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Curating Alienation in the Pavillon des Sessions?

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A Study of the Spatial, Contextual, and (Colonial) Historical Framing
of African, Asian, Oceanic, and American Material Culture and Art in
the Louvre (Pre-Renovation, 2024–2025)

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Conducting research in this field has been both emotionally taxing and deeply rewarding. At times, it has stirred anger and frustration about the past, present, and likely the future; yet it has also sharpened my critical lens. Museum visits will never be the same; I now view curatorial choices with a more discerning eye, hopefully less obscured by the fog of coloniality I was once obvious to.

One of the challenges I faced was recognising how many scholars in this field still rely heavily on Western, Global North sources. This realisation left me uncomfortable and determined not to replicate those same colonial patterns in my own work. As Audre Lorde reminds us, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” As long as we, as advocates for decolonial change, continue primarily citing Western authors from the global North – descendants of those who benefitted from colonialism and continue to do so – we are active participants in maintaining coloniality and risk reinforcing the very systems we seek to dismantle.

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With their motto “Dare to Think,” the University of Ghent cannot be omitted from my acknowledgements, as I have tried to live up to their motto over the past few years, and especially during the last months; always asking the hard questions, instead of the easy ones, trying to be critical of practices within the Pavillon des Sessions, while also remaining fair.

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I am deeply and humbly indebted to all researchers cited in this dissertation, as well as those whose work was not included, for expanding my understanding of the past, present, and potential futures of France and its colonial history and (continuing) legacy; the Pavillon des Sessions; the Louvre and Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac; colonialism and decolonisation is general; (decolonising) museology; (de)coloniality; alienation; and relevant communication strategies for museums.

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Abstract

This dissertation offers a focused and contemporary analysis of the Pavillon des Sessions (Louvre, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac), addressing gaps in the literature by examining how its curatorial practices avoided or perpetuated spatial, contextual, and (colonial) historical alienation before its current renovation (2024-2025). Drawing on literature review, archival research, fieldwork, and in-depth exhibition analysis, it investigates how the pavilion's location within the Louvre, its institutional link to the quai Branly museum, its white-cube aesthetic, artefact selection and arrangement, use of glass cases, and the provision (or absence) of contextual information contributed to a mutually reinforcing cycle of museological detachment, coloniality, and inequality.

Findings show that spatial alienation began with the displacement of objects from source communities, compounded by their physical and symbolic marginalisation within the Louvre. Contextual alienation emerged through Eurocentric categorisation, limited or vague interpretive material, and minimal engagement with source communities. Colonial-historical alienation was reinforced by timelines starting at the point of Western contact, omission of colonial acquisition contexts, and interpretive resources that mentioned colonialism only superficially, if at all.

This study demonstrates that even museum spaces presented as inclusive (and therefore can be interpreted as decolonial) can reproduce exclusionary structures when collaboration is absent or superficial. It calls for sustained partnerships with source communities, the integration of global — not only Western — scholarship, and the adoption of ethical, decolonial display strategies that directly address the colonial foundations of museum practice. In doing so, it contributes to the wider field of decolonising museology and offers insights for creating more inclusive, critically engaged exhibitions.

Keywords: decolonising museology; curatorial choices; spatial, contextual, and colonial-historical alienation; art and material culture displaced in colonial contexts; Pavillon des Sessions (Louvre, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac)

Nederlandstalige Samenvatting (Summary in Dutch)

Deze masterproef biedt een gerichte en actuele analyse van de Pavillon des Sessions (Louvre, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac) en vult hiaten in de bestaande literatuur door te onderzoeken hoe de curatoriële praktijken van het paviljoen ruimtelijke, contextuele en (koloniaal-) historische vervreemding vermeden of juist in stand hielden voor de huidige renovatie (2024-2025). Op basis van literatuuronderzoek, archiefstudie, veldwerk en een diepgaande tentoonstellinganalyse, onderzoekt het hoe de locatie van het paviljoen binnen het Louvre, de institutionele link met het musée du quai Branly, de white-cube esthetiek, de selectie en opstelling van artefacten, het gebruik van glazen vitrines en het al dan niet aanwezig zijn van contextuele informatie bijdroegen aan een elkaar versterkende cyclus van museale vervreemding, kolonialiteit en ongelijkheid.

De bevindingen tonen aan dat ruimtelijke vervreemding begon met de ontheemding van objecten uit hun bron gemeenschappen, versterkt door hun fysieke en symbolische marginalisering binnen het Louvre. Contextuele vervreemding kwam tot uiting in eurocentrische categorisering, beperkte of vage interpretatieve materialen en minimale betrokkenheid van de bron gemeenschappen. Koloniaal-historische vervreemding werd bevestigd door tijdlijnen die starten bij Westerse contacten doorheen het paviljoen, het weglaten van koloniale contexten van verwerving en interpretatiematerialen die kolonialisme slechts oppervlakkig of helemaal niet benoemden.

Deze studie toont aan dat zelfs museale ruimtes die gepresenteerd worden als inclusief (en daardoor geïnterpreteerd kunnen worden als dekoloniaal), uitsluitende structuren kunnen reproduceren wanneer samenwerking met bron gemeenschappen ontbreekt of oppervlakkig is. Het pleit voor duurzame partnerschappen met bron gemeenschappen, de integratie van wereldwijd — niet alleen Westers — onderzoek en de toepassing van ethische, dekoloniale tentoonstellingsstrategieën die expliciet de koloniale fundamenteën van museale praktijken aanpakken. Daarmee levert het een bijdrage aan het bredere veld van dekoloniserende museologie en biedt het inzichten voor het creëren van inclusievere en kritischere tentoonstellingen.

Trefwoorden: dekoloniserende museologie; curatoriële keuzes; ruimtelijke, contextuele en (koloniaal-) historische vervreemding; kunst en materiële cultuur ontheemd in koloniale contexten; Pavillon des Sessions (Louvre, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac)

Positionality Statement

In 2011, Walter Mignolo published the article "I Am Where I Do," in which he advocated for the recognition of the diverse contexts in which knowledge is produced in order to better understand the power dynamics that shape these processes.¹ This dissertation, which examines the display practices of the non-Western material culture and art in the Louvre's Pavillon des Sessions before its current ongoing renovation, requires me to contextualise my own position and privilege within this colonial matrix of power, to maintain transparency in my research. This statement highlights my personal background, experiences, and potential biases, as well as their influence on my work.

I am a white, cisgender woman from an upper working-class background, born and raised in Belgium, with strong family ties to the Netherlands. I hold a Bachelor's degree in Art History, Musicology and Theatre Studies, a Master's degree in Gender and Diversity, and am pursuing a second Master's in Art History, Musicology and Theatre Studies. Growing up in a predominantly white community, I was initially unaware of racial inequalities. However, my academic journey – especially through the lectures given by my now supervisors Prof dr. Maude Bass-Krueger and Prof. dr. Hugo DeBlock – introduced me to the field of decolonising museology, which has shaped my focus on the intersections of social, political, and cultural dynamics within museums.

My research is particularly inspired by Marshall McLuhan's idea of "the medium is the message," introduced to me in high school, which explores how a medium influences its message - often in ways that go unnoticed by its audience. This theory sparked my curiosity about how national contexts shape museums and their collections.²

I am aware that my background, as a person from a European (Belgian/Dutch) perspective, may influence my interpretations of cultural practices different from my own. To mitigate this, I critically examine my assumptions about non-Western cultures discussed in this dissertation, actively seek out diverse perspectives by consulting and drawing upon as many non-Western authors as possible, and engage with scholarship on systemic oppression and privilege to avoid using outdated or possibly harmful language.

My positionality informs not only my research practices but also my interactions with others during the process. I am committed to ethical research practices that promote decolonisation and respect for cultures outside my own, striving to contribute meaningfully to these goals.

¹ Walter Mignolo, "I Am Where I Do: Remapping the Order of Knowing," in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, ed. Walter Mignolo (Duke University Press, 2011), 77-117.

² Marshall McLuhan, *Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 23-35.

Words Matter

"Paying attention to words means acknowledging that the language we use affects whether a person or a group feels excluded or included, whether they feel a sense of belonging to society. This is about representation, recognition and respect," wrote Wayne Modest (Director of Content of Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, Leiden, and Rotterdam) in *Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, a volume he co-edited with Robin Lelijveld.³

Strongly influenced by my supervisor Prof. dr. Hugo DeBlock and the publication *Words Matter* by the National Museum of World Cultures (Netherlands), I found it important to start my dissertation by explaining my reasoning behind the terminology I have chosen to use throughout this research.

Throughout this dissertation, I use varied terminology to refer to non-Western material culture and art. Given the lack of scholarly consensus on a single, politically and ethically unproblematic term, I intentionally employ a range of phrases, including non-Western artefacts, non-Western material culture (and art), non-Western objects, as well as Indigenous artefacts, Indigenous material culture (and art), and Indigenous objects, material culture and art (without the indicator that it refers to material culture and art that is not European), African material culture and art, Oceanic material culture and art, Asian material culture and art, and material culture and art from the Americas. This variation serves two purposes: first, to avoid excessive repetition; second, to expose readers to the multiplicity of terms currently in use, each with its own implications and limitations.

The decision to alternate between terms reflects the complexity of naming practices in museological and academic discourse, particularly when discussing objects rooted in colonial histories. As noted in *Words Matter*, "the issue of terminology is a complex one; there are no one-size-fits-all solutions."⁴ While none of the terms I use is without its challenges, I have prioritised clarity, critical awareness, and alignment with relevant literature. Where appropriate, I also refer to objects by their specific cultural or geographic origins, in order to avoid the colonial practice of homogenising diverse cultural contexts and practices as noted by the Martinique-born philosopher and psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon in the 1960s and more recently by Nigerian journalist Dipo Faloyin.⁵

³ Wayne Modest, "Words Matter," in *Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector*, eds. Wayne Modest and Robin Lelijveld (National Museum of World Cultures, 2018), 17.

⁴ Modest, "Words Matter," 19.

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press, 1966), 171-73; Dipo Faloyin, *Africa Is Not a Country: Notes on a Bright Continent* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 11-13.

Introduction

"[The Pavillon des Sessions] currently reflects a 'fine arts' vision which, by only being interested in the aesthetic value of works, removes part of their meaning and amounts to a rather violent appropriation."

Felicity Bodenstein, 2024.⁶

This critique by Felicity Bodenstein, an art historian and member of the scientific committee of the Franco-German fund for research on the provenance of goods from sub-Saharan Africa, accompanied the temporary closure of the Pavillon des Sessions for its currently ongoing renovation, which began in late October 2024.⁷

Bodenstein's statement encapsulates the enduring tensions within Western museum practices, particularly with regard to their role in the alienation of non-Western material culture and art. This is achieved by perpetuating colonial frameworks that silence historical violence, obscure original meanings and sever links between objects and their source communities. Despite mounting calls for decolonisation, many institutions persist in reproducing the hierarchies inherent in the systems that created their collections.⁸

The public museum, as it is contemporary known, emerged alongside the formation of modern nation-states, often using cultural heritage as a tool of ideological and political dominance.⁹ Aside from their roles as preservers of the past, they were – and continue to be – vehicles of identity construction and education.¹⁰ Rooted in imperial conquest and colonial expansion, many of the "encyclopaedic" colonial museums like the Louvre amassed vast collections through looting, coercive diplomacy, and exploitative trade. These artefacts were then reframed through Western epistemologies, transforming them into "art," and abstracting them from their original meanings.¹¹ In this process, objects were not only removed physically, but also removed from the worldviews, rituals, and communities that had once animated them.¹²

James Cuno summarises the criticism these museums are facing, noting that "such museums are the result of empire, manifestations of historical imbalances of power by which stronger nations enriched

⁶ Marianne Meunier, "Au Pavillon des Sessions, une Rénovation pour Faire Tomber les Frontières," *La Croix*, October 21, 2024.

⁷ Meunier, "Pavillon des Sessions."

⁸ Maria Isabel Roque, "Decolonising the Museum: Exhibition and Mediation of African Collections In European Museums," *Lusophone Journal of Cultural Studies* 7, no. 2 (2020): 54; Catharine Arias, "From Exploration to Equity: A Museum's Journey toward Decolonization," (paper, 2018), 3.

⁹ Donald Preziosi, "Art History and Museology: Rendering the Visible Legible," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon MacDonald (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2006), 50; Pascal Gielens, *Heritage, Urban Culture and Democracy* (Eurocities, 2011).

¹⁰ Stephanie Allen, "The Responsibilities of Museums in the Representation of the Past and present: The Need for Communication and Context," *Student Anthropologist* 2, no. 1 (2010): 22.

¹¹ Roque, "Decolonising the Museum," 55-56; Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, And Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10; Laura Phillips, "An Incomplete Glossary of Change to Activate Decolonising and Indigenising Practices in Museums," *Museum International* 74, no. 3-4 (2022): 123.

¹² Meunier, "Au Pavillon des Sessions;" George Okello Abungu, "Museums: Geopolitics, Decolonisation, Globalisation and Migration," *Museum International* 71, no. 1-2 (2019): 65-69; Mieke Bal, "Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting," in *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, eds. Donald Preziosi and Claire J. Farago (Reaktion Books, 1994), 104-105.

themselves at the expense of weaker ones.”¹³ Museums became sites of symbolic power, transforming cultural belongings into static displays that reflected colonial hierarchies rather than indigenous meanings.¹⁴

Although formal colonial rule has ended in most cases, Aníbal Quijano’s concept of coloniality - the enduring legacy of colonial power structures and epistemologies - persists in museums.¹⁵ They remain monuments to colonial power, showcasing the power and wealth of empires through looted artefacts and Eurocentric narratives.¹⁶ Many museum structures and interpretive frameworks continue to benefit materially, symbolically, and financially from imperial violence while masking their complicity. Practices of display, categorisation, and institutional organisation often perpetuate the same alienation that colonisation enacted: the transformation of cultural belongings into mute, decontextualised objects behind glass.¹⁷

This enduring alienation manifests not only in the provenance of the objects, but also in the ways they are spatially arranged, framed through Western academic lenses, and disconnected from their source communities.¹⁸ As long as museums tell colonial pasts from the colonisers’ perspectives, they reinforce the epistemic frameworks of empire - such as the Doctrine of Discovery, used to justify European colonisation and seizure of land and resources from Indigenous peoples - and obscure alternative worldviews and histories.¹⁹

Although often framed as a gesture of openness or universality, the Pavillon des Sessions (housed in the Louvre but drawing from the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac collection) sat at the heart of this contradiction. Officially opened in 2000, the pavilion was established through a political-cultural initiative spearheaded by then French President Jacques Chirac (1932-2019, president of the French Republic from 1995-2007) and his friend, famous French art dealer and collector Jacques Kerchache (1942-2001).²⁰

Its founding reflected a symbolic shift in France’s national narrative: a public embrace of the so-called “Arts Premiers” - literally meaning “first arts,” a neologism and more politically correct term that had replaced the term “primitive art/art primitive,” as clarified by Marilena Alizatou and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett -, positioned as “free and equal” to Western fine art.²¹ The aesthetisation of the material culture and art and lack of contextualisation formed an essential characteristic of “arts premiers,” a term seemingly

¹³ James Cuno, *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum* (The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 89.

¹⁴ Brandie Macdonald, “Pausing, Reflection, and Action: Decolonizing Museum Practices,” *Journal of Museum Education* 47, no. 1 (2022): 9-10; Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Vintage, 1994), xiii.

¹⁵ Coloniality refers to the enduring structures and mindsets established by colonialism that persist even after the end of formal colonial rule. It describes the lasting impact of colonialism on knowledge systems, social hierarchies, and cultural practices. Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, “Americanness as a Concept, or the Americas in the Modern World-System,” *International Social Science Journal* 44, no. 4 (1992): 549-557; Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Why Decoloniality in the 21st Century,” *The Thinker* 48 (2013): 11.

¹⁶ Macdonald, “Decolonizing Museum Practices,” xiii.

¹⁷ Abungu, “Museums;” Macdonald, “Decolonizing Museum Practices,” 11.

¹⁸ Meunier, “Au Pavillon des Sessions.”

¹⁹ Achille Mbembe, “Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive,” (paper, 2015), n.p; Macdonald, “Decolonizing Museum Practices,” 10; Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (Routledge, 2000), 140.

²⁰ Peter Mark, “The Future of African Art in Parisian Public Museums,” *African Arts* (2000): 1; Raymond Corbey, “Arts Premiers in the Louvre,” *Anthropology Today* 16, no. 4 (2000): 4.

²¹ Marilena Alizatou, “The Politics of ‘Arts Premiers’: Some Thoughts on the Musée du Quai Branly,” *Museological Review* 13 (2008): 44-45; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “World Heritage and Cultural Economics,” in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*, eds. Ivan Karp et al. (Duke University Press, 2006), 166.

created by one of Kerchache's "writer-friends," according to Raymond Corbey.²² However, the classification itself has been challenged for reinforcing outdated, ethnographic and aesthetic frameworks that risk exoticising these cultures rather than engaging with them critically or contextually.²³

The pavilion's marginal placement within the Louvre, ambiguous institutional identity, and emphasis on aesthetic value over cultural context raised questions about inclusion, tokenism, and the persistence of colonial frameworks.²⁴ While the display of non-Western material culture was celebrated as a gesture of universality, its location and curatorial choices were also criticised for perpetuating the alienation of the very objects it sought to honour.²⁵

This tension is not accidental. Encyclopaedic museums like the Louvre are historical constructs, shaped by imperial expansion, material extraction, and epistemic violence. As postcolonial theorists and museum scholars note, their interpretive frameworks often retain the colonial structures they claim to transcend, through practices such as selective labelling, aesthetic prioritisation, and the erasure of provenance.²⁶

The pavilion thus encapsulated a larger museological paradox: could inclusion occur without reproducing alienation? This dissertation addresses that question by examining how its curatorial strategies between 2000 and 2024 contributed to - or sought to mitigate - the alienation of non-Western material culture and art. Alienation here is understood as a historically produced, institutionally maintained condition that severs objects from their communities, histories, and ontologies, and which operates spatially (through exhibition design), contextually (through framing and interpretation), and historically (through the omission or distortion of provenance and colonial histories).²⁷ This theoretical framing is developed in the dedicated conceptual section following the literature review.

Through critical analysis of spatial layout, exhibition narrative, institutional language, and selected case studies of provenance and display, this dissertation argues that the pavilion's promise of inclusion often reproduced exclusion, while also offering diagnostic insights into how alienation might be countered.

The central research question guiding this investigation is: How did the curatorial choices in the Pavillon des Sessions (Louvre) before the current renovation (ca. 2024–2025) avoid or perpetuate spatial, contextual, and (colonial) historical alienation?

²² Alivizatou, "Art Premiers," 44-53; Corbey, "Art Premiers," 3-6; Sally Price, *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the quai Branly* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 59; Mark, "Parisian Public Museums," 21-51.

²³ Peter Mark, "The Future of African Art in Parisian Public Museums," *African Arts* (2000): 1.

²⁴ Meunier, "Au Pavillon des Sessions;" Price, *Paris Primitive*, 1-7.

²⁵ Shahid Wawda, "Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice: From Colonialism to decoloniality," *Museum International* 71, no. 1-2 (2019): 74; Meunier, "Au Pavillon des Sessions."

²⁶ Nélia Dias, "Double Erasures: Rewriting the Past at the Musée du quai Branly," *Social Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (2008): 300-311; Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska, "Introduction," in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples*. Eds. Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska, (Amsterdam University Press B.V., 2022), 12; Murat Aydemir, "Staging Colonialism: The Mise-En-Scène of the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium," in *Migratory Settings*, eds. Murat Aydemir and Alex Rotas (Brill, 2008), 80.

²⁷ Christopher Reed, "Alienation," in *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, eds. Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Columbia University Press, 2016), 11; James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 194.

The analysis is further structured by two sub-questions: 1. In what ways did the curatorial practices in the pavilion avoid or perpetuate coloniality? 2. In what ways did the curatorial practices succeed or fail to display the “world's masterpieces” as “free and equal?”

The next section reviews key debates in colonial history and its legacies in France, decolonial thought, museum display practices, the concept of alienation in museology, and scholarship on the Louvre and the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, and the Pavillon des Sessions, followed by the conceptual framework and methodology.

1. Literature Review

Although considerable research exists on museal alienation, decolonising museology, France's colonial history, and the Louvre as an institution, none address the specific question: How did the curatorial choices in the Pavillon des Sessions (Louvre) before the current renovation (ca. 2024–2025) avoid or perpetuate spatial, contextual, and (colonial) historical alienation?

To respond to this gap, my dissertation engages with existing literature across five key categories: France's colonial context (ca. 1534–now); (de)coloniality and (de)colonial thinking; museum display practices; museal alienation; and scholarship on the Louvre, the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, and the Pavillon des Sessions. These bodies of literature serve as theoretical lenses for examining the intersections of colonial legacies, curatorial practices, and decolonial critique, which form the foundation of my methodological approach.

Many of the sources surveyed in this review span multiple categories, resulting in some overlap in thematic classification. I have intentionally prioritised work by non-Western scholars where possible, in alignment with the decolonial principles underpinning my research. This was more feasible in fields such as decoloniality and museal alienation, while other areas (particularly France's colonial context) still reflect a disproportionate emphasis on Western perspectives.

1.1 France's Colonial Context

In order to understand the Louvre's colonial identity, which is central to this study's investigation into the alienation of cultural artefacts, it is first necessary to examine how this identity is intertwined with France's broader colonial history (ca. 1534–now). Although much scholarship addresses France's colonial

history, much of it either has a focus that is too broad or fails to examine the role of major cultural institutions, such as the Louvre, within colonial frameworks.

A key example is Robert Aldrich's *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion*, which provides a detailed account of French colonialism from 1534 onwards.²⁸ It explains which territories were colonised and the ideological premises behind it. Although Aldrich provides valuable historical background, his study is limited by its publication date and the fact that it does not integrate more recent postcolonial or decolonial perspectives. Notably, he fails to contextualise France's colonial legacy within the broader framework of Western imperialism, nor does he reflect on its persistence into the twenty-first century.

Other historians, including Henk Wesseling, Don Nardo, Norrie MacQueen, and James R. Lehning, offer more comparative and critical analyses to help bridge this gap. For instance, Don Nardo's *The Age of Colonialism* traces the broad sweep of the major colonial movements from ca. 1490 to ca. 1970.²⁹ However, its generalist scope and thematic focus on colonial resistance prevent it from engaging with the nuanced and enduring impact of colonial systems on cultural institutions.

In contrast, Norrie MacQueen's *Colonialism* provides a more critical perspective, examining the moral ambiguities and contradictions inherent in colonial ideology.³⁰ His focus on the enduring legacies of colonial policies is essential for grasping how institutions like the Louvre perpetuate colonial power structures to this day. Similarly, James R. Lehning's *European Colonialism Since 1700* builds on these critiques by addressing how race, gender, class, and sexuality intersected within colonial systems, dimensions often neglected in mainstream colonial historiography.³¹

Henk Wesseling's *The European Colonial Empires: 1815–1919* presents a broader, more comparative view of colonialism across multiple European powers.³² His work reveals valuable insights into the interconnected strategies that different colonial systems employed for cultural domination. However, as with the other scholars mentioned, Wesseling's analysis does not consider how these systems manifested in museological practices or influenced the acquisition and display of cultural artefacts in institutions such as the Louvre.

Although these bodies of literature provide valuable historical context, they predominantly represent Western perspectives. This reveals a persistent imbalance in the field, even when critiques of colonialism are present. A critical counterpoint to this is Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, a seminal text that condemns the violence and hypocrisy of European colonialism.³³ Césaire's work is invaluable for its philosophical and ethical standpoint, as it directly challenges the notion of "civilisation" that underpinned

²⁸ Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (Palgrave, 1996).

²⁹ Don Nardo, *The Age of Colonialism* (Lucent Books, 2006).

³⁰ Norrie MacQueen, *Colonialism* (Peterson Education Limited, 2007).

³¹ James R. Lehning, *European Colonialism since 1700* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³² Henk Wesseling, *The European Colonial Empires: 1815–1919* (Pearson Education Limited, 2004).

³³ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, 2000).

colonial expansion and exploitation. His arguments continue to resonate in debates about the legacy of colonialism within cultural institutions.

Yet despite their importance, most of these works are at least a decade old and remain largely silent on the present-day colonial implications of France's continued overseas presence. More recent insights are provided by the official French government website Le Ministère des Outre-mer, which outlines the latest information on the current French overseas territories.³⁴ It states that, to this day, 2.6 million people in the overseas territories still belong to France and are divided into 12 "territorial communities:" the islands of Wallis and Futuna, the French Southern and Antarctic Territories, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, Saint Barthélemy, Saint Martin, New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Martinique, Réunion, Mayotte, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana. Boasting that "with an exclusive economic zone of 11 million km² and maritime areas, 97% of which are located overseas, France is the second-largest maritime power in the world." However, unlike Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, the website does not aim to criticise contemporary French colonialism.

While Aldrich, Lehning, Wesseling, Nardo, MacQueen, Césaire, and the Ministry of Overseas Territories collectively contribute to a broader understanding of the political and economic systems underpinning colonial expansion, they offer little insight into the implications for museums of these histories, particularly with regard to the displacement of material culture and art. Their focus is primarily historical and macro-political, resulting in a lack of consideration of the cultural legacies and curatorial implications of colonialism.

This gap is partly addressed by Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles in *Collecting Colonialism: Material Culture and Colonial Change*, in which they explore how the collection and exhibition of artefacts by the coloniser transformed the social realities of both themselves and the colonised.³⁵ Their analysis of how objects were repurposed for ideological ends is highly relevant to the Louvre's collections, even though the book focuses primarily on British examples. Claire Wintle's *Colonial Collecting and Display: Encounters with Material Culture from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands* similarly investigates how British collectors redefined the cultural significance of objects through museological practices.³⁶ Her work is particularly valuable for understanding how artefacts are severed from their original meanings and transformed into instruments of imperial knowledge.

However, both Gosden and Wintle centre their analyses on British colonial contexts. In contrast, Kwame Opoku's recent article, "Do French Museums Still Need to Study Looted African Treasures?" brings

³⁴ "The Ministry of Overseas Territories," accessed April 10, 2025, <https://www.outre-mer.gouv.fr/>.

³⁵ Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles, *Collecting Colonialism: Material Culture and Colonial Change* (Berg, 2001).

³⁶ Claire Wintle, *Colonial Collecting and Display: Encounters with Material Culture from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands* (Berghahn Books, 2013).

the discussion directly to French institutions.³⁷ Opoku criticises the reluctance of French museums to return looted artefacts, framing this refusal as a continuation of colonial ideology and a failure to accept ethical accountability. His intervention confronts issues that were overlooked in earlier work, particularly the structural unwillingness of institutions like the Louvre to engage with the implications of their colonial legacies.

Collectively, these authors lay the groundwork for understanding how colonialism continues to influence museum practices, particularly with regard to the displacement and display of cultural artefacts. Their insights emphasise the intricate relationship between imperial histories and curatorial strategies. Building on these significant contributions, this dissertation focuses on a specific case study: the Pavillon des Sessions. It aims to examine how colonial legacies manifest in the practices of a major French cultural institution. While existing literature offers valuable critiques and critical frameworks, it has not yet examined this particular context in depth. By applying and building upon these scholars' ideas in the context of the Pavillon, this research aims to enrich ongoing discussions about cultural restitution, museal alienation, and decolonial critique within the French colonial continuum.

1.2 (De)coloniality/(De)colonial Thought

Given that the alienation of displaced material culture and art can be understood as being rooted in enduring structures of coloniality through spatial positioning, cultural contexts, and (colonial) histories, a central concern of this dissertation is the exploration of (de)coloniality and (de)colonial thought. The work of Frantz Fanon, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Aníbal Quijano, Madina V. Tlostanova, Walter D. Mignolo, Ania Loomba, Felwine Sarr, Bénédicte Savoy and Shadid Vawda has been particularly influential in this regard. Together, these scholars lay the theoretical groundwork for addressing the challenges of confronting colonial legacies within contemporary cultural and institutional frameworks. Their work reveals the often unacknowledged traces of colonial ideology embedded in institutions such as the Louvre.

Frantz Fanon's foundational and philosophical text *The Wretched of the Earth* is essential for understanding the socio-political and psychological ramifications of colonialism for the colonised and coloniser alike.³⁸ By emphasising the dehumanising processes inherent in colonial domination and calling for decolonisation as a material and psychological imperative, Fanon provides a powerful ethical framework

³⁷ Kwame Opoku, "Do French Museums Still Need to Study Looted African Treasures?," *Modern Ghana*, May 26, 2024, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1315012/do-french-museums-still-need-to-study-looted-afric.html#:~:text=never%20given%20back.-,%22,not%20require%20any%20further%20research.>

³⁸ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*.

for analysing how museums perpetuate colonial narratives by displaying artefacts acquired under colonial rule.

Equally pivotal is Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* which critiques Eurocentric modes of knowledge production and exposes the racism and exploitation often inherent in Western research paradigms.³⁹ Smith's emphasis on prioritising Indigenous methodologies offers a valuable perspective for reconsidering how knowledge is created and shared within museums. Her analysis is particularly valuable for interrogating how curatorial decisions reflect — and sometimes invisibly reinforce — colonial power structures.

Building upon Smith's interrogation of Eurocentric epistemology, Aníbal Quijano's seminal essay "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," introduces the concept of "coloniality:" the enduring patterns of power and knowledge imposed during colonialism that continue to shape global institutions.⁴⁰ Quijano's framework is crucial for this study, as it clarifies how museums operate within these enduring hierarchies and often perpetuate Eurocentric narratives and exclusions through their collections and interpretive frameworks.

Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter Dignolo further this discussion in *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas*, in which they emphasise the context-specific nature of knowledge and advocate an epistemic shift that moves away from dominant power structures which marginalise alternative worldviews.⁴¹ Their advocacy of epistemic disobedience highlights the necessity for museums to 'unlearn' colonial logics and adopt knowledge systems grounded in indigenous and local epistemologies.

While the aforementioned works each focus on particular facets of decolonial theory, Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* provides a more holistic synthesis.⁴² Her text bridges theoretical discussions with their practical implications, particularly within museological contexts. It serves as a comprehensive introduction to colonial and postcolonial thought, proving instrumental in situating decolonial debates within the fields of art history and museum studies.

Departing from these broader theoretical concerns, Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy's "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics," offers a more targeted intervention.⁴³ The report addresses the ethical and logistical complexities of returning African cultural artefacts held in French institutions, issues also discussed by Kwame Opoku (see section 1.1). By detailing

³⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (University of Otago Press, 1999).

⁴⁰ Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533-580.

⁴¹ Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (The Ohio State University Press, 2012).

⁴² Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (Routledge, 2015).

⁴³ Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics," (Report, Ministère de la Culture, Université Paris Nanterre, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and École Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay, 2018).

the scale of the issue and proposing practical routes for restitution, the report serves as a valuable resource for exploring how institutions such as the Louvre might start to address their colonial ties. Sarr and Savoy's emphasis on relational ethics also reflects wider movements calling for museums to adopt more transparent, responsible and equitable practices.

Lastly, Shadid Vawda's "Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice: From Colonialism to Decoloniality," draws a necessary connection between decolonial thought and museological practice.⁴⁴ Vawda critiques the persistent misrepresentation and omission of colonial histories in museums, calling for these legacies to be confronted more actively. His emphasis on epistemic justice is particularly pertinent, as it reinforces the decolonial imperative for museums to cultivate inclusive, ethically grounded narratives that avoid reproducing colonial hierarchies.

Although these scholars do not engage directly with the Pavillon des Sessions, their collective insights provide a powerful theoretical basis for the case study in this dissertation. Their analyses of colonial structures and decolonial possibilities within institutions such as museums enable a critical examination of how these dynamics unfold in the specific context of the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre. Building upon their work, this dissertation applies their key concepts to a focused investigation of how coloniality and decoloniality can be understood and enacted within a major Western museum. In doing so, it extends these conversations into new institutional terrain.

1.3 Museum Display Practices and Curatorial Strategies

As with the previous sections, the scholarly discourse on curatorial practices in museums is extensive and covers topics such as curatorial methodologies, decolonial initiatives and the alienation resulting from colonial acquisition. This research is underpinned by key contributions from Michael Baxandall, Svetlana Alpers, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Shuchen Wang, Helen Coxall, Csilla E. Ariese, and Magdalena Wróblewska.

Michael Baxandall's edited volume article "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects," introduces the influential concept of the "museum set."⁴⁵ Baxandall argues that the exhibition experience arises from the interplay of three interrelated factors: the intentions of the artefact's creators, the curatorial strategies employed in its presentation, and the perceptions of the museum audience. This triadic framework is particularly useful for interrogating the

⁴⁴ Vawda, "Epistemology of Injustice," 72-79.

⁴⁵ Michael Baxandall, "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 33-41.

tension between an object's original purpose and its contemporary museum setting, especially when those objects have been acquired through colonial processes. Baxandall's approach enables a critical analysis of how intention and reception converge (or diverge) within the space of the museum.

Extending upon the focus on audience perception, Svetlana Alpers' edited volume article "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," explores what she terms the "museum effect:" the transformation of objects into aestheticised artefacts through processes of display.⁴⁶ Alpers critiques the way in which museums, particularly in Western contexts, strip objects of their original cultural and functional meanings by presenting them in an isolated and decontextualised manner. This analysis is essential for understanding how institutions may inadvertently reinforce Eurocentric hierarchies by prioritising visual appeal over cultural specificity. Alpers's notions of museal alienation, whereby cultural artefacts are elevated aesthetically but diminished contextually, informs this dissertation's critique of museum narratives.

While Baxandall and Alpers address museological theory more broadly, Shuchen Wang's "Museum Coloniality: Displaying Asian Art in the Whitened Context," provides a focused critique of display aesthetics, particularly the white cube model as exemplified by the Musée Guimet (Paris).⁴⁷ Wang contends that this modernist exhibition style erases colonial histories by rendering the display environment culturally "neutral." Her argument complements Alpers' concept of the "museum effect" and deepens the inquiry into how spatial design can obscure the colonial origins and cultural significance of non-Western artefacts.

