



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

'Arts Premiers' in the Louvre

Corbey, R.H.A.

Citation

Corbey, R. H. A. (2000). 'Arts Premiers' in the Louvre. *Anthropology Today*, 16(4), 3-6.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/43058>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License:

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/43058>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Arts premiers in the Louvre

RAYMOND CORBEY

Raymond Corbey is attached to the Department of Philosophy of Tilburg University and the Department of Archaeology of Leiden University, in the Netherlands. His book *Tribal art traffic: A chronicle of taste, trade and desire in colonial and post-colonial times (Amsterdam: KIT-Press/Royal Tropical Institute), on the movements of ethnographic objects to and in 20th-century Western Europe, will appear this autumn. His email is r.corbey@kub.nl.*

New Weblinks

This is the first article published in ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY to be selected for enhanced linking on the RAI website. Please go to the contents page of this issue and click next to its title at: <http://www.rai.anthropology.org.uk/pubs/at/anthrotoday.html>

A new Musée des Arts et Civilisations, to be opened in 2004, is Jacques Chirac's *projet présidentiel*. On 13 April 2000 the Louvre opened the doors of a pavilion containing 117 pieces of the finest 'tribal art'. This pavilion is part of the new museum. The introduction of 'arts premiers' in the Louvre, a temple of high art and *haute culture*, was a symbolically laden moment, a rite of passage that was performed with a suitable amount of theatrical display. Chirac's project has also generated a considerable amount of conflict in French museums, politics and science during the last decade.

It was with a great deal of fanfare that this lofty institution opened, in the spring of this year, a pavilion containing tribal art, part of a huge new ethnographic museum which is now under construction at the quai Branly, in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. The Musée de l'Homme (270,000 objects), which is but a stone's throw away, and the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie (30,000 objects), near the Bois de Vincennes, will both be incorporated into the new museum and cease to exist. Both institutions have suffered with low morale, inappropriate accommodation, and a lack of personnel, money and political goodwill.

Georges Pompidou built the Centre Pompidou; Valéry Giscard d'Estaing the Musée d'Orsay; François Mitterand the Institut du Monde Arabe and the Bibliothèque de France. This new museum is Jacques Chirac's *grand travail*. It will be housed in a spectacular column-supported structure providing 9,000 square metres of exhibition space and 8,000 square metres of storage space. The building was designed by the French architect Jean Nouvel, whose previous work includes the Institut du Monde Arabe. Over the last ten years Chirac's project has generated heated debate in various circles in Paris.

Rendering unto Caesar

Chirac has always had a predilection for tribal art. In 1991 he became friends with the museum consultant, connoisseur and collector Jacques Kerchache (Photo 3), the actual brain behind the project. On 15 March 1990, the latter,

together with 150 prominent writers, art historians, politicians and the like, had published a manifesto entitled *Pour que les chefs-d'oeuvre du monde entier naissent libres et égaux* in the newspaper *Libération*, which argued in favour of the inclusion of the art of small-scale non-Western societies in the Louvre (Kerchache et al. 1990). One year later, when they met on the island of Mauritius, Kerchache managed to acquire Chirac's support for this enterprise.

Kerchache, now 57, was previously for some twenty years a successful dealer in tribal art, which he sold for high profits to collectors, museums and other dealers. He regularly travelled great distances to acquire pieces directly from their makers or from local go-betweens in both Africa and Southeast Asia, and from 1965 until 1980 he ran a gallery in the rue de Seine. One of his first large sales exhibitions there, in 1967, centred around Mahongwe *m'bweti* reliquary figures which he had found in Gabon, in a dried-up well where they had been dumped by missionaries in the 1930s (Kerchache 1967). The Gabonese embassy in Paris got wind of the exhibition and lured Kerchache to Gabon, where he was arrested and imprisoned for a short period after being charged with art smuggling. The *m'bweti* were confiscated, handed over to the embassy, and then mysteriously disappeared, never reaching the Gabonese national collections.

