’s experience at the museum both corresponds with and complicates the process of discovery that the Quai Branly fosters. The public’s unfamiliarity with the objects and with the museum building itself supports the experience of discovery. According to Guy, “les gens découvrent tout: le bâtiment et les œuvres” (personal communication October 29, 2009). However, curatorial choices and the Quai Branly’s architecture provide the objects with an interpretive framework and thus add context to the visitor’s discovery of the collections. As I acknowledged in my discussion of Gell’s theory, the visitor encounters the object as interpreted by the curators and by the architect. This relationship between the visitor and the collections undermines the definition of the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly as a process of discovery of objects as clear windows onto unfamiliar cultures. In this chapter, I first discuss the organization of the collections plateau and the curators’ role in presenting the objects to the public according to certain messages that they wish to communicate. I then analyze positive and negative reactions to the Quai Branly on the part of visitors, curators, and the press. Neutral or indifferent reactions do probably exist, but here I study the opinionated responses that I encountered in my interviews and reading. In the final segment of this chapter, I focus explicitly on the visitor’s intended role as an explorer of unfamiliar cultures at the Quai Branly.

The Organization of the Quai Branly’s Collections: The curators of the permanent collections at the Musée du Quai Branly seek to communicate certain messages to museum visitors through the presentation of the objects. This practice builds on the
museological tradition of Boas and Pitt Rivers, which I discussed in Chapter 2. These messages both support and subvert the Quai Branly’s mission of facilitating discovery of and dialogue with non-Western cultures. On the one hand, the display of non-Western material culture for a Western public encourages visitors to discover and appreciate unfamiliar cultures. On the other, this display adheres to the concepts of curators, which apply an interpretive gaze to the objects. Visitors encounter unfamiliar material culture, but encounter it along with the interpretive context that the Quai Branly’s curators provide. Curators choose how to situate objects relative to the rest of the collections, whether to display them inside or outside of glass cases, and how to use supporting tools such as exhibit labels and multimedia screens. Curators also conceive of several overarching themes relevant to each continent. These themes, called *transversales*, unify the presentation of the objects. For example, the textile *transversale* in *Amériques* leads the visitor through displays of fabrics particular to various American cultures. Questions of culture, history, aesthetics, and conservation face curators as they decide how to present the museum’s collections (personal communication December 15, 2009). The multiplicity of organizational systems that exists within the Quai Branly’s permanent collections encourages visitors to discover the geographical, historical, functional, ceremonial, and artistic significance of the objects. However, these methods of organization also indicate the power of the curators to define the objects on display at the museum.

The Quai Branly’s curators present the museum’s collections in order to encourage visitors to discover the diversity and richness of the cultures that the collections represent. Sophie expresses the necessity of displaying the Quai Branly’s
collections to communicate the history of the objects to the public (personal communication December 18, 2010). Pierre underscores the framework of ethnography that encapsulates the act of engaging with history through the collections. In displaying a “functional” object, he wishes to illustrate the conditions under which it was created, the methods used to create it, and the reason for its existence in its original cultural context (personal communication January 6, 2010). As I asserted in Chapter 2, the object thus acts as an index, in Gell’s definition, that represents a cultural concept. Historical and ethnographic contextualization of the objects also results from the fact that the cultures from which the museum’s collections originate are largely unfamiliar for the Quai Branly’s visitors (personal communication January 6, 2010). The ethnographic lens through which curators encourage visitors to view the Quai Branly’s collections supports the discovery of non-Western cultures that the museum endeavors to create for visitors.

The division of the permanent collections into four continents and the positioning of these continents in a certain order illustrate the geographical relationships of the objects that the Quai Branly’s curators wish to communicate (personal communication January 6, 2010). For example, Insulinde exists within Océanie and serves to link Océanie to Asie in the overall geographical organization of the collections. This point of connection between two continents is called a polygone de contact (personal communication December 18, 2010). Sophie explains that the position of Insulinde between Asie and Océanie illustrates the movement of human populations across these regions. The decision to place Insulinde as a polygone de contact between Océanie and Asie exemplifies the geographical and cultural methods of organization that characterize the Quai Branly’s effort to encourage visitors to discover non-Western material culture.
The anthropological themes that unite objects within the geographical framework of the collections introduce the public to concepts that the curators consider central to the cultures represented in each continent. This introduction simultaneously contributes to the atmosphere of exploration and discovery that the museum fosters and complicates it by indicating the agency of the curators in defining the Quai Branly’s objects. For example, the principal themes in *Océanie* are the notion of power, the importance of ancestors, architecture and authority, exchanges, and the relationship with deities (personal communication December 30, 2009). Louise considers these themes to be relevant for the entirety of Oceania as a culture area. The insertion of more specific cultural divisions into the collections adds nuance to the plateau’s organization. Ghislaine explains the presence of three rooms devoted to shadow puppet theater throughout *Asie*: “Le théâtre d’ombres ponctue l’espace. […] Au Chine, l’extrême Est, et au milieu on a l’Inde avec du théâtre d’ombres, et tout à fait à la fin, la dernière vitrine sur le théâtre d’ombres, c’est donc Syrie” (personal communication January 13, 2010). Ghislaine presents shadow puppet theater as an Asian motif, and integrates it into the geographical scheme of *Asie*. The organization of a certain segment of the *Amériques* collections, titled “Continuité/Disonctinuité,” according to Lévi-Strauss’s theory of the transformation of objects (personal communication December 15, 2009) encourages the visitor to engage with the collections from a theoretical perspective. The objects are presented in such a way as to illustrate the variation in form that takes place across the American culture area. However, Charlotte worries that this display may be too complex as a result of its integration into the diversity of interpretive models that coexist in the permanent collections (personal communication December 15, 2009). Curators foster an
anthropological perspective on the objects through the organization of the collections according to ethnographic criteria. This perspective corresponds with the process of discovery that the museum encourages. The fact that the Quai Branly’s curators construct this perspective facilitates the visitor’s discovery of the objects as they are positioned within the interpretive framework of the museum.

In addition to a desire to illustrate the diversity of the cultures represented at the Quai Branly, aesthetics influence the presentation of objects on the collections plateau and thus visitors’ discovery of the works as art. Charlotte states that the presence of a textile *transversale* in *Amériques* counteracts the impression that archaeological objects give visitors of the American color palette as consisting exclusively of beige and grey (personal communication December 15, 2010). Charlotte’s concern with imparting an aesthetic impression on the visitor illustrates the role of art in the Quai Branly’s mode of presentation. The artistic importance that curators give the collections manifests itself in Ghislaine’s display of an object “like a painting,” that is, at a distance from its neighboring works (personal communication January 13, 2010). Curators’ valorization of the visual qualities of the Quai Branly’s collections renders a visit to the museum an aesthetic as well as an ethnographic experience. According to Sophie, “c’est magnifique, le soir. Il y a beaucoup moins de monde. Tous ces objets, tu les vois en transparence; tu n’as plus les reflets de la lumière à l’extérieur. Tu as les spots qui sont comme un ciel d’étoiles. Et ça- C’est magique. C’est très beau” (personal communication December 18, 2009). Sophie’s statement exemplifies a response to the Quai Branly’s objects as works of art. A visit to the Quai Branly is thus not restricted to the realm of ethnographic study. Rather, curators invite the visitor to encounter the collections as works of art. As
with the valorization of the collections as ethnographic objects, the artistic emphasis on the objects both contributes to the visitor’s experience of exploration of unfamiliar cultures and complicates this experience through the visitor’s discovery of the works as interpreted and presented by the Quai Branly’s curators.

The inclusion of supporting material in the form of exhibit labels and multimedia displays influences the aesthetic and ethnographic experience of the collections plateau on the part of visitors. Charlotte uses an exhibit label to make stylistic comparisons across cultures, demonstrating to visitors the similarities and differences that exist between cosmologies. On a label accompanying the display of a Mesoamerican mask\textsuperscript{lxiii}, Charlotte suggests the resemblance of this mask to representations of the Aztec god Tlaloc (personal communication December 15, 2009). Charlotte thus makes explicit an aesthetic argument through supplementary contextualizing information. Multimedia screens provide additional ethnographic context to the collections. For example, these screens permit a nuanced analysis of written and oral communication in Asian cultures. By presenting audiovisual recordings of oral interaction in cultures with and without a writing system, Ghislaine places written and oral traditions on equal footing within the collections (personal communication January 13, 2010). Written and multimedia displays enhance both an artistic and an ethnographic interpretation of the Quai Branly’s collections. Through the use of these tools, curators support the messages they communicate through objects.