This alienation is also addressed in Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's seminar paper, "Museums and Interpretative Communities," which focusses on museum audiences as well.⁴⁸ Hooper-Greenhill contends that meaning in museums is constructed collaboratively and shaped by the individual visitor's cultural, historical, and social contexts — a notion also discussed by Baxandall. Hooper-Greenhill's work highlights how personal biography and ancestral histories influence audience perceptions, shaping how different groups interpret the same artefacts. She argues that museums must consider this to create more effective exhibitions, offering a broader perspective.

Focusing more specifically on language, Helen Coxall's "'Whose Story is it Anyway?' Language and Museums," examines how the textual framing of exhibitions can either marginalise or empower the cultures represented.⁴⁹ Her analysis of linguisticting representation emphasises the significance of curatorial voice, tone, and translation choices in significantly impacting the accessibility and inclusivity of museum narratives. Coxall's work is therefore essential for evaluating how museums communicate complex histories, particularly those related to colonialism.

⁴⁶ Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 25-32.

⁴⁷ Shuchen Wang, "Museum Coloniality: Displaying Asian Art in the Whitened Context," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 27, no. 6 (2020): 720-737.

⁴⁸ Hooper-Greenhill, "Museums and Interpretive Communities," (seminar paper, University of Leicester, 1999).

⁴⁹ Helen Coxall, "'Whose Story is it Anyway?' Language and Museums," *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 12 (2000): 87-100.

Finally, Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska's edited volume *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples* provides practical strategies for implementing decolonial approaches in museums.⁵⁰ By presenting case studies from around the world of institutions attempting to decentre colonial perspectives, this collection offers valuable tools for evaluating transparency, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility in institutions such as the Louvre. The book informs theoretical discussion and grounds this dissertation in current curatorial practice.

Together, these scholars provide critical frameworks for examining how curatorial strategies, spatial design, language, and audience interpretation shape the presentation of cultural artefacts in museums. Their work enables a deeper understanding of how display practices can either perpetuate or resist colonial narratives. Building on these foundational insights, this dissertation applies their key concepts to a focused case study of the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre, an institutional context that has yet to be explored in this light. Drawing on and extending their analyses, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on decolonial museology by closely examining how display conventions at the pavilion reflect, obscure or complicate colonial legacies.

1.4 Museal Alienation

The fourth key focus of this dissertation is the concept of museal alienation. It examines the ways in which museum practices have historically and contemporaneously contributed to a disconnect between visitors and the cultural contexts and histories (including colonial histories) of material culture and art displaced under colonial conditions. The works of Sally Price, Michael Ames, James Clifford, Ben Dibley, Patrizia Violi, Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, Fred Myers, George Okello Abungu, Shahid Vawda, Geraldine Palmer and Maria Isabel Roque are central to this discussion. These scholars offer valuable insights into how museums perpetuate cultural alienation by removing artefacts from their original contexts and presenting them within institutional narratives.

In *Primitive Art in Civilised Places*, Sally Price delivers a foundational critique of how Western museums and art institutions interpret Indigenous artefacts.⁵¹ Her work is particularly pertinent to the concept of museal alienation, as she demonstrates how these artefacts are detached from their cultural origins and reframed through Eurocentric aesthetic categories. Price challenges the concept of "primitive art," revealing how Western institutions create a hierarchy between Western "high art" and non-Western material culture and art, often reclassifying the latter as exotic or archaic. Price also criticises the lack of

⁵⁰ Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska, eds. *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples* (Amsterdam University Press B.V., 2022).

⁵¹ Price, *Primitive Art*; Alpers, "Way of Seeing," 25-32.

authorship in curatorial practice, where Indigenous voices are often silenced, resulting in artefacts being decontextualised and stripped of their original meanings. Furthermore, she discusses how museums often juxtapose modern Western art with “primitive art” in a manner that perpetuates colonial hierarchies and alienates non-Western artworks from their living cultural contexts.

Michael M. Ames’ *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums* offers an essential critique of both museology and anthropology, challenging their tendency to objectify and advocating for more reflexive and ethical practices.⁵² Like Price and Alpers, Ames asserts that museums frequently transform culturally significant objects into static curiosities, perpetuating cultural alienation through practices that disregard the importance of origin, function/purpose, and authorship.

James Clifford’s *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* introduces the concept of museums as “contact zones,” which are spaces where cross-cultural encounters occur, but where unequal power dynamics often persist.⁵³ Clifford illustrates how artefacts, once removed from their source communities, become physically and symbolically inaccessible. Understanding this phenomenon of object–visitor alienation is crucial for recognising how museums continue to prioritise dominant narratives while marginalising the voices and histories of others. Clifford’s framework complements Price’s concern with the erasure of agency and meaning in institutional displays.

Ben Dibley’s “The Museum’s Redemption: Contact Zones, Government and the Limits of Reform,” builds on Clifford’s concept but focuses on the structural constraints within museums.⁵⁴ He argues that institutional reform is limited by the very power dynamics it seeks to redress. Dibley critiques the inability - or unwillingness - of museums to fully confront their colonial legacies, reinforcing the alienating nature of museal displays and aligning with Price’s critique of curatorial classification systems.

Addressing the emotional dimension of alienation, Patrizia Violi’s “Trauma Site Museums and Politics of Memory,” explores how museums handle sensitive historical content, including colonial histories.⁵⁵ She asserts that when institutions fail to engage comprehensively with historical injustices, they risk alienating visitors due to a perceived lack of empathy or emotional engagement. Her work provides tools for analysing the emotional consequences of museological practices, particularly in relation to unresolved trauma.

Similarly, Divya P. Tolia-Kelly’s “Feeling and Being at the (Postcolonial) Museum: Presencing the Affective Politics of ‘Race’ and Culture,” examines how racialised and cultural identities are experienced in postcolonial museum spaces.⁵⁶ Her focus on affective politics and embodied engagement builds on Violi’s

⁵² Michael M. Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: the Anthropology of Museums* (UBC Press, 2014).

⁵³ Clifford, *Routes*; Price, *Primitive Art*.

⁵⁴ Ben Dibley, “The Museum’s Redemption: Contact Zones, Government and the Limits of Reform,” *Journal of Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (2005): 5-27; Price, *Primitive Art*.

⁵⁵ Patrizia Violi, “Trauma Site Museums and Politics of Memory,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 29, no. 1 (2012): 36-75.

⁵⁶ Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, “Feeling and Being at the (Postcolonial) Museum: Presencing the Affective Politics of ‘Race’ and Culture,” *Sociology* 50, no. 5 (2016): 896-912.

analysis, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the emotional alienation experienced by marginalised communities within museum environments.

Igor Kopytoff's seminal article "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," provides a foundational lens through which to understand the evolving social meanings of objects.⁵⁷ Kopytoff argues that artefacts acquire significance not merely through their material form, but also through the cultural and temporal trajectories they undergo as they shift between commodity and singular status. While not solely museum-specific, this notion of biographical transformation helps to explain how displaced cultural artefacts accrue layered meanings, particularly when they are removed from their original contexts and inserted into new institutional narratives.

Building on these affective and spatial critiques, *The Inbetweenness of Things: Materializing Mediation and Movement between Worlds*, edited by Paul Basu, introduces the concept of "inbetweenness" to describe the complex positioning of displaced objects in museum contexts.⁵⁸ According to Basu and the other contributors, such objects inhabit a liminal state, suspended between cultural worlds, temporalities, and geographies. This inbetweenness reflects a diasporic consciousness: an ongoing entanglement of social, spatial, and historical relationships. In the museum, these objects often act as contact zones, embodying both the cultures from which they were taken (often violently) and the narratives imposed upon them by colonial powers. Curatorial decisions – such as the use of vitrines, spatial positioning, and interpretive framing – become instrumental in either acknowledging or suppressing this inbetweenness. The vitrine itself, as a vehicle of museal separation, symbolises the distancing effect of institutional display and contributes to the alienation of these artefacts from their living cultural contexts. Basu's framework thus adds a critical dimension to understanding museal alienation as a product not only of decontextualisation but also of the museum's management of inbetweenness and epistemic ambiguity.

Fred Myers' article "'Primitivism,' Anthropology, and the Category of 'Primitive Art'," revisits the problematic use of the term "primitive" in describing non-Western cultural artefacts.⁵⁹ Myers critiques the role of linguistic categorisation in reinforcing alienation, as also explored by Helen Coxall, showing how language constructs and maintains Eurocentric perspectives that distort or diminish the significance of non-Western works.⁶⁰ His arguments echo Price's concerns about classification and contextual erasure.⁶¹

In "Museums: Geopolitics, Decolonisation, Globalisation and Migration," George Okello Abungu traces the historical processes through which museums alienated colonial-era acquisitions from their

⁵⁷ Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-94.

⁵⁸ Paul Basu, ed., *The Inbetweenness of Things: Materializing Mediation and Movement between Worlds* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017).

⁵⁹ Fred Myers, "'Primitivism,' Anthropology, and the Category of 'Primitive Art'," in *Handbook of Material Culture*, ed. Christopher Y. Tilley (SAGE Publications, 2006), 267-284.

⁶⁰ Coxall, "'Whose Story is it Anyway'."

⁶¹ Price, *Paris Primitive*.

original cultural contexts.⁶² He examines how these artefacts were forcibly removed and recontextualised within Eurocentric epistemologies that frequently efface their origins. Abungu's geopolitical approach broadens the concept of museal alienation to a global scale, emphasising its importance in current discussions about restitution and decolonisation.

Shahid Vawda's "Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice: From Colonialism to Decoloniality," offers a more specific intervention by critiquing the static and past-focused nature of many museum narratives.⁶³ Vawda argues that this fixation on the past contributes to cultural alienation by ignoring the dynamic, living nature of cultural heritage. He calls for epistemic justice, repositing the museum as a potential site of reconnection that must actively engage with the colonial conditions under which its collections were acquired.

Finally, both "Looted Artifacts and Museums' Perpetuation of Imperialism and Racism: Implications for the Importance of Preserving Cultural Heritage" by Geraldine L. Palmer and Maria Isabel Roque's "Decolonising the Museum: Exhibition and Mediation of African Collections in European Museums," discuss how museums have historically instrumentalised cultural collections to alienate marginalised communities.⁶⁴ They call for a decolonisation of museum narratives and practices to counter their alienating effects.

Collectively, these scholars provide vital conceptual tools for analysing how museums have historically contributed to cultural and emotional alienation, particularly in the context of colonial acquisition and display. Their diverse approaches, from critiques of aesthetic categorisation and institutional structures to explorations of affective experience and epistemic injustice, lay the groundwork for further inquiry into how such alienation is sustained or challenged in contemporary museum settings. Building on these foundational insights, this dissertation extends the conversation by applying these concepts to a specific institutional context: the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre. Through this case study, it aims to offer a focused exploration of how museal alienation operates within a prominent French museum and how curatorial strategies may engage with - or resist - its colonial legacies.

⁶² Abungu, "Museums," 62-71.

⁶³ Vawda, "Epistemology of Injustice," 72-79.

⁶⁴ Geraldine L. Palmer, "Looted Artifacts and Museums' Perpetuation of Imperialism and Racism: Implications for the Importance of Preserving Cultural Heritage," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 50, no. 4 (2023): 1-9; Roque, "Decolonising the Museum," 53-71.

1.5 The Louvre, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, and the Pavillon des Sessions

The final major focus of this dissertation centres on the Louvre, Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, and the Pavillon des Sessions. Key contributions in this area include works by Jean Clay and Josette Contreras, Andrew McClellan, Gabriele Bartz and Eberhard König, Daniel Soulié, Valérie Mettais, Hugo DeBlock, Sally Price, and the Louvre itself.

Jean Clay and Josette Contreras' *The Louvre* provides a comprehensive overview of the museum, tracing its transformation from royal palace to a cultural institution.⁶⁵ Their work outlines critical milestones in the museum's development, framing the Louvre as both a national symbol and a reflection of broader French cultural narratives. This historical grounding is crucial for comprehending the ideological backdrop against which the museum's collections were formed and presented.

Andrew McClellan's *Inventing the Louvre* offers a more critical perspective, situating the museum within Enlightenment thought and French nationalism.⁶⁶ McClellan examines how the Louvre's curatorial practices and institutional development became a global model, shaped by political and intellectual movements. His work is particularly pertinent when considering how the influence of these historical forces on the integration of colonial artefacts into the museum's narrative frameworks.

In *Louvre: Art and Architecture*, Gabriele Bartz and Eberhard König provide a comprehensive overview of the museum's architectural evolution and organisational transformations.⁶⁷ They link these developments to broader political shifts such as the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era, demonstrating how colonial acquisitions were framed as symbols of French cultural and imperial dominance. This work offers essential context for understanding how artefacts from colonised regions were assimilated into the Louvre's collection as aesthetic objects rather than as part of their cultural heritage.

The Louvre's own publications, such as *Masterpieces of the Louvre*, contribute to understanding its self-framing practices.⁶⁸ Although it includes few works from the Pavillon des Sessions, the volume's focus on "masterpieces" reflects the museum's curatorial priorities, often presenting artefacts for their aesthetic value and obscuring their colonial histories. Similarly, Daniel Soulié's *Louvre: 400 Masterpieces* showcases a selection of works, including some from the pavilion, within a broader aesthetic tradition that minimises the political and historical contexts of their acquisition.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Jean Clay and Josette Contreras, *The Louvre* (Chartwell Books inc., 1980).

⁶⁶ Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁶⁷ Gabriele Bartz and Eberhard König, *Louvre: Art and Architecture* (H.F. Ullmann, 2013).

⁶⁸ Musée du Louvre, *Masterpieces of the Louvre* (Musée du Louvre, 2010).

⁶⁹ Daniel Soulié, *Louvre: 400 Masterpieces* (Abrams, 2008).

Sally Price's *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* critically examines the development of the pavilion and its museological implications.⁷⁰ Providing a foundational contextualisation of the pavilion, linked to French politics, the Louvre, and the quai Branly. Price interrogates the provenance of specific artefacts, such as the Nok sculptures, and critiques curatorial choices that prioritise French collectors over the artefacts' source cultures. Price also highlights issues such as decontextualisation, a lack of consultation with source communities, and problematic labelling practices, framing the Pavillon des Sessions as emblematic of ongoing colonial power dynamics. Her work is essential for understanding how postcolonial museums can navigate these legacies with greater ethical awareness.

In his article, "Property and Ownership in Vanuatu: The Lengnangulong Sacred Stone from North Ambrym at the Pavillon des Sessions of the Musée du Louvre," Hugo DeBlock presents a detailed case study of the Lengnangulong Sacred Stone from North Ambrym, exploring the complex issues of cultural ownership, colonial acquisition and contested provenance through its display in the Pavillon des Sessions.⁷¹ By tracing the stone's history and examining its display, DeBlock highlights the ongoing impact of colonial legacies on discussions about restitution and cultural heritage. His work illuminates the ongoing tensions between institutional narratives and the rights of source communities.

Finally, the Louvre's official website illuminates its self-perception and curatorial intentions.⁷² For example, its mission statement "to promote knowledge of its collections" suggests a commitment to accessibility and transparency. However, theoretical critiques of museological alienation and the author of this dissertation's personal observations indicate a discrepancy between this mission and the practices employed in spaces such as the Pavillon des Sessions, particularly with regard to indigenous material culture and art displaced in colonial contexts.

Together, these contributions offer a comprehensive basis for understanding the Louvre's historical development, its role as a national and cultural institution, the complex French political and cultural context in which the Pavillon des Sessions was created, and the complex museological challenges involved in displaying non-Western material culture and art. They also provide critical tools for examining how institutional narratives and display strategies reflect broader political and cultural ideologies. This dissertation builds on these insights by focusing specifically on the curatorial practices of the Pavillon des Sessions, especially as they pertain to spatial design, contextual framing, and colonial historiography. In doing so, it seeks to deepen current understandings of how this gallery negotiates the legacy of colonial acquisition and engages with the wider discourse on museal alienation.

⁷⁰ Price, *Paris Primitive*.

⁷¹ Hugo DeBlock, "Property and Ownership in Vanuatu: The Lengnangulong Sacred Stone from North Ambrym at the Pavillon des Sessions of the Musée du Louvre," *Museum Anthropology* 40, no. 2 (2017): 111-127.

⁷² "Nos Missions," accessed November 28, 2024, <https://www.louvre.fr/l-etablissement-public/nos-missions>.

1.6 Conclusion

The existing literature provides a robust foundation for examining museum practices, (de)coloniality, the French colonial context, the Louvre, and museal alienation. Building on these scholarly contributions enables me to explore how curatorial strategies either perpetuate or challenge the alienation of non-Western material culture, particularly within the Pavillon des Sessions.

The function of museums as cultural, political and ideological institutions has been highlighted by scholars such as McClellan, Price, Basu, Hooper-Greenhill, and Ames. Their work emphasises the complex interplay of aesthetics, power, and history within museum spaces.

Building on this foundation, this dissertation focuses on the macro-, meso-, and micro-level curatorial decisions often overlooked in specific galleries, which profoundly shape how non-Western artefacts are perceived and interpreted. While existing studies address institutional critique and theoretical frameworks, fewer explore how design choices such as location selection, spatial layout, object placement, lighting and textual framing inform or disrupt narratives of colonial authority and cultural alienation.

Recent studies on decolonisation in museum by scholars such as Wang, Ariese and Wróblewska offer valuable insights into the development of decolonial practices across institutions.⁷³ However, the nuanced ways in which individual museum spaces contribute to or resist colonial legacies remain under-examined. This is particularly relevant in major institutions such as the Louvre, where curatorial strategies carry considerable symbolic and cultural weight due to the museum's global status.

This dissertation builds upon and extends these discussions by offering a site-specific analysis of the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre as it existed just before its renovation (ca. 2024–2025). Through an in-depth examination of spatial organisation, cultural framing, and historical contextualisation, the research explores the curatorial strategies employed within the pavilion to navigate the legacies of colonial acquisition and museal alienation. The research contributes to ongoing conversations around decolonisation, representation, and ethical display practices in one of the world's most influential museum contexts.

⁷³ Wang, "Museum Coloniality," 720-737; Ariese and Wróblewska, *Practicing Decoloniality*.

2. Conceptual Lens: Alienation in the Museum

This dissertation employs alienation as a conceptual lens to assess curatorial practice, grounded in a broader framework of decolonial theory, decolonising museology, and critical curatorship. While the literature review surveys France's colonial context (ca. 1534–present), museal alienation, museum display practices, and scholarship on the Louvre and the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, this section outlines the conceptual tools that underpin the analysis.

This dissertation adopts alienation as a critical lens through which to assess the Pavillon des Sessions' curatorial strategies prior to its ongoing renovation. The concept serves a dual function: it is both the object of analysis - evident in spatial, visual, and narrative dimensions of the museum - and the theoretical tool through which those structures are read. The term alienation offers a capacious and multi-dimensional vocabulary that captures the layered processes through which non-Western cultural belongings have been removed from their original contexts and reframed within Western institutions.

2.1 Alienation: A Multidimensional Concept

This dissertation adopts "alienation" as a critical lens through which to assess the Pavillon des Sessions' curatorial strategies.⁷⁴ Alienation has been widely explored across disciplines: sociology, philosophy, psychology, economics, and politics, aside from theology.⁷⁵ The term originates from the Latin noun *alienatio*, derived from the Latin verb *alienare*, which means to "cause a separation to occur," "remove," "take away," or "make a thing belong to another."⁷⁶ The fear of alienation from a harmonic state was originally popularised in theological writings.⁷⁷

In contemporary usage, the term *alien* performs a trio of linguistic functions. As a noun, it refers to a foreigner; as an adjective, it denotes foreignness; and as a verb, it describes the act of estrangement. This multidimensional character makes alienation a key term in thinking about the global—particularly

⁷⁴ While classical conceptions of alienation in Hegelian or Marxist thought inform broader philosophical understandings of estrangement, this dissertation engages more directly with its decolonial, museological, and epistemic dimensions (see Fanon, Azoulay, Reed). For more classical conceptions, I advise the following two philosophical contributions on alienation: Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (Progress Publishers, 1956); Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁷⁵ Devorah Kalekin-Fishman and Lauren Langman, "Alienation: The Critique that Refuses to Disappear," *Current Sociology* 63, no. 6 (2015): 916.

⁷⁶ Hamid Sarfraz, "Alienation: A Theoretical Overview," *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research* 12, no. 1-2 (1997): 45; Martin Jay, "A History of Alienation," accessed July 16, 2025, <https://aeon.co/essays/in-the-1950s-everybody-cool-was-a-little-alienated-what-changed>.

⁷⁷ One example is the line "darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God," in the New Testament's "The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians," which, according to Britannica, was written sometime before 90 CE. This theological framing highlights how old connotations of alienation revolved around separation from an ideal or divine order, a theme that re-emerges in secular discussions of cultural estrangement; "The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians," in *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: Translated Out of the Original Greek*, trans. Daniel Curry (Tibbals, 1882), 498; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Letter of Paul to the Ephesians," accessed July 16, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Letter-of-Paul-to-the-Ephesians>.

about the ways in which people, objects, and ideas are rendered “other” when detached from their place of origin or embedded in unfamiliar systems of meaning.⁷⁸

Importantly, in this dissertation, alienation is not understood as a subjective psychological feeling, but as a structural and epistemic process enacted through institutional mechanisms such as spatial relocation, aesthetic reframing, and historical omission. As Professor of English and Visual Culture Christopher Reed argues, alienation is embedded in systems of power, including religion, race, class, gender, and culture, that disconnect individuals and communities from dominant narratives and institutions.⁷⁹

2.2 Colonial Alienation

In decolonial literature, alienation often appears implicitly. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Martician politician and poet Aimé Césaire’s writes: “I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out [...] I am talking about the millions of men torn from their gods, their land, their habits, their life-from life, from the dance, from wisdom,” describing how colonisation reduced people to things, to instruments, thereby alienating them.⁸⁰

Similarly, Martician philosopher and psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon explains how colonialism “turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it,” thereby alienating the colonised peoples from their pre-colonial history. For Fanon, colonial domination seeks not just political control but cultural estrangement—replacing indigenous systems of knowledge and belonging with imposed colonial frameworks.⁸¹

These ideas resonate directly with museum practices, particularly in institutions that house objects acquired through imperial conquest. By separating artefacts from their original communities, colonial museums imposed a rupture - both physical and epistemic - that remains unresolved.⁸²

⁷⁸ “Alienated,” accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/alienation-society>; Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur, “Alienation,” accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/social-sciences-and-humanities/alienation>.

⁷⁹ Christopher Reed, “Alienation,” in *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, eds. Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Columbia University Press, 2016), 11.

⁸⁰ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 21-22.

⁸¹ Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 170.

⁸² Olga Zabalueva, “‘Not All Museums,’ Memory, Politics, and Museum Activism on the Move,” (Doctoral Dissertation, Linköpings Univeritet, 2023), 2; Toni Morrison, “Home,” in *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (Pantheon Books, 1997), 3.

2.3 Museal Alienation

Within critical museum studies, alienation has been explored through concepts such as decontextualisation, objectification, and the aestheticisation of violence. In academic and activist for Indigenous knowledge and decolonial movements Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll's volume chapter "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine: Three Parerga of a Feather Headdress," museum vitrines are described as "the most insidious kind of alienation: transparent but impenetrable."⁸³ The object is visible but inaccessible, trapped within a glass enclosure that both reveals and silences.

Similarly, in Canadian academic and Professor of Anthropology Michael Ames' *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes*, a sense of alienated is implicated. Ames critiques the failure of museum displays to create meaningful cultural context, stating that "to fail to create a cultural context within a museum exhibition is to commit a crime of 'decontextualisation,' or worse, a blasphemy against the culture from which the objects were obtained." Framing it not only as a curatorial misstep but as a deeper ethical failure; an erasure of the cultures from which these objects originate.⁸⁴

Israeli Curator and academic Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* furthers this critique by arguing that modern museum practices present the disconnection of artefacts from their source communities as a naturalised condition. The museum, in this reading, is not a neutral space. Rather, it is a colonial apparatus that reaffirms imperial forms of knowledge and authority. Alienation, here, is not accidental—it is designed.⁸⁵

2.4 From Feeling to Structure

While alienation may manifest as an emotional response - such as discomfort, confusion, or detachment - it is also a systemic condition rooted in histories of imperialism, institutional power, and epistemic exclusion. It reflects who is allowed to belong, who is represented, and who is made to feel out of place. In museum contexts, alienation often results from spatial hierarchies, cultural silencing, and narrative framing that privileges certain worldviews over others.⁸⁶

⁸³ Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine: Three Parerga of a Feather Headdress," in *The Inbetweenness of Things: Materializing, Mediation and Movement between Worlds*, ed. Paul Basu (Bloomsbury, 2017), 24.

⁸⁴ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 95.

⁸⁵ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019), 1-2.

⁸⁶ Reed, "Alienation," 23-24.

As Reed suggests, alienation can also be generative: it may provoke critical reflection or resistance, enabling new connections to be forged across boundaries. In this way, alienation is both symptom and diagnostic tool, revealing the limits of current museological practice while pointing toward alternatives.⁸⁷

While critical museum studies emphasise the structural and ethical dimensions of alienation - through decontextualisation, epistemic violence, and spatial exclusion - it is also worth considering that alienation may be intrinsic to art itself. As German art historian Paul Laporte puts it, "Art, to be art, must be both alienating and integrating." Art inherently creates distance from everyday experience, allowing reflection and meaning-making, yet it also seeks to reconnect, to build shared understanding and add something new to the world. In this light, even displaced objects behind glass may carry the potential to transcend their alienation. When museums acknowledge original contexts and curate with care, these works can move beyond isolation and become agents of cultural reconnection. Thus, alienation in art and museum practice is not only a condition to be critiqued but also, at times, a paradox to be negotiated — one that reveals both the harm of detachment and the possibility of reintegration.⁸⁸

2.5 Application to the Pavillon des Sessions

This dissertation uses the Pavillon des Sessions as a case through which to interrogate the enduring force of alienation in museological space and narrative. In the context of the Pavillon des Sessions, this framework offers a method for analysing how the pavilion was created, its spatial arrangements, object placements, interpretive texts, and curatorial narratives engage with colonial legacies. Do they reinforce estrangement by presenting African, American, Oceanic, and Asian objects in an ahistorical, aestheticised manner? Or do they resist alienation by contextualising objects within their cultural, historical, and political origins?

By treating alienation as both a structural and affective phenomenon, this dissertation aims to interrogate the ethical and epistemic implications of curatorial practice. This theoretical lens enables a deeper understanding of how museums like the Louvre and Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac either uphold or challenge the colonial frameworks within which they were built.⁸⁹

In the context of the Pavillon des Sessions, alienation operates on three interlocking levels: spatial, contextual, and (colonial) historical. These three dimensions serve not only as diagnostic categories but also as structuring principles for the analysis that follows. The tripartite structure is not intended to isolate each form of alienation as distinct or mutually exclusive; rather, it is precisely their entanglement - their

⁸⁷ Reed, "Alienation," 23-24.

⁸⁸ Paul Milton Laporte, "Art and Alienation," *The Centennial Review* 12, no. 2 (1968): 158.

⁸⁹ Murgia, Camilla. *Images, and Art Perception in Napoleonic Paris: Setting the Gaze*. Amsterdam University Press, 2025; Dias, "Double Erasures."

recursive reinforcement - that constitutes the "perfect storm" of museal alienation. This is why the dissertation avoids flattening alienation into a single category and instead insists on its multiplicity: spatial alienation often entails or enables contextual alienation, which in turn is embedded within historical conditions that remain unacknowledged or suppressed.⁹⁰

Spatial alienation in this dissertation refers to the physical and institutional separation of cultural belongings from their places and communities of origin. This displacement can also occur within a museum's own layout, for example when an object or collection is positioned at a physical or conceptual remove from the institution's central displays.⁹¹ While certain curatorial decisions may intensify this sense of dislocation, others may work to situate objects in ways that acknowledge or re-establish meaningful spatial connections.⁹²

Contextual alienation describes the process by which curatorial framing — through display strategies, labels, wall texts, and other interpretive devices — alters or obscures an object's original function, significance, or cultural context. Such reframing can emphasise aesthetic qualities at the expense of social or historical meanings.⁹³ However, curatorial approaches can also counteract contextual alienation by embedding interpretation that restores, honours, or makes visible those original connections.⁹⁴

(Colonial) historical alienation refers to the omission, minimisation, or reframing of the colonial and historical conditions under which cultural belongings entered museum collections. This may occur through vague provenance records, selective storytelling, or the universalising of artworks.⁹⁵ Yet curatorial practice can also actively resist historical alienation by foregrounding the circumstances of acquisition and situating objects within their broader historical and political contexts.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Zabalueva, "Not All Museums," 2; Morrison, "Home," 3.

⁹¹ Aydemir, "Staging Colonialism," 78; Duane McKinley, "Bhm: Why Is the Louvre Hiding African Art?," published February 1, 2019, <https://afropunk.com/2019/02/the-other-black-history-why-is-the-louvre-hiding-african-art/>; Samer Abdelnour, "What Decolonizing Is Not," *M@n@gement* 25, nr. 4 (2022): 81-82.

⁹² Ariese and Wróblewska, "Introduction," 12; Ka Tat Nixon Chen, "Communication and Museums: Museums as a Place of Discourse," *The Indonesian Journal of Communication Studies* 7, nr. 1 (2014): 38.

⁹³ Zabalueva, "Not All Museums," 2; Bal, "Telling Objects," 104-105; Efram Sera-Shriar, "From Museumization to Decolonization: Fostering Critical Dialogues in the History of Science with a Haida Eagle Mask," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 56, nr. 3 (2023): 2-11; Alpers, "Ways of Seeing," 25-32.

⁹⁴ Ana Bilbao, "The Museum of European Normality: Colonial Violence, Community Museums, and Practices of Display," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 36, no. 6 (2021): 649-665; Elana Bernnard, "Fascinating Narratives: Textual Analysis Inside of the Museum," *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum* 8, nr. 3 (2015): 10; Coxall, "Whose Story is it Anyway," 93; Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, "Changing Values in the Art Museum: Rethinking Communication and Learning," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 6, nr. 1 (2000): 22.

⁹⁵ Bryony Oniciu, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice: Decolonising Engagement* (Routledge, 2015), 26; Suzie Thomas, "Representing Difficult Histories and Contested Heritage in Museums," In *Museum Studies: Bridging Theory and Practice*, eds. Nina Robbins, Suzie Thomas, Minna Tuominen and Anna Wessman (s.l.: ICOFOM, University of Jyväskylä and Open Science Centre, 2021): 532-542; Abungu, "Museums," 69; "Reckoning with History: Colonial Pasts, Museum Futures and Doing Justice in the Present," (Research Center for Material Culture Annual Conference, 2017), 1-3.

⁹⁶ Sera-Shriar, "Museumization," 11; Thomas, "Difficult Histories," 33-35; Vawda, "Epistemology of Injustice," 79; Abungu, "Museums," 69.

3. Methodology

This dissertation adopts a qualitative approach informed by decolonial theory, decolonising museology, and critical curatorship to investigate the research question: How did the curatorial choices in the Pavillon des Sessions (Louvre) before the current renovation (ca. 2024–2025) avoid or perpetuate spatial, contextual, and (colonial) historical alienation?

While this dissertation is grounded in decolonial theory, it deploys alienation as its central analytic for assessing curatorial strategies within that framework. These frameworks provide the theoretical lens through which I analyse the display practices in the Pavillon des Sessions, paying particular attention to how colonial legacies inform curatorial decisions. The theoretical foundation draws on decolonial perspectives that challenge the dominant narratives surrounding artefacts acquired in colonial contexts and subsequently displayed in Western museums.

3.1 Methods of Analysis

This qualitative study employs literature review, field research, archival research, and in-depth exhibition analysis to examine the Pavillon des Sessions' curatorial practices and their role in perpetuating or challenging museum alienation.

The literature review (outlined earlier in this introduction) underpins the entire study by synthesising key scholarship on museal alienation, France's colonial context and legacy, decoloniality, curatorial strategies, and the Louvre's, quai Branly's, and Pavilion's institutional history. This theoretical foundation informs observations made during fieldwork and archival study.

Six field visits between 2021 and 2025 documented the Pavilion, its signage, and related architectural features, supported by comparative visits to museums in Amsterdam, Oxford, London, and Paris to contextualise Louvre and quai Branly's curatorial strategies within a broader Western European museological landscape. Photographic documentation was central to analysing spatial and display elements.

Archival research conducted in the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac archives and the French National Archives provided crucial insight into the Pavilion's founding and the political-cultural vision of Jacques Chirac and Jacques Kerchache. This archival foundation is key to understanding how the Pavilion's design and curatorial practices were shaped by historical and institutional imperatives.

To explore how spatial, cultural, and (colonial) historical alienation are perpetuated or avoided in display practices, and how these practices reflect or challenge colonial legacies, this research employs visual analysis and critical reading.

The visual analysis method in this dissertation draws directly on the approaches of Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall. Alpers' concept of the "museum effect" informs the investigation into how spatial arrangements, object positioning, lighting, and framing may aestheticise and decontextualise indigenous artefacts.⁹⁷ Baxandall's triadic model, examining the intentions of makers, curators, and viewers, structures the analysis of how visual presentation mediates meaning, and the role the curator plays in this.⁹⁸ These frameworks are complemented by Murat Aydemir's methodology in his *mise-en-scène* analysis of the AfricaMuseum (Tervuren) displays, which this dissertation mirrors in its attention to object grouping, vitrines, and spatial dynamics.⁹⁹ While Paul Basu's edited volume *The Inbetweenness of Things* contains thematically resonant approaches, it was consulted only at a later stage and did not inform the methodological framework.¹⁰⁰

The critical reading approach mirrors the decolonial interpretative strategies employed in Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska's *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums*.¹⁰¹ Their use of textual analysis to uncover institutional bias and trace decolonial interventions provides a methodological model for examining object labels, wall texts, and institutional narratives in this study. This approach interrogates how museums narrate colonial histories - or obscure them - through curatorial language, and where such narratives are challenged or subverted.