During the 1970s Kerchache developed a new ambition: the documentation of all aesthetically important tribal art worldwide. His well-to-do parents supported this enterprise, which involved visits to public and private collections around the world. The hefty and authoritative standard work *l'Art africain* (Kerchache, Paudrat and Stéphan 1988) is a result of that documentation project. A venomous review in an anthropological journal characterized this book as a beefed-up sales catalogue, primarily aimed at increasing the market value of pieces which were selected from the private collections of his clients (Anonymous 1990). In 1994 Kerchache curated a spectacular exhibition on the Caribbean Taino in the Petit



Photo 1. A téké bitégué, collected by Robert Lehuard in the 1920s, now in the Louvre. From Kerchache (2000:184). The route whereby this kind of art comes into the Louvre is very different from that of the great art of the past. For example, Lehuard, a railway engineer in colonial French Moyen-Congo during the 1920s, developed a predilection for the indigenous statuettes that the local Roman Catholic missionary sought to destroy by burning every Saturday. In this manner Lehuard once in a while saved a few heathen idols from the pile. One of the objects that he collected was this so-called bitégué of the Wumu Téké (see photos left), 38 centimetres high: a seated male ancestral spirit with whom an individual could communicate through a ngaa, a priest or sorcerer, and who provided protection. Through the collection of Lehuard's son Raoul and the exclusive Parisian tribal art gallery Ratton Hourdé (Anonymous 1999:23), this frequently exhibited and published object has now wound up at the Louvre.

Palais in Paris, to the great pleasure of Chirac, then still mayor of Paris, and in 1995 he curated the exhibition *Picasso/Afrique: Etat d'esprit*, in the Centre Pompidou.

Kerchache's history as an art dealer was carefully omitted from the official publicity surrounding the Louvre opening. He is a man with both many friends and many enemies. Some see him as a brilliant cultural czar, others as a slick and irritable individual who is not afraid to show his temper. That he is both very successful and very knowledgeable is however denied by almost no-one. One influential dealer in African art felt there was something of a witch-hunt going on in the French press against Kerchache, orchestrated by ethnologists as well as art historians/curators at the Louvre. 'I have no stake in it, he is no special friend of mine, and I do not want to gloss over everything that he has done,' he told me, 'but I do think that this is going somewhat too far. The man is a visionary, a major authority on tribal art, and we owe to him the fact that everyone can now enjoy over one hundred top pieces in a top museum. As the saying goes, we should render unto Caesar what is Caesar's.'

Aesthetics versus ethnology

The succession of name changes which the planned museum, with its recently opened annexe in the Louvre, has undergone is significant in itself. It started with a campaign for a Musée des Arts Premiers, completely in the spirit of Chirac and Kerchache. A wave of protest by anthropologists followed. Such luminaries as Louis Dumont and Henry de Lumley quickly committed themselves to print on this issue (Dumont 1996; Despertis 1996). In their view, cultural backgrounds and ethnographical context were more important than the aesthetic contemplation of isolated objects, and *arts premiers* – a neologism apparently coined by one of Kerchache's writer-friends – still sounded too much like *art primitif*. Furthermore, their Musée de l'Homme, with its rich tradition of anthropological study of all aspects of humans, including biology and prehistory,

was to be abolished. *Trésors méconnus* ('undervalued treasures'; Di Chiara 1999) is the telling title of one of the most recent and probably last publications of the Musée de l'Homme.

The name of the planned museum was soon changed to Musée des Arts *et des Civilisations* Premiers, and then the much-debated 'premiers' was eliminated altogether. In view of all the controversy surrounding the issue, the official name is currently the 'Musée du Quai Branly'. Some cynics have suggested that it be called quite simply the 'Musée Chirac'.

The prominent left-wing anthropologist Maurice Godelier played a significant role in this shift from pure aesthetics to art *and* ethnology. It was an inspired move on the part of the left-wing Jospin government to recruit this heavyweight for the *Mission de préfiguration* (planning commission). He was to act as a counterweight to the dominance of the aesthetic approach, championed by Kerchache, in collaboration with Germain Viatte, the curatorial director of the quai Branly museum, and Stéphane Martin, its general director. Kerchache was initially mainly involved in the Louvre annexe, as *commissaire* – curator, or perhaps one should say, art director – of the new exhibits, but was recently appointed *conseiller esthétique* (aesthetic advisor) of the larger project, the Musée du quai Branly, in addition.