In spite of the complex relationship between ethnography and aesthetics that characterizes the presentation of objects at the Quai Branly, the museum’s curators do not draw a distinction between the artistic and the ethnographic significance of the
collections. Pierre explains his preference for displaying objects that have aesthetic interest for visitors, but stresses the need to provide information regarding the meaning and use of the objects in their cultures of origin (personal communication January 6, 2010). He gives the example of a funeral mask from Gabon in the Quai Branly’s collections to illustrate his point:

Pour les populations qui vont le créer ce sera un masque qui est lié à la mort. Ici, ce sera un masque qu’on va trouver très beau au point de vue esthétique d’abord. Donc après il faut le remettre en contexte et dire: ‘Attention, c’est aussi un masque qui est lié à la mort.’ Donc les populations […] qui l’ont créé et qui le voient, ne voient pas du tout de la même façon que nous. [personal communication January 6, 2010]

Pierre emphasizes the difference between the perspective of Gabonese individuals familiar with the funerary use of the mask and that of visitors to the Quai Branly in relation to the same object. This difference demonstrates the fact that an object can possess both an artistic and an ethnographic meaning. Pierre’s assertion of the lack of boundaries between aesthetics and ethnography at the Quai Branly echoes Charlotte’s dismissal of this duality as a false distinction (personal communication December 15, 2010). Through their diverse methods of display and contextualization, the Quai Branly’s curators encourage visitors to encounter the objects from standpoints of anthropology, art, geography, and history. This pluralistic mode of analysis suggests the multitude of identities that each object fills simultaneously. The diversity in interpretive approaches that curators facilitate at the Quai Branly also reinforces Sally Price’s theory that ethnographic and the aesthetic perspectives are inseparable.

Positive and Negative Reactions to the Quai Branly: The Musée du Quai Branly provokes both positive and negative reactions from visitors, curators, and the press. According to the museum’s study of its public, 98 percent of visitors in 2009 were
satisfied with the museum’s structure for receiving visitors, and 96 percent with the overall comfort of their visit (musée du quai Branly 2010a:94). 14 percent were not satisfied with the orientation information provided by the museum, and 7 percent with the information supplied to aid understanding of the collections (94).

The Quai Branly seeks to better understand its reception by the public through sociological studies of visitors’ reactions. The museum refers to these studies as connaissances de public au musée (110-111). Jean, the museum’s chargé de missions auprès du directeur des publics, organizes and implements the studies. Three principle forms of the investigation of the public’s reactions are: a survey conducted with visitors at the museum’s exit, focus groups, and a study of visitors’ comportment in the collections plateau (personal communication December 22, 2009). The survey, or observatoire des publics, consists of questions that establish the visitor’s social and demographic profile, as well as expectations and satisfaction relative to the museum (personal communication December 22, 2009). The focus groups are comprised of individuals who have connections to the geographic areas represented in the Quai Branly’s permanent collections. In these groups, a sociologist asks a series of questions to determine the participants’ impressions of the message that the museum communicates and their approval or disapproval of this message (personal communication December 22, 2009). The study of visitors in the plateau is intended to reveal the public’s experience with the collections. Sociologists observe the movement of visitors relative to the objects on display and to the supporting information (personal communication December 22, 2009). Jean assembles the results of these three research projects and discusses them with a committee, which submits a recommendation to the Quai Branly’s administration. The
administration considers this recommendation in determining the evolution of the museum (personal communication December 22, 2009). These sociological research methods demonstrate the concern on the part of the Quai Branly’s directorial staff with understanding visitors’ reactions to the museum. This concern provides a vivid illustration of Susan Pearce’s insistence on the importance of museums striving to understand their visitors. The Quai Branly’s internal sociological research also suggests the influence of Peter Vergo’s “new museology,” which I discussed in Chapter 2. By carrying out extensive research into visitors’ impressions of and responses to the collections and to the museum as a whole, the Quai Branly engages with issues concerning the role of museums in the contemporary globalized world.

Positive reactions to the Quai Branly can be grouped into four main themes, illustrated in the following figure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive reactions to the Quai Branly</th>
<th>Objects are “magnifiques” (visitors, curators, and press)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building and plateau are beautiful (visitors, curators, and press)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Museum gives a sense of the richness of world cultures (visitors, curators, and press)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Museum is a “musée vivant” and fosters a “dialogue des cultures” (curators)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3

During my interviews with curators and visitors, the designation of the objects as *magnifiques* was notable for its universality. Regardless of whether visitors marvel at the form or the function of the objects on display, this reaction suggests that individuals
encounter the objects as works in themselves, that is, as works that are unencumbered by the complex histories that shaped them and that saw their relocation to the Quai Branly’s permanent collections. Visitors conclude that the object is *magnifique* due to its appearance, to the way curators have chosen to place it in relation to other objects, or to the contextualizing information that accompanies it. All three of these possible sources of the conclusion that a work is *magnifique* indicate that the visitor has no prior knowledge of the object. One thus finds an object breathtaking as one discovers it during a visit to the Quai Branly. However, one visitor remarks that his interest in a display of spurs from the Andes results from his familiarity with these objects (personal communication October 21, 2009). If he were to conclude that these spurs were *magnifiques*, his reaction would stem not from awe at unfamiliar craftsmanship or use, but from fond familiarity. This example indicates that the description of an object as *magnifique* can undermine the conception of the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly as one of discovery of unfamiliar cultures. An encounter with the objects as *magnifiques* both reinforces and complicates the process of discovery that the Quai Branly’s curators seek to facilitate for visitors.

Describing the Quai Branly as a superb work of architecture constitutes a further aesthetic reaction to the museum (personal communication November 4, 2009). However, this response does not relate directly to the objects on display, but rather to the framework that supports them. For example, one visitor speaks admiringly of the contrast between the exterior and interior of the museum (personal communication October 28, 2009). Journalist Fabrice Bousteau, writing in the publication *Beaux Arts*, compares the Quai Branly to the Louvre and the Pompidou, referring to all three as “*chefs d’œuvre*
architecturaux d’avant garde; les collections qu’ils présentent sont majeures et incontournables au niveau international (Bousteau 2006:7). Bousteau’s positioning of the Quai Branly in the canon of architectural masterpieces validates the museum’s bold aesthetic. The reaction on the part of museum visitors, curators, and the press to the beauty of the Quai Branly and its objects demonstrates the power of the collections as works of art, and the museum as a work of architecture. This reaction exemplifies Guy’s assertion that visitors discover both the Quai Branly’s collections and the museum building itself.

The visitor’s impression that the Quai Branly’s collections illustrate the rich diversity of world cultures constitutes a reaction to the objects as ethnography. The vast geographic range and the wide historical span of the collections support the museum’s role for the visitor as providing a vivid panorama of cultures. A visitor remarks that he found the objects to be presented well and that he was satisfied with the written descriptions on the information cards (personal communication November 4, 2009). Most visitors whom I interviewed examine the objects and read the information cards (although not necessarily in this order), a trend that indicates visitors’ interest in both the object itself and in the cultural context in which it was produced. Véronique Petit, writing for the general interest magazine Ça m’intéresse, describes a visit to the Quai Branly as a “rencontre parfois inquiétante, comme ce masque hérisse de cheveux humains, sombre figure longiligne incrustée de coquillages, le nez traversé d’un dent de cochon. Le choc passé, on se passionne pour son histoire” (Petit 2006:107). According to Petit, the unsettling mystery of the initial encounter with the collections cedes ultimately to an ethnographic appreciation of the objects. Pierre’s goal of presenting ethnographic
information on the cultures represented in *Afrique* (personal communication January 6, 2010) exemplifies curators’ interest in evoking the diversity of the world’s cultures. In emphasizing the fact that the objects comprising the permanent collections change periodically, curators support the Quai Branly’s stated identity as a “living museum” and its mission of facilitating cultural dialogue. Charlotte describes the collections as “dynamic” and states that displaying an object in place of another affects other works in the collections, a process that resembles, in her words, tumbling dominos (personal communication December 15, 2009). Changing the works on display encourages visitors to revisit the collections, thereby stimulating a continuous engagement with the museum as “là où dialoguent les cultures.”