3.2 Scope

The Pavillon des Sessions was chosen for its symbolic and institutional significance: a space showcasing non-European art within the heart of the Louvre, a museum long associated with the canon of Western art. By exhibiting artefacts from Africa, Oceania, the Americas, and Asia - many of which entered French collections through colonial contexts - the Pavilion represents a critical site for examining how curatorship both challenges and replicates spatial, contextual, and historical alienation.

This dissertation does not assess the psychological experience of alienation among visitors, which would require ethnographic or phenomenological methods. Instead, it examines the structural, spatial, and narrative mechanisms through which alienation is produced or resisted at the level of display and

⁹⁷ Alpers, "Ways of Seeing," 25-32.

⁹⁸ Baxandall, "Exhibiting Intention," 33-41.

⁹⁹ Aydemir, "Staging Colonialism," 77-98.

¹⁰⁰ Basu, *Inbetweenness*.

¹⁰¹ Ariese and Wróblewska, *Practicing Decoloniality*.

institutional framing. It does, however, occasionally acknowledge the possibility of psychological alienation being a side effect of spatial, contextual, and/or (colonial) historical alienation among visitors.

Although three provenance case-studies will be discussed in chapter 3, this study focuses specifically on strategies of display and (re)presentation, deliberately excluding direct discussions on restitution. While restitution is an essential dimension of decolonising museum practice, my aim is to foreground the importance of how artefacts are presented within existing institutions. Based on extensive research, I argue that even if full restitution and reparations were achieved, museum spaces would remain colonial unless curatorial practices themselves evolve to align with decolonial ideals. Museums, as institutions, are embedded in colonial systems of knowledge production and cultural authority. Even if emptied or dismantled, institutions such as the AfricaMuseum, the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac remain lieux de mémoire, physical embodiments of - in this case - colonial memory.¹⁰²

By combining theoretical analysis with visual analysis, and critical reading, this study offers a multi-dimensional investigation into how museums mediate cultural encounters through display. It seeks to illuminate both the alienating effects and the transformative potential of curatorial choices in fostering meaningful engagement with global material culture.

Finally, artificial intelligence was employed in this dissertation solely for grammar correction, text shortening, and proofreading. All content was originally written by the author, with AI programmes (ChatGPT and DeepL Write) used only as editing tools and never as content generators. All substantive content was authored by the researcher.

3.3 Chapter Overview

Instead of a dissertation structure that follows my three analytical categories (spatial, contextual, (colonial) historical), this dissertation follows an epistemic and institutional logic, complying to a funnel in shape, it first looks at the institutional frameworks (macro-level), then the visual display practices (meso-level), and finally the textual representation (micro-level), to highlight not the different individual alienation types, but how they intersect on different levels.

This dissertation is structured into three analytical chapters, forming a descending funnel from the institutional to the interpretive (textual) level. Chapter One focuses on the spatial politics of the Pavillon des Sessions, interrogating how its marginal architectural location, signage routes, and institutional ties to

¹⁰² Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Why Decoloniality," 10-15; Vawda, "Epistemology of Injustice," 77-79; Ariese and Wróblewska, "Introduction," 12.

the Louvre and Musée du quai Branly reflect lingering colonial hierarchies. while claiming universality. Chapter Two turns to the curatorial framing of objects within the Pavilion, exploring how visual strategies - such as overall aesthetic, selection and arrangement of artefacts, and use of vitrines - decontextualise and aestheticise cultural belongings. Chapter Three investigates the textual framing, colonial provenance, and historical silences surrounding specific objects, looking at thematic characterisations found within the texts in the pavilion (e.g. authorship, temporality, terminology, discussion or omission of colonial contexts) and using three case studies to analyse how the Louvre's interpretive choices obscure histories of violence, dispossession, and extraction.

Collectively, these chapters argue that the Pavilion's inclusion of non-Western artefacts does not inherently challenge (colonial) alienation, rather, it often reconfigures it through more subtle forms.

Chapter 1. The Louvre as a Medium:

The Pavillon des Sessions as Its Message

"In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message."

Marshall McLuhan, 1964.¹⁰³

Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan famous phrase "the medium is the message," captures a foundational idea in media theory: that the form through which something is communicated shapes the meaning of the message itself. It is not only what is said, but how it is presented, framed, and distributed that influences how it is received.¹⁰⁴ In cultural institutions like museums, this principle takes on a particular resonance. Museums do not merely exhibit content neutrally; they mediate, shape, and inscribe meaning onto the objects they present. They are ideological machines, not simply reflections of culture, but producers of it.¹⁰⁵

The Louvre operates simultaneously as both a message - a carrier of national French narratives, political ambitions, and cultural values - and a medium that structures the very conditions of visibility, interpretation, and legitimacy for the objects it houses. It conveys and reinforces a particular vision of France, one that is grounded in Enlightenment ideals, imperial legacies, and enduring myths of cultural universality.¹⁰⁶ Museums, and the Louvre in particular, are not neutral spaces; they are shaped by external political agendas (such as state funding and national identity), as well as internal institutional politics. These forces shape the museum's architecture, collection strategies, and curatorial decisions—ultimately shaping how cultural heritage is framed, valued, and remembered.¹⁰⁷

While this chapter explores the Louvre's dual function as both medium and message, it does so through a focused case study: the Pavillon des Sessions. This space, which housed artworks and objects from Africa, Oceania, Asia, and the Americas until late 2024, operated as a kind of paradox. Positioned as a gesture of inclusion within the Louvre, the Pavilion was at once celebrated and marginalised — spatially distant, institutionally ambiguous, and ideologically fraught.

¹⁰³ McLuhan, *Understanding of Media*, 23.

¹⁰⁴ McLuhan, *Understanding of Media*, 23.

¹⁰⁵ Chen, "Communication and Museums," 26-34; Roque, "Decolonising the Museum," 55-64; Ivan Karp, "Culture and Representation," in *Exhibition Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, eds. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Smithsonian Books, 1991), 19-21.

¹⁰⁶ Camilla Murgia, "Displaying Public Space: The Example of the Louvre," in *Space, Images, and Art Perception in Napoleonic Paris: Setting the Gaze* (Amsterdam University Press, 2025), 36-53.

¹⁰⁷ François Mairesse, "The Politics and Poetics of Museology," *ICOFOM Study Series* 46 (2018): 17; Roger Silverstone, "The Medium Is the Museum: On Objects and Logics in Times and Spaces," in *Towards the Museum of the Future: New European Perspectives*, eds. Roger Miles and Lauro Zavala (Routledge, 1994), 161.

The following sections will examine the ways in which the Louvre came to embody its myth-making power and expanding role in constructing national identity, as well as the politics involved in the creation of the pavilion. Next, I will examine how these dynamics manifest in the Pavilion itself, where inclusion takes on a new form of alienation and non-Western material culture remains trapped within France's colonial framework, even within a museum that purports to be universal.

1. The Louvre as National Emblem: The Museum as Message



Image 1. Aerial view of the Louvre

The Louvre (see image 1) is not simply one museum among many, it is a cultural and political cornerstone of the French Republic. As a French institution, it has continuously served the ideological interests of the French state, from monarchy to modern republic. However, its apparent universality conceals a selective cultural memory, particularly with regard to colonialism.¹⁰⁸

As a museum, the Louvre is “virtually synonymous with the word museum,” itself. Situated in the geographic and symbolic heart of Paris, it receives more than eight million visitors annually, surpassing even the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But this popularity is not merely a matter of tourism or artistic excellence; it is the result of centuries of deliberate positioning: political, cultural, and ideological.¹⁰⁹

The Louvre's significance lies not only in the magnitude of its collections – which today number over 400,000 objects, spanning fifty centuries and two hundred generations of human culture –, but in the story it tells about France. It is known for its “universal” scope, for the “supreme” quality of its holdings, and for the “grandeur” of its architecture. Yet, what makes the Louvre so symbolically potent is the way its

¹⁰⁸ Murgia, “Displaying Public Space,” 36-53.

¹⁰⁹ Andrew McClellan, “Musée du Louvre, Paris: Palace of the People, Art for All,” in *The first modern museums of art. The birth of an institution in 18th-and early 19th-century Europe*, ed. Carole Paul (Paul Getty Museum, 2012), 235; James Gardner, *The Louvre: The Many Lives of the World's Most Famous Museum* (Grove Press UK, 2020), xvi-xvii.

institutional narrative is entwined with the history of modern France itself. The Louvre is not merely a container of art; it is a monument to a particular political project, one that reflects France's claim to universalism, its Enlightenment rationalism, and its imperial past.¹¹⁰

1.1 The Louvre's Origins

The Louvre's transformation into a museum was not simply an architectural or curatorial shift; it was a foundational moment in the creation of the French nation-state. Originally constructed as a fortress in the twelfth century and later expanded into a royal palace, the Louvre transformed into a public museum in 1793, in the wake of the French Revolution. This conversion was ideologically significant.¹¹¹ With the fall of the monarchy, a new political order had to justify its legitimacy not through divine right – as the monarchy had done –, but through culture, reason, and collective identity. The artworks and artefacts seized from the aristocracy, the Church, and other ancien régime institutions no longer served the glory of the few. Instead, they were to be repurposed in service of the people — as evidence of the greatness of France, and as tools for civic education.¹¹²

This idea was clearly articulated by Jean Marie Roland (1734-1793), French Minister of the Interior in 1792, who wrote to artist Jacques-Louis David: "There is talk of creating a museum in the galleries of the Louvre; [...] This museum must showcase the great riches that the nation possesses [...] As I see it, it must attract foreigners and capture their attention; it must nurture a taste for the fine arts, entertain art lovers, and serve as a school for artists; it must be open to everyone [...] This monument will be national; no individual will have the right to enjoy it alone [...] France must extend its glory over all times and all peoples; [...] It will be one of the most powerful means of illustrating the French Republic."¹¹³

Here, the museum was framed not as a passive repository, but as an active engine of national identity. It would transform inherited wealth into shared patrimony, private luxury into public enlightenment. When the Musée du Louvre opened on August 10, 1793, to commemorate the first anniversary of the monarchy's fall, it was heralded as a triumph of democratic access and modern reason. "in the halls of the Louvre, every man is king," art critic Allison Hewitt Ward described it.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ McClellan, "Musée du Louvre," 235; James Gardner, *The Louvre: The Many Lives of the World's Most Famous Museum* (Grove Press UK, 2020), xx.

¹¹¹ McClellan, "Musée du Louvre," 235; David A. Hanser, *Architecture of France* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 115; Murgia, "Displaying Public Space," 36-53.

¹¹² Allison Hewitt Ward, "Museums and Politics: A History of Disappointments Part 1," *Caesura* (2020): <https://caesuramag.org/posts/museums-and-politics-a-history-of-disappointments-part-i>.

¹¹³ Jean-Marie Roland de La Platière, *Lettre à Monsieur Roland, Ministre de l'Intérieur, à Jacques-Louis David, Peintre et Député à la Convention nationale du 17 8bre 1792*, transcribed by Jean-Charles Deloynes (Paris: [n.p.], 1792), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105383449>.

¹¹⁴ Clay, *The Louvre*, 17; Ward, "Museums and Politics."

This radical egalitarianism was also symbolic: while the physical artworks remained unchanged, their meaning had shifted. No longer tied to aristocratic ownership, they were now part of a national tradition, recontextualised to serve a shared republican identity.¹¹⁵

1.2 The Louvre's Role in Nation-Building

The Louvre's function as a nation-building instrument did not end with the Revolution; it evolved with France's changing political landscape. As the revolutionary government consolidated power, the Louvre's collection grew, bolstered by the spoils of Napoleonic conquest, looted from across Europe and the Mediterranean. During the Napoleonic era, the museum was transformed into a showcase of imperial grandeur, filled with artworks looted during France's military campaigns across Europe and beyond. These additions expanded the Louvre's symbolic role: it was no longer just a national museum, but an imperial archive, reinforcing France's claim to cultural leadership and its entitlement to the artistic legacies of other civilisations. The Louvre came to embody an ambitious Enlightenment fantasy: a museum that displayed the full material record of human existence under a single roof, incorporating all peoples, times, and places into a shared history.¹¹⁶

Looted artworks were used not only to underscore Paris' status as a cultural and political centre, but also to construct a link between French national identity and a supposedly universal history — a connection grounded in a territorial form of power. This imperial logic imagined that all peoples, periods, and places could be subsumed under one roof, curated and interpreted through a Western lens. The legacy of this vision continues to shape museum practices today, maintaining unequal dynamics between the centre and the periphery in the global cultural field.¹¹⁷

In the twentieth century, this ideological function was reasserted through President François Mitterrand's (1916-1996) Grand Louvre project (ca. 1981-1999). Under this plan, the Louvre underwent a sweeping renovation, expanding to occupy the entire palace complex and culminating in the construction of the now-iconic glass pyramid by Chinese-American architect Ieoh Ming Pei (1917-2019).¹¹⁸ Mitterrand framed the project as the fulfilment of Enlightenment ideals — a democratisation of knowledge and access to cultural heritage. Echoing archaeologist Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy's (1755-1849)

¹¹⁵ Ward, "Museums and Politics."

¹¹⁶ Farah Nayeri, "Napoleon's stolen masterpieces: The Plunder that Formed the Louvre: The Return of Treasures After the Commander's Defeat Set a Model for Museums Today," *The Irish Times*, June 15, 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/art-and-design/napoleon-s-stolen-masterpieces-the-plunder-that-formed-the-louvre-1.4589616>; Ward, "Museums and Politics."

¹¹⁷ Andrea Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum* (Routledge, 2003), 107-108.

¹¹⁸ "The Story Behind the Architecture and Construction of the Louvre Museum," January 12, 2023. <https://www.rostarchitects.com/articles/2023/1/6/the-louvre>.

eighteenth-century vision of the Louvre as a “universal high school,” the pyramid was presented as a symbol of modernity and transparency, positioning the Louvre as a truly universal museum.¹¹⁹

Yet beneath these proclamations of democracy and universality, the museum’s structure remained deeply Eurocentric. Despite rhetorical gestures toward inclusion, the Louvre continued to privilege a Western art-historical canon. Non-European collections remained marginal or absent, reinforcing a narrow definition of what counted as “universal” culture.¹²⁰ An exception were the Egyptian antiquities, which were included in the Louvre, but would be notably absent from the Pavillon des Sessions. This might be due to what Kailey Smith describes as a curatorial trend that intentionally distinguishes Ancient Egypt from the rest of Africa, a move echoed across global museum practices and academic scholarship, often referred to as Egyptian exceptionalism.¹²¹

As articulated by Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop, “the ancient Pharaonic Egyptian civilization was undoubtedly a Negro civilization,” a claim that challenges the dominant narrative and reasserts Egypt’s rightful place within African history.¹²² Smith frames this reclamation by Diop as a vital step toward cultural and psychological decolonisation, where reconnecting Egypt to Africa becomes a form of retrieving historical identity and selfhood. The museum’s decision to isolate Egypt perpetuates an intellectual tradition that marginalises African contributions by upholding a myth of Egyptian exceptionalism detached from its continental roots. This not only distorts historical memory but also reinforces the broader colonial logic that elevates Western thought while diminishing African civilisations.¹²³

This tension between universalism and exclusion is not accidental — it reflects the persistent ideologies that shape the Louvre’s operations. As a state institution, the museum operates under the supervision of the Établissement Public du Musée du Louvre (EPML) since 1992, which is overseen by the French Ministry of Culture, highlighting the persistent influence of French politics in the Louvre. The EPML outlines the museum’s responsibilities as follows: to “conserve, protect, restore on behalf of the State and present to the public the works which are part of the collections listed in the inventories of the Louvre National Museum which are in its care; [...] to promote knowledge of its collections, by any appropriate means; to ensure the scientific study of its collections; to contribute to education, training and research in the field of art history, archaeology and museography; [...] to preserve, manage and enhance the buildings with which it is equipped.”¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ “Allocution de M. François Mitterrand, Président de la République sur le grand Louvre et sur l’aventure humaine et artistique de sa modernisation, le 18 novembre 1993.” <https://www.elysee.fr/francois-mitterrand/1993/11/18/allocution-de-m-francois-mitterrand-president-de-la-republique-sur-le-grand-louvre-et-sur-laventure-humaine-et-artistique-de-sa-modernisation-le-18-novembre-1993>.

¹²⁰ Dias, “Double Erasures,” 304.

¹²¹ Kailey Smith, “Legacies of Empire: Museums, Neocolonialism, and Repatriation,” (Master’s dissertation, Syracuse University, 2023), 36–37.

¹²² Mercer Cook, Preface to *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, by Cheikh Anta Diop, trans. Mercer Cook (Lawrence Hill & Company, 1974), ix.

¹²³ Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. Mercer Cook (Lawrence Hill & Company, 1974); Smith, “Legacies of Empire,” (36–37).

¹²⁴ “L’Établissement Public,” accessed April 3, 2025, <https://www.louvre.fr/l-etablissement-public>.

This language reinforces the museum's dual function: to safeguard cultural heritage, and to promote France's cultural image both domestically and abroad. In practice, this means that curatorial decisions are closely aligned with national political agendas. Official narratives often prioritise heritage and prestige over critical reflection. Colonial violence, cultural appropriation, and questions of restitution are absent from exhibitions — not due to oversight, but because such topics threaten the museum's ideological coherence and its role as a symbol of the Republic.¹²⁵

1.3 The Louvre Becomes (Again) Universal

The inclusion of "les arts premiers" into the Louvre was far from a neutral or uncontested development. As early as the sixteenth century, European monarchs had collected "exotic curiosities" from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, creating cabinets of curiosities that would later feed into the formation of ethnological museums.¹²⁶ In 1827, King Charles X of France (1757 - 1836) formally institutionalised this impulse by founding the Musée du Marine et d'Ethnographie at the Louvre, where non-European objects were displayed alongside navigational tools — a symbolic alignment of imperial exploration with cultural acquisition.¹²⁷

However, these artefacts were eventually displaced from the Louvre, reflecting an enduring discomfort with their presence in a museum devoted to "high art." By the 1870s, influential political figures such as Jules Ferry (1832–1893), a proponent of colonial expansion and racial hierarchies, argued that these objects lacked artistic merit and did not belong in the Louvre. This position reinforced a rigid boundary between so-called "ethnographic" artefacts and the European fine arts, thereby institutionalising the hierarchy of cultures. Although Indigenous works often captivated public audiences, they were removed by 1905 and relocated to more marginal institutions such as the Trocadéro Palace, where "primitive" cultures could be segregated and studied from a scientific rather than aesthetic perspective.¹²⁸

Efforts to reintegrate non-European works into the Louvre re-emerged in the twentieth century, driven not by institutions but by the avant-garde. Artists like Pablo Picasso drew profound inspiration from African and Oceanic art, recognising not only their formal power but also their ability to challenge the conventions of Western aesthetics.¹²⁹ Yet this embrace was not without contradiction: while avant-garde artists were celebrated for their originality, they often built their reputations by drawing on non-Western

¹²⁵ Peggy Levitt, *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display* (University of California Press, 2015), 3.

¹²⁶ Barbara Musetti, "Arts Premiers. Le Pavillon des Sessions du Louvre Fête Ses Dix Ans," published May 27, 2010. <https://altritaliani.net/article-arts-premiers-le-pavillon-des/>.

¹²⁷ "Aux Quatre Coins du Monde," accessed April 3, 2025, <https://www.louvre.fr/decouvrir/le-palais/aux-quatre-coins-du-monde>.

¹²⁸ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 30–31; "Quatre Coins du Monde."

¹²⁹ Philippe Bourgoin, "The Triumph of 'Early Arts' at the Louvre," *Tribal Arts* (2000), 54.

cultures, which were rarely credited as sources of individual creativity and instead reduced to anonymous aesthetic traditions.¹³⁰

As early as 1909, poet Guillaume Apollinaire championed the inclusion of Indigenous material culture and art in the Louvre, arguing that they provoked emotional and psychological responses equivalent to those evoked by European masterpieces. Intellectuals such as Félix Fénéon and Claude Lévi-Strauss took up this cause, advocating for their artistic recognition. Meanwhile, cultural theorist André Malraux sought to escape the problematic category of “primitive art” by proposing alternative terms like arts primordiaux, an early step in dismantling colonial nomenclature.¹³¹

Yet even as discourse evolved, institutional resistance remained entrenched. When renowned art dealer Charles Ratton (1895-1986) offered to donate African works from his collection to the Louvre in 1979, the museum declined. This rejection was telling: the Louvre’s self-image as a temple of European civilisation remained largely intact, even amid the rhetorical turn toward diversity.¹³² During the 1980s, as President Mitterrand’s Grand Louvre project unfolded with an eye to modernising the museum, debates about including non-European works remained unresolved — their presence too ideologically disruptive, too politically fraught.¹³³

A turning point came in 1990, when art critic and dealer Jacques Kerchache published a provocative manifesto titled “Masterpieces Are Born Free and Equal.” Backed by hundreds of cultural figures, the document demanded the integration of African, Oceanic, Insulinde, and Indigenous American works into the Louvre. Kerchache’s campaign gained momentum with the election of President Jacques Chirac in 1995, whose admiration for non-Western cultures would come to define his cultural legacy.¹³⁴

The debate intensified after Chirac’s victory. On 14 November 1995, his Minister of Culture, Philippe Douste-Blazy (°1953), announced the formation of a committee to explore ways of incorporating so-called “primitive arts” into the Louvre. It was time for the “highest temple of civilisation” to wake up from its amnesia and illuminate the “forgotten arts.” The announcement sparked controversy. Critics accused the project of symbolic tokenism, arguing that a handful of objects could not meaningfully challenge the deep-seated hierarchy of cultures embedded in the museum’s structure.¹³⁵ Resistance came from within the Louvre itself as well, where curators insisted that the museum had never claimed to be universal. At the same time, curators from the Musée de l’Homme, which housed many of the proposed artefacts to be

¹³⁰ Reed, “Alienation,” 14.

¹³¹ Bourgoïn, “‘Early Arts’ at the Louvre,” 54.

¹³² Bourgoïn, “‘Early Arts’ at the Louvre,” 54; Corbey, “Arts Premiers,” 5.

¹³³ François Mitterrand “Inauguration de la Pyramide du Louvre,” directed by Antenne 2, March 4, 1988, <https://fresques.ina.fr/miterrand/fiche-media/Mitter00155/inauguration-de-la-pyramide-du-louvre.html>.

¹³⁴ “Le Pavillon des Sessions,” accessed April 4, 2025, <https://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/collections/toutes-les-collections/le-pavillon-des-sessions>.

¹³⁵ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 36-46.

included in the Louvre, feared that their institution would be reduced to a peripheral research archive for elite audiences, stripped of its public role.¹³⁶

In response, Prime Minister Alain Juppé (°1945) appointed businessman Jacques Friedmann (1932-2009) to head a commission charged with resolving the issue. Comprising museum directors, anthropologists, legal experts, and art historians, the commission deliberated extensively over the place of non-European art in France's museum landscape. In September 1996, it delivered a compromise: the creation of a new institution — later realised as the Musée du quai Branly, which opened in 2006 — alongside an annex space in the Louvre. This annex would house 150 to 200 selected masterpieces from Africa, Oceania, Insulinde, and the Americas, and would open in 1999 as the Pavillon des Sessions.¹³⁷

The Pavillon des Sessions was designed to strike a balance between inclusion and containment: a compromise space that gestured toward universality without disturbing the Louvre's foundational Eurocentrism. Its five stated objectives were carefully crafted by late 1997: to showcase the historical and visual significance of works from Africa, Oceania, Asia, and the Americas; to engage the public with an exceptional yet curated selection; to prefigure the Musée du quai Branly; to create an original museographic project; and to enhance a previously underused area of the Louvre. By grouping these works together, the pavilion aimed to induct them into France's national pantheon of "masterpieces," symbolically recognising the civilisations from which they originated.¹³⁸

From the outset, this framing invited both acclaim and critique. Supporters noted the exceptional quality of the artefacts, arguing that their aesthetic refinement rivalled anything in the Louvre. The installation was designed by architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte, who adopted a formal vocabulary "similar to that used for Western sculptures:" subdued lighting, vitrines, and expansive sightlines. These design choices were meant to assert the visual and artistic legitimacy of non-European works — to say, in effect, "these belong here."¹³⁹

Yet this very aestheticisation proved controversial. Critics such as Felice Bodenstein have argued that by stripping the works of their ethnographic, historical, and colonial contexts, the pavilion enacted a subtle form of appropriation. The objects were divorced from the circumstances of their acquisition - including colonial violence, missionary collection, and coerced trade - and presented instead as autonomous art objects, whose value was measured solely by formal beauty. In this sense, the Pavillon des Sessions was a quintessential Louvre solution: inclusive in form, exclusive in content.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Pierre Rosenberg, Letter to Jacques Friedman, July 26, 1996. Sourced in the folder "Courrier Divers," Archives Nationales, box 20210007-38; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 43-44.

¹³⁷ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 43-44.

¹³⁸ "Musée de l'Homme, des Arts et des Civilisations: Antenne Louvre Pavillon des Sessions: Programme," page 3, December, 1997. Archives Nationales, box 20080655, art. 4.

¹³⁹ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 59-63; "Pavillon des Sessions."

¹⁴⁰ Meunier, "Pavillon des Sessions."

The debate over the pavilion's permanence surfaced almost immediately. Then-director of the Louvre Pierre Rosenberg (°1936) insisted that the museum's mission was to represent Western art from the Middle Ages to the 1850s, not to accommodate global cultures. He predicted that once the Musée du quai Branly opened in 2006, the artefacts would be transferred there. Kerchache, by contrast, argued for their continued presence in the Louvre, viewing the pavilion as a necessary corrective to centuries of exclusion.¹⁴¹ For scholars like anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009), the entire controversy was politically charged: a battle not over aesthetics or museography, but over France's self-image and its ability to reckon with its imperial legacy.¹⁴²

Despite ongoing tensions, the Pavillon des Sessions opened on 13 April 2000, inaugurated by President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (°1937).¹⁴³ Its launch was hailed as a milestone in France's recognition of non-European cultures, but its position within the Louvre — marginal, subterranean, and spatially isolated — continues to raise questions (as will be discussed in the next section).¹⁴⁴ The absence of explicit colonial history in the gallery's interpretive texts (which will be discussed further in chapter 3) suggested that aesthetic inclusion had not been matched by the critical reflection people like influential anthropologist Maurice Godelier (°1934) aimed for.¹⁴⁵

The relationship between state and museum remains complicated, with the Louvre's aim of cultural preservation intersecting with historical reckoning. The Louvre can be read as an important French state archive, about which Achille Mbembe posits that they are essential for state legitimacy yet inherently destabilising. Archives like the Louvre safeguard memory while paradoxically exposing inconvenient truths. The Louvre's extensive holdings - from classical antiquities to colonial acquisitions - embody this tension. By presenting itself as a global custodian of heritage, France affirms its cultural authority, yet the visibility of contested objects, especially in the Pavillon des Sessions, simultaneously challenges official narratives and provokes calls for restitution. In this way, the archive (in this case the Louvre) becomes not only a tool of sovereignty but also a ghostly mirror reflecting the French state's unresolved past.¹⁴⁶

In late October 2024, after nearly 25 years of operation, the pavilion was closed for renovation. Once again, Jean-Michel Wilmotte was entrusted with the redesign.¹⁴⁷ In March 2025, an agreement was

¹⁴¹ "Rapport de la Commission 'Arts Premiers'," August 1996, page 17. Archives Nationales, box 20210007-38; Maurice Godelier and Germain Viatte, "Mission de Préfiguration du Musée de l'Homme, des Arts et des Civilisations," sent to Pierre Rosenberg, page 9. Sourced in folder "20210007/99". Archives Nationales, box 20210007-39; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 63-64.

¹⁴² Price, *Paris Primitive*, 36.

¹⁴³ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 59.

¹⁴⁴ Corbey "Arts Premiers," 3; Mark, "Parisian Public Museums," 7.

¹⁴⁵ Dias, "Double Erasures," 306-309; Corbey "Arts Premiers," 4; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 59; Mark, "Parisian Public Museums," 1.

¹⁴⁶ Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 23; Kwame Opoku, "Can Looted African Art Remain in France Because of Alleged 'mutation'?" published May 29, 2025, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/1404322/can-looted-african-art-remain-in-france-because.html>; "The Louvre Museum in Brief," published July 2024, <https://presse.louvre.fr/le-musee-du-louvre-1063000201419/>.

¹⁴⁷ Joséphine Bindé, "Plus de Détails Dévoilés Sur le 'Nouveau Louvre: Galerie des Cinq Continents, Salle de la Joconde, Nouveau Café...," accessed March 2, 2025, <https://www.beauxarts.com/grand-format/plus-de-detaills-devoiles-sur-le-nouveau-louvre-galerie-des-cinq-continents-salle-de-la-joconde-nouveau-cafe/>; Antonin Albert, "Le Louvre prépare un nouveau décor pour la Joconde," last accessed 2nd of March 2025, <https://mesinfos.fr/75000-paris/le-louvre-prepare-un-nouveau-decor-pour-la-joconde-216104.html>.

signed between the Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière Foundation, the French Ministry of Culture, and the Louvre, with the stated goal of transforming the space into the “Galerie des Cinq Continents.”¹⁴⁸ The new gallery, set to open in late 2025, will mark the permanent integration of these works into the Louvre’s institutional structure, a reversal of earlier reluctance.¹⁴⁹

The redesign aims to promote interaction and relationality between the objects: to highlight influences, hybridisations, and exchanges between cultures that challenge the traditional, segregated model of display.¹⁵⁰ The initiative will draw on artefacts from the Musée du quai Branly, the Musée Guimet, and the Louvre’s own collections, suggesting a broader institutional collaboration.¹⁵¹ Patron and businessman Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière (°1940), a longtime supporter of the Louvre, has framed the project as a gesture of cultural tolerance and global understanding, inspired by the late President Chirac’s vision.¹⁵²

As this chapter argues, the Pavillon des Sessions (and in the future, the Galerie des Cinq Continents) must be read not simply as an architectural intervention, but as an ideological site. It crystallises the Louvre’s complex position at the crossroads of nationalism, universalism, and colonial legacy. Whether its transformation signals a shift toward decolonial practice or a continuation of aesthetic diplomacy remains an open - and urgent - question.

2. The Louvre as Cultural Medium: The Museum Effect

Art historian Michael Baxandall famously outlined a triadic model in the interpretation of visual culture, comprising the artist, the viewer, and the curator, each playing a role in the creation, reception, and mediation of meaning.¹⁵³ Yet, this triad overlooks a fourth, and arguably more powerful actor: the museum itself. Rather than being a mere container of objects, the museum acts as a medium in its own right, shaping, structuring and generating meaning.¹⁵⁴

Institutions like the Louvre do not merely present artworks; they actively intervene in how they are understood. Museums are not neutral spaces, they mediate complex ideas, assert cultural hierarchies,

¹⁴⁸ Letizia Dannery, “Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière s’Engage pour un Lieu Iconique du Louvre,” *L’Express*, 27 March, 2025, <https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/art/marc-ladreit-de-lacharriere-sengage-pour-un-lieu-iconique-du-louvre-B4WCPBMARRGRVADPIXNZCL3VKQ/>; Martine Robert, “Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière offre au Louvre une Galerie des cinq continents,” *Les Echos*, 27 March, 2025, <https://www.lesechos.fr/industrie-services/services-conseils/marc-ladreit-de-lacharriere-offre-au-louvre-une-galerie-des-cinq-continents-2156573>

¹⁴⁹ Bindé, “Galerie des Cinq Continents;” Albert, “Le Louvre.”

¹⁵⁰ Dannery, “Marc Ladreit.”

¹⁵¹ Robert, “Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière.”

¹⁵² Robert, “Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière.”

¹⁵³ Baxandall, “Exhibiting Intention,” 36-37; Dannery, “Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière.”

¹⁵⁴ George Okello Abungu, “Connected by History, Divided by Reality: Eliminating Suspicion and Promoting Cooperation Between African and European Museums,” in *Museum Cooperation Between Africa and Europe: A New Field for Museum Studies*, eds. Tomas Laely, Marc Meyer, and Raphael Schwere (Transcript, 2018), 26.

and curate collective memory.¹⁵⁵ Svetlana Alpers introduced the notion of the “museum effect” to describe how an object, once placed in a museum, undergoes a transformation.¹⁵⁶ Removed from their original social, spiritual, or functional contexts, they are recontextualised within the museum’s own epistemic frameworks: reframed as aesthetic, historical, or scientific specimens, thus alienated spatially, contextually, and historically.¹⁵⁷

Similarly, Efram Sera-Shriar terms this process “museumisation,” whereby objects are abstracted from their lived contexts and inserted into new, institutionally sanctioned narratives. This process entails more than just relocation; it imposes new meanings and values onto the object, meanings aligned with the museum’s institutional logic and the broader sociopolitical structures it upholds.¹⁵⁸

The Louvre exemplifies this transformative paradigm. It has been frequently described using sacred metaphors: the “holy temple of French culture,” by Sally Price, a “temple of high art and haute culture” by Raymond Corbey, a “temple of culture,” by James Gardner, and a “sacred temple,” by Bruno Brulon Soares.¹⁵⁹ These designations convey more than reverence; they underscore the museum’s role as a cultural sanctifier: an institution that not merely displays art but decides what qualifies as art.¹⁶⁰

André Delpuech goes further, referring to the Louvre as a “Temple of Western civilization.” according to Delpuech, a designation that reveals the institution’s role not only in preserving but producing a specific civilisational hierarchy.¹⁶¹ This phrasing reveals the museum’s ideological function: it constructs a civilisational hierarchy that centres Western narratives and marginalises others. The Louvre does not simply reflect existing cultural value, it produces it. In this way, the museum becomes a medium through which civilisation itself is defined and disseminated.