New Guinea specialist Godelier fought, and continues to fight, 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. Under his leadership, and with the guidance of a large number of advisory committees with a wide-ranging international membership, the 'tribal art' in the planned museum is provided with a thorough cultural contextualization, realised with the help of the latest digitally interactive technology in a *secteur transversal* connecting the areas dedicated to four continents, as well as in those areas themselves. In addition, the new institution is to become a centre for anthropological research and teaching on, with, and partly by the relevant non-Western societies.

It is rumoured that the *cohabitation* between these two Parisian mandarins, Kerchache and Godelier, is as uneasy as the political cohabitation between the left-wing government and the right-wing president; the left-wing newspaper *Le canard enchaîné* (Anonymous 1997) labelled it a 'cohabitation commerciale', in a dig at Kerchache and his close ties to the world of tribal art dealers and collectors. This world is represented by, among others, his friends and former clients, artists Georg Baselitz and Arman, both artists, and the wealthy Swiss collector Jean-Paul Barbier, who runs his own Musée Barbier-Mueller in Geneva. These three individuals acted as advisors to the project.

In 1997 Barbier sold 276 high-quality pieces from Nigeria to the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et

d'Océanie, for some 40 million French francs. Four of them are now in the Louvre. This purchase was made to fill a gap in the national ethnographic collections. After all, these collections generally consist – as they do in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany or Great Britain – of colonial heirlooms and booty, and Nigeria was never a French colony. One side-effect of international conventions designed to protect cultural property now and in the future is that they tend to protect and legitimize former acquisitions.

In a similar fashion the polychrome, hermaphroditic *uli* ancestor figure from New Ireland (Kerchache 2000: 290-293) which can now be admired in the Louvre was acquired to fill another such gap, and other purchases are being planned. In the context of a presidential *grand travail* a few million francs more or less are not a great issue of debate, and it is at moments like this that Kerchache's contacts come in handy. The *uli* was purchased for 18 million French francs from the well-known Paris tribal art dealer Alain Schoffel, who has retired to a château in the country. He could have got an even higher price in the United States – but, as he pointed out, the honour of having your name and your piece in the Louvre is priceless. There was much gnashing of teeth in the Musée de l'Homme at the thought of what they could have done with the amount of money that was spent on this single object.

In Paris the tensions between several of the parties involved continue: between the art world and the ethnological community; between the Ministry of Culture (which is responsible for the soon to be closed Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie) and the Ministry of National Education (responsible for the Musée de l'Homme); between those in favour of *arts premiers* in the Louvre, and the Louvre's curators and director, Pierre Rosenberg, who were strongly opposed to this move. Individuals on both sides have accused their opponents of racism, both for trying to keep tribal art out of the Louvre and for an aestheticizing, exoticizing approach to ritual objects.

While the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example, has shown tribal art since 1935, even in 1979 the Louvre, more traditionalist and bourgeois than avant-garde, failed to come to an agreement with the reputed Parisian art dealer Charles Ratton, who wished to donate his collection of reliquary figures from Gabon and other African art to the nation.

Individual members of the advisory committees are likewise dissatisfied with their role. 'It's all cosmetic,' one anthropologist complained, 'in fact, decisions are taken at the top while we are only consulted on details and issues of no consequence.' Two other sources made similar statements independently. Conflicts and opposition abound, but the president has pushed his project through, in good French political tradition.

In the Louvre

But what a fantastic sight it is, meanwhile, there in the Pavillon des Sessions (Photo 2) on the quai des Tuileries, where the average queueing time on the first day was an hour and a half. The *malanggan*, for example (Photo 3), which was used in a death ritual on New Ireland around 1890, the sort of piece that stole the hearts of Paris surrealists and which was formerly in the private collection of André Breton. Or the Kwakwaka'wakw mask from the Canadian west coast. When closed, it represents a raven, but when open, it represents a human-like ancestral figure into whom the raven changed in the mythical primeval time, a transformation that was dramatically performed in the winter rituals of a secret society, year in, year out. A spectacular three-metre-high house pole of the Paiwan of Taiwan (Kerchache 2000: 220-224) was loaned by a Taiwanese museum – one of the results of Kerchache's worldwide search.

Most of the total of 117 objects come from the two Paris museums mentioned above and from other French museums. Some were loaned by foreign museums. Also included are fifteen recent purchases, and a group of recent

Photo 2 (left). A sideroom of the Pavillon des Sessions with pre-Columbian objects.