Negative reactions to the Quai Branly can also be grouped into several categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative reactions to the Quai Branly</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plateau is too theatrical (curators)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plateau is confusing (visitors)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plateau is too dark (visitors, press)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum is offensive and outdated (press)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum provides too little context (press)</td>
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</table>

*Figure 4*

Distinction between an aesthetic and an ethnographic interpretation of the Quai Branly’s collections emerges in curators’ negotiation of Jean Nouvel’s space. The relationship between curators’ interpretations of the collections and the frame that Nouvel’s design provides for the objects indicates the role of the curators and the architect in influencing visitors’ experience at the museum and thus undermines the definition of this experience.
as a process of discovery of unfamiliar material culture unadulterated by interpretive perspectives. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the Quai Branly’s curators do not consider ethnography and aesthetics to be opposing categories. However, Pierre describes Jean Nouvel’s decision to illuminate Congolese fetishes dramatically as an example of aesthetics eclipsing the ethnographic context that curators wish to communicate:

Toutes ces sculptures ont été éclairées par en dessous, ce qui donnait un aspect absolument terrifiant aux sculptures. De toute façon, éclairer des objets, c’est faire un choix. Là, le choix était de dramatiser complètement ces pièces. Alors, pour la conservation, nous, on trouvait ça absolument épouvantable. Ça faisait un grand guignol. C’était un peu le train fantôme. Mais par contre, le public l’a adoré\textsuperscript{LXX}. [personal communication January 6, 2010]

According to Pierre’s description, I conclude that the fetishes provide a vivid illustration of the category of \textit{arts premiers} that I analyzed in Chapter 2. The fact that visitors reacted positively to the display could mean that they saw the objects in the same way that they understood non-Western cultures in Tintin comics, that is, as exotic and sensational. In Pierre’s view, the theatrical presentation of the sculptures detracted from the anthropological mission of the museum. Regardless of the public’s positive reaction to Nouvel’s dramatic style of lighting, the aestheticization of the objects can impede visitors in appreciating the cultural information that the works contain. Curators also note the difficulties presented by the openness of the collections space. Although curators intend to group objects geographically and thematically, the Quai Branly’s collections do not possess the rigid organization of objects in the Louvre (personal communication January 6, 2010). The open plan of the plateau renders challenging the creation of clearly defined groups of objects (personal communication January 13, 2010). The ethnographic messages of curators occasionally conflict with Nouvel’s aesthetic emphasis in the
collections space. This opposition between art and ethnography challenges the opinion of curators that these two concepts do not represent distinct categories within the museum’s collections. The negotiation of conceptual frameworks at the Quai Branly undermines the view of the visitor’s experience as the discovery of objects as ambassadors of unfamiliar cultures. Rather, this perspective positions the experience as an encounter with unfamiliar works in addition to their interpretation as constructed by the museum.

The lack of a set path through the Quai Branly’s collections supports the process of discovery that the museum seeks to facilitate for its visitors. However, this aspect of the collections plateau does conflict with the wishes of some curators and visitors for a more obviously defined organization of the space. Ghislaine cites the plateau’s organization as confusing for the visitor as well as challenging for the curator (personal communication January 13, 2010). Although maps and directional arrows encourage the public to visit the collections beginning in Océanie and ending in Amériques, the plateau’s organization permits visitors to choose their route at many points. This liberty of movement opposes the traditional museum experience, and some visitors find it disorienting. One visitor remarks that she felt she was walking without knowing where she was going, and that she would have appreciated a clearer organization of the collections (personal communication October 28, 2009). My observation of the movement of visitors through the plateau clearly demonstrated the lack of a single path through the collections. Visitors entered and exited enclosures in Océanie from different directions. One visitor turned against the route through the collections proposed by the map and arrows affixed to the floor, turning again once he had studied a particular display. These observations do not necessarily correspond with negative experiences of
the collections, but the ability of the public to turn and turn again as they navigate the plateau can produce frustration (personal communication November 12, 2009). The lack of constraints on the visitor’s path through the collections can result in disorientation. Nevertheless, the open plan of the plateau corresponds with the experience of exploration and discovery that the museum facilitates for visitors.

Issues of colonialism characterize criticism of the Quai Branly as an instrument of exoticization of “other” cultures. Visitors and the press respond negatively to the darkness of the plateau. For one visitor, this darkness acts as a practical impediment to her ability to read information cards (personal communication October 28, 2009). The press’s critique of the museum’s darkness emphasizes in particular the problematic connotations of this choice. Art critic Michael Kimmelman of The New York Times denounces the Quai Branly’s collections plateau as having apparently been “devised as a spooky jungle, red and black and murky” (Kimmelman in Shelton 2009:6). As I discussed in the previous chapter, Pierre acknowledges the press’s criticism, stating that the Quai Branly has been portrayed as reinforcing a concept of “Dark Africa” through its somber collections space (personal communication January 6, 2010). Public critique of the Quai Branly often focuses on the issues of colonialism raised by the aesthetic choices evident in the museum. The Guardian quotes Gilles Manceron, historian and vice-president of the French League for Human Rights, in a statement that encapsulates this sentiment of the museum’s critics:

This idea of a jungle or a forest surrounding the museum, a place where you will discover the ‘dark continent’ is a problem. It’s as if these other continents are still savage, exuberant, dangerous and primitive. […] Why not integrate all these pieces into the history of world art, show them all in the Louvre in the same space as European art? This whole project goes
back to a colonial vision of the world: Europe is civilised, the other continents are not. [Manceron in Chrisafis 2006:2-3]

Manceron decries the patronizing colonialist attitude that he sees in the Quai Branly’s physical character. Nouvel’s design has been criticized as an instrument of exoticization of the cultures represented by the museum’s collections. Ruiz-Gómez condemns the museum’s design as “a ‘primitive shelter’ surrounded by a ‘sacred wood’ [that] gives form to a primitivist aesthetic” and that reveals “unproblematised binaries of self versus other and culture versus nature” (Ruiz-Gómez 2006:417). Critiques of the Quai Branly’s presentation of its objects draw upon the perceived mysterious and exotic aura with which the museum shrouds its collections.

The majority of visitors to the Quai Branly whom I interviewed made a clear distinction between their impression of the museum itself and of the objects it housed. This critique took the form of an evaluation of Nouvel’s architectural design as separate from opinions on the collections themselves. The visitor’s reaction to the architecture informs a reception of the collections: one visitor remarks that the Quai Branly’s décor and ambiance gives him “l’impression d’être tout seul avec les objets” (personal interview November 18, 2009). Solitude with unfamiliar objects in a dramatic environment encourages discovery of these objects. This reaction reinforces the status of the Quai Branly as a work of art in its own right. The guided tour of the museum that focuses exclusively on the building itself illustrates the acceptance of this designation of Nouvel’s work on the part of museum officials and the public (personal communication December 17, 2009). The context that Jean Nouvel’s aesthetic choices provide for the objects housed within the museum underscores the influence of the Quai Branly’s décor on the interpretation of its collections.
Although visitors express both positive and negative reactions to the museum space, their responses to the objects displayed at the Quai Branly are, according to my research, universally favorable. Guy describes this distinction:

Je ne crois pas que les gens visitent un musée et puis se disent: ‘Bon, euh, franchement les masques […] c’est nul, quoi.’ […] Les gens pensent au musée, à ce musée, c’est par rapport à l’architecture mais au fond- […] il me semble que les collections, […] devraient être considérées en premier, ensuite le reste. […] Les gens qui n’ont pas forcément aimé le musée, ils vont dire: ‘Bon, franchement l’architecture, c’est un peu bizarre et tout ça.’ Ils vont dire: ‘Bon, les collections sont magnifiques mais là, le bâtiment, c’est un peu…’ Voilà. Souvent les gens différencient les deux. [personal communication October 29, 2009]

Guy identifies the comfort with which visitors critique the museum as a work of architecture, as well as the admiration and wonder that characterize their reactions to the objects themselves. I propose three possible explanations of visitors’ critical distinction between the objects and the building: the building’s position within the Western architectural canon, its recent opening, and strategies of presentation of the objects within the building. Visitors’ occasional disapproval of the building’s design and their universal praise of the collections it houses indicate a possible difficulty enclosed within cross-cultural aesthetic criticism and opposes Jacques Kerchache’s belief in an immediate aesthetic understanding of non-Western material culture, which I discussed in Chapter 3. Parisian museum visitors may recognize that they do not have the cultural vocabulary to evaluate a Maori ship’s prow or a Vietnamese scarecrow, but they do feel comfortable passing judgment on contemporary Western-European architecture. The contrast between visitors’ reactions to the collections and to the Musée du Quai Branly as a work of architecture suggests the complexity of undertaking aesthetic criticism across cultures.
The lack of enthusiasm of some visitors for the Quai Branly’s physical aspect may result from the building’s recent opening, rather than from its vulnerability to criticism within a Western architectural context. Guy explains this second possibility: “Quand les gens vont visiter le Louvre, il me semble qu’ils s’attendent généralement à voir quelque chose de précis. […] Je ne crois pas qu’on est déçu par le Louvre,” (personal communication October 29, 2009). The Louvre’s pedigree protects its design from criticism. According to Guy, because the Quai Branly is a new museum, visitors “ne savent même pas à quoi il ressemble vraiment. […] soit ils apprécient spontanément le musée, soit ils le détestent spontanément aussi” (personal communication October 29, 2009). As a recent addition to the Parisian museum landscape, the Quai Branly finds itself exposed to public opinion. Guy contrasts the expectations of visitors to the Louvre with those of the Quai Branly’s public. At the Louvre, visitors flock to the Mona Lisa. They know what they will see: “c’est comme regarder un film trois ou quatre fois parce qu’on aime” (personal communication October 29, 2009). In contrast, visitors discover the Quai Branly as an unfamiliar museum housing unfamiliar objects (personal communication October 29, 2009). According to Guy, familiarity and unfamiliarity with a museum’s collections produce radically different approaches to viewing objects. The established and intimate position that the Louvre occupies with Parisians (and with people around the world) contrasts sharply with the Quai Branly’s identity as a new and unfamiliar museum. Criticism of the Quai Branly’s appearance could stem from its vulnerable position as a recently opened museum.