Within this context, material culture in the Louvre is not inherently a “masterpiece;” it is made one by the institution’s authority. The Louvre assigns value not only through display, but through omission: what is not shown, what is relegated to storage, or what is never acquired at all. This institutional decision-making affects everything from public perception to the market value of similar artefacts, influencing what is part of the art canon, and what is not.¹⁶²

Returning to Mbembe’s argument, the museum, like the archive, is not merely a repository; it is a symbolic structure. Its authority is as much architectural as it is curatorial. The building itself plays a

¹⁵⁵ Bjarki Valtýsson, Sanne Lynge Nilsson, and Christine Eva Pedersen, “Reaching Out to be in Reach: Museum Communication in the Current Museum Zeitgeist,” *Nordisk Museologi* 1 (2021): 14; Silverstone, “The Medium Is the Museum,” 161-66.

¹⁵⁶ Alpers, “Ways of Seeing,” 25-32.

¹⁵⁷ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 46.

¹⁵⁸ Sera-Shriar, “Museumization,” 1-2.

¹⁵⁹ Price, (on respectively pages 36, 59, and the backflap), Corbey, “Arts Premiers,” 3, James Gardner, *World Most Famous Museum*, 351; Bruno Brulon Soares, “Every Museum Has a God, or God Is in Every Museum?” *ICOFOM study series* 47, no. 1-2 (2019): 62.

¹⁶⁰ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2000), 140; Stuart Hall, “Whose Heritage? Un-Settling ‘The Heritage’, Re-Imagining the Post-Nation,” *Third Text* 13, nr. 49 (1999): 5.

¹⁶¹ André Delpuech, “Il est des situations acquises dont il faut s’accommoder: À propos de frontières dans les musées français,” *Les Nouvelles de l’archéologie* 39, no. 1 (2017): n.p.

¹⁶² Hooper-Greenhill, *Visual Culture*, 140; Hall, “Whose Heritage?” 5; Michaela Mikhy Neveu, “How to Exhibit Deceptively: Aesthetics of Globalization within Pre-Hispanic Art Displays,” published January 11, 2021, <https://heritageforallorg.wordpress.com/2021/01/11/new-article/>.

mediating role, conferring legitimacy and sanctity upon the objects it houses. Without this physical edifice — the monumental walls, the marble halls, the grand entrances — the museum's ability to impose interpretive frameworks would be diminished. The structure does not simply contain meaning; it constructs it.¹⁶³ Yet, this architecture also enacts forms of epistemic and material violence. In protecting artefacts from the outside world, the museum simultaneously enacts a process of dispossession. Objects, often obtained through colonial conquest or asymmetrical exchange, are removed from source communities, communities that are then rendered powerless in shaping the narratives told about their own heritage.¹⁶⁴

Institutions like the Louvre and the Musée du quai Branly maintain unquestionable authority over these displaced materials. They determine not only what is displayed but how it is framed, what is dignified as "universal" and what remains peripheral, hidden, or invisible. In doing so, the museum acts as a gatekeeper of cultural knowledge, controlling the meanings these objects are permitted to convey within a national or civilisational story.¹⁶⁵

For much of their history, museums have presented themselves as neutral spaces — objective, disinterested, and apolitical. This myth is decisively challenged by theorists like Rolando Vázquez Melken, who frames the museum as an institution embedded within the modern/colonial matrix of power. Museums wield both epistemic (knowledge-defining) and aesthetic (taste-shaping) authority, constructing hierarchies of civilisation and culture.¹⁶⁶

Within this framework, the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre becomes a case study in the politics of display. Though framed as a celebration of "Arts Premiers," the pavilion ultimately reproduces colonial logic. Non-European objects are extracted from their cultural contexts and aestheticised for Western appreciation. Their original purposes — spiritual, ritualistic, or communal — are obscured, reinterpreted as markers of "universal" artistic value. Meanwhile, the people and worldviews from which they originate are excluded from narrating their meaning.¹⁶⁷

In this sense, the Louvre becomes a medium of colonial continuity, reinforcing a modernity/coloniality divide by rebranding colonised heritage as European cultural capital. The very act of displaying these objects within such a revered institution transforms them from cultural artefacts into artistic trophies: symbols not of their origin cultures, but of the museum's own civilisational supremacy.¹⁶⁸

In displaying Indigenous and non-Western artefacts, Western museums such as the Louvre engage in a dual process of decontextualisation and recontextualization, according to anthropologist Benoît de L'Estoile. These objects are not simply removed from their original settings; they are assigned new

¹⁶³ Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive," 19.

¹⁶⁴ Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive," 20.

¹⁶⁵ Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive," 22.

¹⁶⁶ Rosa Wevers, "Decolonial Aesthetics and the Museum: An Interview with Rolando Vázquez Melken," *Stedelijke Studies* 1, no. 8 (2019): n.p.

¹⁶⁷ Wevers, "Decolonial Aesthetics," n.p.

¹⁶⁸ Wevers, "Decolonial Aesthetics," n.p.

meanings, tailored to fit within Western aesthetic and institutional frameworks. Once part of ritual, spiritual, or everyday life, they are reframed as artworks, divorced from use and made legible through the lens of European cultural values.¹⁶⁹

This transformation is not benign. As Laporte argues, such reframing entails alienation: a shift from living object to passive spectacle. Behind glass, labelled and isolated, these objects are subjected to a Western gaze that extracts aesthetic value while flattening cultural specificity. The act of seeing is no longer participatory or embedded in lived tradition; it becomes a distanced, disembodied viewing experience, one that privileges form over function and image over meaning.¹⁷⁰

Even when the intent is inclusive, as in the Pavillon des Sessions, the result is often symbolic exile. The pavilion may grant non-European cultures visibility, but only within boundaries defined by the Louvre. The art is appreciated, but its context is effaced. The cultures are acknowledged, but their epistemologies are not. Thus, the Louvre operates not simply as a venue, but as a mediating apparatus — shaping what the viewer can know, feel, and believe about these objects.¹⁷¹

Yet, the museum's role as medium is not totalising. As Achille Mbembe contends, the agency of the viewer introduces variability into this equation. Visitors bring with them personal, cultural, and political perspectives that affect how they interpret what they see. While the museum seeks to guide perception, this guidance is not always accepted passively. Individuals may comply, resist, reinterpret, or critically engage with the narratives offered.¹⁷²

Laporte supports this view, urging audiences to move beyond passive spectatorship and become critical participants. Perception is not neutral; how viewers interpret objects influences how they understand the cultures from which they come. Recognition of the museum's mediating role can empower audiences to question dominant narratives and seek alternative readings, challenging the authority the museum assumes over cultural meaning.¹⁷³

To consider the Louvre as a medium is to recognise its active role in the shaping, not merely the showing, of cultural meaning. It is not a transparent vessel through which art is neutrally displayed; rather, it is a meaning-making machine, mediating value, hierarchy, and visibility through architecture, narrative, and display. Through its curatorial choices and institutional framing, the Louvre transforms objects into artworks, artefacts into commodities, and cultures into curated experiences.

¹⁶⁹ Benoît De L'Estoile, "From the Colonial Exhibition to the Museum of Man. An alternative genealogy of French anthropology," *Social Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (2003): 353.

¹⁷⁰ Laporte, "Art and Alienation," 145-168.

¹⁷¹ Wevers, "Decolonial Aesthetics," n.p; Anna Seiderer, *Une Critique Postcoloniale en Acte: Les Musées d'Ethnographie Contemporains sous le Prisme des Études Postcoloniales* (Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 2014) 39.

¹⁷² Mbembe, "Archive and Its Limits," 23.

¹⁷³ Laporte, "Art and Alienation," 157.

3. The Pavillon des Sessions: Spatial Marginality and Institutional Ambiguity

The Pavillon des Sessions presents a compelling case study in the spatial politics of museum display. Frequently lauded as a progressive step towards universality, its physical location, naming, signage, and ambiguous link to the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac suggest otherwise.

3.1 Architectural Marginality and Spatial Hierarchy in the Louvre

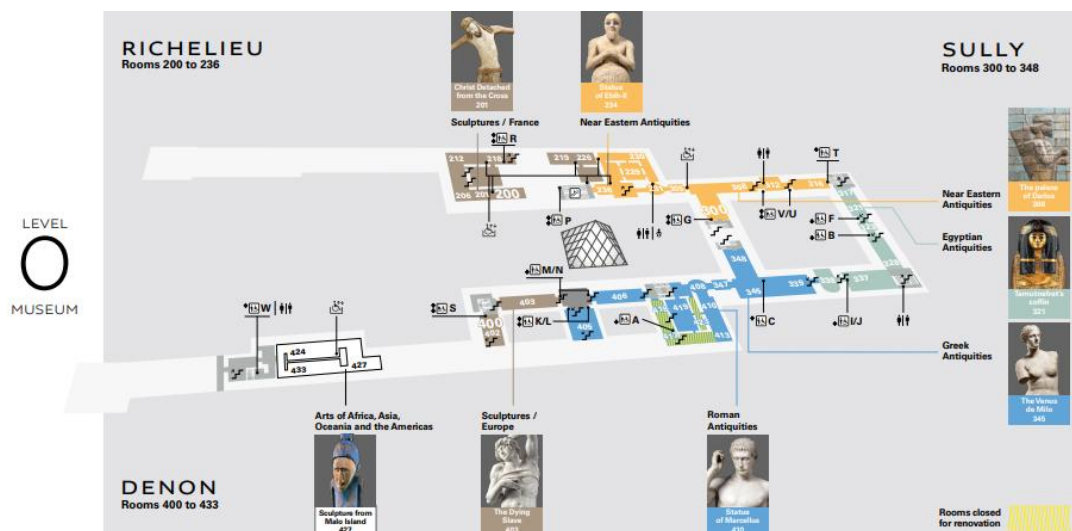


Image 2. Ground floor map of the Louvre

Scholars such as Corbey, Price, Meunier, and McKinley have pointed out that the Pavillon occupies a marginal position within the Louvre. One that is not only physically remote, but also difficult to locate.¹⁷⁴ Situated at the far end of the ground floor in the Denon Wing (see image 2), the space is far removed from the Louvre's symbolic heart: the pyramid entrance. Visitors must first make their way through to the end of the Denon Wing's first floor, where they need to take the stairs or escalator to the level below.¹⁷⁵

The Pavilion is not architecturally or thematically connected to other galleries within the museum, as McKinley points out.¹⁷⁶ This detachment is not incidental. As philosopher Michel de Certeau reminds us, space is never neutral. It is the product of institutional design, ideological intent, and historical precedent. The Louvre's architectural flow and navigational logic shape visitor experience and, by extension, cultural meaning.¹⁷⁷ By isolating the Pavillon des Sessions, the museum participates in an epistemological framing

¹⁷⁴ McKinley, "Hiding African Art;" Corbey, "Arts Premiers," 6; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 59.

¹⁷⁵ "Map."

¹⁷⁶ McKinley, "Hiding African Art;" Price, *Paris Primitive*, 59.

¹⁷⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (University of California Press, 1984), 117-122.

in which non-Western cultures appear as supplementary, legitimate enough to be shown, but not to be woven into the museum's main storyline. They remain adjacent, never integral.¹⁷⁸

The marginal identity of the Pavillon can be partially attributed to the Grand Louvre project: a sweeping renovation plan initiated before the inclusion of the arts premiers was under discussion. Under this scheme, all spaces in the former palace were planned out to be transformed into functional museum zones in the early 1980s, regardless of public access. By the time serious conversations began about incorporating non-European collections in the Louvre (ca. 1995-1996), all of the museum's spatial organisation had already been formalised. Internal debates - involving curators and Louvre leadership - acknowledged these limitations.¹⁷⁹

Yet, President Jacques Chirac remained resolute: the Louvre must accommodate the underrepresented civilisations of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. This meant that by the time formal discussions took place, only five options of spaces that could house the Indigenous artefacts were brought forward: one on the ground floor of the Pavillon des Sessions, two different sections under the entrance pyramid, one in the Pavillon de Flore, and one in the Aile de Flore. Ultimately, the current location - the Pavillon des Sessions - was selected, an architectural compromise, if not an ideological one.¹⁸⁰

Yet, even if this choice appears pragmatic, the Pavillon's continued marginalisation through unclear naming, minimal signage, and lack of institutional visibility cannot be explained solely by logistical constraints. Instead, it exposes a persistent curatorial hierarchy and symbolic distancing. The failure to integrate these collections into the Louvre's main curatorial narrative reveals a deeper tension: the politics of inclusion often stop short of the politics of prioritisation.

This symbolic distancing is further reflected in the ambiguity surrounding the pavilion's name. While referred to as the Pavillon des Sessions on the websites of both the Louvre and the Musée du quai Branly, this designation is virtually absent within the Louvre itself.¹⁸¹ Internally, the space is instead labelled "Arts d'Afrique, d'Asie, d'Océanie et des Amériques," a description that fits better with the other names used throughout the Louvre to indicate different sections, e.g. "Sculptures Europe." The different use of terminology to refer to the pavilion - which seems to refer to the name of the building section which houses the pavilion as well as the Spanish paintings in the level above - is odd, yet not uncommon. For example, on the Louvre's website, spaces are referred to as the "Salon Carré" and "Galerie Grande," which are not used on the maps and plans within the museum, making it harder for visitors to find these rooms found online.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ McKinley, "Hiding African Art."

¹⁷⁹ Serge Louveau, Letter "Commission 'Arts Premiers'," sent to Pierre Rosenberg, March 1996. Sourced in map "Arts Premiers." Archives Nationales, box 20210007-38

¹⁸⁰ Louveau, Letter "Commission 'Arts Premiers.'"

¹⁸¹ "Aux Quatre Coins;" "Pavillon des Sessions."

¹⁸² "The Palace," accessed May 19, 2025, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/explore/the-palace>; "Map."



Images 3 and 4. Signage leading to the Pavillon des Sessions in the general entrance hall and next to an elevator

This ambiguity is compounded by the Louvre's wayfinding system. Signage directing visitors to the "Arts from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas" is sparse, inconsistent, and visually understated. Where signs exist — in the entrance hall (see image 3), on museum maps, and next to certain elevators (see image 4) — they do little to orient visitors clearly or suggest the significance of the gallery.

For example, in the main entrance hall, a poster above the Denon Wing entrance features the Trou Korrou statue, also referred to as the "Sculpture de l'Île de Malo" or the "Blue Man."¹⁸³ This statue was purchased by members of the Korrigane Expedition in 1934–1935 in Port Vila, the capital of Vanuatu, on the island of Efate.¹⁸⁴ The poster offers a rare visual cue.

Similarly, a discreet mention near an elevator and inclusion on printed maps technically mark the pavilion's existence, but these indicators are insufficient. As McKinley notes, there is no architectural or conceptual transition leading visitors into the space; no sense of arrival or thematic framing. Unlike the major galleries at the Louvre, which are often characterised by grand arches, large-scale text or immersive spatial sequences, the Pavillon appears almost incidental. It lacks both presence and narrative invitation.¹⁸⁵

It is important to acknowledge that the few instances of signage, particularly the entrance poster, indicate an institutional effort to draw attention to the gallery. However, these efforts are minimal, and in the context of a museum as well-organised as the Louvre, their obscurity is notable. It is unsurprising that the pavilion is included on museum maps and near lifts; excluding it would itself be suspicious. Yet, this minimal inclusion should not be mistaken for genuine prominence. Instead, it reflects a token presence: one that acknowledges existence without demanding attention.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ "Sculpture de l'Île de Malo," accessed June 24, 2025, <https://www.quaibranly.fr/fr/collections/toutes-les-collections/le-pavillon-des-sessions/le-pavillon-des-sessions/le-pavillon-des-sessions/notice/610?referer=search&cHash=83554f75e0a86991b20ff5df759699ae>.

¹⁸⁴ Hugo DeBlock, "Objects as Archives of a Disrupted Past: The Lengnangulong Sacred Stone from Vanuatu in France, Revisited," *Museum Worlds: Advances in research* 8 (2020): 88.

¹⁸⁵ McKinley, "Hiding African Art."

¹⁸⁶ McKinley, "Hiding African Art;" Price, *Paris Primitive*, 59.

This token presence is confirmed by archived meeting minutes dating back to late 1999. The minutes state that the Louvre would only mention or promote the arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas at two locations: around the “Porte des Lions” and in the “Hall Napoléon.” Two banners were to be displayed in the Passage des Lions (the passageway between the two entrances known as La Porte des Lions), as well as signage on the “large information walls” and a poster near the Denon Wing in the main entrance hall of the museum, known as the “Hall Napoléon.”¹⁸⁷

The Louvre’s digital infrastructure reinforced this marginality. On its website, the Pavillon des Sessions and its collections are absent from featured visitor trails, thematic itineraries, and guided tours. It does not figure in official promotional materials, nor does it hold a place in the museum’s online narratives of major galleries.¹⁸⁸ Most strikingly, on the Louvre’s interactive floor plan, the Pavillon is the only room that is not clickable and thus not interactive — a silence in the interface that echoes its spatial obscurity.¹⁸⁹ For the average visitor browsing online, the pavilion simply does not appear to belong to the Louvre’s core story. It is invisible by design.¹⁹⁰

Consequently, the typical visitor stumbles upon the space accidentally, if at all. Those who find it often do so with prior intent: researchers, curators, or tourists already invested in non-Western collections. Its audience, then, is self-selecting. This spatial filtering mirrors deeper epistemic exclusions. Rather than inviting broad engagement, the Pavillon appears to demand prerequisite knowledge. It becomes a space not of discovery, but of confirmation, for those who already know where to look.¹⁹¹

This spatial ambiguity is more than inconvenient; it is ideologically charged. By obscuring the presence of non-Western collections, the Louvre enacts a museological form of exclusion — one that allows for inclusion without integration, and presence without prioritisation.¹⁹² The Pavillon des Sessions exists, but it does so in the margins. It is visible, but peripheral; included, but disoriented.¹⁹³ Its architectural marginality serves to mirror, and indeed perpetuate, the historical marginalisation of the cultures it represents. In this way, the Louvre offers not a genuine reconfiguration of its curatorial narrative, but a carefully managed accommodation, one that preserves the primacy of its Eurocentric canon.¹⁹⁴

The Louvre’s layout, like its institutional culture, encodes a hierarchy of artistic value. Galleries dedicated to European painting and sculpture are prominent, central, and celebrated, both physically and ideologically. Those housing African, Oceanic, Asian, and Indigenous American artefacts are pushed to the

¹⁸⁷ “Compte Rendu la Reunion du 21.10.99, Object: Mise au Point sure les Modalités de Fonctionnement de la Future Antenne du Musée du quai Branly,” November 2, 1999. Sourced in the folder “Musée du Louvre: Correspondance, 1999-2001,” in the map “Mission de Préfiguration puis Musée du quai Branly – Musée du Louvre: Correspondance.” Archives Nationales, box 20080655, art. 6.

¹⁸⁸ “Visitor Trails,” accessed May 23, 2025, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/explore/visitor-trails>.

¹⁸⁹ “The Palace;” “Interactive Map,” accessed May 23, 2025, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/plan>.

¹⁹⁰ McKinley, “Hiding African Art;” Price, *Paris Primitive*, 59.

¹⁹¹ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 59.

¹⁹² McKinley, “Hiding African Art.”

¹⁹³ Abdelnour, “What Decolonizing Is Not,” 82; Csilla E. Ariese, “Increasing Inclusivity,” in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples*, eds. Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska (Amsterdam University Press B.V., 2022), 40.

¹⁹⁴ Bartz and König, *Louvre*, 43-44.

edges, rendered supplementary in both spatial and symbolic terms.¹⁹⁵ This arrangement communicates a tacit but powerful message: non-Western cultures are worthy of recognition, but not of equal standing. They are to be included in the museum, but not in its centre — neither in terms of physical space, nor in terms of narrative authority. They are addenda to the Louvre's story of civilisation, which continues to be structured around a French and European axis.¹⁹⁶

The Pavillon des Sessions is not simply a gallery on the edge of the Louvre — it is the symbolic expression of France's ambivalent relationship with its colonial past and multicultural present. While its inclusion within the Louvre's walls signals a desire to recognise and represent non-European cultures, its spatial marginality reveals an enduring reluctance to fully integrate them into the national narrative.¹⁹⁷

France reinforces older, much criticised divisions between Europe and the so-called "other" by separating the European collections from the non-European ones. The quai Branly and its antenna are unable to avoid essentialisation of non-European cultures it supposedly represents. Even though there are soft transitions between the different continental areas, the displayed material culture is abstracted and exposed as embodiments of specific cultural essences. These artefacts are detached from history, their context, their places of origin, the collections being purified and essentialised from any sort of intercultural relationships, which could possibly create links between the West and the other, as well as removed itself and its own history from it that can be negatively perceived and bring attention to the Western influence in narrative. The other is othered, while the West remains the contemporary we.¹⁹⁸

Ultimately, the Pavillon des Sessions reveals that space is not just a container for culture — it is a medium that actively produces meaning. The Louvre's geography is an argument in itself, one that privileges Western narratives while relegating others to the sidelines. The museum may claim to speak for humanity, but its walls, corridors, and signs continue to speak most clearly in the voice of the French state.¹⁹⁹

In this configuration, the Pavillon des Sessions does not disrupt the canonical narrative; it confirms its borders. It offers a space for the non-European "other" within the museum, but always at a remove — never allowed to destabilise the overarching story the Louvre tells about cultural achievement, national identity, and universal values.²⁰⁰ Without genuine spatial and narrative integration, gestures toward

¹⁹⁵ "Map;" Bartz and König, Louvre, 43-44.

¹⁹⁶ Charlene Villaseñor Black and Tim Barringer, "Decolonizing Art and Empire," *The Art Bulletin* 104, nr. 1 (2022): 10; McKinley, "Hiding African Art."

¹⁹⁷ McKinley, "Hiding African Art."

¹⁹⁸ Anthony Shelton, "Critical Museology: A Manifesto," *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 1, no. 1 (2013): 17.

¹⁹⁹ Walter Mignolo, "I Am Where I Think: Remapping the Order of Knowing," in *The Creolization of Theory*, eds. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 174; Csilla E. Ariese, "Decentering," in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples*, eds. Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska (Amsterdam University Press B.V., 2022), 53.

²⁰⁰ Abdelnour, "What Decolonizing Is Not," 82; Ariese, "Increasing Inclusivity," 40.

diversity risk becoming tokenistic — an aesthetic of inclusion that masks the persistence of colonial hierarchies within national institutions.²⁰¹

The current spatial strategy mirrors France's broader tensions around postcolonial identity. While France has one of the largest immigrant populations in Europe and a rich history of interaction with Africa, Asia, and the Americas, its self-image remains firmly anchored in universalist republican ideals that leave little room for pluralism. As a country that promotes assimilation and colour-blind policies, the prevalence of racism —, which according to the colour-blind tradition is impossible, as it posits that race does not exist, is striking.²⁰² The museum's layout reflects this contradiction: the French Republic professes equality and inclusivity, yet spatially and symbolically maintains hierarchies of culture and value.²⁰³

The Pavillon des Sessions is not merely a gallery at the physical edge of the Louvre; it is the architectural expression of France's unresolved relationship with its colonial past and its multicultural present. While its creation signals a desire to acknowledge non-European cultures, its spatial marginality betrays a deeper reluctance to fully integrate them into the national patrimony. The Louvre thus continues to maintain a curatorial geography that separates "the West" from "the rest" — reinscribing the very divisions it claims to transcend.²⁰⁴

3.2 The Pavilion as Mechanism of Institutional Ambiguity

Aside from its physical marginalisation within the Louvre, the Pavillon des Sessions occupies a paradoxical position: located inside the museum yet institutionally disavowed by it. The works on display formally belong to the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, transferred largely from the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie.²⁰⁵ Within the Louvre, however, this affiliation is largely obscured. This dual claim — owned by one museum, hosted by another — produces an institutional ambiguity that shapes both the legibility and perceived value of the artefacts.²⁰⁶

²⁰¹ Ariese, "Increasing Inclusivity," 40; Tom Phillips, "Le Louvre pratique un Apartheid Culturel," in *Les Arts Premiers au Louvre? Le Figaro*, February 23, 1996.

²⁰² Assimilation entails a society that does not seek to integrate foreign cultures into its existing one, but instead prefers that immigrants conform to their way of life. Avoiding the use of subjective evaluations is essential in maintaining objectivity. Heather Main, "France and the Netherlands: Immigration, Assimilation and Conflict," (thesis, University of Washington, 2006), 2; Peter Scholten, "Beyond National Models of Integration? Rethinking Interconnectedness and Fragmentation in Dutch and French Integration Policies," in *Beyond Fragmentation and Interconnectivity: Public Governance and the Search for Connective Capacity*, eds. Menno Fenger and Victor Bekkers (IOS Press, 2012), 44-53.

In the colour-blind approach, when dealing with any group of people, skin colour is ignored. This approach is often well intentioned, but it has been criticised for not seeing race and therefore, not seeing racism. Additionally, this approach often perceives the white race as dominant. Main, "France and the Netherlands," 2; Théo Bourgerie-Gonse, "New Plans Coming to Fight 'Overwhelming' Racism in France," *Euractiv*, January 25, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/new-plans-coming-to-fight-overwhelming-racism-in-france/>; "France Sees Itself as Colourblind – So How Do the French Talk About Race," *France 24*, July 5, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230705-france-colorblind-nahel-immigration-talk-about-race-laicite-secularism>.

²⁰³ Black and Barringer, "Decolonizing Art and Empire," 10.

²⁰⁴ Walter Mignolo, "I Am Where I Think: Remapping the Order of Knowing," in *The Creolization of Theory*, eds. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Duke University Press, 2011), 174; Ariese, "Decentering," 53.

²⁰⁵ Mark, "Parisian Public Museums," 7; "Pavillon des Sessions."

²⁰⁶ "Pavillon des Sessions;" "Aux Quatre Coins."

Behind the Pavillon of the Louvre, a collaboration between the Louvre and quai Branly museum can be found. On the websites of both museums, they state this dual identity proudly. The dual stewardship within the gallery allows for the Louvre to show its inclusivity and for the quai Branly to highlight that Indigenous material culture and art isn't only interesting for its historical background, but also because of its formalistic traits, which transcend the objects to masterpiece status within the pavilion. Yet this arrangement obfuscates responsibility. The Louvre gains prestige from the inclusion of these works without confronting their provenance, while the quai Branly distances itself from the symbolic capital of the Louvre's centrality.²⁰⁷



Image 5. Entrance of the Pavillon des Sessions

Despite its location in one of the world's most visited museums, the pavilion remains semi-invisible. Neither printed guides nor digital resources clarify its institutional status. The name "Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac" is absent from maps and directories, and even at the entrance (see image 5), the only reference is an unexplained logo. Visitors unfamiliar with this symbol (which has changed) would not recognise the institutional affiliation. This obscurity appears deliberate: a withholding of clarity that sustains the fiction of seamless integration.²⁰⁸

This ambiguity is reinforced at the level of labelling. Some objects are credited to the quai Branly, others to different institutions, and others lack clear attribution altogether. Such inconsistency suggests not error but curatorial strategy. Rather than acknowledging the works as loans, the Louvre presents them in a liminal state: symbolically incorporated yet administratively unclaimed.

²⁰⁷ "Le Pavillon des Sessions;" "Aux Quatre Coins."

²⁰⁸ "Le Pavillon des Sessions;" "Aux Quatre Coins."

The result is structural disavowal. Both institutions derive symbolic benefit, but neither assumes full curatorial or ethical responsibility. The Louvre strengthens its universalist narrative through the inclusion of extra-European material while avoiding engagement with its histories of acquisition.²⁰⁹ Meanwhile, the Musée du quai Branly secures a prestigious foothold within the Louvre in the form of a “satellite” or “embassy,” but it loses the interpretive, contextual and museographic control it exercises in its own main galleries. Curatorial control of the pavilion was instead handed over to Kerchache’s hands-on approach (see Chapter 2).²¹⁰

This institutional vagueness functions as a form of laundering. The pavilion becomes a neutralised space where objects from colonised cultures are displayed without raising questions of provenance or colonial violence. The flattening of institutional distinctions permits both museums to promote narratives of inclusion while evading accountability. The artefacts are stripped not only of cultural origins but also of institutional heritage, doubly displaced.²¹¹

Such displacement directly affects visitor interpretation. In the absence of explicit contextualisation, the works are read through the Louvre’s dominant interpretive frame: as aesthetic masterworks valued for formal qualities rather than historical trajectories. The colonial entanglements that shaped their entry into French collections are effaced, their complex pasts simplified into objects of aesthetic contemplation.²¹²

The symbolic authority of the Louvre further compounds this erasure. As the pre-eminent repository of artistic “greatness,” the Louvre confers legitimacy upon what it displays. For non-European works, however, inclusion often entails assimilation into Western categories of art. Their ritual, cultural, and Indigenous specificities are subordinated to aesthetic criteria. To be admitted into the canon is to be redefined by it, reinforcing hierarchies rather than destabilising them.²¹³

The curatorial strategies of the pavilion — its signage, labels, spatial placement, and framing — thus allow both institutions to claim symbolic capital while displacing responsibility. The Louvre can gesture toward universality without integrating these works into its historical or narrative core. The quai Branly can claim a prestigious satellite while outsourcing the politics of representation.²¹⁴

What emerges is a curated form of disavowal. The objects are neither fully claimed by the Louvre nor adequately contextualised by the quai Branly. They occupy a suspended state: valorised as art yet

²⁰⁹ Jean-Claude Dumont, Letter to François Barre: “Objet: Pavillon des Sessions, Aménagement de l’Antenne au Louvre du Musée des Arts et des Civilisations,” December 8, 1998. Sourced from the folder permis d’Aménagement: Dossier Monuments Historiques, in the map MAC/Louvre – Dossier M.H., Archives Nationales, box 20080655, art. 6; “Pavillon des Sessions.”

²¹⁰ Claude Baudez and Jean Jamin, Letter to Germain Viatte and Maurice Godelier, March 12, 1998. Sourced in folder “20210007/99”. Archives Nationales, box 2021007-39; “Pavillon des Sessions,” Corbey, “Arts Premiers in the Louvre,” *Anthropology Today* 16, no. 4 (2000): 4.

²¹¹ Baudez and Jamin, Letter to Viatte and Godelier; Corbey, “Arts Premiers in the Louvre,” 4.

²¹² Baudez and Jamin, Letter to Viatte and Godelier; Mark, “Parisian Public Museums,” 7.

²¹³ Maurice Godelier and Germain Viatte, “Mission de Préfiguration du Musée de l’Homme, des Arts et des Civilisations,” sent to Pierre Rosenberg, page 9. Sourced in folder “20210007/99”. Archives Nationales, box 2021007-39; Phillips, “Apartheid Culturel.”

²¹⁴ “Aux Quatre Coins du Monde,” “Le Pavillon des Sessions.”

marginalised in meaning. Their epistemic framing remains opaque, and their interpretive apparatus minimal. Such indeterminacy is not neutral but a mechanism of erasure. The pavilion functions as an epistemic orphanage: a site where objects are preserved but disconnected, celebrated but displaced.²¹⁵

By failing to articulate a coherent institutional framework that addresses provenance, colonial legacies, and interpretive stakes, the Louvre sustains a mode of museological mystification.²¹⁶ Visitors are not prompted to ask how or why the works arrived in France, under what conditions, or at whose expense. Instead, they are guided toward surface appreciation, reinforcing the aestheticising logic that underpinned their initial selection. The ambiguity, therefore, is structural: it shields institutions from accountability while positioning non-European material culture as supplementary, exotic, and ultimately other.²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Constantine Petridis, "Recent Exhibitions: Arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas," *African Arts* 34, no. 3 (2001): 76; Dias "Double Erasures," 302-309.

²¹⁶ Vawda, "Epistemology of Injustice," 74-79; Magdalena Wróblewska, "Creating Visibility," in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples*, eds. Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska (Amsterdam University Press B.V., 2022), 23.

²¹⁷ "Reckoning with History," 1-3; Benoît de L'Estoile, "Appropriations," (seminar, Arts & Sociétés, 2007), <https://www.sciencespo.fr/artsetsocietes/en/archives/2354>.

Chapter 2. Curating the Other:

Museal Violence in the Pavillon des Sessions

"The museum cabinet, viewed through a postcolonial lens, exposes the continuities of imperial taxonomies and hierarchies of culture that underpin its use. The result is an encounter with colonial cultures of epistemic violence and subjugation, sanctioned in the present."

Divya P. Tolia-Kelly, 2016.²¹⁸

Divya P. Tolia-Kelly's statement highlights that an exhibition is never objective or neutral. Her statement is mirrored by Michaela Mikhy Neveu, who adds to it that exhibitions can never exist without objects, ideas, or concepts, ordered by signage, light, colours, shapes, texts, titles, stories, and narrative.²¹⁹

Brandie MacDonald echoes this sentiment, as many museums house cultural artefacts taken from Indigenous peoples and territories across the globe. The narratives presented in these exhibits are often shaped by curators, researchers, or explorers, rather than by the Indigenous communities to whom the objects belong. Educational programmes and public engagement initiatives frequently rely on teaching methods that reinforce dominant Euro-American worldviews.²²⁰

Nowadays, exhibition is perceived as a powerful communication method, consisting of a multiform of languages, built from numerous interpretations, including its developer, visitor, and far beyond the walls of the museum.²²¹

In this chapter, the perpetuation or avoidance of spatial, contextual, and (colonial) historical alienation will be examined on the visual curatorial level. First, the general aesthetic of the Pavillon des Sessions will be critically examined. After, the selection of the material culture and ordering of them throughout the pavilion will be discussed. Finally, the use of vitrines throughout the gallery will be highlighted. Throughout each section, decolonising practices will be given where alienation is perpetuated, to highlight how the alienation could (have) be(en) avoided.