Photo 3 (right). Jacques Kerchache with a malanggan ancestor figure from New Ireland, now on display in the Louvre.



For their help I would like to thank Marc Felix, Maurice Godelier, Pieter ter Keurs, Philippe Peltier, Wil Roebroeks, Mark Vitullo and an anonymous referee.

- Anonymous 1990. L'art africain: Une marchandise dissimulée. *Gradhiva* 8 (1990), 100-103.
- Anonymous 1997. Guerre tribale pour les 'arts premiers'. *Le Canard Enchaîné*, 20 October.
- Anonymous 1999. *Téké – Collection de Robert et Raoul Lehuard*. Paris: Galerie Rattou Hourdé.
- Corbey, R. 1999. African art in Brussels. *Anthropology Today* 15 (1999), 6, 11-16.
- Desperts, Jean 1996. Non à la dispersion. Entretien avec Henri de Lumley. *Valeurs Actuelles*, 12 October.
- Di Chiara, C.E. (ed.) 1999. *Trésors méconnus du Musée de l'Homme*. Paris: Musée national d'Histoire naturelle.
- Dumont, Louis 1996. Non au Musée des Arts premiers. *Le Monde*, 25 October.
- Kerchache, Jacques 1967. *Le m'boueti des Mahongoue, Gabon*. Paris: Galerie Jacques Kerchache with Editions François Maspero.
- Kerchache, Jacques et al. 1990. Pour que les chefs-d'oeuvre du monde entier naissent libres et égaux. *Libération*, 15 March.
- Kerchache, Jacques (ed.) 2000. *Sculptures: Afrique, Asie, Océanie, Amériques*. Paris: Réunion des Musées nationaux.
- Kerchache, Jacques & Maurice Godelier 2000. *Sculptures: Afrique, Asie, Océanie, Amériques*. CD-ROM. Paris: Carré Multimedia.
- Kerchache, Jacques, Jean-Louis Paudrat & Lucien Stéphan 1988. *L'art africain*. Paris: Mazenod.
- Krüger, Klaus-Jochen 1999/2000. The arts of Bahr-el-Ghazal: Funerary sculpture of the Bongo and Belanda. *Tribal Arts/Le Monde de l'Art Tribal*, Winter/Spring, 82-101.

gifts from dealers and collectors. The selection was made by Kerchache, and, as he explicitly states, was based on aesthetic considerations rather than on rarity, age, or ethnographical features. In an annexe to the austere, evenly lit and spaciouly arranged pavilion of 1,400 square metres there are twelve interactive consoles where visitors can tap into a wealth of information, including early ethnographical footage. Most of this information appears on the available CD-ROM (Kerchache & Godelier 2000). This ethnographic contextualization was Maurice Godelier's initiative, and was realised – on this point at least – in relatively harmonious collaboration with Jacques Kerchache. It shows that ethnographical and aesthetic perspectives can complement one another elegantly, especially with the help of the latest information technology.

The new exhibits in the Louvre are beautiful, but, characteristically enough, at the same time fill but a small corner of the largest museum in the world, and are situated at a considerable distance from the main entrance. The title of the catalogue, *Sculptures: Afrique, Asie, Océanie, Amériques* (Kerchache 2000; cf. Kerchache & Godelier 2000), is very much in the Louvre style, as is the set-up of the pavilion, though none of the 48 authors who contributed to the catalogue is affiliated with that institution.

The origins of the objects in the Pavillon des Sessions illustrate the degree to which we are dealing with colonial heirlooms in the case of the museums in Paris, as well as those from, for example, St. Petersburg, Chicago, Hamburg or Leiden. The institution which is currently known as the Musée de l'Homme issued from a world's fair which exhibited and celebrated one nation's world-spanning endeavours in 1878. Numerous expeditions provided a regular flow of pieces to the collections, as well as adding to its photographic collection, which now numbers 300,000 photographs. The Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie was originally the Musée des Colonies, founded in the Palais des Colonies at the 1931 colonial exhibition. Then it became the Musée de la France d'Outre-mer, until Minister of Culture André Malraux remoulded it into its present state as an art museum.