The unique manner in which the Quai Branly’s collections are organized and displayed represents a third possible explanation of the distinction that visitors make
between the museum’s appearance and the objects presented within it. As discussed above, visitors express positive and negative reactions to the ambiance of the collections plateau. Guy articulates this distinction: ‘Il y a des gens qui disent: ‘Ah, c’est trop sombre. On a la sensation d’étouffer; on est perdu,’ etc. […] Et il y en a uns qui disent: ‘Ah, c’est fantastique; on a l’impression de partir à la découverte d’un nouveau pays.’ (personal communication October 29, 2009). In Guy’s analysis, some visitors thrill at the sense of discovery facilitated by the museum’s atmosphere, while others find the obscurity of the plateau unpleasantly disorienting. Criticisms of the collections space could result from the plateau’s darkness and from its organization, characteristics of the Quai Branly that differ dramatically from traditional museum presentations. Visitors clearly distinguish their unfavorable reactions to the unorthodox organization of the collections space from the objects that populate the collections.

The Visitor as Explorer: The process of discovery central to the Quai Branly’s presentation of its permanent collections encourages the visitor to interact with objects as art and as ethnography. According to Jean, the organization of the museum often results in confusion on the part of its visitors: ‘Ça va perdre Occidentaux pour se confronter à des civilisations qui ne fonctionnent pas selon les normes tels qu’on les connaît’ (personal communication December 22, 2009). Jean suggests that the exploration that the Quai Branly facilitates is informed by the unfamiliarity of the objects to visitors. Discovery therefore becomes an appropriate approach to navigating a space whose form and content are foreign to the visitor. In his capacity as an agent d’acceuil et de médiation, Guy answers visitors’ questions and explains the organization of the collections if requested (personal communication November 12, 2009). Otherwise, he
allows visitors to explore the collections on their own, even if their chosen path through the plateau contradicts the directions presented by the orientation aids throughout the space. Guy remarks that visitors occasionally have the tendency to begin their route through the collections with *Amériques* rather than with *Océanie*, but that he does not direct them to the “beginning” of the plateau (personal communication November 12, 2009). Guy’s laissez-faire approach to providing directional information to visitors indicates the importance of discovery to the ethos of the Quai Branly. Through the organization of the collections and the décor of the museum, curators and Jean Nouvel encourage the visitor to explore the darkened passages and to confront unfamiliar objects as one moves past them and as one’s interest is piqued. “Discovering” cultures gives the visitor the power to experience the visual products of these cultures as art and as ethnography.

The display of a Vietnamese scarecrow in the form of a serpent on the ceiling in *Asie* exemplifies the process of discovery through which curators encourage visitors to approach the collections. In traditional museum displays, objects are presented so that they can be readily noticed and studied by the visitor. The obscure location of the scarecrow contradicts this conventional presentation strategy. Guy remarks that he had been working at the Quai Branly for several months before he noticed this object (personal communication November 19, 2009). He cites the scarecrow’s role in an activity for school groups visiting the Quai Branly in which students are instructed to find all the representations of serpents in the permanent collections (personal communication November 19, 2009). This activity makes explicit the process of discovery in the collections. Visitors must search the plateau for specific objects, venturing into dark
corners and looking in all directions. In spite of the apparent ease with which the Vietnamese scarecrow fits the model of discovery as applied to a visit to the collections, its presence on the ceiling waiting to be discovered may result simply from practical considerations. Ghislaine states that the scarecrow is displayed in its current position as a result of its great length and of its cultural ties to the objects that surround it (personal communication January 13, 2010). Her assertion calls into question the volition of curators in facilitating the discovery of the collections through non-traditional display. Regardless of the curators’ intentions in displaying the scarecrow, its obscurity locates it within a process of cultural discovery.

The results of the Quai Branly’s study of visitors’ movement through the collections supports the experience of the plateau as one of exploration and discovery. According to Jean, visitors move freely and “erratically,” stopping when a particular display attracts their attention (personal communication December 22, 2009). In general, visitors read the information cards after having decided to investigate an object more closely; they often do not consult video displays (personal communication December 22, 2009). Jean’s description suggests that the aesthetic encounter motivates the visitor to stop in front of a particular object and to investigate its ethnographic character. Walking through the collections space without a systematic plan, moving between cultures, and stopping in front of intriguing objects to experience them first aesthetically and then ethnographically constitute a process of exploration for the visitor. The organization of the plateau and the diversity in material culture presented therein allow visitors to discover the forms and functions of objects produced in cultural contexts largely unfamiliar to them.
The apparent progression from “seeing” to “knowing” (Price 2007:50) enclosed within the visitor’s aesthetic and ethnographic experience of the Quai Branly’s collections can be interpreted as an encounter with the objects as they correspond with Western interpretations of non-Western cultures. For example, the visitor’s interest in a Luba chief’s scepter from the Congo (Roberts 2009:88) may result from the fact that the scepter is reminiscent of Tintin au Congo. Viewed from this perspective, the visitor discovers not the object in itself, but encounters it as a marker of images present in French mass culture. Linking the visitor’s encounter with an object to the images of this object in mass culture defines the experience of the permanent collections as concerning not the objects as works of art or as ethnographic ambassadors in themselves, but rather as palimpsests bearing the marks of a complex global exchange of material culture, images, and impressions.

Multisensory experiences reinforce the exploration that the visitor undertakes at the Quai Branly. The collections engage with the visitor’s senses of sight, sound, and touch. Jean states that the Quai Branly is “un des premiers musées qui a été conçu pour faire vivre une expérience justement sensorielle complète” (personal communication December 22, 2009). The visitor examines objects, reads supplementary information, and views multimedia displays. One hears the sounds of objects in use and the voices of those who use them in contextualizing multimedia tools. One feels the raised forms of objects in miniature along the parcours tactile. The prominent roles of sound and touch in the visitor’s experience of the collections distinguish the Quai Branly from traditional museums, which rely exclusively on sight to impart information. The multisensory
character of the collections facilitates an immersive encounter between the visitor and the cultures represented at the Quai Branly.

Multisensory exploration at the Quai Branly corresponds with anthropologist Paul Stoller’s discussion of the senses in anthropology (1989). Stoller asserts that “considering the senses of taste, smell, and hearing as much as privileged sight will […] render our accounts of others more faithful to the realities of the field” (Stoller 1989:9). According to Stoller, experiencing cultures with several senses facilitates a more complete understanding of these cultures. The multisensory experience at the Quai Branly allows the visitor not only to appreciate more fully the aesthetic qualities of the objects, but also to understand the significance of these objects in their original cultural contexts. The display of a Melanesian mask becomes more vivid when the visitor is able to see and hear the mask in use on a video screen. The visitor can wonder at the intricacy of the segments of the mask that cover the wearer’s body, and that are not presented in the museum. In addition, the video allows the visitor to appreciate the function of this mask in its culture of origin, thus deepening an ethnographic understanding of the object. Viewed through Stoller’s lens of the senses in anthropology, a visit to the Quai Branly’s collections becomes a journey of intercultural encounters, in which the visitor discovers and engages with other cultures in a variety of sensory modes.