²¹⁸ Tolia-Kelly, "(Postcolonial) Museum," 897.

²¹⁹ Neveu, "Exhibit Deceptively."

²²⁰ Macdonald, "Decolonizing Museum Practices," 9.

²²¹ Chen, "Communication and Museums," 25; Macdonald, "Decolonizing Museum Practices," 9.

1. Aesthetic Ideology: The Illusion of Neutrality

"With its pure lines and uncluttered use of space, with minimal partitioning, bathed in subdued light by silver-plated bronze mesh screens, it is at once modern and faithful to the Louvre's original architectural principles that entail exhibiting its works of art to maximum effect."

Musée du quai Branly, 2025.²²²



Image 6. First room in the Pavillon des Sessions

The physical and ideological space of a museum is never neutral. It is shaped by systems of meaning that frame how viewers encounter objects and by extension, how those objects are understood.²²³ One of the most dominant of these systems is the white cube aesthetic, a design ideology that emerged with modernist art galleries but now permeates ethnographic and encyclopaedic museums under the guise

²²² "Pavillon des Sessions."

²²³ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 24.

of “universality.” This aesthetic, famously analysed by Brian O’Doherty, is characterised by white walls, sealed-off windows, controlled lighting, and minimal contextual information.²²⁴

The Pavillon des Sessions (see image 6) adopts this aesthetic with striking fidelity. Designed by Jean-Michel Wilmotte, it won the design competition launched by a number of members of the Arts Premiers committee and architects in late 1997. Prior to the competition, the members of the prefiguration mission for the future Musée du quai Branly had already agreed on several choices, meaning that the commission members (especially Kerchache) had already given much thought to how they wanted the Antenna to look.²²⁵ Wilmotte won the organised design competition with ten out of eleven votes from the jury, which included Godelier, the art historian and museum curator Germain Viatte (1939–2024), and Kerchache.²²⁶ Interestingly, Wilmotte proposed a brown-grey finish for the walls and ceiling to create a warm atmosphere, but this appears to have been rejected.²²⁷

1.1 Neutral or Not?

The white cube aesthetic is often regarded as apolitical, creating a seemingly neutral space to grant visitors the illusion of objective engagement, allowing them to form their own personal narratives.²²⁸ Its purpose is to present art as autonomous, timeless, and pure; detached from history, geography, and social function.²²⁹ This approach aims to direct the viewer’s attention solely to the aesthetic qualities of the objects.²³⁰

However, this aesthetic strategy is problematic. For starters, this very spatial purity carries political weight. As Filipovic argues, the white cube is never a tabula rasa, but rather a cultural container “that circumscribes an attitude toward art.”²³¹ Additionally, Damgacioglu argues that by severing objects from their cultural and historical context and placing them into a completely decontextualised space, the white cube suppresses their contemporary relevance and agency.²³²

²²⁴ Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (The Lapis Press, 1976), 15.

²²⁵ “Musée de l’Homme, des Arts et des Civilisations: Antenne Louvre Pavillon des Sessions: Programme,” December, 1997. Archives Nationales, box 20080655, art. 4; Wilmotte “Musée de l’Homme et des Arts et des Civilisations Antenne Louvre – Pavillon des Sessions – 3 Mars 1998.” Sourced in the folder “1. Wilmotte,” in the map “Antenne au Louvre du Musée des Arts et Civilisations: Projets des Candidats Retenus au Concours de Maîtrise d’Oeuvre, 1998,” 13, March 3, 1998. Archives Nationales, box 20080655, art. 4.

²²⁶ “Procès Verbal de la Deuxième Réunion du Jury: Choix du Lauréat,” page 7, sourced in the file “Correspondance (1998),” in the map “Antenne au Louvre du Musée des Arts et Civilisations: Dossier Concours de Maîtrise d’Oeuvre, 1994-1998,” Archives Nationales, box 20080655 art. 3; “Commission Technique,” March 1998, in the file “Commission Techniques: Arts Premiers Concours, 1998,” Archives Nationales, box 20080655 art. 3.

²²⁷ Wilmotte, “Musée de l’Homme.”

²²⁸ Zeynep Damgacioglu, “Inherently Political Museums: How Does the White Cube Affect Art’s Agency?” *Theory and Practice* 4 (2021): n.p.; Whitney Fehl Birkett, “To Infinity and Beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic White Cube,” (Master’s Dissertation, Seton Hall University, 201), 7.

²²⁹ Damgacioglu, “Inherently Political Museums,” n.p.; Birkett, “White Cube,” 7.

²³⁰ Jennifer Harris, “Globalisation, Post-Colonialism and Museums,” *ICOFOM-Study Series* 37 (2008): 129.

²³¹ Elena Filipovic, “The Global White Cube,” *ONCURATING* 22 (2014), 64.

²³² Damgacioglu, “Inherently Political Museums,” n.p.; Birkett, “White Cube,” 7.

Furthermore, Michaela Mikhy Neveu posits that Indigenous material culture is simply too complex to be shown through a modern white-cube aesthetic, because this clashes with the connection to the divine world, which is too sacred to be immersed in this colonial modernist aesthetic.²³³ This sentiment is echoed by Birkett, who states that the white cube aesthetic elevates the material culture from its earthy origins, transforming it, which reinforces traditional colonial power structures while simultaneously alienating uninitiated visitors.²³⁴

Jennifer Harris takes this a step further, arguing that, regardless of culture, contextual information significantly enhances understanding and interpretation. Presenting artworks as though they emerged in isolation from a neutral void denies almost all of their meaning beyond visual form. The formal traits of material culture are historically and culturally situated, and awareness of this history enriches viewers' engagement. According to Harris, the insistence on a Western aesthetic when exhibiting non-Western objects reveals the homogenising influence of globalisation within museum practice.²³⁵

However, the minimalist style often appears culturally neutral, making it difficult for visitors to recognise its Western origins. For a long time, museums sustained this aesthetic under the guise of objectivity, with the apparent neutrality of white gallery spaces concealing the cultural frameworks that shaped them.²³⁶ Frameworks that tend to be colonially charged. For example during the Pavilion's curatorial process, not a single meaningful collaboration between the committee in charge of the pavilion and any people from the to-be represented cultures, or even Indigenous people in general appear to have occurred.²³⁷

Price states that Chirac had expressed the possible participation of "native voices" in the early stages of the process of the museum, seemingly viewing art premiers and native voices as a good match, but this proposition was rejected, according to Price, by unnamed individuals who were afraid that involving living people from represented cultures would take the project's focus away from the material culture and art and would result in social unrest.²³⁸

Exhibition spaces often feel colonial due to their lack of (visual) indigenous values, creativity, and aesthetic systems. Material culture is often decontextualised in cases and reduced to curiosities. The colours of the walls following white cube minimalism, instead of for example steeping the material culture of the Indigenous artists in the vibrant colours many of the represented cultures are known for, creating an overly reverent mood, which doesn't resonate with (Indigenous) visitors. The visual narratives follow the

²³³ Neveu, "Exhibit Deceptively."

²³⁴ Birkett, *White Cube*, 75.

²³⁵ Harris, "Globalisation," 129.

²³⁶ Harris, "Globalisation," 129.

²³⁷ Not a single one of the consulted documents in the National Archives or the quai Branly museum indicated that there had been any meaningful contact with Indigenous peoples during the entirety of the creation process of the pavilion; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 46-47.

²³⁸ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 172.

colonisers rather than colonised, with community members being left out of the discussion during the earliest part of the curation process.²³⁹

Instead of representing the displayed material cultures and arts' cultures in the pavilion, the taste of the architect and their client(s), but especially its curator are represented. As Ames poses, exhibitions often tell more about the exhibitioners than the represented cultures.²⁴⁰ In the Louvre, although Jean-Michel Wilmotte is credited as the architect, it is the pavilion's curator or "art director" – notably uncredited in the quai Branly's statement at the start of this chapter - Jacques Kerchache whose taste appears to be best represented in the gallery.²⁴¹ Galleries like the pavilion are designed to promote quiet contemplation, silence being enforced by museum staff, in order to prioritise the comfort of wealthy, white visitors.²⁴²

Instead of allowing for the appreciation of Indigenous material culture, the design elements in the pavilion isolate objects from both each other and their original contexts, alienating them. The white cube's pretence of neutrality thus becomes a mechanism of epistemic control, according to Damgacioglu. It gives the impression that non-Western artefacts are being "treated equally," when in fact they are being assimilated into a Western art-historical regime that flattens their difference.²⁴³ As Birkett observes, such aestheticisation divorces the object from its cultural ground, placing it into a hermetically sealed world where its original meanings are rendered inaccessible.²⁴⁴ Ames and Roque warn that when Indigenous material culture is treated solely as "art," they are degraded, its entanglement with colonialism, ritual life, or contemporary identity is either occluded or erased, likely disorienting and upsetting people.²⁴⁵

This effect is amplified by the fact that the white cube is both architectural and ideological. It does not merely shape space; it shapes how that space is meant to be experienced. The Pavillon invites a certain mode of looking: distanced, contemplative, formalist. Viewers move through the space as if in a cathedral, encouraged to admire beauty, not question provenance. As O'Doherty argues, "you become the spectator of a spectatorless art"—one that is extracted from time and community and presented as universal. In this setting, artefacts are detached not only from their own cultural logics, but also from the violences of their displacement.²⁴⁶

²³⁹ Adrienne Lalli Hills and Margaret Middleton "Resisting the Colonial Imagination: The Role of Exhibition Design in the Decolonial Project," *Exhibition Journal* 42, no. 2 (2023): n.p.

²⁴⁰ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 44.

²⁴¹ Corbey, "Arts Premiers," 4; Vincent Noce, "Le Louvre s'Ouvre Enfin aux Arts Premiers," *Liberation*, April 13, 2000, https://www.liberation.fr/arts/2000/04/13/le-louvre-s-ouvre-enfin-aux-arts-premiers_322640/.

²⁴² Hills and Middleton "Colonial Imagination," n.p.

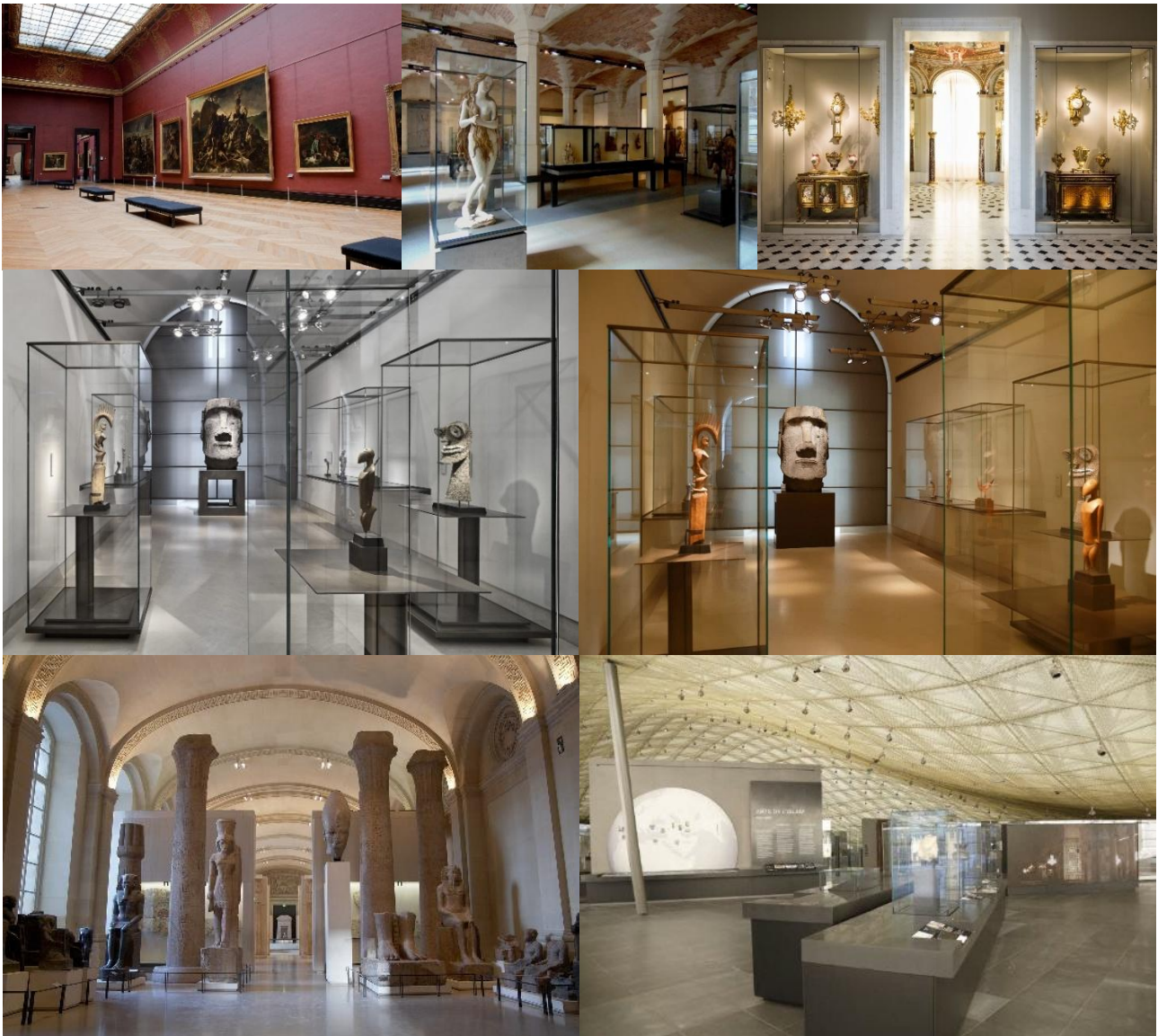
²⁴³ Damgacioglu, "Inherently Political Museums," n.p; Birkett, "White Cube," 7.

²⁴⁴ Birkett, "White Cube," 75.

²⁴⁵ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 53; Roque, "Decolonising the Museum," 66.

²⁴⁶ Filipovic, "White Cube," 64; O'Doherty, *White Cube*, 15.

1.2 Aesthetic (Dis)continuity?



Images 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13. Images of a Large-scale French Painting Gallery, a European Sculpture Gallery, a European Decorative Arts Gallery, two images of an Oceanic Pavillon des Sessions Room, an Egyptian Antiquities Gallery, and an Islamic Art Gallery

The quai Branly webpage on the Pavillon des Sessions states that the “architecture of the exhibition area fits in perfectly with the Louvre.” This statement is false. Consider the Louvre’s typical galleries dedicated to European paintings, sculptures, and decorative arts (see images 7-9). These spaces all adhere to well-established “Encyclopaedic” museological typologies, featuring coloured walls, concealed lighting integrated into the architecture (aside from the European sculpture gallery), and object arrangements that prioritise density, (sometimes) contextualisation, openness, and narrative coherence.

By contrast, the Pavillon des Sessions (see image 10) adopted a starkly minimalist, decontextualised, separated by walls, white-dominated aesthetic, aligned with the modernist “white cube”

model typically reserved for contemporary art galleries, despite its presentation of Indigenous and non-European cultural material.²⁴⁷

The discrepancy between photographic representations of the pavilion on institutional websites - where the space appears notably warmer and more inviting (see image 11) - and its reality as an austere, predominantly cool, white environment (see image 10) - captured in the images found on architect bureau Wilmotte's website - further underscores this visual and conceptual rupture.²⁴⁸

Even within the Louvre's brighter galleries, the curatorial *mise-en-scène* actively resists the sterile neutrality associated with white-cube aesthetics. In the European Decorative Arts galleries (see image 9), for instance, black-and-white chequered flooring, densely arranged object groupings, and layered displays evoke an intimate, domestic atmosphere that invites narrative engagement.²⁴⁹ Similarly, the Egyptian Antiquities section (see image 12), though spatially generous, mitigates emptiness through the monumental scale of its sculptures, a warm beige palette, and architectural elements such as vaulted ceilings and integrated columns, all of which soften the environment.²⁵⁰

The Islamic Art galleries (see image 13) may appear at first glance most aligned with the Pavillon des Sessions, sharing minimalist tendencies and the use of glass cases. Yet even here, careful spatial interventions distinguish the experience. Muted grey plinths and columns, architectural openings offering visual connection to the exterior of the Louvre, no actual walls separating the material culture, and an organic ceiling structure that evokes the fluidity of water collectively counteract the sensation of abstraction or isolation. Notably, lighting is integrated into the architectural fabric, minimising visual intrusion. By contrast, the Pavillon des Sessions features conspicuous lighting fixtures mounted on stark, black beams, undermining the illusion of curatorial neutrality.

This comparative analysis reveals that far from integrating seamlessly into the Louvre's curatorial language, the Pavillon des Sessions reflected an isolated, and arguably exceptionalised, treatment of indigenous cultural material. The decision to frame these objects within a space reminiscent of a modernist gallery, rather than within cultural-historical or contextually rich environments, raises important questions about institutional hierarchies of value, representation, and visibility, as previously discussed.²⁵¹

Rather than being a minor curatorial inconsistency, this discontinuity reflects deeper tensions in how Indigenous artefacts are framed within Western museological settings. The stark, decontextualised environment of the Pavillon des Sessions risks re-inscribing colonial dynamics by abstracting objects from their cultural, historical, and relational contexts, aestheticising them as singular "masterpieces" for Western

²⁴⁷ "Available Galleries," accessed May 25, 2025, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/visit/list-of-available-galleries>.

²⁴⁸ "Aux Quatre Coins;" "Pavillon des Sessions;" "The Louvre Museum – Department of Primitive Arts," accessed June 27, 2025, <https://www.wilmotte.com/en/projects/louvre-arts-premiers/>.

²⁴⁹ "Decorative Arts," accessed May 25, 2025, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/visit/list-of-available-galleries>.

²⁵⁰ "Egyptian Antiquities," accessed May 25, 2025, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/visit/list-of-available-galleries>.

²⁵¹ "Islamic Art," accessed May 25, 2025, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/visit/list-of-available-galleries>.

consumption. This stands in contrast to more integrated or contextually rich visual presentations found elsewhere within the Louvre (with notable exceptions of Egyptian and Islamic material culture and art).²⁵²

Such aesthetic discontinuity signals more than a curatorial preference; it betrays a structural inequity in how cultural material is valued. The Pavillon isolated non-European artefacts, aestheticising them as "masterpieces" rather than acknowledging their social, spiritual, or political dimensions. The spatial marginality of the Pavilion within the Louvre reinforced this symbolic separation once more: it was present, yet peripheral; included, yet othered.²⁵³

1.3 Other Options?

The alienation in the Pavillon was plural: the artefacts were physically dislocated from their communities of origin (displacement), stylistically different from both the rest of the Louvre and the quasi-Branly museum, and then symbolically dislocated again through their aestheticised presentation, according to Damgacioglu.²⁵⁴ This plural estrangement reinforced what James Clifford would call a lack of contact zone — that is, a space where meanings might be negotiated between museum and source community, as well as different peoples.²⁵⁵ Instead, the Pavillon maintained what Tony Bennett has described as the explanatory and evaluative categories and principles of classification, which allow the museum staff to mediate the relationship between the displayed material culture and visitors as the staff deems fit.²⁵⁶

The classification within museums has been historically used to display material culture in the Western story of civilisation, linking the histories of Western nations and civilisations with those of other cultures, but only by distinguishing and separating them. This created a disrupted continuity in the classification of peoples and races—where so-called "primitive people" were effectively excluded from history and positioned in a liminal space between nature and culture.²⁵⁷ The result is not a dialogue, but a silent monologue of Western authority over non-Western culture.

²⁵² Tolia-Kelly, " (Postcolonial) Museum," 896-898; "Reckoning with History," 1-3; Dias, "Double Erasure," 302.

²⁵³ Shelton, "Critical Museology," 17.

²⁵⁴ Damgacioglu, "Inherently Political Museums," n.p.; O'Doherty, *White Cube*, 15

²⁵⁵ Clifford, *Routes*, 192.

²⁵⁶ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (Routledge, 1995), 165.

²⁵⁷ Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 77.



Image 14. White Cube LIRCAEI Museum

The ideological effect of this becomes clearer when contrasted with projects that consciously invert the white cube's colonial logic. One such project is Renzo Martens' collaboration with the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC) in Lusanga, Democratic Republic of Congo.²⁵⁸ Their establishment of a White Cube gallery on the site of a former Unilever plantation explicitly reclaims the aesthetic language of the Western museum to serve a radically different purpose: reparative justice and the redistribution of value.²⁵⁹

Unlike the Pavillon, the Lusanga White Cube (see image 14) does not universalise cultural objects into abstract "art." Instead, it redirects the visibility and profit generated by art-world attention back into the hands of the formerly colonised. Profits from exhibitions fund land buy-backs and ecological farming cooperatives. Crucially, the Lusanga project does not isolate art from life; it reconnects them. The same minimalism and clarity that in Paris serves to erase context is here used to highlight historical violence and contemporary resistance.²⁶⁰

While the white cube aesthetic may allow for "neutrality" and aesthetic appreciation for some viewers, its illusion of neutrality benefits only those already centred by the museum's epistemology: Europeans. For source communities, its decontextualisation produces alienation, distortion, or even sacrilege. As Sumaya Kassim puts it, "the way exhibitions are constructed usually assumes a white audience and privileges the white gaze. The white walls signified the choices of white people, their agency, their museum collections, and the endeavours of colonialists. To many white people, the collections are an enjoyable diversion, a nostalgic visit which conjures up a romanticised version of Empire. For many people

²⁵⁸ Shwetal Patel, "Beyond the White Cube: An Interview with Renzo Martens," *OnCurating*, no. 58 (2024): 107-113; "White Cube LIRCAEI," accessed June 19, 2025, <https://www.oma.com/projects/white-cube-lircae>.

²⁵⁹ Jocelyn C. Zuckerman, "See the Congolese Artists Ignite a Modern Arts Movement," *National Geographic*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/congolese-artists-fuel-modern-arts-movement-white-cube>.

²⁶⁰ "Repatriation of the White Cube," accessed June 25, 2025, <https://www.renzomartens.com/repatriation-of-the-white-cube/>; Philip Stevens, "OMA-Designed 'White Cube' Gallery in DR Congo Highlights the Plight of Plantation Workers," *Designboom*, May 18, 2017, <https://www.designboom.com/architecture/oma-white-cube-lusanga-lircae-dr-congo-rem-koolhaas-05-18-2017/>.

of colour, collections symbolise historic and ongoing trauma and theft. Behind every beautiful object and historically important building or monument is trauma."²⁶¹

However, Mark Wigley has noted that the modernist white space is structurally fragile, "the delicate layer of paint holds together a vulnerable conceptual structure that starts to be exposed when the layer cracks or flakes."²⁶² The Lusanga White Cube deliberately cracks that layer. It appropriates the prestige of the white cube not to aestheticise colonial artefacts, but to expose and dismantle the structures of dispossession that underpin Western museum collections. It reminds us that the aesthetic itself is not inherently oppressive; its political valence depends on who controls the narrative and to what end.²⁶³

In this light, the Pavillon's aesthetic can be read not as benign appreciation, but as cultural laundering — an attempt to reframe looted or displaced objects as universally appreciable masterpieces, thereby neutralising their political charge.²⁶⁴ The question remains whether institutions like the Pavillon des Sessions can ever genuinely decolonise from within, or whether, as Martens suggests, true decolonisation must occur by returning resources, agency, and cultural production to the communities from which they were unjustly taken. "If not, there's a real risk that museums that benefited from colonialism are now going to be the first beneficiaries of decolonisation," Martens explains.²⁶⁵

Thus, the white cube — and the broader display ideology of the Pavillon — is not just a curatorial decision but a political stance. It determines whether the museum is a space of reckoning or one of erasure. In the Pavillon des Sessions, the aesthetic creates the illusion of neutrality while preserving the logics of control. The question is no longer whether these objects belong in the Louvre, but under what terms, in what voice, and toward what futures.

2. Curatorial Control: The Power of Selection and Arrangement

The selection and arrangement process behind the Pavillon was driven primarily by the personal aesthetic preferences of Jacques Kerchache, rather than relying on ethnographic, historical, or community-based input.²⁶⁶ This approach resulted not only in a subjective and exclusionary exhibition but also in what

²⁶¹ Sumaya Kassim, "The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised," published November 15, 2017, <https://mediadiversified.org/2017/11/15/the-museum-will-not-be-decolonised/>.

²⁶² Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1995), xviii.

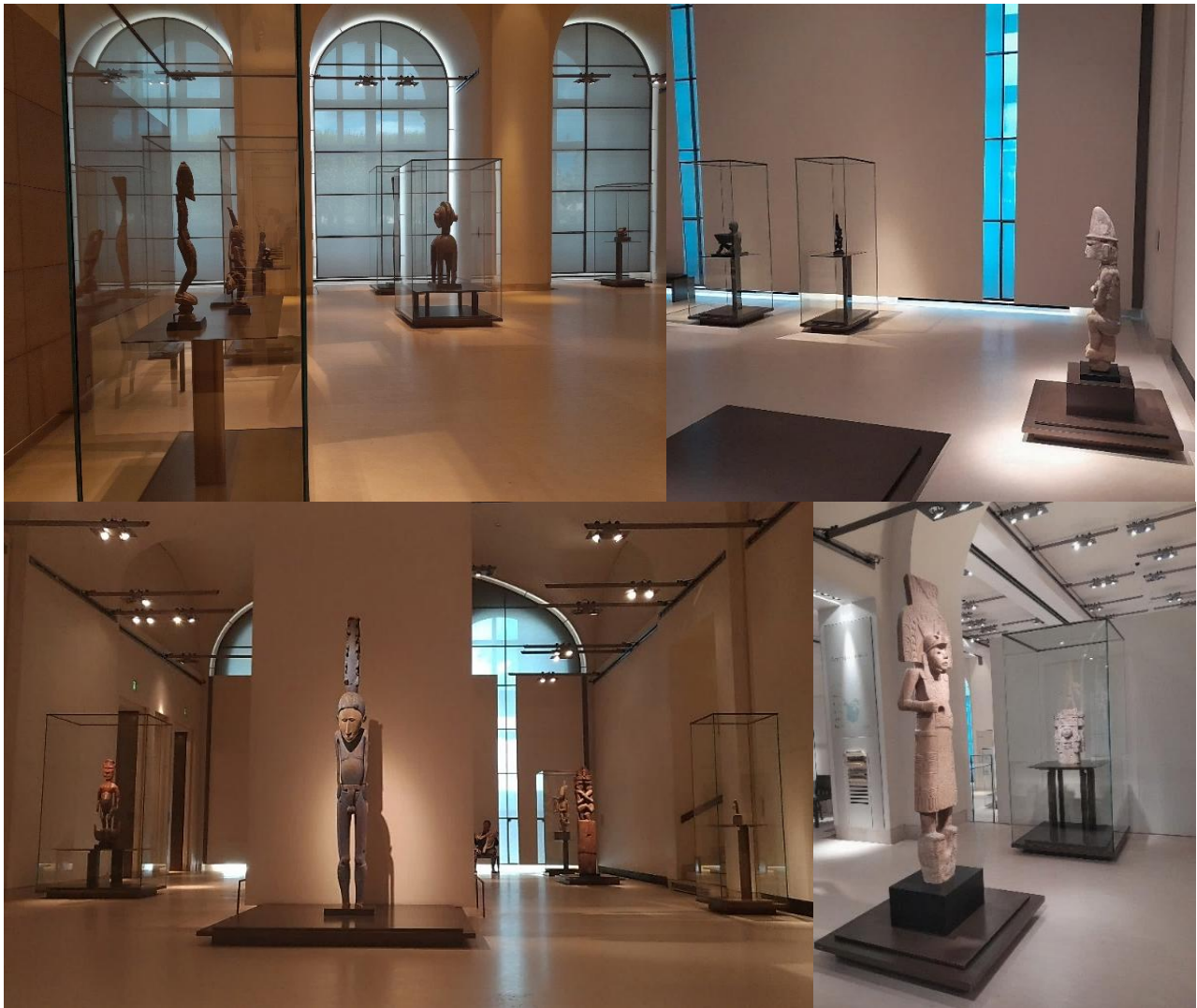
²⁶³ Margriet Schavemaker, *The White Cube as a Lieu de Mémoire: The Future of History in the Contemporary Art Museum* (Reinwardt Academy and Amsterdamse University of the arts, 2017), 22; Wang, "Museum Coloniality," 720-732.

²⁶⁴ Benoît de L'Estoile, "Appropriations."

²⁶⁵ Patel, "White Cube," 107-113.

²⁶⁶ Baudez and Jamin, Letter to Viatte, Godelier; Corbey, "Arts Premiers," 6.

may be considered a form of epistemic violence, where colonial logics persist through seemingly neutral curatorial decisions.²⁶⁷



Images 15, 16, 17, and 18. Images of the African, Asian, Oceanic, and American Art Sections in the Pavilion

2.1 Aesthetic Selection as Epistemic Violence

Kerchache's selection prioritised sculptural objects that aligned with classical Western ideals: purity of line, symmetry, balance, use of "noble" materials such as stone or wood, and anthropomorphic features that resembled Western art (see images 15-18). His choices largely ignored forms that appealed to Surrealists, and he dismissed works that did not conform to his refined and narrowly defined aesthetic

²⁶⁷ Vawda, "Epistemology of Injustice," 79; Peter Sloterdijk and Iain Boyd Whyte (Translator), "Museum – School of Alienation," *Art in Translation* 6, no. 4 (2014): 441-442.

standard. This bias created a distorted representation of the cultures on display, privileging objects that visually pleased Western tastes over those that held contextual, ritual, or community significance.²⁶⁸

In March 1998, two members of the prefiguration commission – archaeologist Claude Baudez (1932-2013) and anthropologist Jean Jamin (1945-2022) – openly criticised Kerchache’s selection process. They expressed concern that the exhibition relied too heavily on his subjective eye, and lacked diversity in its curatorial rationale. These scholars urged the inclusion of pieces that both contrast and resonate with Western art, calling for an emphasis on innovation—such as the use of new materials and forms—alongside contextual documentation. They argued that objects should be selected not solely for aesthetic excellence, but also for their documentary and historical significance.²⁶⁹

Despite these internal disagreements, Kerchache retained curatorial control and selected around 42 sculptures from Africa, 28 from Oceania, 32 from the Americas, and only six from Asia.²⁷⁰ His neglect of Asian material culture appears intentional. Archival material from early 1996 reveals that Asian material culture had initially been excluded from the prefiguration commission’s plans.²⁷¹ Kerchache believed Asian art did not meet the visual criteria set by his selections from other continents, according to Price.²⁷² This might have been due to its omission in the appreciation (or appropriation) of Indigenous material culture forms in the French avant-gardist scene, which favoured African, American, and Oceanic forms.²⁷³ Although Asian objects began to appear more frequently in later commission discussions, their marginal inclusion remained inconsistent and underexplained.²⁷⁴

The overrepresentation of African, Oceanic, and American material culture reflects not only personal taste but also a continuation of colonial narratives. The vast majority of artefacts housed within the Pavillon des Sessions originate from the French public collections, such as the Musée de l’Homme and the Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie (MAAO) – which were later merged to form the collection of the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac –, underscoring their colonial provenance.²⁷⁵ Additional objects were sourced from other French and international institutions, including museums in Taiwan, while others were acquired through purchase or donation. Additionally, some were bought or gifted.²⁷⁶ Other artefacts were directly seized during military expeditions, such as the Bijogo Orebok shrine, taken in 1853, according to Peter

²⁶⁸ Baudez and Jamin, Letter to Viatte, Godelier.

²⁶⁹ Baudez and Jamin, Letter to Viatte, Godelier.

²⁷⁰ Cecile David, “De l’Art Primitif à l’Art Primordial: Le Pavillon des Sessions Fête 10 Ans d’Échange Culturel,” *Toute La Culture*, April 16, 2010, <https://toutelaculture.com/arts/de-lart-primitif-a-lart-primordial-le-pavillon-des-sessions-fete-10-ans-dechange-culturel-2/>; “Musée de l’Homme.”

²⁷¹ Alain Juppé, Letter to Jacques Friedman, January 23, 1996. Sourced from small folder “Commission des ‘Arts Premiers,’” in bigger folder “Arts Premiers,” in binder “2021007/97.” Archives Nationales, box 2021007-38.

²⁷² Price, *Paris Primitive*, 46.

²⁷³ Sophie Leclercq, “The Surrealist Appropriation of the Indigenous Arts,” *Arts & Sociétés* 13, no. 1 (2006): <https://www.sciencespo.fr/artsetsocietes/en/archives/2473>.

²⁷⁴ “Compte Rendu de la Réunion,” “Conseil Scientifique,” March 5, 1998. Sourced in folder “20210007/99,” Archives Nationales, box 20210007-39.

²⁷⁵ Corbey, “Arts Premiers in the Louvre,” 4-6; Mark, “Parisian Public Museums,” 7.

²⁷⁶ Baudez and Jamin, Letter to Viatte and Godelier, Jean-Louis Paudrat, “The Classics of African Sculpture in the Louvre,” in *Sculptures: Africa, Asia, Oceania, Americas*, eds. Jacques Kerchache and Vincent Boloré (Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2001), 55-56.

