The Colonial Legacy of Non-Western Art in French Museums

French museums, in common with many in Europe, contain countless artworks and everyday objects from Asia, Africa, Oceania and the pre-Columbian Americas. Many come from France’s old colonies and were collected during the imperial age by explorers, administrators, missionaries and soldiers, private individuals and official expeditions. Collections include pieces brought home as curios and souvenirs, as well as works carefully selected by art experts and anthropologists. Indigenous people made free will gifts of some objects and sold others. Europeans commissioned works, and local artisans produced some specifically for trade. Occasionally Europeans simply recovered objects discarded when their ritual functions came to an end. Other items, however, were pilfered from areas of conquest. Museums have continued collecting non-Western art since the end of the colonial era, mostly at art sales and auctions, though with episodic controversies about provenance, authenticity and price.

Not all non-Western art in France can be considered in even a remote sense as colonial ‘booty’, and art-lovers from the Third World have acknowledged the role played by European institutions in preservation of cultural artefacts. Yet collections currently curated and exhibited owe much to colonial perspectives and collecting practices. Furthermore, most of the museums in which they are displayed – including the Musée de l’Homme, the Musée National des Arts Asiatiques-Musée Guimet and the recently closed Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie (MAAO) – date from the colonial period. They were established when France ruled an empire, and when collectors, social scientists, dealers and spectators, as well as European avant-garde painters, sculptors and designers fascinated by primitive art, carried out their activities in the context of imperialism. In this sense, much non-Western art on show is connected to the history of expansion and the diverse ideologies that underpinned it, took issue with it, or were engendered by the ‘culture contact’ it created. Collections of non-Western art, and the institutions that house them, are more directly colonial lieux de mémoire than often realised. Current debates and projects concerning the ethnographic...
museums reflect efforts to ‘decolonise’ exhibition of primitive arts and crafts.3

Connections between museums and colonialism are particularly blatant with art from black Africa and the Pacific islands: works variously called ‘primitive arts’, ‘tribal arts’, ‘savage art’, ‘Negro art’ (art nègre), art from distant places (arts lointains), or – an increasingly popular designation – arts premiers (generally translated as ‘primal arts’). The very names suggest changing views about works from very different cultures grouped together but contrasted with the arts of Europe and Asia.4

One straightforward trait that evidences connections between colonialism and museums appears in the strengths of French collections, which to a great degree coincide with areas of colonisation. Sub-Saharan African art in France, for example, is concentrated on countries of the former AOF, AEF and Madagascar. Collections on eastern and southern Africa – regions of British, Portuguese and German penetration – were historically less extensive, although acquisitions in recent decades have filled gaps. French Polynesia and New Caledonia are well represented for Oceania. Similarly, collections of Asian art are strong in Khmer and Cham works from Indochina, sparked by fascination for the temples of Cambodia and by the collecting efforts of colonials and the Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient. French museums have far fewer works of Indian art than do British institutions, and there is much less Indonesian art than in the Netherlands.

Non-Western collections in European museums constitute multiple lieux de mémoire. They form part of the heritage of the societies that created the works, embodying particular artistic skills and codes, and the cultural, religious, social and political functions that objects performed. They represent the collective identity of cultural groups, though it should be remembered that they also show the vision of an individual sculptor, painter or artisan, as well as the specific period when they were produced. Despite what many colonial-era observers thought, ‘traditional’ design was not immutable. Secondly, many works are a legacy of colonialism, the ideologies that patterned French views of people overseas, the circumstances in which collections were assembled, the ‘discovery’ of Asian and primitive art, and the vogue for founding museums in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Finally, these collections are now part of the French artistic patrimony. For generations, they have inspired artists and writers (such as Cubists and Surrealists), entertained gallery visitors enthralled by marvels from darkest Africa or mythical Oceania, stimulated the vocations of travellers and colonialists (as well as anti-colonialists), and provided research materials for scholars. Some of the most famous artworks in France are not French – the Winged Victory of Samothrace, for instance – but they are now essential parts of the French cultural heritage. So too are the Dogon masks, Khmer sculptures and Polynesian weapons housed in French museums.