The visit to the Quai Branly’s collections as a process of discovery can be overwhelming as well as enlightening for the visitor. Guy considers the collections space to be relatively small, but visitors nevertheless frequently refer to the plateau as enormous (personal communication October 29, 2009). According to Jean, the sociological study of visitors in the collections reveals their surprise at the large size of the plateau (personal
communication December 22, 2009). In Guy’s opinion, the apparent contradiction between the reality of the collections and visitors’ reactions to its size can be attributed to the fact that “il y a trop de cultures, trop d’endroits différents dans le monde” (personal communication December 17, 2009). He wonders whether “ça les enivre un petit peu” (personal communication December 17, 2009). However, Guy observes that a feeling of being overwhelmed by the size of a collections space is not uncommon for museum visitors in general (personal communication December 17, 2009). The fact that the majority of visitors do not fully understand the Quai Branly’s goal in facilitating an experience of discovery compounds this sense of bewilderment (personal communication December 22, 2009). Visitors to the Quai Branly are encouraged to engage with a great diversity of material culture. Even if one finds the collections space to be relatively contained, the wide variety of cultures it represents can create the impression of an exhaustive and exhausting world tour. The discovery of the Quai Branly’s collections facilitated by the museum places the visitor in the role of explorer. The visitor can marvel at the forms of the objects on display and, seeking further information, can consult supporting information for cultural contextualization. Discovery therefore fosters both aesthetic and ethnographic interactions with the collections.
Chapter 5: The Quai Branly as a Universal Museum

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the Musée du Quai Branly’s accessibility and its definition as a universal museum in the context of global museum dialogue. The principle of universality acts as a foundation for the process of cultural discovery that the Quai Branly’s curators intend, but the experience of exploration and discovery is nonetheless possible without this conceptual foundation. Considering discovery in the context of a discussion of universality serves to expand the framework of my analysis of the Quai Branly’s relationship with its visitors to encompass aspects of the relationship between museums and the public around the world. In this chapter, I first apply Kwame Anthony Appiah’s theory of cosmopolitanism to the question of universal patrimony. I then present an argument that opposes this theory and explore how these two contrasting positions complicate the visitor’s experience of discovery at the Quai Branly. In the second segment of this chapter, I examine the ways in which the movement of objects between museums around the world replicates colonial power structures and complicates the conception of the Quai Branly as a universal museum. The voyage of objects along colonial channels means that visitors discover the Quai Branly’s collections accompanied by the identity of these objects as colonial commodities. This discussion develops the concept of objects’ colonial past that I first addressed in Chapter 1. The movement of objects according to colonial relationships positions universality as a privileged marker exclusive to museums in the global North. Finally, I analyze the question of accessibility that both accompanies and complicates the concept of universality with which the Quai Branly defines itself.
Complicating the Cosmopolitan Perspective: A museum’s construction of a universal or a culturally specific identity for an object influences the discovery of the object on the part of the visitor. Anthropologist Emmanuel Désveaux defines two types of museums: “le musée de site et le musée central” (Désveaux in Latour 2007:309). The distinction between these two kinds of museums leads to a choice. Should museums present objects in the cultural contexts or geographic locations from which these objects originated? Alternatively, should every museum host a diverse collection of objects from around the world? An affirmative response to the latter question corresponds with the theory of cosmopolitanism advocated by Kwame Anthony Appiah (Appiah 2006:121). Appiah defines cosmopolitanism as “universality plus difference” (151). He argues that the “cosmopolitan contamination” that accompanies globalization creates a cultural mix in each locality that undermines the definition of an original cultural context as immune from the influence of global forces (101-103). The cosmopolitan view of global cultural relationships supports the Quai Branly’s definition of its collections as part of the universal patrimony of humanity. Visitors discover the objects as representatives of unfamiliar cultures, but understand them according to aesthetic and ethnographic criteria that transcend cultural boundaries. For example, the “Continuité/Discontinuité” display encourages visitors to see the use of bags as universal across cultures in the Americas. A cosmopolitan argument holds that exposing communities to objects from diverse cultures emphasizes the common characteristics among human beings, and thus builds a stronger global community (135). Appiah writes that “it is the value of the cultural property to people and not to peoples that matters” (121). A cosmopolitan perspective on contemporary museum issues supports the existence of the Quai Branly as a site of
intercultural dialogue that illustrates the essential shared qualities between humans (130). This definition positions the discovery of unfamiliar material culture that the Quai Branly facilitates as founded upon a universal human experience.

A position opposing the cosmopolitan perspective holds that an object in a museum possesses its full significance only in the culture that produced or inherited it, and therefore that it should be displayed in a museum in its place of origin. From this perspective, discovery as conceived by the Quai Branly’s curators remains possible, but the foundation of a universal cultural heritage collapses. Archaeologist Kim Lawson directly opposes the concept of a universal cultural patrimony:

The ‘greater good’ of humanity in general is put ahead of whatever this little community feels, and that’s remarkably arrogant. And it’s very divisive, often the value of some thing or place to the local community is very different than it would be to the whole world. [Lawson in Clavir 2002:124]

Lawson’s statement suggests the difference in meaning for objects in a musée central from the original significance of these objects. This interpretation of the proper social role of museums manifests itself in the argument for repatriation of objects to Indigenous North American communities and in the call for the return to Athens of the Parthenon Marbles from the British Museum (Hitchens 1998:88-90). At the Quai Branly, the objects in the “Continuité/Discontinuité” display lose their full cultural significance as they are removed from their particular cultural context and placed within a sequence of universality. As a result of its opposition to the concept of all material culture as belonging to a universal patrimony, the perspective that rejects cosmopolitanism necessitates museum contextualization and thereby supports discovery as an experience for the visitor to the Quai Branly. Both the cosmopolitan and the non-cosmopolitan
perspectives can facilitate the interpretation of a visit to the Quai Branly as the discovery of unfamiliar cultures, but the former supports while the latter refutes universality as the foundation of the visitor’s experience.

The Movement of Museum Objects: The movement of objects into and within the global museum network reveals a profound imbalance in power between the global North and South that replicates colonial-era relationships. This imbalance leads to a questioning of the universality of the Musée du Quai Branly. Is the museum of universal importance in spite of the disproportionate number and power of museums in the global North? Colonial history and historical Western interest in non-Western material culture strengthen the position of Northern museums and present universality as a privileged concept accessible to the Northern public.

The movement of objects defines the visitor’s experience of the Quai Branly’s permanent collections as an encounter with the works in addition to their context as colonial objects, a situation that undermines the process of discovery that the museum seeks to facilitate. The history of objects presented in Western anthropological museums reveals the colonial forces that determined the entrance of many non-Western works into these museums. As I stated in Chapter 1, the French interest in images of non-Western cultures in the early twentieth century complicates the definition of the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly as a process of discovery. I now examine the movement of African material culture into and between Western museums in order to support my argument. Neil MacGregor, director of the British Museum, describes the trajectory of a Sudanese slit drum: the drum was created in southern Sudan, taken to the Muslim north and modified with Islamic carving, seized by General Kitchener at the Battle of
Omdurman in 1898 and branded with “the emblem of the British Crown” (MacGregor 2010:618), presented to Queen Victoria, and finally placed in the halls of the British Museum in London (613, 618). British colonial subjugation of Sudan resulted in the transportation of Sudanese material culture to the imperial capital. The large number of African objects at the Quai Branly results from the movement of these objects to Paris through the colonial network. The French colonial empire in West Africa facilitated the seizure and shipment to France of a great quantity of objects, many of which fill the Afrique section of the Quai Branly’s permanent collections (Joubert and Vivier 2009:17). The colonial legacy of many museum objects (which is physically evident in the case of the Sudanese slit drum) drives the visitor to encounter not the works in themselves but the objects as the inheritors of colonial history. This history establishes the West’s familiarity with non-Western material culture and thus complicates the model of discovery of unfamiliar cultures that the Quai Branly encourages.

In addition to colonial conquest, Western interest in non-Western material culture spurred the growth of the movement of objects from Africa to Europe. The importance of non-Western objects in Western mass culture adds a layer of meaning to the definition of the Quai Branly’s collections. The familiarity with non-Western objects that results from Western artists’ interest in these objects complicates the definition of the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly as the discovery of unknown cultures. Artists such as Picasso were intrigued by African aesthetics, and their interest spread throughout the general European population (Steiner 1995:4-5). European artists’ fascination with African material culture defines the vocabulary of the Western market for these objects “largely in terms of Western concepts such as ‘art’ and ‘authenticity’” (2). These
concepts remain important in the Western consumption of art objects from Africa in the contemporary globalized world. Gabai Baaré, the Nigerien art dealer profiled in the documentary film *In and Out of Africa*, recognizes Western interest in old and “authentic” West African objects (*In and Out of Africa*). He therefore orchestrates a process of artificial aging that gives the objects the appearance and pedigree of age (*In and Out of Africa*). Western interest in non-Western material culture as art illustrates the power of modes of interpretation to shape the significance of these objects and reveals the historical presence of non-Western objects in Western mass culture. This interest influences the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly and complicates the definition of the visit as an exploration of unfamiliar cultures.