Mark's review of the pavilion in the journal *African Arts*. The presence of such pieces in the Louvre's satellite space, without substantive engagement with their histories or communities of origin, demonstrates the ongoing entanglement of French museology with imperial legacies.²⁷⁷

The problematic nature of the selection was recognised at the time. Anthropologist Maurice Godelier, known for his work in New Guinea, was brought into the prefiguration commission in the late 1990s as a counterbalance to Kerchache's aesthetic-driven approach. Godelier, along with Stéphane Martin (°1956, future director of the Musée du quai Branly) and Germain Viatte (1939-2024, future curatorial director), advocated for a museum that would engage critically with colonial histories and include the voices of source communities. They envisioned an institution that would reflect both for and about others, challenging the legacy of cultural domination. However, their efforts were often overridden by Kerchache, who functioned as the pavilion's de facto art director and retained significant curatorial influence.²⁷⁸

The selection process not only excluded Indigenous input but also failed to represent lesser-known or understudied cultures. As Africanist art historian Jean-Louis Paudrat noted, almost all the displayed objects had previously appeared in exhibitions or publications. Despite Kerchache's claims to the contrary, many artefacts bore labels indicating previous ownership by figures such as Pablo Picasso or Max Ernst—further reinforcing the idea that Western validation was a key selection criterion.²⁷⁹

Scholars at the time were also concerned about the impact of this exhibition model on public understanding. In 2000, Peter Mark noted that Kerchache's lack of academic training had raised significant concerns among anthropologists and ethnographers in Paris, stating that his emphasis on aesthetic appreciation - often shaped by political or personal motives - posed a threat to the scientific and educational mission of museums holding colonial-era collections.²⁸⁰ By prioritising beauty over context, the pavilion risked turning objects into detached art commodities, severed from their cultural and historical moorings.²⁸¹

Following the pavilion's opening in April 2000, Stéphane Martin was quick to draw a distinction between the Louvre installation and the forthcoming Musée du quai Branly. He acknowledged that the Pavillon des Sessions was intended for an audience unfamiliar with non-Western art, aimed at fostering recognition and respect. Yet he clarified that the exhibition was not meant for those already immersed in scholarly discourse—such as readers of *African Arts*. In practice, this translated into a display with minimal contextual information, presented through an overwhelmingly aesthetic lens.²⁸²

Kerchache himself stated that his selection was neither encyclopaedic nor systematic; rather, it was subjective and "autobiographical." In his view, the objects were chosen for their ability to speak across

²⁷⁷ Mark, "Parisian Public Museums," 7.

²⁷⁸ Corbey, "Arts Premiers," 4.

²⁷⁹ Paudrat, "African Sculpture in the Louvre," 44. Sally Price, *Paris Primitive*, 46-60.

²⁸⁰ Mark, "Parisian Public Museums," 1.

²⁸¹ Petridis, "Recent Exhibitions," 76.

²⁸² Peter Mark, "Parisian Public Museums," 7.

cultures through form, not through historical or social narrative.²⁸³ However, the effect of this approach is a flattening of cultural complexity. The overwhelming focus on sculptural works and familiar visual tropes (see images 15-18) means that casual visitors may leave with a simplified and distorted understanding of the represented cultures—especially those of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.²⁸⁴

The consequences of such curatorial choices are not merely academic—they are ideological. As Frantz Fanon warns, attempts to define or preserve a singular “Black culture” risk essentialising what is in fact a diverse, evolving, and politically contingent set of identities. Grouping objects by continent, as seen in the Pavillon des Sessions, reinforces the illusion of cultural homogeneity. In the case of Africa—an immensely diverse and dynamic continent—this framing can flatten complex traditions, political histories, and social meanings into a singular, static visual category.²⁸⁵

Fanon reminds us that culture is inseparable from power and agency. Treating African, Oceanic, Asian, or American material culture as aesthetic artefacts for passive appreciation erases the lived experiences and future aspirations embedded in them. It reduces cultures to style, divorcing them from the political and historical struggles that shaped their expression. A display guided by aesthetic categories alone fails to ask: What societal roles do these objects play? What futures do they imagine? Whose knowledge do they affirm or silence?²⁸⁶

As Ames puts it, “a non-contextual exhibit is a form of appropriation and therefore exploits the peoples whose work is being displayed. To display Aboriginal art out of its context becomes immoral.”²⁸⁷ Sanjoori adds that, when artefacts are removed from their cultural or historical origins and placed in a context that obscures or ignores their meanings, visitors - both from source communities and the general public - may experience alienation due to a sense of loss, confusion, or misrepresentation.²⁸⁸

Similarly, Aimé Césaire was deeply critical of the Western museum’s tendency to glorify its collections of colonised peoples’ artefacts. He viewed such institutions not as neutral repositories of knowledge but as monuments to cultural destruction. For Césaire, Europe’s collecting impulse symbolised not admiration but domination. The museum, in his view, enshrined not cultures but their remains—stripped of meaning, cut off from their communities, and reinterpreted through the lens of imperial pride and racial hierarchy. True understanding, he argued, is not found in the accumulation of objects, but in respect for the people and civilisations from which those objects come.²⁸⁹

²⁸³ Petridis, “Recent Exhibitions,” 74-75.

²⁸⁴ Neveu, “Exhibit Deceptively.”

²⁸⁵ Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 188-89.

²⁸⁶ Petridis, “Recent Exhibitions,” 76; Azoulay, *Potential History*, 1-2.

²⁸⁷ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 71.

²⁸⁸ Layla Sanjoori, “The Relationship Between Culture and Space within the Museum,” accessed July 15, 2025, <https://globalhorizonsjournal.wordpress.com/portfolio/the-relationship-between-culture-and-space-within-the-museum/>.

²⁸⁹ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 54.

This critique resonates powerfully with the Pavillon des Sessions. Although framed as a celebration of artistic excellence, the selection and display methods – unconsulted, aestheticised, exclusionary – ultimately mirrored the very colonial systems the museum space claimed to transcend. The project presents a partial and curated vision, rather than a self-reflexive one. What resulted was a fragmented and depoliticised story told through beautiful forms: attractive, accessible, but ultimately disconnected from the power relations and historical violence that enabled their presence in the Louvre in the first place.²⁹⁰

The decontextualised presentation of objects, particularly those originating from other cultures, is deeply problematic as it obscures the colonial entanglements—the “determining weight of History.” Exhibition strategies that prioritise aesthetic form tend to flatten the intricate histories and cultural significance of the works, inadvertently revealing the West itself as the fetishist—a designation so often imposed upon the very cultures the museum claims to honour. Museums operate as “institutions of memory,” and even when the colonial past appears effaced through the aestheticisation of the artefact, it inevitably resurfaces. The varying strengths and deficiencies within the collection have long been directly linked to France’s colonial undertakings. By privileging visual appeal, the Pavilion continues to consign the “civilisations oubliées” – to borrow Chirac’s phrasing – to the margins of remembrance.²⁹¹

2.2 Spatial Cartography and Curatorial Narrative

Much like the selection of material culture, spatial arrangements within museums are far from neutral, and the one in the Pavillon des Sessions formed no exception.²⁹² While the quai Branly museum’s website claims that “the four great geographical regions are presented, all intercommunicating, with visitors able to pass from one to another unhindered,” the reality was starkly different.²⁹³ The pavilion’s layout, far from enabling open movement and dialogue between cultures, was rigidly structured, architecturally segmented, and ideologically loaded.²⁹⁴

The pavilion adopted a linear, continental narrative: visitors were guided by both spatial constraints and design logic from West to East, thus guided from Africa, through Asia, then Oceania, and finally to the Americas (see images 15-18). Though technically possible to begin the visit in the Americas section, architectural features such as walls, mesh screens, level changes, and staircases strongly encouraged a

²⁹⁰ de L’Estoile, “Appropriations.”

²⁹¹ Natasha Ruiz-Gómez, “The (Jean) Nouvel Other: Primitivism and the Musée du Quai Branly,” *Modern & Contemporary France* 14, no. 4 (2006): 425.

²⁹² Divya P Tolia-Kelly, “(Postcolonial) Museum,” 901-905.

²⁹³ “Pavillon des Sessions.”

²⁹⁴ Levitt, *Artifacts and Allegiances*, 7-9; Seiderer, *Une Critique Postcoloniale*, 39.

singular directional flow.²⁹⁵ Notably, visitors couldn't move directly from the African to the Oceanic section. This choreographed progression enacted what Kali Tzortzi describes as the "long model" of museum layout: a structured, didactic configuration that prioritises curatorial control over visitor agency. The result is a highly regulated encounter with material culture in which both the sequence and geography of objects are pre-determined, leaving little space for exploratory or dialogic engagement.²⁹⁶

Tzortzi associates this long model with a "conservative way of using space." It restricts relationships among objects, among viewers, and arguably among the themes represented - such as the continents themselves - reproducing something already known: a curatorial narrative chosen by a central figure, in this case most likely, Jacques Kerchache. The uniformity of the rooms - each visually and thematically consistent with the next (see images 15-18) - removes surprise and spontaneity.²⁹⁷ The controlled atmosphere revealed more about Kerchache's tastes and vision than the diverse cultures supposedly being celebrated.²⁹⁸

Although the exhibition aimed to be transpatial and coherent, the spaces remained distinct, bounded entities with subtle but significant ideological messages.²⁹⁹ For example, while the exhibition's slogan stated that "all civilisations are born free and equal," the spatial design contradicted this: American and Oceanic material cultures were literally elevated, housed on platforms above the African and Asian objects. Moreover, physical barriers such as walls, mesh screens, and varying heights reinforced separation. Additionally, the African, Oceanic, and American sections were markedly larger than the Asian section.³⁰⁰ The resultant spatial hierarchy constructed a distorted geography in which some regions, and by extension some cultures, were rendered hyper-visible while others were effectively erased.³⁰¹

One might argue that the spatial constraints of the Louvre annex, selected due to limitations posed by the larger Grand Louvre project, restricted architectural possibilities. Structural walls or pre-existing level differences may have influenced design decisions.³⁰² However, alternative architectural solutions such as replacing walls with supporting columns could have opened the space, while elevating the African and Asian sections or levelling the others might have mitigated hierarchical implications. Even the mesh screens - an added design element - could have been omitted to enable visual continuity and allowed the material cultures to "speak" to each other.³⁰³

²⁹⁵ "Musée de l'Homme," 37-38; Bill Hillier and Kali Tzortzi, "Space Syntax: The Language of Museum Space," in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon Macdonalds (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 282.

²⁹⁶ "Musée de l'Homme," 38; Kali Tzortzi, "Museum Building Design and Exhibition Layout: Patterns of Interaction," *6th International Space Syntax Symposium* (Paper, 6th International Space Syntax Symposium, 2007), 10.

²⁹⁷ Tzortzi, "Design and Exhibition Layout," 10-11.

²⁹⁸ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 44.

²⁹⁹ Tzortzi, "Design and Exhibition Layout," 11.

³⁰⁰ "Compte Rendu la Reunion."

³⁰¹ Allen, "Responsibilities of Museums," 16.

³⁰² Louveau, Letter "Commission 'Arts Premiers',"

³⁰³ Tzortzi, "Design and Exhibition Layout," 11.

This sequential design was justified in archival documentation from 1997 as “logical” for an audience presumed unfamiliar with non-Western cultures.³⁰⁴ Such reasoning reveals the paternalistic assumption that these objects must be presented through a Western framework to be understood, thus reinforcing the museum’s role not as a space for discovery, but as a didactic institution for passive – mostly Western – consumption.³⁰⁵ While the inclusion of extra-European material culture in the Louvre marked a symbolic gesture toward cultural plurality, this gesture remains embedded in colonial logics.³⁰⁶

Kerchache claimed that formal aesthetic relationships guided the object placements, but this principle was largely illegible to the average visitor unfamiliar with Indigenous visual systems, which are diverse and context-specific, as pointed out by Constantine Petridis.³⁰⁷ The emphasis on aesthetic formalism became superficial tokenism, serving to consolidate institutional authority over colonised material culture. This undermined the potential for these objects to be understood in their original social, ritual, or political contexts.³⁰⁸

The notion of “intercommunicating regions” of both the quai Branly museum and its antenna in the Louvre was further contradicted by the spatial reality of the museum spaces. Visitors encounter(ed) barriers, including walls, vitrines, alcoves, and elevated platforms that obstruct(ed) lines of sight and movement. At the quai Branly, it is for example nearly impossible to see from one continental zone into another because of elevated exhibition platforms, walls, the high vitrines, and alcoves. Depending on where you stand, a vitrine, wall, or elevated section will obstruct your view. When situated in one of the alcoves housing material culture in the Oceanic, Asian, and African zones, views on the rest of the zones are subsequently obstructed, as are views from the general continental zones into the alcoves, because of the architectural choices.

In the Pavillon des Sessions, the mesh screens between the lower level and higher level obstructed views, as well as walls, making it sometimes difficult to look into the next room which housed material culture from the same continent (e.g. African artefacts). This poor inter-visibility was not only the case among continental sections themselves but across continents, where viewing material culture from for example the Americas from the African zone was not possible.

This fragmented layout constructed the illusion of order while actively preventing interconnection. Geographic divisions, presented as neutral or practical, instead enclosed cultures into discrete, essentialised entities. As James Clifford points out, this reduces complex peoples and histories to one static identity, in this case defined solely by the continent of origin.³⁰⁹ Why this exact structure was chosen (aside from its

³⁰⁴ “Musée de l’Homme,” 37-38.

³⁰⁵ Oluwatoyin Sogbesan, “Reframing the Present by Recontextualising the Past: Towards Decolonising Nigerian Museums,” *Museum International* 74, no. 3-4 (2022): 51-52; Wevers, “Decolonial Aesthetics,” n.p.

³⁰⁶ Corbey, “Arts Premiers,” 3.

³⁰⁷ Petridis, “Recent Exhibitions,” 76.

³⁰⁸ “Reckoning with History,” 1-3.

³⁰⁹ Clifford, *Routes*, 24.

presumed logic) remains unclear.³¹⁰ The result, however, was a museum space as visual taxonomy, a spatialised ideology where difference was systematised, actively othered under the guise of celebrating human creativity.³¹¹

Western taxonomies dominated.³¹² Classifications and categories from source communities were omitted, resulting, as Abungu notes, in entire continents being homogenised. The immense variation and complexity of African, Oceanic, American and, in particular, Asian cultures, nations and peoples were lost in an undifferentiated "otherness," which, as Clifford would say, simplifies and essentialises them.³¹³

The stark imbalance was perhaps clearest in the marginalisation of Asian material culture. This was not a simple curatorial oversight but reflects France's long-standing imperial focus on Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, and Kerchache's bias against them.³¹⁴ As Witcomb and de L'Estoile argue, this spatial hierarchy was a form of representational appropriation that continued colonial traditions—not only in the displacement of objects but in the seizure of the right to interpret, define, and order them.³¹⁵

By failing to confront these tensions, the pavilion maintained the status quo. Though framed as a celebration of global art, it preserved the same colonial relationships that enabled these collections in the first place. As de L'Estoile describes, Europe continues to absorb and reframe "otherness" for its own narrative purposes, maintaining curatorial power and controlling cultural meaning under the guise of inclusivity.³¹⁶

Vawda calls this the "normalised" mode of museological with objects, knowledge, histories, and cultures from the (previously) colonised world. Western curators construct representational assemblages that shape global understanding through dominant, colonial frameworks, thereby fragmenting the "discovered" world into discrete, bounded entities according to Western epistemologies, thus being in charge of said cultures narratives instead of allowing their source communities to speak for them.³¹⁷

In this framework, museums do not merely preserve; they reconstruct, reinforces colonial epistemologies. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminds us, colonialism did not just extract resources; it imposed foreign systems of knowledge. Just as Indigenous languages were overwritten, so too were traditional systems of classification, spirituality, and meaning. This was evident in the Pavillon des Sessions' architectural layout, curatorial voice, and absence of cultural interlocutors from the communities

³¹⁰ "Musée de l'Homme," 38.

³¹¹ Tolia-Kelly, "(Postcolonial) Museum," 901-905.

³¹² Witcomb, *Re-Imagining*, 107.

³¹³ Abungu, "Museums," 69; Clifford, *Routes*, 24.

³¹⁴ Pric, *Paris Primitive*, 46.

³¹⁵ Witcomb, *Re-Imagining*, 107-108; Benoît de L'Estoile, "Appropriations," (seminar, Arts & Sociétés, 2007) <https://www.sciencespo.fr/artsetsocietes/en/archives/2354>

³¹⁶ de L'Estoile, "Appropriations."

³¹⁷ Vawda, "Epistemology of Injustice," 78.

represented. The extraction of objects from their original contexts and their reinstallation in institutions like the Louvre is not a neutral act; it is an assertion of interpretive control and symbolic dominance.³¹⁸

The Pavillon des Sessions did not simply reflect a colonial past, it actively perpetuated it, reinforcing colonial power structures and ideologies.³¹⁹ Through its continental organisation, spatial separation, and aesthetic homogeneity, it presented cultures as static and self-contained, actively freezing them.³²⁰ Cross-cultural connections, shared histories, and entangled narratives were erased.³²¹ What was left was a carefully constructed display of difference, otherness as Fabian would call it.³²²

The exclusion of Indigenous voices from the selection and narration process reveals a deeper epistemic failure.³²³ There are many possible stories - of resistance, kinship, transformation - that could have been told. They did not need to resolve into a single narrative.³²⁴ Yet they remained silenced, overtaken by a curatorial voice that claimed neutrality while speaking with inherited authority.³²⁵

The Pavillon beared resemblance to what Toni Morrison describes as the "race house:" a polished, seemingly inclusive space that hides the violent histories upon which it is built. Just as Morrison warns against the "delusion of agency" offered by coexistence within oppressive structures, the pavilion presented global artefacts in one gallery – albeit clearly separated from one another –, suggesting harmony. However, in reality, many of these objects remained trapped in a space defined by colonial power. The promise of cultural celebration was undermined when the pavilion's authority rested on the displacement and silencing of the communities from which these artefacts were taken. Rather than offering genuine liberation or dialogue, the pavilion formed a colonial showcase dressed in the "glossy comfort" of inclusion, rather than a space transformed by decolonial justice.³²⁶

The Pavillon des Sessions vague visual framing and lack of true intercommunication and visual equality between the represented cultures, left visitors – which were often unfamiliar with the represented cultures - to draw conclusions without adequate context.³²⁷ For those attuned to colonial histories and museum politics, it may have seemed a symbolic gesture—perhaps well-intentioned, but ultimately insufficient.³²⁸ For other, less critical visitors, it risked being seen as a resolved act, a final step toward inclusion that masked persistent structural inequalities.³²⁹ For more critical visitors, who knew about the

³¹⁸ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature," *New Left Review* 150 (1985): 118.

³¹⁹ Chiara De Cesari and Lora Sariaslan, "(Post)Coloniality and Museum Failure: A Report on Colonial Exhibits in Europe," (Report, COHERE, 2018): 2.

³²⁰ Clifford, *Routes*, 24; Tolia-Kelly, "(Postcolonial) Museum," 906.

³²¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Provincializing Europe: Postcoloniality and the Critique of History," *Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (1992): 351-52; Wevers, "Decolonial Aesthetics," n.p.

³²² Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. (Columbia University Press, 1983), x-xi.

³²³ Sera-Shriar, "Museumization," 5-6.

³²⁴ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 57.

³²⁵ Sogbesan, "Reframing the Present," 58; Tolia-Kelly, "(Postcolonial) Museum," 906.

³²⁶ Morrison, "Home," n.p.

³²⁷ Musetti, "Arts Premiers;" Petridis, "Recent Exhibitions," 76.

³²⁸ Corbey, "Art Premiers.;"

³²⁹ Noce, "Arts Premiers;" Michael Kimmelman, "In the City of Light, a Heart of Darkness: A Chaotic and Condensing Museum of Theatrics," *The New York Times*, July 4, 2006, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/city-light-heart-darkness-chaotic-condensing/docview/318750412/se-2>.

provenance of many of the material culture and art within the pavilion, the gallery formed a failure by Chirac, Kerchache, the other prefiguration committee members, and Wilmotte to confront France's colonial past, present, and the aim to free the (former) colonised regions represented within them, much less present them as equal, to both "the West" or each other.³³⁰

Ultimately, the spatial configuration of the Pavillon des Sessions was not merely a curatorial decision—it was a political act.³³¹ It mapped out a worldview in which Western institutions retained interpretive power, and where the appearance of diversity masked" enduring epistemic asymmetries.³³² What is omitted is as meaningful as what is displayed.³³³ It reminds us that the West should not, and need not, have the final word.³³⁴

As Audre Lorde has phrased so well, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."³³⁵



Image 19. Glass Cases in the Americas Section

³³⁰ McKinley, "Hiding African Art;" Dias, "Double Erasure," 302.

³³¹ Robert E. Roth, "Cartographic Design as Visual Storytelling: Synthesis and Review of Map-Based Narratives, Genres, and Tropes," *The Cartographic Journey* 58, no. 1 (2021): 86.

³³² de Cesari and Sariaslan, "Museum Failure," 2; Vawda, "Epistemology of Injustice," 78.

³³³ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 119; Mbembe, "Archive and Its Limits," 23.

³³⁴ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 57.

³³⁵ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

3. Displayed Containment: The Semiotics of Glass

"Glass walls are the most insidious kind of alienation: transparent but impenetrable."

Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, 2017.³³⁶

The use of glass cases throughout the pavilion (see images 15-19) is another way in which the curatorial staff – primarily Jacques Kerchache – imposed their will onto the material culture of peoples of which they form no part of.³³⁷ Von Zinnenburg Carroll highlights that vitrines impose a powerful presence: they frame, distance, distort, and control access to the objects which they enclose. Additionally, the transparency characteristic of these cases is deceptive, it pretends not be present, yet it powerfully shapes how visitors within the pavilion view, experience, and understand what is displayed.³³⁸ Instead of a lived object it is turned into an observed spectacle.³³⁹

Far from being neutral, transparent containers, vitrines reinforce the ontology of the 'treasure' or art object. They declare value, assert rarity, and frame the displayed object within a language of modernity, luxury, and scientific preservation. In some cases, the display cases are more visually present than the artefacts themselves, dominating the visitor's perception. As such, the vitrine is not only a physical barrier but a symbolic and historical one, imposing a conceptual framework upon the object it holds.³⁴⁰

Material culture within the pavilion that was housed within a glass case thus became a masterpiece. Elevated by the museum effect – the artefact already being heightened to an object of visual pleasure just because of its inclusion within a museum context – its status was elevated further by its containment. However, an issue here arises. The material culture in the pavilion is stated to be "born free and equal." A statement that was first brought forward by Kerchache in 1990, plagued the news articles accompanying the creation process of the pavilion and the quai Branly museum, and to this day stands prominently on the pavilion's webpage on the Louvre's website.³⁴¹ However, the glass cases harmed this statement.

If looking at the first section of that statement, this covers the material culture within the pavilion all being "free." This is simply untrue. About two thirds of the artefacts located in the pavilion were contained by glass. This means that the objects – which could no longer be danced with, touched, or used as they were created for – may have been inert within the museum. They continued to hold cultural meaning and resonate with contemporary artists, scholars, and communities, but they were no longer actively engaged with. However, it is important to note that because of the vitrines, even their cultural meaning

³³⁶ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 25.

³³⁷ Archival research?

³³⁸ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 24.

³³⁹ Laporte, "Art and Alienation," 147.

³⁴⁰ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 24.

³⁴¹ "Artworks From Around the World," accessed June 5, 2025, <https://www.louvre.fr/en/explore/the-palace/artworks-from-around-the-world>.

was strongly diminished, as they were reframed through a Western lens.³⁴² While their original significance was excluded, their visual power was recontextualised and aestheticised within a modernist display logic – influenced by the architect Jean Wilmotte and curator Jacques Kerchache – which starkly contrasts with the deep, layered histories of the objects themselves.³⁴³

The result was a powerful visual contradiction: the objects' origins are complex, sacred, and communal, yet they were now encased in sleek, minimalistic, vitrines, objects of modern Western design and ideology – the ideology that resulted in their displacement from their locations of origin and found their ways to the pavilion – often through morally questionable means like looting, theft, illegal trafficking, unequal power balances between buyer and seller or owner -. The vitrine acts as both veil and barrier: it permits vision but denies proximity, allows spectatorship but prevents tactile or empathetic connection.³⁴⁴

Though the cases were relatively recent (late 1990s), the gesture of encasing these artefacts was an anachronistic, out-dated, uncomfortable, even self-conscious act of museal control.³⁴⁵ It separated the material culture not only from visitors, but also from one another. Instead of allowing visitors to have an intimate connection with the artefacts, they were kept at a distance, literally.³⁴⁶ Yet, they were stated to be “free.”

In the pavilion, vitrines did not merely preserve; they performed. The sculptures were staged as frozen in time, caught between sacred Indigenous origin and the Western institutional gaze. These objects were not created to be viewed in such ways, their meaning preceded their musealisation, sometimes by centuries. The glass case imposed a new temporality and purpose, transforming them further from ritual items into aestheticised artefacts. They were trapped between institutional gaze and sacred origin. They revealed the museum's role in the temporal and political reframing of non-Western art. The objects were not created to be shown in vitrines, to be contained, their function and meaning preceded their entrance on the Louvre, where they were now “free.”³⁴⁷

This boundary crystallises the colonial and modernist gaze, reflecting back an image of “us” (cosmopolitan France, rational and advanced) against “them” (primitive, ancient, static cultures of the Global South). The glass supports the illusion of Western dynamism and non-Western stasis. By extracting the objects from their contexts and suspending them in sleek vitrines, the museum denies visitors the possibility of engaging emotionally or imaginatively with them. The glass promises clarity but enforces distance. It turns culture into spectacle.³⁴⁸ However, in the pavilion they were both “free and equal.”³⁴⁹

³⁴² von Zinnenburg Carroll, “The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine,” 24.

³⁴³ von Zinnenburg Carroll, “The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine,” 24.

³⁴⁴ von Zinnenburg Carroll, “The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine,” 24; Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum*, 54.

³⁴⁵ von Zinnenburg Carroll, “The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine,” 24.

³⁴⁶ Clifford, *Routes*, 115.

³⁴⁷ von Zinnenburg Carroll, “The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine,” 24.

³⁴⁸ von Zinnenburg Carroll, “The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine,” 24.

³⁴⁹ “Artworks.”

Now, equality. As already mentioned, not all material culture was contained by glass. About a third of the artefacts were displayed without glass. However, as discussed, the glass cases, according to von Zinnenburg Carroll, elevated the material culture and art housed within them. This means that all objects without glass encasements were degraded in status in comparison, according to this logic.³⁵⁰

The argument can be made that perhaps glass was used for protection or conservation. Museums frequently justify the use of vitrines on the grounds of conservation, backed by technical standards and institutional precedent.³⁵¹

However, archival plans of the pavilion provide insight into this area. The plans inform that there were three types of vitrines: "vitrines centrales mobiles," which were mobile cases that contain material culture and can be walked around, meaning that the artefacts could be viewed from all angles; additionally there were "vitrines murales fixes," which were vitrines situated against a wall, meaning that they could not be admired from three sides (left, right, and front, not the back); finally there were "vitrines de protection," or protective screens. From the – according to archival documentation – ca. 61 glass cases located throughout the pavilion, there were only four "vitrines de protection" indicated on the archived plan from 1999: one in the Africa zone, one in the Oceania zone, and two in the Americas zone (one of those vitrines containing two objects), which means that only five objects were protected by protective vitrines.³⁵²

Additionally, ca. 23 podia were located throughout the pavilion, which elevated the material culture that was not encased by glass, meaning that although they were not elevated by the glass vitrine – in status –, they were literally elevated. These ca. twenty-three podia displayed ca. 28 artefacts.³⁵³ Further archival research provided the following information: the podia (and presumably glass cases) were used to distance visitors from the material culture.³⁵⁴ Later archival documents clarify that indeed the vitrines were also used to distance the visitors. However, for unclarified reasons, they were not meeting this goal.³⁵⁵

Although the material culture displayed in the pavilion appeared to be equal to one another in terms of glass displays and podia elevating them, they were far from free. Vitrines don't only have protective functions, they also have political ones. They are descendants of the Wunderkammer tradition, crafted containers displaying exotic goods for European consumption. In this sense, the wealth of former French colonies is not only extracted but framed in European materials, enclosed within French design.³⁵⁶ In the

³⁵⁰ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 24.

³⁵¹ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 24.

³⁵² "Plan Museographique," February 20, 1999. Sourced in folder "Maîtresse d'Oeuvre à EMOC, 1998-2000," in map "Antenna au Louvre du Musée des Arts et Civilisations." Archives Nationales, box 20080655, art. 6.

³⁵³ "Plan Museographique,"

³⁵⁴ Helene Dano Vanneyre, "Releve de Decisions," sent to Daniel Sancho, September 24, 1999. Sourced in the folder Mission de Préfiguration puis Musée du quai Branly: Correspondance, Comptes Rendus de Réunion," in the map "Mission de Préfiguration puis Musée du quai Branly – Musée du Louvre: Correspondance," Archives Nationales, box 20080655, art. 6.

³⁵⁵ Jacques Friedman, Letter "Mission de Préfiguration du Musée de l'Homme des Arts et des Civilisations," to Jean-Claude Moreno, November 24, 1998. Sourced in the folder "Mission de Préfiguration puis Musée du quai Branly: Correspondance, Comptes Rendus de Réunion," Archives Nationales, box 20080655, art. 6; "Pavillon des Sessions: Remarques à Propos du Prototype Présenté le 20 novembre 98." Sourced in the folder "Mission de Préfiguration puis Musée du quai Branly: Correspondance, Comptes Rendus de Réunion," Archives Nationales, box 20080655, art. 6.

³⁵⁶ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 26.

pavilion, this was still the case. The vitrines also reminded of the glass display cases of vitrines in stores, which is again linked to value and materialism.³⁵⁷

Here it is important to note that the display of the material cultures in the pavilion has not been without effect on the art market. The visible artefacts within museum contexts gained value.³⁵⁸ This was not just artistic value. Material culture in museums is elevated to masterpiece status, solely through institutional fact, influenced by the museological influence on the public's perception. This also influences the market value of the artefact and similar objects.³⁵⁹

In case of the pavilion, prices for certain material cultures seemed to raise during the creation process of the pavilion, Price stating that there was "widespread concern" at the time for the inevitable inflationary art market effect the acquisitions for the pavilion would have. Stating that in 1998 a tall "Nok statue" was bought for 2.5 million francs, while during the early part of the decade, similar material culture would cost between 60.000 to 600.000 francs. It is noteworthy that Kerchache, who is often identified as an "art dealer" and knew many people who dealt in extra-European material culture and art, was the active force behind the pavilion.³⁶⁰

In 1988, a book co-written by Kerchache, Jean-Louis Paudrat and Lucien Stéphan was published: an authoritative and hefty work titled *l'Art Africaine*, in which his passion of documenting all aesthetically valuable worldwide tribal art came together. An anonymous review from 1990 criticised the book on the grounds of it being primarily aimed at increasing the market prices of the featured artefacts selected from Kerchache's clients' private collections.³⁶¹

While these artefacts – and similar ones – were initially degraded, perceived as exotic, primitive, and irrational artefacts of human value, they were placed in a most civilised, rational, ordinary, and modern setting (commodity fetishism).³⁶² The violence does not only stem from their removal (provenance history), but also how they are displayed, to support a Western narrative of "the other."³⁶³

The impulse to "collect the other" is embedded in capitalism. It's problematic and ethically objectionable. There is a link between the ornamental artefact, the fetish the Western world holds for it and its shiny aesthetic. The artefact's function is radically removed from it, deprived from the visitors knowledge, now only its aesthetic appeal remains.³⁶⁴ The narrator chooses what visitors are told or what is insinuated (very little), and what is ultimately not (a lot). These artefacts are denuded and abducted on purpose and new meaning is assigned to them.³⁶⁵

³⁵⁷ Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum*, 21.

³⁵⁸ Wróblewska, "Creating Visibility," 23.

³⁵⁹ Neveu, "Exhibit Deceptively."

³⁶⁰ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 75.

³⁶¹ Georges Dupré, "L'Art Africaine, Une Marchandise Dissimulée," *Gradhiva*, no. 8 (1990): 100-103; Corbey, "Arts Premiers," 3.

³⁶² Bal, "Telling Objects," 107.

³⁶³ Bal, "Telling Objects," 108.

³⁶⁴ Mieke Bal, "Telling Objects," 110.

³⁶⁵ Mieke Bal, "Telling Objects," 111.

Ames highlights that some might see the act of displaying material culture from other cultures as appropriation, whilst other might see it as inspiration. Additionally, some might always perceive the vitrines as protective, a way to preserve world heritage, while others find it a way of cultural imprisonment.³⁶⁶ Yet, what right did Kerchache have to lock the spirits of other cultures, housed inside certain of the material culture in the pavilion, into glass cases, keeping Western cultural superiority in place?³⁶⁷

Tolia-Kelly describes museum galleries as "theatres of pain" where visitors relive the trauma of cultural loss and misrepresentation. For Māori communities, exhibitions of their cultural objects often feel like funerals rather than celebrations of heritage. The display practices reinforce colonial hierarchies and silence Indigenous voices, leading to emotional responses such as grief, anger, and disempowerment. Instead of displaying sterile, objectified displays behind glass, museums should be advocating for living, breathing, participatory relationships with cultural objects.³⁶⁸

Specifically for the pavilion, Dr. Kwame Opoku recently described the statues in the gallery as looking lost and melancholic due to their fate of being stuck in the gallery. Furthermore he posed that the statues were probably wondering how long they needed to remain in their colonial detention in Paris.³⁶⁹

Ames acknowledges that while several opinions exist, including those who don't mind the glass cases, museums still express control when they put material culture in display cases according to their own will. By doing this, curators insulate, preserve, sanitise, and plasticise these "traditional societies" under glass, according to Ames.³⁷⁰ Although there is more to museums than ideology production, cannibalistic appetites to reduce entire cultures to a hand full of objects, and glass box display vitrines, appear to form its core.³⁷¹

The vitrines suspend the artefacts they contain in time, meaning that they are no longer part of a living culture from which they have been displaced, but they are also not fully assimilated into the present either. The display renders the object passive and untouchable – instead of free –, stripping it of functional and ritual agency and recasting it as a mere aesthetic specimen.³⁷²

Together with the white cube aesthetic they appear timeless, but they are contained in time and space, under tight control of its curator.³⁷³ This perpetuates what Fabian calls the duality between the archaic timelessness and the modern time-centredness.³⁷⁴ Ames adding that the classification of diverse cultures into glass boxes is a way in which these artefacts and their cultures are frozen into mythical

³⁶⁶ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 4.