For centuries ancestor figures, masks, shields, amulets, and other ritual or ceremonial objects from small-scale non-Western societies were seen as hideously ugly heathen fetishes, or, in a more secular context, rarities and curiosities. Early 20th-century avant-garde artists such as Picasso and Derain, however, started to speak of *art nègre* and *art primitif*, and used them in the context of their rebellion against bourgeois classicist aesthetic canons. It was at this time that the suggestion that this type of art be included in the Louvre collections was first put forward. Claude Lévi-Strauss repeated the suggestion in the 1940s, and André Malraux, who preferred the term *arts primordiaux*, once again made the proposal in the 1950s. It is worth pointing out that before he became minister Malraux, like Kerchache, was an art dealer and adventurer who was not beyond controversy.

The term 'tribal art' is handy and comfortably short, but both 'tribal' and 'art' are disputable. The alternative term 'non-Western', also refers to, for example, China or India, and has the further drawback that it is more of a negation than a definition. In the Louvre the neutral but somewhat unwieldy phrase 'Arts de l'Afrique, d'Asie, d'Océanie et des Amériques' is used, although the term *art primitif* does occur on at least one panel.

Across the Seine

For those who truly wish to immerse themselves in tribal art, it is possible to cross the Seine by way of the Pont des Arts and peruse the narrow streets around the Hôtel des

Monnaies. There, one can find a dozen or so serious galleries specializing in tribal art, such as the exclusive, and equally expensive, Leloup, Rattou Hourdé, and De Monbrison. Galleries of a more dubious nature can, however, also be found there. As much, or perhaps even more trade goes on behind the scenes.

Several times a year considerable quantities of tribal art are sold at auction in Paris, primarily at Drouot. Every autumn, an exclusive Salon d'Art tribal is held on the Champs-Élysées, attracting hundreds of visitors. Around the corner is the small but smart and professional Musée Dapper, a private initiative which, since its foundation in 1986, has organized some 25 impressive temporary exhibitions of high-quality tribal art, presented in an aesthetically refined fashion and accompanied by a similar number of scholarly catalogues. Undoubtedly the new exhibits in the Louvre will stimulate the trade in tribal art in Paris and elsewhere to no small degree. Sotheby's New York used the opening of the Louvre pavilion to its own advantage, showing material from its upcoming New York auctions in Paris in the same week, including part of the private collection of the Brussels aristocrat Comte Baudouin de Grunne.

One thing that becomes clear on both banks of the Seine is the extent to which these objects are given new, second lives in North Atlantic societies, with new uses and meanings, and an equally interesting cultural history. Here they become the object of new cults. It is still possible to find, in personal legacies, at flea markets, local auctions and the like, objects which were taken back to the mother country during the colonial era and during periods of decolonization. The better pieces usually quickly find their way to galleries in Paris and Brussels, the two European centres of trade in tribal art, where fierce struggles take place between wealthy collectors for the best pieces, and between dealers for the richest and most prestigious clients (cf. Corbey 1999). The objects then disappear into private collections, though in some cases, as the voluminous Louvre exhibition catalogue illustrates, they end up in museums, side by side with pieces collected on early expeditions.

The ancestor figures, masks, amulets, shields, poles and so on found in Paris have escaped rot after being discarded by their makers, disposed of following the completion of certain rituals, or Islamicization. They have escaped destruction by missionaries, indigenous syncretist movements, or populist regimes – thanks to the efforts of collectors and dealers, or so the latter argue. In Africa they have often passed through the hands of specialized Senegalese, Hausa, Congolese or other go-betweens, who cover large parts of the continent in the course of their activities. These dealers maintain close contacts with travelling Western dealers, and with Western galleries to which they travel.

Civil wars such as that in Biafra or, more recently, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan, resulted in a greater flow of ritual objects which have been bought, taken or stolen from altars and other sacred places, or from museums. Over the last few years, a large number of Bongo, Belanda and other objects from southern Sudan have been offered on the market (Krüger 2000). Most of what is on sale in the West is fake. Terracotta objects such as Nok from Nigeria, Koma from Ghana and Djenné from Mali are plundered and smuggled to a certain extent.

To such fascinating, bizarre or bitter backgrounds the world of galleries, private collections, and auctions as well as the *grand travail* of Kerchache and Chirac is directly or indirectly tied. It is questionable therefore whether the project is or ever will be as resolutely postcolonial as Godelier wishes it to be. □