The movement of objects through diverse cultural contexts complicates the process of discovery that the Quai Branly facilitates for visitors. According to Christopher Steiner, traders in African material culture “are not only moving a set of objects through the world economic system, they are also exchanging information—mediating, modifying, and commenting on a broad spectrum of cultural knowledge” (Steiner 1995:2). Steiner’s statement reveals an issue at the heart of the Quai Branly’s display of non-Western culture in a Western context: the translation that accompanies the movement of the objects that comprise the permanent collections gives these objects a multitude of meanings in different places and at different times. This issue reinforces Ames’s concept of the museum object as a palimpsest, which I discussed in Chapter 1. The meanings that accompany the objects at the Quai Branly cause visitors to position the collections within a framework of familiarity. Ralph Regenvanu, director of the Cultural Center of Vanuatu, states frankly that ‘l’ouverture de ce musée [le quai Branly] a changé
le sens des objets qui sont désormais exposés ici (Regenvanu in Latour 2007:107). The translation of objects’ significance that takes place when the works join the Quai Branly’s collections adds a further layer to the identities and histories that define them. The layers of meaning that Western contextualization creates for non-Western material culture subverts the discovery of unfamiliar cultures as characterizing the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly.

The movement of objects between museums demonstrates further inequalities in the global museum network today. The presence of objects from the global South in Northern museums positions Southern cultures as resources for museum visitors. This interpretation of museum politics supports the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly as the discovery of unfamiliar cultures, but complicates this experience with global power dynamics. From this perspective, the cultures represented at the Quai Branly, the majority of which are located in the global South, constitute new cultural worlds waiting to be explored by the visitor to the Northern museum. While ancient and modern works from the global South are routinely displayed in Northern museums, these museums rarely send objects from Northern cultures to museums in peripheral societies (Wallerstein 1974). The architect Jean-Loup Pivin expresses a perspective that he shares with Samuel Sidibé, director of the Musée National du Mali: “Il faudrait essayer d’inverser les choses, et de faire par exemple une exposition des peintres impressionnistes européens in African museums (Pivin in Latour 2007:303). Pivin voices a concern with the South-North movement of objects through the global museum network. “Inverting” this trend through the presence of Northern material culture in Southern museums would, in Pivin’s
view, create a balanced relationship between museums in the contemporary globalized world.

Concerns about the poor conservation conditions at museums in Southern societies often prevent these museums from hosting Northern objects deemed too important to risk. This prohibition results from the hegemony of the global North. This imbalanced relationship manifests itself in the comments of the director of an African country’s national museum as she visited the Quai Branly’s permanent collections. She explains her presence at the museum as resulting from a need to study its conservation methods, so that her country’s national museum can care more effectively for its own collections (personal communication 18 November, 2009). She acknowledges the problematic colonial past of these objects, but states that at least they are being cared for (personal communication 18 November, 2009). The dominance of the North in the presentation of both Northern and Southern objects denies power to Southern museums and places it in the hands of the Quai Branly’s visitors as they discover the Southern cultures represented in the museum’s collections. The historical and contemporary presence of Southern objects in the North restricts the characteristic of universality to Northern museums.

The issue of where objects should be displayed in order to be accessible to the global public relates directly to the process of discovery that the Quai Branly facilitates for its visitors. Would the Quai Branly be more accessible were it located in Lagos, Mexico City, Delhi, or Port Moresby? Nigerian visitors to the Quai Branly in Lagos would be more familiar with Yoruba sculpture than would the French public. This familiarity could reinforce sentiments of Nigerian cultural patrimony, but could
undermine the Quai Branly’s mission of facilitating the discovery of cultures for visitors. The strengthening of the cultural heritage of Nigeria could also subvert the solidification of the concept of universal cultural patrimony that the Quai Branly upholds. Bourdieu’s discussion of the cultural distinction that museum visits represent poses a possible counterargument to the power of the museum’s location as the primary determinant of its accessibility. Although the Quai Branly in Lagos would be physically accessible to an individual for whom the museum was out of reach in Paris, one may not view visiting museums as congruent with one’s social identity. In this case, one would not visit the Quai Branly in spite of one’s cultural knowledge and proximity to the museum. Despite the complexity that an application of Bourdieu’s theory introduces, visitors’ familiarity with the Quai Branly’s collections as well as the museum’s location play significant roles in a discussion of the museum’s universality. This statement leads to the following question: How does the location of the Quai Branly in the global North affect its accessibility, and thus its status as a “universal” institution?

The Quai Branly as Universally Accessible: A visit to the Quai Branly is designed as an encounter with the objects and the cultures that they represent. The “direct contact” (Martin 2006:7, 9 in Levitz 2008:601) that Stéphane Martin describes as central to the visitor’s encounter with the material culture on display at the Quai Branly implies the universal resonance of the collections with museum visitors. The definition of the Musée du Quai Branly as a universally accessible museum subverts the importance of location in determining the interpretation of material culture. If a museum is universally accessible, visitors from any culture are able to appreciate its collections. However, the Quai Branly’s location continues to exert an influence on visitors’ understanding of the objects
on display and on the relationship between the museum and its visitors. In contrasting definitions, the Quai Branly’s universality depends on its representation of diverse cultures or on its wide accessibility.

The ability of the Quai Branly’s collections to introduce the public to unfamiliar cultures supports the definition of the Quai Branly as a universal museum at which visitors discover non-Western material culture. Martin defines the objects in the Quai Branly’s permanent collections as “ambassadeurs d’une meilleure compréhension entre les cultures d’origine des œuvres et les sociétés européennes” (Martin in Latour 2007:13). Describing the objects as cultural ambassadors imbues them with the power to educate visitors about the cultures in which they were produced. Non-Western objects become “remplaçants actifs” that speak for the absent individuals who comprise the societies in which the works were produced (Dias 2004:17-18). In Martin’s view, the objects “speak for themselves” as representatives of cultural traditions and have universal resonance with visitors, regardless of the visitors’ familiarity with these cultures. This perspective buttresses the Quai Branly’s identity as a universal museum and supports the process of discovery of unfamiliar cultures that the museum fosters. Marie-Claude Tjibaou, widow of New Caledonian Kanak independence movement leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou, supports the Quai Branly’s definition of universality. She asserts that “chaque création correspond au ressenti de l’homme dans son environnement […] c’est toujours le travail de l’homme” and that the cultures represented at the Quai Branly all contribute to the patrimony of humanity (Tjibaou in Latour 2007:96). Tjibaou’s statement positions the Quai Branly as a universal museum due to the humanity that unites the collections.
Her position reinforces the definition of a visit to the Quai Branly as an exploration of unfamiliar cultures.

Ralph Regenvanu argues the converse of Tjibaou’s belief in the universality of the Quai Branly’s collections. In his view, the power of those who have access to the collections to define both the objects and the cultures that produced them renders universality a false standard (Regenvanu in Latour 2007:118). The definition of the objects by the Western museum world undermines the experience of discovery that the Quai Branly seeks to create for its visitors. Regenvanu states that the concept of knowledge universal to humanity “a toujours été utilisé par les pays privilégiés qui disposent de cet accès, et nous devrions nous en éloigner parce qu’il s’agit en réalité d’une illusion totale” (118). He dismisses the belief that a museum’s universality stems from the diversity of its collections. In his view, if the objects are viewed by a narrow segment of the global population, then the interpretations of these objects reinforce the ideological dominance of the individuals with access to them. Samuel Sidibé states that “l’universalité réside non dans la diversité des collections, mais dans la possibilité que celles-ci soient accessibles au plus grand nombre y compris aux populations d’origine” (Sidibé in Régnier 2007). The presentation of non-Western material culture to an exclusive group of Western visitors would nonetheless allow for an experience of discovery at the Quai Branly. However, the Quai Branly’s location in a specific cultural context limits its effectiveness as a universal museum. The geographical and cultural specificity of a museum, combined with political and economic forces on the world stage, necessarily exclude certain groups from visiting it. As Sidibé observes frankly, “Combien de Maliens [...] peuvent avoir la chance de visiter ces musées?” (Sidibé in Régnier 2007).
2007). In Sidibé’s definition, universality can only be achieved through access by a large and diverse public. This view holds that museums throughout the world must reach out to the global public in order to facilitate an equal exchange of cultures, both material and intangible. The geographic exclusivity of the Quai Branly challenges the principle that the cultural diversity of its collections alone render the museum universal. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, discovery of the collections is possible both with and without a definition of the Quai Branly as a universal museum, but rejection of universality as a legitimate characterization undermines the foundation of common humanity that is intended to support the visitor’s experience at the museum.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this thesis, I examined the visitor’s experience of the Musée du Quai Branly’s permanent collections through the lens of discovery. I analyzed ways in which interpretations of the visit both support and complicate its characterization as a process of exploration and discovery of unfamiliar cultures. In the first chapter, I framed my argument and explored the issues of cultural translation, the encounter between self and other, and the colonial history of non-Western material culture in the West as they relate to the discovery of material culture at the Quai Branly. In Chapter 2, I examined relevant studies of museums and material culture, the relationship between primitive art and art proper, and the social power of museums in the context of exploration at the Quai Branly. In Chapter 3, I described the intellectual genesis and the physical character of the Quai Branly in order to contextualize the experience of discovery at the museum. In Chapter 4, I analyzed the relationship between the museum and its visitors in the framework of discovery through my ethnographic data. In Chapter 5, I studied the Quai Branly’s accessibility and its definition as a universal museum both as accompanying and as absent from the conception of a visit to the museum as a process of discovery.