³⁶⁷ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 23-57.

³⁶⁸ Tolia-Kelly, "(Postcolonial) Museum," 898-900.

³⁶⁹ Opoku, "Looted Art."

³⁷⁰ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 23.

³⁷¹ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 4.

³⁷² von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 24.

³⁷³ Kimmelman, "Heart of Darkness;" Price, *Paris Primitive*, 59-60.

³⁷⁴ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 41.

categories which simplify them.³⁷⁵ Instead of being active material culture and art with functions or meaning, which is contextualised and free, the artefacts are decontextualised, passive, observed objects in glass boxes.³⁷⁶

In this sense the glass isn't only spectacular, but also frightening. It is proof of an active containment. The wealth and power of the "other-worldliness" is contained in a small sheltered fortress in the museum's walls. As the "masterpieces" were revealed in their cages in 2000, they were born as museal beings.³⁷⁷ As their function and context were stripped away, they became pure display.³⁷⁸

Now, their visitors have the power to make of these encased objects what they will. Even though the objects are spectacular and interesting, they're stuck.³⁷⁹ In the context of repatriation demands, the objects are immobilised in their sophisticated cases.³⁸⁰ Though silenced, the objects were still associated to the lingering feeling of emotional and material suspense between France and its (former) colonies, as was also pointed out by Chirac during his opening speech of the pavilion.³⁸¹ However, as will be discussed in the next chapter, this past was hardly visible in the museum space to the unfamiliar eye. Thus, the objects were born "free and equal," but they were held captive in their vitrines in Paris.³⁸² There, they were sanitised and ordered, their colonial past hidden from plain sight.³⁸³

As Bilbao posits, putting the material culture and art of cultures behind glass, thus assuming a kind of universality of display and exchange formats, is a form of epistemic violence: a display violence. As these artefacts didn't belong to Kerchache, him deciding for those cultures which ones should be placed in glass cages and which ones shouldn't, was a form of imperial violence, because he felt comfortable to make a decision for them, without them.³⁸⁴ His decision, as well as similar decisions made in Western museums, means that many members of source communities now have to travel to far away cities and pay to visit their heritage behind glass.³⁸⁵

In this sense, little seems to have changed between the colonising tendencies of museums when they were born and how the pavilion operated until it closed for renovation recently. The paternalistic colonial idea of displaying the other, as it's the Western role to teach people about other cultures, from a Eurocentric perspective, shows the enduring legacy of colonialism though coloniality.³⁸⁶

³⁷⁵ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 140.

³⁷⁶ François Mairesse, "Museology and the Sacred," *Material Religion* 15, no. 5 (2019): 653.

³⁷⁷ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 27.

³⁷⁸ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 27-28.

³⁷⁹ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 28.

³⁸⁰ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 28.

³⁸¹ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 29.

³⁸² von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 29; Azoulay, *Potential History*, 128

³⁸³ Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting atrocity: Memorial museums and the politics of past violence* (Rutgers University Press, 2017), 102.

³⁸⁴ Ana Bilbao, "Museum of European Normality," 653.

³⁸⁵ Bilbao, "Museum of European Normality," 661.

³⁸⁶ Coloniality refers to the enduring structures and mindsets established by colonialism that persist even after the end of formal colonial rule. It describes the lasting impact of colonialism on knowledge systems, social hierarchies, and cultural practices. Quijano and Wallerstein, "Americanness as a Concept," 549-557; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Decoloniality," 11.

Indigenous peoples haven't taken the appropriation of their heritage passively, often objecting to the museumification of their material culture. They want their materials back, freed from their glass cages, and they want to control not only their own history, but also its interpretation. As history is controlled by the ones benefitting from it, it is long overdue that Indigenous peoples are in control of their past and heritage.³⁸⁷

Von Zinnenburg Carroll argues, however, that ritual power does not reside solely in the original object; through community agreement, ritual energy can be transferred to replicas. This suggests a possible pathway toward restitution, towards setting the material culture and art finally free: either through repatriation or through meaningful and sacred duplication, allowing source communities to reconnect with their heritage. Perhaps the answer lies in removing some vitrines altogether, creating shared spaces of engagement, or returning objects while keeping replicas in Paris. Each of these gestures would disrupt the politics of distance that the glass currently enforces.³⁸⁸

Like the ordering of the material culture discussed in the previous section, displaying two thirds of the artefacts in well-lit, "elegantly shaped," cases homogenises them to a Western standard of visual interest. Their contexts omitted, left not only outside of the glass cases or the pavilion, but out of the museum entirely. As Roque highlights, the "other" which is represented, is silenced and the selected material culture hardly forms a representation of the complex and rich material culture the represented cultures are able to call their heritage. In the exhibition, they aren't the "I" or "we," but clearly the other, put in glass boxes to look at, like wild animals in a zoo. From a - mostly - singular Western perspective the represented cultures are aestheticised, providing access to a "timeless and dreamlike universe."³⁸⁹

Perhaps Ames provides the best summary: "museums are cannibalistic in appropriating other peoples' material for their own study and interpretation, and they confine their representations to glass box display cases. There is a glass box for everyone."³⁹⁰

Thus, the vitrine in the Pavillon des Sessions becomes a potent metaphor for the Louvre's broader position: a place that appears to honour the cultural production of the Global South, yet ultimately renders it static and aestheticised.

By aestheticising alienation, the vitrines transform absence into elegance and erasure into a form of museum sophistication. They are agents of epistemic violence: visually seductive yet ideologically silent, they maintain a colonial structure of power while pretending to protect.

³⁸⁷ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 140.

³⁸⁸ von Zinnenburg Carroll, "The Inbetweenness of the Vitrine," 34-35.

³⁸⁹ Roque, "Decolonising the Museum," 60-61.

³⁹⁰ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 3.

This glass must be broken to end the Western habit of classifying peoples according to our hegemonic systems and finally liberate Western museums from their dependence on material culture and art obtained and framed in a questionable manner from Indigenous peoples.³⁹¹

We can only hope, as Michael Taussig evokes, “that the gods asleep in the museum [...] will awaken and come to life with the tinkling of glass as the vitrines give way.”³⁹² In this way, the artefacts could enter the here and now, becoming part of dynamic, ongoing traditions instead of static ones from the past.³⁹³

³⁹¹ Ames, *Cannibal Tours*, 141.

³⁹² Michael Taussig, *My Cocaine Museum* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 315.

³⁹³ Clifford, *Routes*, 115.

Chapter 3. Authorship and Erasure:

The Museum Text as a Site of Power

"Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."

African proverb quoted by Chinua Achebe, 1994.³⁹⁴

Achebe's invocation of this African proverb highlights a fundamental imbalance in historical narration: the authority to define meaning - and, by extension, power - remains with the dominant narrator. At the Pavillon des Sessions, this imbalance was starkly reflected in the absence of Indigenous voices from both the curatorial process and the textual framing of the artefacts. Until source communities are not only consulted but given real interpretive agency, narrative authority will remain concentrated in Western hands.³⁹⁵

This dynamic is particularly troubling given the pavilion's primary audience: largely Western museumgoers unfamiliar with the cultures and objects on display. In such contexts, clear, culturally grounded interpretation is essential. Yet, historically, Indigenous material cultures have been sidelined within dominant Western knowledge systems, frequently dismissed as "primitive," "barbaric," or simply unworthy of aesthetic or intellectual consideration.³⁹⁶ The colonial claim that certain peoples "lacked art" was more than prejudice, it was used to justify domination.³⁹⁷ While progress has been made in academic institutions, such as the École du Louvre's increasing (if uneven) inclusion of non-Western material cultures in its curriculum, these efforts remain largely surface-level.³⁹⁸

Philosopher Thomas Leddy outlines the shifting Western reception of non-Western art: from curiosity, to paradox, to recognition as equal—so long as it conformed to Western criteria of "authenticity."³⁹⁹ Coleman further notes that the emergence of non-Western objects in art discourse paralleled changes in Western definitions of art itself. This inclusion, however, often came at the cost of cultural context, as seen in the Primitivist movement and the problematic concept of arts premiers. These frameworks aestheticised Indigenous forms while stripping away their epistemological grounding. True

³⁹⁴ Jerome Brooks, "Chinua Achebe, The Art of Fiction," *The Paris Review* 139 (1994): <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1720/the-art-of-fiction-no-139-chinua-achebe>.

³⁹⁵ Brooks, "Chinua Achebe;" Price, *Paris Primitive*, 46.

³⁹⁶ Rolando Vázquez, "The Museum, Decoloniality and the End of the Contemporary," in *The Future of the New: Artistic Innovation in Times of Social Acceleration*, ed. Thijs Lijster (Valiz, 2018), 186.

³⁹⁷ Elizabeth Burns Coleman, "Engaging With Indigenous Art Aesthetically," in *Introduction to Philosophy: Aesthetic Theory and Practice*, ed. Valery Vino and Christina Hendricks (Rebus Community, 2021), 125-131.

³⁹⁸ "Histoire Générale de l'Art – 1ère Année," accessed July 15, 2025, <https://www.ecoledulouvre.fr/fr/catalogue-des-cours-auditeurs-libres/histoire-generale-de-l-art-1ere-annee#agenda-du-cours>.

³⁹⁹ Thomas Leddy, "Aesthetics Today," published May 25, 2017, <https://aestheticstoday.blogspot.com/2017/05/comparative-aesthetics-syllabus-for.html>.

appreciation demands more than visual admiration; it requires engaging with the worldviews and practices that produced these objects—a fusion of horizons.⁴⁰⁰

Yet, colonial logics persist. Kiriama and Onkoba argue that Western educational systems and missionary interventions disrupted many Indigenous heritage practices. Even internal religious transformations, such as Islamic reform, contributed to this dislocation. Missionaries and colonial authorities frequently dismissed Indigenous knowledge systems, preserving only those aspects deemed legible within Western categories—especially tangible, rather than intangible, cultural heritage.⁴⁰¹

Contemporary Indigenous scholars —such as Jarette Werk and Jaida Grey Eagle—emphasise that material culture encodes generations of knowledge, kinship, and cosmology.⁴⁰² Victoria Hutter notes that non-Native audiences often fail to grasp these layers due to a lack of cultural grounding, while Edwina Taborsky warns that without the symbolic frameworks that give these objects meaning, viewers risk misinterpretation.⁴⁰³ Michael Baxandall adds that, when confronted with unfamiliar objects, audiences rely heavily on textual interpretation to make sense of them. In such cases, curators become mediators—and museum labels, didactic texts, and wall panels become primary sources of meaning.⁴⁰⁴

At the Pavillon des Sessions, however, contextual information was notably limited. Aside from minimal wall texts, a few of printed factsheets, and a discreet multimedia room, visitors were offered little interpretive support. This scarcity might have led them to infer that such cultural contexts were either unknown or irrelevant.⁴⁰⁵ This minimalism reflected the curatorial vision of Jacques Kerchache, the pavilion's conceptual architect, who championed a formalist, aesthetic approach. He insisted that the works should "speak for themselves"—an ethos that prioritised visual impact over cultural explanation.⁴⁰⁶

This vision was contested. Anthropologist Maurice Godelier, among others on the prefiguration committee of the future Musée du quai Branly, advocated for deeper contextualisation. But Kerchache, drawing from the arts premiers discourse, viewed such framing as an obstacle to recognising these objects as "true" art. Ultimately, Kerchache's vision prevailed. The resulting textual infrastructure was sparse, fragmented, and often opaque, leaving visitors adrift in a sea of partial, Eurocentric information.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁰ Coleman, "Indigenous Art," 125-143.

⁴⁰¹ Herman Ogoti Kiriama and Edith Nyangara Onkoba, "Significance in African Heritage," in *Heritage*, ed. Daniela Turcanu-Carutiu (IntechOpen, 2020), 182.

⁴⁰² Jarette Werk and Jaida Grey Eagle, "Do's and Don't of Reporting on Indigenous Art," *IJNet*, November 25, 2019, <https://ijnet.org/en/story/dos-and-donts-reporting-indigenous-art#:~:text=Nov%2025%2C%202019%20in%20Representation,the%20work%20that%20they%20make.%E2%80%9D>.

⁴⁰³ Victoria Hutter, "Outside the Box," *NEA Arts*, no. 2 (2016): <https://www.arts.gov/stories/magazine/2016/2/challenges-arts-21st-century/outside-box>; Edwina Taborsky, "The Discursive Object," in *Objects of Knowledge*, ed. Susan Pearce (The Athlone Press, 1990), 65-69.

⁴⁰⁴ Baxandall, "Exhibiting Intention," 34-39.

⁴⁰⁵ Petridis, "Recent Exhibitions," 76; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 51-61.

⁴⁰⁶ "Proces Verbal du Conseil Scientifique du 17 Novembre 1998," November 17, 1998. Page 4. Sourced from "Conseil Scientifique" in the map "2021007/99." Archives Nationales, box 2021007-39.

⁴⁰⁷ "Conseil Scientifique," 4-5; Corbey, "Arts Premiers," 4; Mark, "Parisian Public Museums," 1; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 61

This curatorial ideology aligned with Svetlana Alpers' argument that museums may be ill-suited to represent entire cultures.⁴⁰⁸ Laurajane Smith and Rolando Vázquez similarly warn that museums often reinforce colonial narratives under the guise of education.⁴⁰⁹ Oluwatoyin Sogbesan observes that Western museums act as distorting lenses, projecting their own values and assumptions onto the objects they display.⁴¹⁰ As Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds us, what is Western has long been centred; what is not has been marginalised, distorted, or erased.⁴¹¹

And yet visitors do seek meaning. As David Carr emphasises, they turn to museum texts - labels, wall panels, provenance - for guidance. These are not peripheral tools; they are the architecture through which meaning is produced. Shouldn't these tools, then, offer access to the people, cultures, and worldviews from which these artefacts emerged?

Carr offers a hopeful possibility: that well-crafted interpretation can facilitate meaningful encounters across cultural and temporal boundaries. But such encounters depend on clarity, transparency, and depth—all of which are open to question at the pavilion.⁴¹²

While connoisseurs of the represented cultures might have appreciated Kerchache's aesthetic restraint, most visitors—like Kerchache himself—are cultural outsiders. Curators, too, are often external to the cultures they interpret. Though presented as experts, their authority is partial, situated, and often disconnected from the lived experience of the cultures in question, not to mention, sometimes misplaced. Research into local aesthetic systems reveals that conceptions of artistic value often diverge significantly from Western art historical frameworks.⁴¹³ If the museum truly seeks to bridge the ethnological-aesthetic divide, it is ethically obligated to include multiple perspectives—especially those of source communities.⁴¹⁴ And yet, these perspectives are conspicuously absent.⁴¹⁵

This chapter analyses how curatorial texts — object labels, didactic panels (factsheets), and wall texts, as well as the multimedia/interpretation room — contributed to or challenged the erasure of Indigenous voices. Drawing on Roth's structure of setup, conflict, and (non-)resolution, this chapter adopts a funnel structure. It begins broadly by outlining the myth of neutrality and the minimalist textual setup that shape visitor experience; then narrows to explore conflicts in interpretive transparency—including Eurocentric terminology, temporal framing, and colonial mapping—that complicate claims of equality; and finally focuses closely on the near-silence around colonial history, using case studies to demonstrate

⁴⁰⁸ Alpers, "Ways of Seeing," 30.

⁴⁰⁹ Laurajane Smith, "Theorizing Museum and Heritage Visiting," in *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies: Museum Theory*, eds. Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 478; Wevers, "Decolonial Aesthetics," n.p.

⁴¹⁰ Sogbesan, "Reframing the Present," 51.

⁴¹¹ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 63-64.

⁴¹² Allen, "Responsibilities of Museums," 20.

⁴¹³ Petridis, "Recent Exhibitions," 76; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 78.

⁴¹⁴ Sogbesan, "Reframing the Present," 52-54; Onciul, *Decolonising Engagement*, 82-87; Sanjoori, "Culture and Space."

⁴¹⁵ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 46-47.

erasure and consider possibilities for decolonial textual practices. This approach reveals how museum texts act as sites of power, shaping—and often limiting—visitor understanding.

By asking whose voices are centred, what information is included or omitted, and how provenance is framed (or not), this chapter explores how textual framing possibly shapes visitors' understanding—and misunderstanding—of the art and material culture on view.⁴¹⁶ At stake is not only interpretive clarity, but the ethical imperative to decolonise institutional knowledge systems.⁴¹⁷ In prioritising the voices of French curators, architects, and intellectuals—while omitting Indigenous perspectives—the pavilion asserts the museum's right to speak for others.⁴¹⁸ This is not an oversight, but a structural consequence of ongoing coloniality.⁴¹⁹

Until the "lions" are accepted as their own historians, the story told in institutions like the Pavillon des Sessions will remain one-sided.⁴²⁰ This chapter acknowledges its own position within a Western academic framework, with all the limitations that entails. While it critiques Eurocentric curatorial practices, it also recognises the urgent need to engage more fully with Indigenous methodologies—both in scholarship and in curatorship.⁴²¹ The absence of such methodologies within the Pavillon is not merely a curatorial gap, but a symptom of broader systemic erasure. This analysis seeks not to reproduce that erasure, but to foreground it.⁴²²

1. Setup: The Stage of Neutrality

"The museum cannot be seen as a neutral institution; it is an expression of the modern/colonial power.

It holds epistemic and aesthetic power."

Rolando Vázquez, 2019.⁴²³

Vázquez (sometimes referred to as Vázquez Melken) his statement sets the tone, highlighting that there is no such thing as neutrality when it comes to museums. This extends to their textual strategies.⁴²⁴

⁴¹⁶ Graham Hingangaroa Smith and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, "Doing Indigenous Work: Decolonizing and Transforming the Academy," in *Handbook of Indigenous Education*, eds. Elizabeth Ann McKinley and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Springer, 2019), 1077; Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Indigenous Resurgence and Co-Resistance," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2016): 20-21.

⁴¹⁷ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 55; Rachel Charlotte Smith, Heike Winschiers-Theophilus, Rogério Abreu de Paula, Tariq Zaman, and Daria Loi, "Towards Pluriversality: Decolonising Design Research and Practices," *CoDesign* 20, no. 1 (2024): 3-4.

⁴¹⁸ Hills and Middleton "Colonial Imagination," n.p.

⁴¹⁹ De Cesari and Sariaslan, "(Post)Coloniality," 3; Wayne Modest, "Museums Are Investments in Critical Discomfort," in *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*, eds. Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius (Leuven University Press, 2020), 67-68.

⁴²⁰ Brooks, "Chinua Achebe."

⁴²¹ Smith and Smith, "Indigenous Work," 1077; Chakrabarty, "Provincializing Europe," 353-354.

⁴²² Vázquez, "Decoloniality," 183; Tolia-Kelly, "(Postcolonial) Museum," 906.

⁴²³ Wevers, "Decolonial Aesthetics," n.p.

⁴²⁴ Wevers, "Decolonial Aesthetics," n.p.

The debunking of the myth of neutrality (discussed as well in the previous chapters) is echoed by anthropologist Wayne Modest, curator Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, as well as sociologist Peggy Levitt.⁴²⁵

Following Roth's three-act storytelling framework, the first act - the set-up - introduces the story's setting, characters, and problem context. In the case of the Pavillon des Sessions, this means first establishing the physical and interpretive environment in which visitors encountered the works. Here, the "setting" was defined by a minimalist design, sparse labels, and an aura of neutrality that shapes the visitor's initial orientation. Once the space was situated, the "characters" emerge: the dominant Western curatorial voice, positioned as the primary interpreter, and the absent or silenced Indigenous perspectives, whose omission is part of the narrative tension. Finally, the "problem context" comes into view: the interpretive materials that could offer deeper understanding existed, but were physically and conceptually displaced, hidden in peripheral spaces, fragmented, and often framed through Eurocentric lenses.⁴²⁶

By structuring the section in this order—space, then voice, then conflict—the aim is to replicate how visitor's likely encountered the pavilion: first absorbing the spatial cues, then recognising whose voice is narrating, and finally discovering what is missing. This progression mirrors Roth's emphasis on grounding the narrative in a clear geography before introducing the central figures and tensions that will drive the story forward.

1.1 The Disappearing Object: Strategic Minimalism

"The label should not hinder the discovery of the work."

Prefiguration committee, 1997.⁴²⁷

This principle, initially framed by the prefiguration committee of the Pavillon des Sessions within the bigger project of the future quai Branly museum as a gesture of respect toward the aesthetic integrity of the object, quickly revealed itself as a disciplinary strategy: one that universalised a particular subject position, the Western spectator, and rendered the object legible only through European categories of understanding.⁴²⁸

Archival records make clear that the exhibition in the Louvre's Pavillon des Sessions was designed for the broadest possible audience. The curators privileged emotion, aesthetic shock, and "discovery," terms that, while ostensibly neutral, assume a viewer encountering these objects for the first time,

⁴²⁵ Modest, "Critical Discomfort," 67-68; Azoulay, *Potential History*, 41-42; Levitt, *Artifacts and Allegiances*, 7-9.

⁴²⁶ Roth, "Visual Storytelling," 88.

⁴²⁷ "Musée de l'Homme," 39.

⁴²⁸ "Musée de l'Homme" 37; "Conseil Scientifique," 4; Kassim, "Museum Will Not Be Decolonised."

untethered from history or politics and implying a Western audience. Additionally, this description is reminiscent of the colonial exhibitions, such as the Parisian colonial exhibition in 1931, which similarly blended curiosity, consumption, and power, according to Benoît de L'Estoile.⁴²⁹ De L'Estoile explains how, beginning in the 1930s, anthropologists appropriated cultural artefacts under the guise of scientific neutrality, aiming to create an encyclopaedic inventory of human diversity.⁴³⁰

The Pavillon des Sessions can be seen as a contemporary, institutionalised continuation of these dynamics. Though framed as an artistic (albeit Eurocentric, as highlighted by Nederveen Pieterse and Marilena Alivizatou) celebration of "Arts Premiers." The pavilion operates within the same logic of fascination and consumption that De L'Estoile calls the "taste for the Others."⁴³¹ Objects from Africa, Oceania, Asia, and the Americas, many taken through colonial extraction, are displayed in the Louvre's prestigious setting, stripped from their original contexts and reclassified within European aesthetic or academic traditions. Despite avoiding the crude spectacle of past "human zoos," the pavilion still participates in the colonial legacy of controlling, interpreting, and consuming other cultures, reinforcing the unequal structures De L'Estoile describes.⁴³²



Images 20 and 21. Images of the labels of "Sculpture Bidjogo" and "Sculpture Baga"

Each object label (see images 20 and 21) at the Pavillon des Sessions followed a tightly standardised format. It included: an image of the accompanying material culture/art, the category of object

⁴²⁹ de L'Estoile, "Appropriations."

⁴³⁰ de L'Estoile, "Appropriations."

⁴³¹ Jan Nederveen Pieterse, "Multiculturalism and Museums: Discourse about Others in the Age of Globalization," *Theory, Culture & Society* 14, no. 4 (1997): 124-125; Alivizatou, "Arts Premiers," 44-53; de L'Estoile, "Appropriations."

⁴³² de L'Estoile, "Appropriations."

(typically “sculpture”), the associated “culture” of origin, its original country (it remains unclear how they determined this), estimated date, material, an inventory number, and provenance beginning only from the point of European acquisition.⁴³³

Although each artefact had its own label, the labels were placed at a distance, further highlighting the “aggressively aestheticising” of the exhibition, as seen in chapter two. However, due to the images added to the labels, it was hard to confuse material culture’s select clarifications. While the forms of the material culture and art from a number of places throughout Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Oceania were admirable, the general lack of information left many visitors hungry for information which was sparse on these labels, as highlighted by Price.⁴³⁴

The labels’ brevity and uniformity were justified as a way to be “discreet” and “readable by all audiences”—but this restraint did not produce neutrality.⁴³⁵ Instead, it flattened histories, silenced Indigenous voices, and made the object legible only through the language and framework of European classification.⁴³⁶

The Indigenous object was framed not as situated or relational, but as an autonomous “masterpiece.” Under the guise that all masterpieces from around the world are “free and equal,” they available for visual consumption, but mainly Western consumption or people who the displayed material culture is perceived by as their cultural heritage, who had the means to visit the Parisian pavilion. The viewer was not positioned as a cultural interlocutor, but as a detached, implicitly Western observer.⁴³⁷

1.2 The Voice of Authority: Naming the West, Silencing the Rest

“The domination of a people’s language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised.”

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, 1998.⁴³⁸

The texts throughout the gallery shed light on who the pavilion was intended for or centred. Starting with the labels, each of the artefacts being accompanied with one, the selective information provided by the curators (as discussed in the previous section), was only provided in French. As the late Ngũgĩ’s statement highlights, the choice of discussing material culture of another country – in the case in the

⁴³³ “Musée de l’Homme,” 39; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 60.

⁴³⁴ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 61.

⁴³⁵ “Musée de l’Homme,” 39.

⁴³⁶ Sogbesan, “Reframing the Present,” 52; De L’Estoile, “From the Colonial Exhibition to the Museum of Man,” 343;

⁴³⁷ “Musée de l’Homme,” 37; “Conseil Scientifique,” 4; Kassim, “Museum Will Not Be Decolonised.”

⁴³⁸ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, “Decolonising the Mind,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 1135

pavilion often acquired in colonial contexts – should not be regarded as neutral.⁴³⁹ While his statement was not made specifically in regard to the Parisian pavilion's textual language choices, it is important to point out how something seemingly as neutral as a language choice can show the contradiction of the foundation of a museal space (in the Pavilion this is "The world's masterpieces are born free and equal") so strikingly.⁴⁴⁰

While many aspects I highlight throughout this dissertation were touched upon by other authors, the language choices used throughout the pavilion seem to have evaded attention. Like several other aspects which will be discussed in this chapter, it is however important to point out the coloniality attached to these choices. Language is not innocence, it is political, includes and excludes, forms a symbol of power, and therefor should always be considered critically. This sentiment is echoed by Hooper-Greenhill, who acknowledges the often obviousness to the language use within museums. She highlights how language not only shapes thought, but also presents a world view. It is impossible to produce a text without ideological consequences.⁴⁴¹ When taking into account McLuhan's concept of the medium being the message, the notion alone of all labels – the only true tangible written information provided relatively close to each of the works within the display spaces themselves – imply that the texts are only meant for people who can read and understand French and according to Sumaya Kassim even more specifically a white audience, although this remains hard to prove.⁴⁴²

What is, however, provable, is the focus within the pavilion itself. From its inception, criticism arose about the information provided within the Pavillon des Sessions, noting for example that the choices made by the curator (Jacques Kerchache) to focus on the "post-collected" provenances of the material culture and art throughout the pavilion, sidelining the pre-collected provenances as well as the colonial histories and legacies tied to many of the selected artefacts, to varying degrees.⁴⁴³ As Price's opening quote (*Primitive Art in Civilized Places*) "dedicated to those artists whose works are in our museums but whose names are not," illuminates, learning about non-Western artists was not the aim of the pavilion.⁴⁴⁴

Instead, throughout the some hundred – solely French – labels within the pavilion, names like Max Ernst, Clause Lévi Strauss, Alphonse Pinart, André Breton, Adams Hollis Twichell, Julius Carlebach, M. Latour-Allard, Francis Robicsek, Anne and Jacques Kerchache, Charles Ratton, and Félix Fénéon grabbed the attention, just to name a few.

⁴³⁹ I refer to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o as Ngũgĩ following the example of the following sources, respecting their authority on the matter: Wedaeli Chibelushi, "Giant of African Literature Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o Dies Aged 87," *BBC*, May 28, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce999kwxn1ro>; Ben Okri, "In His Company You Could Not Be Lazy: Remembering My Friend Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o," *The Guardian*, May 30, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/may/30/ngugi-wa-thiongo-remembered-ben-okri>.

⁴⁴⁰ "Artworks," Ngũgĩ, "Decolonising the Mind," 1135.

⁴⁴¹ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Their Visitors* (London: Routledge, 1994), 116-118.

⁴⁴² McLuhan, *Media*, 23-35; Sumaya Kassim, "Museum Will Not Be Decolonised."

⁴⁴³ Mark, "Parisian Public Museums," 7; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 60.

⁴⁴⁴ Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (The University of Chicago Press, 1989), n.p.

Aside from these names, many labels featured names of French institutions or “events,” like the International Exhibition of 1900, Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Mission Métraux-Lavachery, the Cabinet of Medals of the National Library, Mission Henri Labouret, Cerle Levi-Strauss de la Société des Amis du Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Mission Denise Paulme et Deborah Lifchitz, the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris.

Although not contextualised, these institutional names already arguably provided more French-centred contextualisation than any other region throughout the pavilion’s labels were contextualised. While remembering their French-centric origins, their non-French-centric origins were structurally forgotten.⁴⁴⁵ It is important to highlight that this issue is by no means solely a problem within the Pavillon des Sessions. As Kassim highlights, the entirety of Western museums work to forget, retreat, and deny, from the craftsmanship, to the beauty of the institution, to the way items are described, to the display case. Some things are shown, whilst others remain hidden.⁴⁴⁶ In the pavilion, what was shown was French-centric, and what wasn’t, remained invisible.

The only work throughout the entire pavilion for which an attributed to an artist appeared to have been given, in contrast to the endless stream of French and Western names, was the “fon” Sculpture, attributed to “Akati Ekplékendo,” (see image 34) dated “before 1858.” For context, additional information on the label informs that the sculpture was donated by “Eugène Fonsagrives” in “1894.” The dating of donations, missions, and expositions were significantly more precise than those of the material culture and art provided on the labels, e.g. from the sixth century before our time to the sixth century, seventeenth century, 1325-1521, fourteenth to sixteenth century, before 1858, nineteenth century, and early twentieth century, highlighting again that the West was centred and the rest was not. Bjarki Valtýsson, Sanne Lynge Nilsson, and Christine Eva Pedersen draw attention to museums’ tendency to promote collective beliefs: they play instrumental roles in what parts of history are remembered, but also what will be forgotten.⁴⁴⁷ Taking that into account, visitors appear to be more likely to remember one of the many Western names and names of institutions found in the labels, than the sole attribution to one of the some one hundred “masterpieces,” or a vague dating of an object.

Two room texts (see images 22 and 23), located at the pavilion’s entrance/exit, provided broader framing in French, English, and Spanish. Drawing back on McLuhan’s concept of the medium being the message, it implies that the information provided in these texts was more important to a broader audience.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁵ Thomas, “Representing Difficult Histories,” 540.

⁴⁴⁶ Kassim, “Museum Will Not Be Decolonised.”

⁴⁴⁷ Valtýsson et al., “Reaching Out to be in Reach,” 14.

⁴⁴⁸ McLuhan, *Media*, 23-35.

On 13 April 2000, French President Jacques Chirac inaugurated the rooms designed by Jacques Kerchache (for the museography) and Jean-Michel Wilmotte (architecture) dedicated to African, Asian, Oceanic and American art.

The arrival - or rather the return - to the Louvre of this art so long and so unjustly considered as primitive was the fulfilment of the dream of many men over more than a century: poets, artists, scientists, collectors and heads of state as well as ordinary citizens.

A selection of approximately one hundred works of exceptional quality, a magnificent anthology of the arts of four continents, is thus available to the public in an architecture that is in perfect harmony with the spirit of the place. These exemplary works come primarily from national or regional collections while some of them have been generously loaned from foreign institutions. In addition to the aesthetic emotion felt during the visit, visitors can also learn about the history of the objects, the societies that produced them and their use in the especially prepared multimedia area.



Image 22. Close-up of English section of first wall text Pavillon des Sessions

The first text (see image 22) outlines the purpose and history of the Pavillon des Sessions briefly: it hosted around 100 “masterpieces” from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, primarily drawn from the collections of the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac. It traced the pavilion’s origin to French President Jacques Chirac, who inaugurated it in 2000 as a precursor to the quai Branly museum, and credited art collector and dealer Jean-Jacques Kerchache and architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte as key figures in its realisation. The text framed the pavilion as a culmination of a longstanding French ambition to “restore” these arts to the Louvre, championed by figures like Félix Fénéon and Guillaume Apollinaire.

The text concluded with a striking juxtaposition: the gallery was described as both “an anthology of arts from the four continents” and a site offering insight into “the construction of perspectives on artworks from around the world thanks to its specially equipped multimedia space” – a duality that placed Europe at the centre of perspective-making – and finally introduced the existence of a multimedia space.



The Department of the Arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas in the Pavillon des Sessions at the musée du Louvre was the first satellite for the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, which did not open until June 2006 in Paris.

Founded at the initiative of Jacques Chirac, President of the French Republic from 1995 to 2007, and constructed by the architect Jean Nouvel, the musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac seeks to restore the arts and civilisations of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas to their rightful place at the crossroads of multiple cultural, religious and historical influences. Located on the banks of the River Seine, at the foot of the Eiffel Tower, the museum serves as a space for scientific and artistic dialogue, a crossroads of discussion between the public, researchers, students and contemporary creators.

Image 23. Close-up of English section of second wall text Pavillon des Sessions

The second room text (see image 23), shorter and more institutional in tone, framed the pavilion as the quai Branly's "first satellite," – still keeping the institutional relationship between the pavilion and the quai Branly rather vague, as the meaning of "satellite" remained unclarified – initiated by Jacques Chirac and built by Jean Nouvel, notably omitting Kerchache. The quai Branly museum was described as a space that "restores" the arts and civilisations of non-European continents to "their rightful place" and fosters "scientific and artistic dialogue." Again, French people and institutions were centred, while the proclaimed civilisations which were finally "free and equal," were marginalised.