As art and as ethnography, the objects in the Quai Branly’s permanent collections offer a multitude of potential interpretations. These interpretations both support and complicate the process of discovery that the Quai Branly’s curators endeavor to create for the museum’s visitors. The objects’ position in a musée central facilitates a cultural dialogue between visitors and objects, but this location also limits the museum’s accessibility for many members of the societies in which the objects were produced. The role of the Quai Branly as a universal museum that displays objects that can be
appreciated by all members of the public, regardless of their cultural knowledge, remains contested. Visitors’ ethnographic and aesthetic interpretation of the Quai Branly’s collections lies at the heart of the experience of discovery that the museum seeks to facilitate, while simultaneously complicating this experience.

The movement of the Quai Branly’s objects through cultural contexts produces complex layers of meaning for the works. These meanings undermine the conception of the visitor’s experience at the museum as an exploration of unfamiliar cultures. Individuals construct significance for an object depending upon their cultural context, as well as their knowledge of the object and of its history. An object viewed for its aesthetic merit as well as for its functional and social importance in its original cultural context takes on new significance as it moves geographically and culturally. The colonial appropriation of non-Western material culture constitutes a powerful example of this process of recontextualization. In the context of the colonial relationships that characterized the movement from societies of origin for many works in the Quai Branly’s collections, the objects are viewed as indicators of a foreign cultural tradition, but also assume new significance as members of their new cultural environment. An object’s simultaneous status as ethnographic ambassador and subject of new interpretive perspectives is especially apparent when the object moves to the halls of an anthropological museum. The ethnographic context presented on the information label that accompanies the work presents this object’s original cultural role. However, the content of the label reflects the goals of the museum curators in communicating certain messages to visitors. The ethnographic label thus articulates and exemplifies the interpretation of the object on the part of the curator. This interpretation in turn influences
the museum visitor’s understanding of the object. Definition of the visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly as an encounter with the collections in addition to their meanings as former colonial commodities and as museum objects complicates the process of discovery that the museum seeks to create.

Expanding the scope of the definition of ethnographic contextualization, other aspects of the museum environment reflect the interpretations of curators and of the architect and influence the interpretations of visitors. The lighting and décor of the Quai Branly’s collections space, the presentation of an object in relation to other works, and the design of the visit to the collections plateau all indicate the understanding of the objects on the part of museum curators and of the architect and play central roles in shaping the interpretation of the collections on the part of visitors. The power of the architect and the curators to influence the visitor’s experience at the museum complicates the conception of the visit as the discovery of non-Western cultures. Further broadening the definition of contextualization, the location of the museum and the cultural background of the visitors frame the interpretation of the collections. The Quai Branly’s location in Paris and the unfamiliarity of the museum’s objects for the majority of visitors shape the understanding of the collections and define the museum’s relationship with other institutions worldwide. This too renders more complex the process of discovery that is intended to characterize the visitor’s experience.

Ethnographic contextualization does not constitute the entirety of the interpretive process that takes place at the Quai Branly. The presentation of the museum’s objects as art prescribes an omission of supporting ethnographic information and encourages the visitor’s aesthetic engagement with the works. However, neither curators nor visitors
exercise an aesthetic gaze independent of the cultural considerations discussed above, and cultural context thus influences the interpretation of the Quai Branly’s collections as works of art. The aesthetic vocabulary of the museum’s largely Western public places the objects in relation to the Western aesthetic canon. Curators and visitors often define the works as distinct from Western art, a fact that reveals the historical significance of the category of primitive art. The aesthetic gaze at the Quai Branly indicates the network of cultural knowledge that influences any perspective on a work of art. The importance of culture to aesthetic perspectives reveals the layers of significance applied to the object. These layers result from the diversity of the object’s various identities and from the diverse social forces that shape the attitude of the observer toward the object.

The separation of the Quai Branly’s objects from their original cultural context, the progression from aesthetic encounter to ethnographic contextualization, and the museum’s dramatic design support a definition of the visitor’s experience as a process of discovery. However, the familiarity of the Quai Branly’s objects for many members of the global public, the layers of meaning that accompany the collections, and the familiarity of the French public with images of non-Western material culture complicate the conception of the visit to the Quai Branly as the discovery of unfamiliar cultures. An object’s presentation in the museum’s permanent collections influences its interpretation. This interpretation is predicated upon an interpretation of the object on the part of the individual who constructed the presentation space. The interpretation of the Quai Branly’s collections therefore indicates the multiplicity of meanings that the objects occupy simultaneously. These meanings provide a frame for the understanding of the objects on the part of the visitor. The role of diverse cultural forces in shaping the
visitor’s experience at the Quai Branly both supports and complicates a definition of this experience as a process of discovery of unfamiliar cultures.
Endnotes

i In spite of critics’ association of the painting with the Trocadéro’s collections, Picasso denied any influence of African art on Les demoiselles d’Avignon (Barr, Jr. 1980:56). Picasso’s denial nevertheless conforms to art historian Robert Goldwater’s (1938:42-43) belief that objects in ethnographic museums “made possible a long unconscious association between European artists and works of art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas” (Williams 1985:159).

ii “Where cultures meet in dialogue.” (Musée du Quai Branly official translation.)

iii “A grandiose superposition of cocoa beans that is more real than nature, sculpted in exceptional dark chocolate. Worthy of display at a museum of arts premiers.” (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.)

iv Arts premiers can be roughly (though not exactly) translated as “primitive art.” I discuss this term in detail in Chapter 2.

v “The museum must provide more information on the interpretation of the objects, in particular the African objects, so that visitors understand the significance of these objects and the position they occupy in the societies that produced them. Because if the object is displayed unaccompanied, it is definitively interpreted on the basis of its aesthetic qualities. This interpretation depends on the understanding of the observer and on the context of the museum’s physical character […] its architecture, its design, etc.”

vi “In a museum, you must provide the significance of the object as produced by an individual and by a society, a single society, and at the same time […] We cannot […] prevent someone else from having a different vision of the same object, because the object is symbolic and all symbols can be transferred, transformed, take on a new meaning: they are alive.”

vii Bayard asserts that “the notion of the book-that-has-been-read is ambiguous” (Bayard 2007:xviii).

viii “‘Meanings’ must be in the plural, and by no means in the singular.”

ix Quai Branly inventory number: 71.1969.17.1.

x Quai Branly inventory number: 71.1901.6.11.

xi The term “responsable” designates a museum official charged with the management of the Quai Branly’s collections or a part of its collections. The responsible’s role is similar to that of a curator.

xii “Deepest of man’s attitudes.”

xiii “Rests without a doubt on a firm psychological foundation since it tends to appear in each of us when we are placed in an unfamiliar situation.”

xiv “The near totality of works that it [the Quai Branly] is charged with displaying, conserving, and explaining, are wholly unfamiliar to the museum’s immediate surroundings.”

xv “Patrimony of humanity.”

xvi “Each cultural heritage is part of the patrimony of humanity insofar as this patrimony enriches understanding of the other and allows each particular heritage to blossom.”

xvii “Often, the public experiences a feeling of revolt: ‘We’ve come to see our objects, but why is our patrimony here? How did it get here? It was stolen from us!’”

xviii This method is outlined by James P. Spradley in The Ethnographic Interview (1979) and by David W. McCurdy et al. in The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society (2005).

xix “Shows how the forms are transformed and also how an idea is transformed from the north to the south, from the pre-Hispanic era to today.”

xx “We must give an order to what we want to display; we must therefore classify the objects and the societies that produced them!”

xxi Notable exceptions to the appellate “Dead Circus” are the World’s Fairs and Universal Expos, contemporary to anthropological museums such as the Trocadéro, in which live human specimens were displayed in recreated “natural” habitats (Magubane 2009).

xxii Quai Branly inventory number: 71.1965.104.1.

xxiii Quai Branly inventory number: 71.1935.61.1.

xxiv “An art of small cultures, cultures that remained relatively autonomous […] So this doesn’t exist in places where enormous, extremely powerful civilizations had long ago eradicated all the small cultures. This is the case with Europe. This is the case with Asia, with India and China.”

xxv Quai Branly inventory number: 71.1956.44.13.


xxvii “Magnificent.”
“An inventiveness of the forms and a beauty of the works that is unbelievable.”

Quai Branly inventory number: 71.1953.3.1.

“Agricultural object.”

“Like a painting.”

“In the context of the tail of the polemical comet on aesthetics and ethnography, and of the shifting, relative nature of our way of considering ‘other’ art.”

The object in the museum, defunctionalized and sometimes mutilated, contrasts with the object in use, in its original context. […] Extracted from its context, it loses its functional meaning and is seen as a pure form. The ethnographer thus disapproves of the aesthete’s ignorance of context and meaning, and of his ethnocentrism that causes him to take the same attitude before an African sculpture that he takes before a work of art created in his own culture.”

Ethnographers have no understanding of the artistic dimension of societies without writing. Africa, Oceania, and America are still denied legitimacy in museums.”

Although Kramer surely did not intend to include them, reading Tintin comics and Paris Match constitutes a possible way to develop at least a partial familiarity with the styles of non-Western material culture.

“Immediately fascinated artists, notably the surrealists. Its character all at once provocative, mysterious, fetishistic, ‘object-ified’, unreal, and haunted by the theme of sacrifice, is without question not coincidental: it is an enchanting object that proclaims its own conceptual interest. We do not need to explain this interest.”

People can’t resist.”

“Eighty-three of these objects were linked with power: with the power of chiefs, of African chiefs, of human beings, of gods, of spirits. So, in a certain sense, aside from their beauty, these were really ethnographic objects! They had been in a society, they had an ethnographic meaning and at the same time they were superb, because they carried the meaning of power, the link between human beings and the invisible world, with forces of nature, etc. We must realize that the borders, the boundaries between ethnography and art are fluid.”

“An ethnographic object is one that we view ethnographically; but the same object can easily be considered from an artistic point of view.”

The debate between understanding and aesthetic feeling is completely incomprehensible to ethnographers. An object that is exclusively functional does not exist. […] Notions of aesthetics and use are inseparable.”

“False question.”

Quai Branly inventory number: 71.1932.9.104.

“Cultural affinities […] functional affinities [and] […] iconographic affinities.”

“We always find ourselves before the mystery of the object, a mystery that in one sense is necessarily tied to a form, although the form can detach itself from its meaning. The museum is the best place to delve deeper into reflection on this mystery.”

Quai Branly inventory number: 71.1963.40.2.

“Challenges us to foster an ethnographic dialogue on the white myth that we know as the aesthetic; and to consider the Louvre, the Prado, or the Collection Ludwig as a section of the Museum of Absolute Ethnography devoted to the ‘art of whites’.”

“Wanted the visitor to feel lost.”

Of course, the visitor is limited by the physical reality of the museum’s collections. French neoclassical and romantic paintings are displayed in adjacent rooms, and the visitor is powerless to change this structure. Limitations to the visitor’s freedom at the Louvre thus emerge after all.

On one occasion, I saw a visitor sleeping in one of the exhibition rooms on the Louvre’s upper floors.

These questions do in fact exist at the Louvre, notably in the presence of Egyptian objects.

Quai Branly inventory number: 71.1956.44.14.

Quai Branly inventory numbers: 71.1934.188.1259 and 71.1934.188.496.

“The architect, I understand, for aesthetic reasons, didn’t want the works [to be placed in] display cases and distanced. But we’ve done it, because people can’t resist.”

“There is really only one problem that this poses in relation to the objects that are outside of display cases: for example the enormous drums from Oceania that are- Or from Melanesia, rather- [...] -that are displayed in the open and that people try to... Tam-tam.”

“In my view, if you put everything behind glass, you’ve encouraged a comportment that is simply that of a spectator. If you take the object out of its case, you have another- What I’m telling you is completely personal, I don’t know if it’s true or not, but it’s how I understand the situation. If you can have confidence in the visitor- If the object is sufficiently large, beautiful- People won’t scrape it. They know that they are in a museum and they are almost more respectful when the object is not in a case.”

“The museum was criticized for the darkness of the collections, which many members of the Anglo-Saxon press called the ‘Dark Africa’ aspect, but the darkness doesn’t only concern Africa, so it’s not just ‘Dark Africa,’ and it’s- I think that there’s another side to the issue. I think the architect emphasized the mystery of the object, which contradicts the museum’s curatorial mission. We would like the information labels to be better lit. We illuminate the objects as much as we can, but for some of them we’re already a bit over the limit.”

“Laïc sacrality.”

“People discover everything: the building and the objects.”

“So you see, shadow puppet theater punctuates the space. [...] In China, the extreme East, and in the middle we have India with shadow puppet theater, and all the way at the end, the last display case on shadow puppet theater, we have Syria.”

“Continuity/Discontinuity.”

“It’s great in the evening. There are far fewer people. You see all the objects in transparency; there are no longer any reflections from the light outside. The spotlights are like a sky full of stars. And that is magical. It’s very beautiful.”

Quai Branly inventory number: 71.1959.70.4.

Quai Branly inventory number: 71.1965.52.1.

“Studies of the museum’s public.”

“Project manager for the Director of Visitor Relations.”

“Living museum.”

“Masterpieces of avant-garde architecture; they display major collections that are incontrovertible on the international level.”

“Occasionally disturbing encounter, as with a mask bristling with human hair, its gaunt shape encrusted with shells, its nose pierced with a pig’s tooth. The shock passed, we are fascinated by the object’s history.”

“All the sculptures were lit from below, which made them look absolutely terrifying. To illuminate the objects is to make a choice. In this case, the choice was to make the objects look dramatic. As curators, we found this absolutely awful. It was a joke. It was like a haunted house at an amusement park. On the other hand, the public loved it.”

“The impression that you are completely alone with the objects.”

“I don’t think that people visit a museum and say: ‘Well, frankly the masks [...] are no good.’ [...] People think of the museum, of this museum, it’s related to the architecture, but actually- [...] it seems to me that [...] people think of the collections first, and then the rest [...] People who didn’t really like the museum say: ‘Well, the collections are magnificent, but the building is a bit...’ People often differentiate between the two.”

Quai Branly inventory number 72.1985.1.2 D.

“I think that when people visit the Louvre, they expect to see something in particular. [...] I don’t think that one is disappointed with the Louvre.”

The uproar in the 1980’s at the occasion of the “Grand Louvre” renovation project underscores the protectiveness that the Parisian public felt for their institution’s appearance (Heyer in “Great Buildings” 2010).

“Have no idea what it looks like, really. [...] They either like the museum spontaneously or they hate it spontaneously.”

“It’s like watching a movie three or four times because you like it.”

“Some people say: ‘Oh, it’s too dark. It’s suffocating; we’re lost,’ etc. [...] But others say: ‘Oh, it’s great; we feel like we’re discovering a new world.’”

“It confuses Westerners so that they come face to face with civilizations that do not function according to the norms that they are used to.”
Quai Branly inventory number: 70.2003.3.10.

“One of the first museums that was conceived to create a complete sensory experience.”

Quai Branly inventory number: 72.1998.5.1.

“There are too many cultures, too many different places in the world.”

“Tactile route.”

“It intoxicates them a little bit.”

“The local museum and the central museum.”

“The opening of this museum changed the meaning of the objects that will be on display here from now on.”

“We should try to invert things, and to present an exhibition of European Impressionist painters.”

“Ambassadors for a better understanding between the cultures of origin and European societies.”

“Active stand-ins.”

“Each creation corresponds with man’s feeling in his environment […] it’s always the work of man.”

“Has always been used by privileged countries who possess this access, and we should avoid this idea because in reality it is a complete illusion.”

“Universality resides not in the diversity of the collections, but in the possibility that the collections be accessible to the largest amount of people possible, including the populations of origin.”

“How many Malians […] have the opportunity to visit these museums?”
Bibliography


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