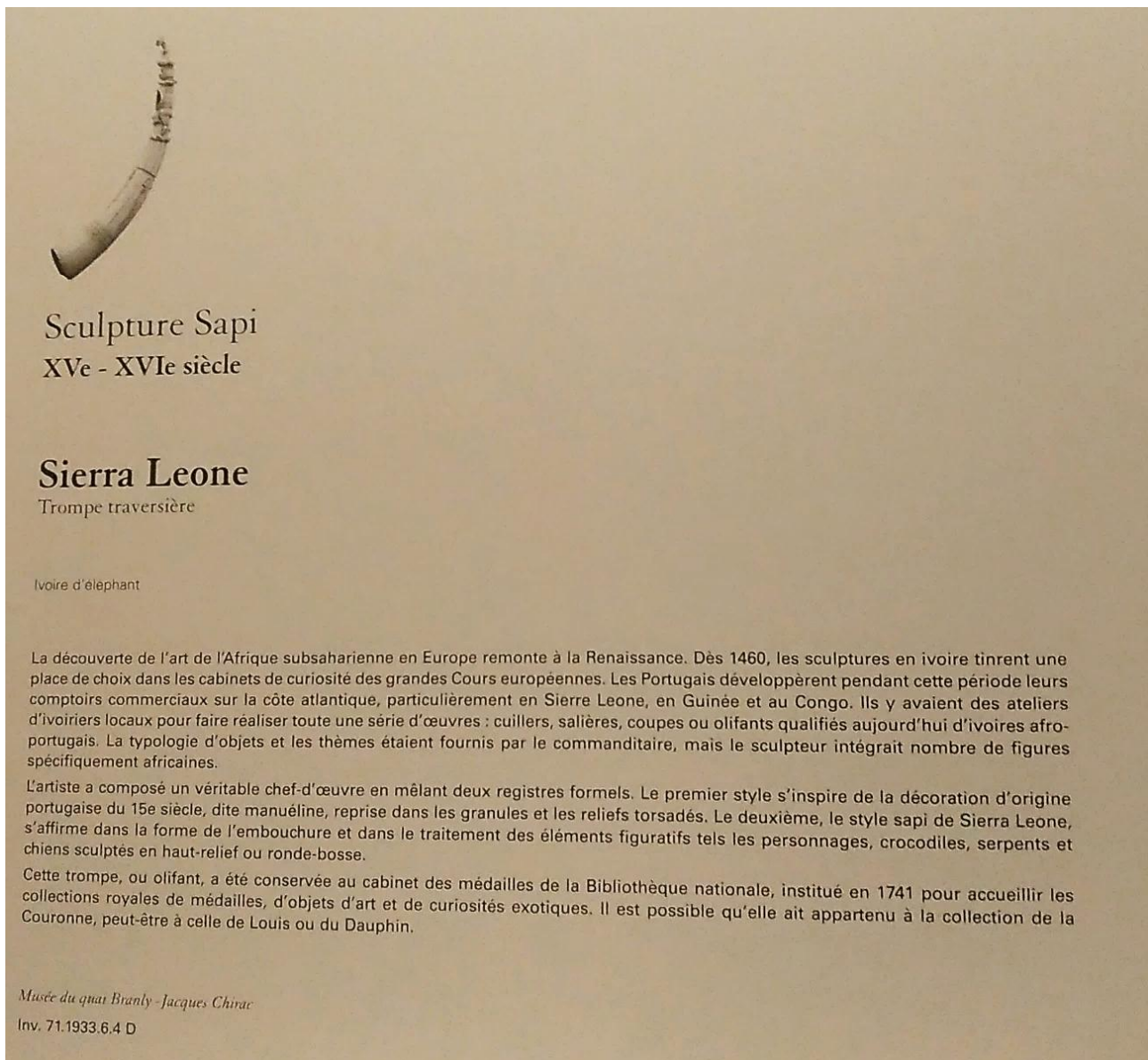


Image 24. Object label "Sculpture Sapi"

One label, attached to the "Sculpture Sapi" from "Sierra Leone" (see image 24) offered expanded information aside from the identification (see images 20 and 21). This label, in French only, provided a European-centred narrative of the "discovery" of African art during the Renaissance. It referenced Portuguese trading posts, ivory workshops, Afro-Portuguese ivories, and the object's eventual place in French royal collections, culminating in a stylistic analysis of the sculpture's European and local features. The Indigenous artist was anonymous, and the framing remained firmly within Western art historical discourse.

Across this textual landscape, several patterns emerge which can be linked back to numerous influential authors within the research fields of decoloniality and decolonising museology. To start on a decolonial note, the centring of European people, although contrasting with the pavilion's mission to promote non-European material culture, is far from unique. As highlighted by Dipesh Chakrabarty in the

late twentieth century, Europe remains a dominant reference point, even in the telling of non-European histories.⁴⁴⁹

More recently (2020), Roque noted that Eurocentrism continues to prevail in Western museums today, keeping ethnographic othering in place.⁴⁵⁰ This sentiment was mirrored by Wróblewska, who stated that museum narratives remain very Eurocentric and based on Western knowledge systems, even though many artefacts have been unfairly obtained from other parts of the world.⁴⁵¹ Eurocentrism problematically affirms patriarchy and whiteness according to Vázquez. It is the axis that separate worlds from one another, a world and a racialised world.⁴⁵²

Rather than dismantling colonial perspectives and power dynamics, art historian Gina Marie Schwenzfeier stated that the quai Branly museum reinforces them by presenting the Eurocentric worldview as the sole valid and all-encompassing lens. The same can be said about the pavilion. This perpetuation of (neo-)colonial relations goes largely unchallenged within the institution's framework.⁴⁵³ Rather than foregrounding indigenous interpretations, such narratives tend to reflect the curator's own cultural biases and lived experiences, according to cultural historian and museologist Sogbesan.⁴⁵⁴ By assuming that visitors are unwilling or incapable of breaking away from traditional outlooks on history (Eurocentric, Western), Kerchache let his own vision limit the learning potential of the pavilion's visitors.⁴⁵⁵

1.3 Hidden Depths: Peripheral Contexts and Dislocated Meaning

"In addition to the wall labels and the pockets of cards, an 'interpretive area' was provided for visitors wishing to supplement their visual contemplation with background information. The existence of that area was not signaled in the main galleries, however, and most people walked by the entrance to it without noticing its existence."

Sally Price, 2007.⁴⁵⁶

Beyond the object labels and wall texts, two additional formats offered contextual information in the Pavillon des Sessions: printed factsheets and a multimedia/interpretation room. Both were physically and epistemically marginalised — poorly signposted, inconsistently available, and easily overlooked. As Sally Price noted in 2007, even the so-called "interpretive area" remained virtually invisible to most visitors. In this section, I argue that these tools represent a performance of transparency without meaningful

⁴⁴⁹ Chakrabarty, "Provincializing Europe," 337.

⁴⁵⁰ Roque, "Decolonising the Museum," 64.

⁴⁵¹ Wróblewska, "Creating Visibility," 21.

⁴⁵² Vázquez, "The Museum," 191.

⁴⁵³ Gina Marie Schwenzfeier, "Cultures don't Converse: Das Display im Musée du quai Branly, ou le Dialogue des Cultures," *Art History Journal for Student Research and Criticism* 9, no. 1 (2024): 244.

⁴⁵⁴ Sogbesan, "Reframing the Present," 54.

⁴⁵⁵ Allen, "Responsibilities of Museums," 18.

⁴⁵⁶ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 61.

accessibility or accountability. What seemed like contextualisation was in fact another form of control — one that privileged certain kinds of knowledge (European) and actively distanced others.

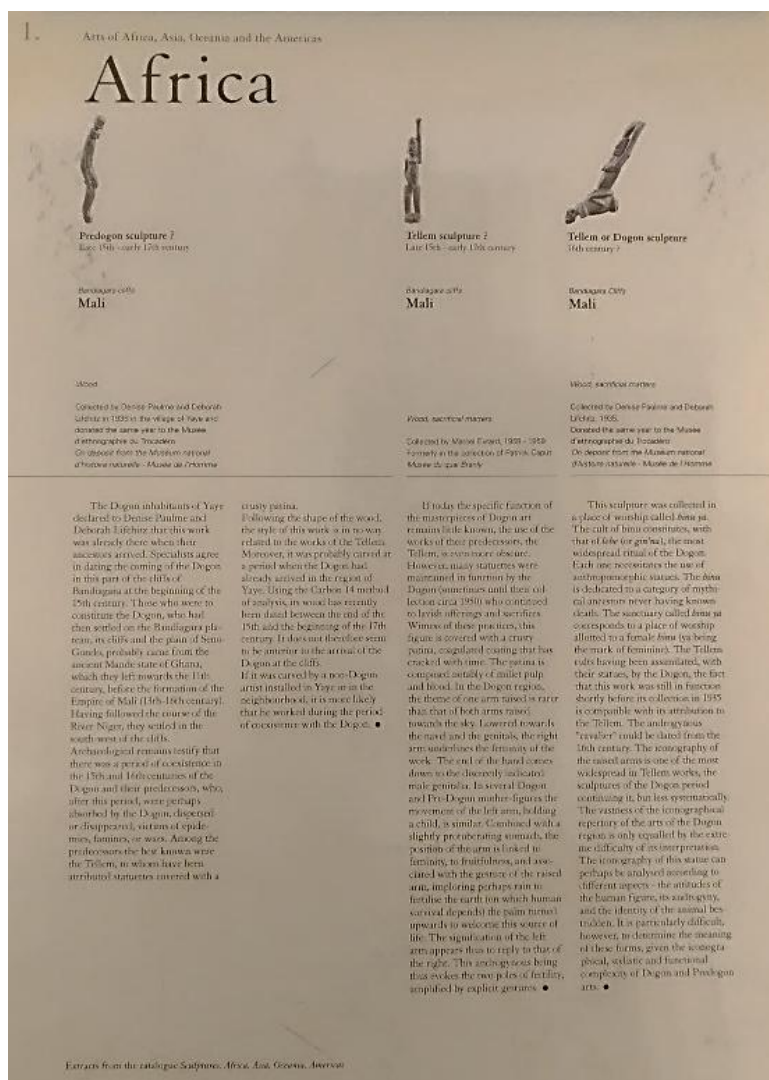


Image 25. Factsheet "1. Africa,"

1.3.1 Hidden Factsheets

Discreetly tucked away under the continental maps or at times simply placed on bare walls beneath the general public's eyeline, the factsheets – removable clipboard-like printed cards – were easy enough to slip people's eyesight.⁴⁵⁷ Additionally, Price noted that finding the correct card for works/continents was hard because they were often misplaced in the wrong wall "pockets."⁴⁵⁸ During the Covid-19 pandemic, they were additionally all briefly removed.

Originally intended to provide information about each of the featured material culture and art within the gallery according to archival research, the informational entries only provided additional information

⁴⁵⁷ Petridis, "Recent Exhibitions," 76.

⁴⁵⁸ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 61.

about 37 artefacts in French, Spanish, and English.⁴⁵⁹ The smaller number of further contextualised material culture and art than originally planned, might be due to Kerchache opposition against their inclusion in the galleries.⁴⁶⁰

Returning to McLuhan's the medium is the message, the lack of effort to foreground the factsheets within the pavilion reinforce the established vision of Kerchache that context was secondary. The availability of the three languages highlight the likely importance the curatorial staff – excluding Kerchache – felt towards further contextualising the 37 sculptures selected for additional context, however, the some seventy remaining sculptures which were only provided French labelling raise questions about the supposed equality of the displayed "masterpieces."⁴⁶¹ If they were all equal, why were they not textually treated as such?

The 37 entries, further clarifying a selection of the displayed "masks" and "sculptures" were divided among twelve plates, which each featured two to five entries. This included seven "sculptures," from Africa, six "sculptures" from Asia, eleven "sculptures," from Oceania, and thirteen "sculptures" from the Americas, located throughout the pavilion. Kerchache's preferred type of Indigenous material culture (sculptures) was consistent.⁴⁶²

Structurally, the factsheets (see image 25) largely followed the information provided on the labels – albeit also in English and Spanish. It included the continent in which the accompanying material culture derived from (e.g. Africa), followed by the images of the artefact, the "names" of the sculptures, their dates (never a specific year), occasionally their "cultures/regions," the modern names of nation states, occasionally identification of the objects (e.g. helmet mask), their materials, and their criticised post-collected provenances.⁴⁶³

Additionally, some contextualisation was provided, ranging from one sentence to thirteen sentences for a single object and eighteen sentences which accompanied three sculptures. Many of the factsheets provide Western-centric information, for example, the "Predogon Sculpture?" (see image 25) started by stating that the general "Dogon inhabitants of Yaye" declared specifically to "Denice Paulme and Deborah Lifchitz" that the sculpture was already there when their ancestors arrived. It continued by discussing "specialists" presumably Western ones due to the tone of the text, "archaeological remains testify," and "using the Carbon 14 method of analysis, the wood has recently been dated" highlighting that Western methods were more important than oral accounts by Indigenous peoples.

⁴⁵⁹ "Musée de l'Homme, des Arts et des Civilisations: Mission de Prefiguration: Synthese Pre-Programme," April 1998, n.p. Sourced in the folder "Commission Technique: Arts Premiers Concours," in the map "Antenne au Louvre du Musée des Arts et Civilisations: Correspondance Présidence," Archives Nationales, box 20080655, art. 3; "Compte Rendu la Reunion."

⁴⁶⁰ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 199.

⁴⁶¹ McLuhan, *Media*, 23-35.

⁴⁶² Baudet and Jamin, Letter to Viatte and Godelier

⁴⁶³ Mark, "Parisian Public Museums," 7; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 60.

However, the factsheets also provided some information on for example the Bandiagara Cliffs, the region provided by the factsheet, e.g. "Those who were to constitute the Dogon, who had then settled on the Bandiagara plateau, its cliffs and the plain of Senegondo, probably came from the ancient Mande state of Ghana, which they left towards the eleventh century, before the formation of the Empire of Mali (thirteenth-sixteenth century). Having followed the course of the River Niger, they settled in the South-West of the cliffs," highlighting a change in movement. However, how many people or why they left are for example not clarified, making it unclear whether they don't know, or don't find it important. Additionally, the museum texts often read somewhat awkwardly, likely due to direct translation from French. For instance, one label stated: "If today the specific function of the masterpieces of Dogon art remains little known, the use of the works of their predecessors, the Tellem, is even more obscure." The phrasing here feels formal and slightly opaque, which may have hindered visitor engagement.

Unlike the other texts throughout the pavilion however, the general source of the information was provided, although vaguely, with each of the sheets ending with the following line: "extracts from the catalogue *Sculptures: Africa, Asia, Oceania, Americas*." This exhibition catalogue, edited by Jacques Kerchache, was a collaborative effort involving 48 authors, only eight of whom appear to be non-Western.⁴⁶⁴ Despite this imbalance, the catalogue was praised for its scholarly value, with contributions from eminent experts and specialists such as Ezio Bassani, as well as (then) upcoming voices like Marie Yvonne Curtis, offering what some described as "quite elaborate summaries" of the objects on display.⁴⁶⁵ However, no page names were provided, meaning visitors had to find access to a copy of the book, and then find the chapter discussing the provided information about the objects to learn more and see if the information was correct.

1.3.2 Marginalised Interpretation/Multimedia Space

This catalogue could initially be consulted in the – tucked away in a dark corner at the margins of an already peripheral exhibition – multimedia space. Advertised solely on the final line of the previously discussed wall text as well as a small text at its entrance, it was easy to miss. As Sally Price and Constantine Petridis both observe, this informational corner was likely the product of a compromise: the outcome of anthropologist Maurice Godelier's push for contextualisation and the consistent resistance by Jacques Kerchache. This resulted to the contextualisation being separated from the visual presentation. The

⁴⁶⁴ Jacques Kerchache, ed, *Sculptures: Africa, Asia, Oceania, Americas* (Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2001), 12-13.

⁴⁶⁵ Petridis, "Recent Exhibitions," 76;

“contextualisation place” thus existed, but hidden and it was often entirely overlooked by visitors, as highlighted by Price and Petridis.⁴⁶⁶

Located adjacent to the first Oceania room, the space was intended to offer visitors additional background on the objects beyond what is presented in labels and factsheets. In 2023, this included three types of material: digital resources, printed books, and a video that played in loop on a big tv screen (see image 30).

The room contained 10–12 computer terminals, where visitors could browse the Pavillon des Sessions section of the quai Branly website. In 2007, Price noted that these terminals hosted the award-winning CD-ROM *Chefs-d’Oeuvre et Civilisations*, directed by Kerchache and Godelier.⁴⁶⁷

However, by 2023, this CD-ROM appeared to no longer be in use. Instead, the terminals simply opened the public-facing online content already available on the Musée du quai Branly's website. This site provides a more exact and visual placement of the material culture on a world map (although how this specifically was determined remains unclear), provides records of each of the objects, and provides general information about the pavilion. Crucially, no additional information is currently provided on the website's object record pages beyond what was already available on their object labels within the exhibition, and far less than what appeared on the factsheets. This appears to differ from the situation in 2007, as Price noted that the quai Branly website provided brief ethnographic background on each of the displayed works in the pavilion back then.⁴⁶⁸

Aside from the screens, there were also books. In 2007, the room included two reference books: *Sculptures: Afrique, Asie, Océanie, Amériques*, as well as *Jacques Kerchache: Portraits croisés*, both solely in French.⁴⁶⁹ By 2023, four books were on display: *20 Ans: Les Acquisitions du Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac*, *Statues dans les Collections du Musée du quai Branly*, *Kimono: Catalogue de l'Exposition*, and *The Collection: Art from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas* (the only one in English). Significantly, the original catalogue accompanying the displayed works had been removed by this time, taking the chance away from visitors to learn more about the displayed material culture. The books focus on the quai Branly and remain uncritical in tone, centring the quai Branly museum and their display.

Finally, a big television screen in the back of the dark alcove featured a film in 2007 showing Kerchache in five self-fashioned roles: “the adventurer,” “the collector,” “the visionary,” “the perfectionist,” and “a particular gaze,” followed by a segment on André Breton's collection. By 2023, this film had been replaced with a looped video titled *Le Pavillon des Sessions: Les Arts Non-Occidentaux au Musée du Louvre*, also viewable on the Louvre's website and YouTube. The 13 minute and 14 second video, available with

⁴⁶⁶ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 60; Petridis, “Recent Exhibitions,” 76.

⁴⁶⁷ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 61–62.

⁴⁶⁸ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 199.

⁴⁶⁹ Price, *Paris Primitive*, 62.

French, English, and Spanish subtitles, opens with the line: "Our relationship with objects from other civilisations reveals our own vision and how it has evolved over the centuries."⁴⁷⁰ This framing immediately centres Western self-perception over Indigenous knowledge or context. The speakers in this video were: Yves Le Fur (Director of Heritage and Collections at the Musée du quai Branly), Aurélien Gaborit (Head of the Africa Collections and the Pavillon des Sessions), and Emmanuel Kasarhérou (Director of the Musée du quai Branly and the first Kanak to lead a French national museum).⁴⁷¹

While Kasarhérou's inclusion marked a symbolic gesture toward Indigenous presence, the script largely framed the works as ambassadors within a Western "temple of art," as Le Fur concludes: "Each object is conceived like a performance. They are above all like ambassadors, the voices of the countries of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Here in the temple of Western art, representing their peoples." The white Director of Heritage and Collections at the Musée du quai Branly having the first and final word in the video was rather fitting, considering the contents of the Pavilion, both in terms of its history, institutional practices, curatorial practices, and textual practices.⁴⁷²

Although documents by the prefiguration committee from 1998 state that particular care would be put into providing info to the public in the forms of labels, which would provide dating using the history of the objects since they were collected, detailed educational sheets on each of the displayed material culture, and a contextualisation space on the represented cultures, combining databases, and DVDs. It appears that between Kerchache's aestheticisation and Godelier's contextualisation battle, Kerchache ultimately won.⁴⁷³

2. Conflict: Transparency Without Context

"When we consider the efforts made to carry out the cultural estrangement so characteristic of the colonial epoch, we realise that nothing has been left to chance and that the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness."

Frantz Fanon, 1966.⁴⁷⁴

Fanon illuminates an important colonial tendency also found in the Pavillon des Sessions: the alienation of material culture through colonial practices which are all assuming, albeit often embedded to

⁴⁷⁰ "Pavillon des Sessions;" Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, "Le Pavillon des Sessions: Les Arts Non-Occidentaux au Musée du Louvre," *YouTube* (00:00-13:13), December 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qq1GydIjetQ>.

⁴⁷¹ Isabelle Martinetti, "Kanak Emmanuel Kasarhérou to Head Paris' Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac Museum," *RFI*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/culture/20200528-kanak-emmanuel-kasarh%C3%A9rou-to-head-paris-quai-branly-jacques-chirac-museum>; "Pavillon des Sessions."

⁴⁷² "Pavillon des Sessions."

⁴⁷³ "Synthese Pre-Programme;" Corbey, "Arts Premiers," 6.

⁴⁷⁴ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 170.

a degree that their use comes to be perceived as neutral and unquestioned, and the coloniser's patriarchal tendency to speak for Indigenous people instead of meaningfully with them, due to the ignorant notion that Western epistemologies are universally objective, which is echoed by Vázquez and Mignolo.⁴⁷⁵

In Roth's three-act structure, the second act – conflict – presents the central obstacle or tension driving the narrative forward. At the Pavillon des Sessions, this act unfolded as a clash between the promise of transparency and the reality of interpretive opacity. The museum space provide certain facts (e.g. names, dates, classifications, maps), but these fragments are embedded in frameworks that shape, and often distort, meaning. The "characters" in this act are the curatorial voice, which asserts authority through ostensibly neutral information, and the suppressed Indigenous perspectives, which remain absent from the interpretive stage.⁴⁷⁶

The rising action develops through three key "plot points." First, taxonomical control shows how the language of classification exerted epistemic violence, embedding Eurocentric hierarchies into seemingly objective terms. Second, chronopolitics reveals how temporal framing situated objects in a way that flattened or distorted historical realities, reinforcing colonial narratives. Finally, cartopolitics examines how maps, while offering spatial reference, embed colonial worldviews that subtly directed visitor perception. Each of these plot points escalates the central tension: transparency that is only partial, and therefore misleading.

By sequencing these subsections in this way (language, then time, then space), the section mirrors Roth's model of rising action, moving from the conceptual frameworks that categorise, to the historical frames that situate, to the spatial frames that contain. In each case, the conflict is not simply a lack of information, but the strategic shaping of that information to privilege certain interpretations while excluding others.

2.1 Taxonomical Control: Language as Epistemic Violence

"Using vernacular terms like *nimba* or *eyima bieri* without explanation does not teach the visitor anything."

Constantine Petridis, 2000.⁴⁷⁷

Even though many museology scholars recommend using language that is easy to read and understand, using short and clear sentences without underexplained specialised terminology, this was not

⁴⁷⁵ Vázquez, "The Museum," 187; Mignolo, "I Am Where I Think," 174.

⁴⁷⁶ Roth, "Visual Storytelling," 88-89.

⁴⁷⁷ Petridis, "Recent Exhibitions," 76.

employed within the pavilion.⁴⁷⁸ As Petridis noted in her 2000 review of the newly opened Pavillon des Sessions, the exhibition frequently employed culturally specific terms without offering adequate explanation. This issue persisted across both the object labels and the supplementary factsheets.⁴⁷⁹

2.1.1 Vague Labels

Most labels throughout the exhibition space identified objects using – what seem like – ethnonyms or cultural identifiers such as Sapi, Banga, Tlingit, Toba Batak, Kanak, Koniag, or Kwakwaka'wakw. These names, while specific, were offered without background or clarification, assuming a level of prior knowledge that most visitors were – as the pavilion was created for a public which was unfamiliar with Indigenous “masterpieces” – unlikely to have. In some cases, the labels provided even less specificity: in the Oceania section, for example, several objects are simply labelled as “Sculpture” (see image 32), without further detail.⁴⁸⁰

Where more elaborate identifications were provided, by adding clarifications of what the artefacts were, below the name of the contemporary nation state where the objects derive from, they were often presented in similarly unexplained Indigenous terminology. Examples include: masque “Karanga,” protective statue “bitégué,” divinity figure “riz bulul,” statue of a male initiation ritual “trrou kôrrou,” figure of the god “Kuka'ilimoku,” and house post “gwasila.” These are just a selection of the terminology used. While these labels appeared to be informative, they often – likely – left the visitor with little actual understanding of what the terms mean, their linguistic or cultural origin, or their significance within their source communities, as pointed out by Petridis.⁴⁸¹

2.1.2 Obscure Factsheets

The factsheets (see images 25, 29, and 33) carried this practice further. Alongside repeating the same terminology from the labels, they embedded it into contextualisation entries that assumed the reader could infer meaning. For example: “the Dogon inhabitants of Yaye,” “these statuettes, under the generic name of bitegue, come under the responsibility of the family head,” “their books of magic contained recipes

⁴⁷⁸ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and their Visitors* (Routledge, 1994), 125-126; Anna Faherty, “What Makes a Great Museum Label? The Science and Art behind Museum Labels,” published December 1, 2024, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-makes-a-great-museum-label/>.

⁴⁷⁹ Petridis, “Recent Exhibitions,” 76.

⁴⁸⁰ Mark “Parisian Public Museums,” 7.

⁴⁸¹ Petridis, “Recent Exhibitions,” 76.

of which the most powerful, the pupuk, entailed the use of the viscera of a child, ritually killed, and which were kept in a ceramic pot," "the grade statues represented a spirit. The tamat doro statue shown here is female." In many cases, this language flattened complex cultural and cosmological systems into opaque terminology that exoticised rather than explained.

However, there were some exceptions, in which terms were briefly unpacked. For example: "they were sacred objects, known as zemis, figurations of a god or of a divinised ancestor. Each man, each animal species, each element of nature had its zemi," as well as "in one of the malo languages Trouu körrou means 'he who stands before you and looks at you.' Each Malo village had at least one men's house and the male community was structured into a system of hierarchical ranks. The Trrou Körrou sculpture celebrated the accession of the man who commissioned it to one of the highest ranks of a society in the south-east of Malo. The decoration of carved and engraved jaws of pigs testified the sacrifices that must have been offered to celebrate this new promotion. This statue was made of Natora wood, used currently in Melanesia for the making of the poles of the ceremonial buildings."

Even in these cases, however, the explanations remained surface-level, often framed more as curiosities than as legitimate knowledge systems requiring deep contextual engagement. The reliance on Indigenous terms without explanation creates an illusion of authenticity and specificity, while ultimately withholding understanding. As Petridis argues, such practice "does not teach the visitor anything," it suggests cultural richness while obscuring its meaning.⁴⁸²

By often leaving terms unexplained, the exhibition implicitly asserted curatorial control: the knowledge remained behind the glass, coded in a way only accessible to the expert. This technique can be understood as a form of epistemological gatekeeping, where vocabulary becomes a barrier rather than a bridge.

Furthermore, when violent or sensational aspects were highlighted without cultural nuance, such as the pupuk example involving ritual child sacrifice, it played into longstanding colonial tropes of "savagery" and "mysticism." In contrast, deeper elements of Indigenous cosmology, ceremony, or symbolism were rarely afforded the same space, even though Kasarhérou informed in the video played in the interpretation space of the pavilion, that most statues portray the supernatural, religion, and the hereafter.⁴⁸³

The taxonomy at work in the Pavillon thus functioned less as a neutral or educational system, and more as a subtle tool of control. By invoking Indigenous terms selectively and without context, it reasserted a dynamic in which Western institutions speak for, rather than with, the cultures they display.

⁴⁸² Petridis, "Recent Exhibitions," 76.

⁴⁸³ Musée du quai Branly, "Le Pavillon des Sessions."

2.2 Chronopolitics: The Coloniality of the Gregorian Calendar

“if there is one colonial achievement that splendidly survives the age of colonization and imperialism, it is the world-wide implantation of the Gregorian calendar.”

Benward Joerges, 2000.⁴⁸⁴

Throughout the Pavillon des Sessions, the Gregorian calendar, also known as the New Style calendar, was used as the default temporal framework for dating both Western historical events and the African, American, Oceanic, and Asian material culture (see images 20-34).⁴⁸⁵ This seemingly neutral practice in fact imposed a colonial temporal structure onto artefacts that were often never originally situated within that system.⁴⁸⁶ The result is an epistemic imbalance: Western artefacts and events were precisely dated, often to the exact year, while non-Western cultural items were loosely labelled with vague or broad timeframes. This disparity did more than obscure the cultural specificity of Indigenous temporalities; it perpetuated the colonial logic that time itself belongs to the West.⁴⁸⁷

Calendars are not merely tools of measurement. They are cultural systems that organise social, religious, political, and economic life. Across time, civilisations around the world have developed distinct calendrical systems suited to their geographic, ecological, and cosmological conditions.⁴⁸⁸ The Gregorian calendar, developed under Pope Gregory XIII (1502-1585) in 1582 as a reform of the Julian calendar, was designed to better align with the solar year. By 1583 it had been adopted across much of Catholic Europe.⁴⁸⁹ However, its global dominance emerged only through colonial expansion.⁴⁹⁰

From the eighteenth century onwards, contact and trade with the West increasingly introduced the Gregorian calendar into societies outside Europe.⁴⁹¹ Under colonisation, this system was formalised, internalised, and normalised, often at the expense of traditional temporal logics.⁴⁹²

In the region historically known as Yorubaland (in this case referring to what is now southwestern Nigeria) contact with European merchants began influencing temporal practices from the eighteenth century, prior to formal colonial rule. In both the British and French colonial contexts, the Gregorian

⁴⁸⁴ Bernward Joerges, “Metropolitan Time: Reflections on the Millenium, Calendars, and Gregorian Hegemony,” (WZB Discussion Paper, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung, 2000), 14.

⁴⁸⁵ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Gregorian Calendar,” last modified May 16, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julius-Caesar-Roman-ruler>.

⁴⁸⁶ Katharina Hunfeld, “The Coloniality of Time in the Global Justice Debate: De-Centring Western Linear Temporality,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 18, no. 1 (2022): 103

⁴⁸⁷ Muhammad A. Z. Mughal, “The Western and Non-Western Dichotomization of Time in Anthropology,” *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology* 7, no. 7 (2023): 5; Hunfeld, “Coloniality of Time,” 102.

⁴⁸⁸ Joanne Clapcott et al., “Out of Sync: Transforming Environmental Monitoring through Indigenous Perspectives of Time,” *Earth Stewardship* 2, no. 3 (2025): 3; Rachael Cadman, et al., “All Kinds of Seasons: Articulating Labrador Inuit Governance through Crafting a Seasonal Calendar,” *Arctic Science* (2025): 3-4.

⁴⁸⁹ Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Gregorian Calendar.”

⁴⁹⁰ Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870-1950* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 1.

⁴⁹¹ Oluwatoyin Sogbesan, “Primordial Yoruba Concept of Time and Calendar: The Case of The Aboòrìsàs of Oyo Town,” *Journal of Culture, Society and Development* 67 (2022): 68. (68-75); Ogle, *Transformation of Time*, 1.

⁴⁹² Partha Mitter, “Colonial Modern: A Clash of Colonial and Indigenous Chronologies: The Case of India,” in *Time in the History of Art Temporality, Chronology, and Anachrony*, eds. Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey (Routledge, 2018), 70.

calendar was gradually imposed and institutionalised in the region, leading to the erosion of the Indigenous Yoruba calendrical system based on a four-day week. While this system remains embedded in ritual and cosmological life - especially among traditional religious communities such as the Aboòrìsàs in towns like Oyo - it has been marginalised in the digital and bureaucratic spheres, which overwhelmingly reflect the indigenised Gregorian framework.⁴⁹³

Time exemplifies what Walter Mignolo calls the "coloniality of knowledge." Just as space was colonised and mapped to suit imperial ambitions, time was also disciplined and reordered.⁴⁹⁴ Western time—linear, progressive, mechanised—was introduced to enforce industrial productivity and religious conformity.⁴⁹⁵ The seven-day week, the clock, and time zones were all colonial instruments designed to reorganise life, labour, and land.⁴⁹⁶ Indigenous understandings of time, whether non-linear (as in many Aboriginal cosmologies), cyclical (as in Mesoamerican calendars), or event-based (as in some West African contexts), were rendered illegible or irrational by colonial powers.⁴⁹⁷

The Gregorian calendar's dominance is neither a matter of objective superiority nor technical inevitability. Other calendars (such as the Hindu lunisolar system, the Islamic Hijrī calendar, or the Ethiopian calendar) offer alternative logics and serve vital cultural, agricultural, and religious functions.⁴⁹⁸ Yet, their usage is often confined to the private or spiritual sphere, while Gregorian time structures dominate public institutions. The calendar's use of BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini, "in the year of the Lord") explicitly centres Christian cosmology and further universalises a Western narrative of time.⁴⁹⁹

However, some may argue that the Gregorian calendar serves as a practical standard for global coordination, especially in fields such as science, commerce, and diplomacy. It allows for synchronisation across borders and institutions. While this utility is undeniable, the question remains whether this convenience should come at the cost of erasing diverse temporalities in spaces designed for cultural representation, such as museums. The challenge is to distinguish between necessary standardisation for function and uncritical universalisation that reproduces epistemic inequality.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹³ Oluwatoyin Sogbesan, "Primordial Yoruba Concept of Time and Calendar: The Case of The Aboòrìsàs of Oyo Town," *Journal of Culture, Society and Development* 67 (2022): 68; S. Adebajji Akintoye, *A History of the Yoruba People* (Amalion Publishing, 2010), 13-25.

⁴⁹⁴ Hunfeld, "Coloniality," 103; Mignolo, *Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 177-179.

⁴⁹⁵ Clapcott, "Out of Sync," 3; Hunfeld, "Coloniality of Time," 107; Ferdinand de Jong, "Replicas and Religious Heritage in the Ethnographic Museum," in *Reframing the Ethnographic Museum: Histories, Politics and Futures*, eds. Michael Rowlands, Nick Stanley, and Graeme Were (UCL Press, 2025), 178.

⁴⁹⁶ Hunfeld, "Coloniality of Time," 103; Mari Margil, Alice Gorman, and Michelle Maloney, "Imposing Lunar Time Zones, a Giant Leap Toward Colonizing the Moon," accessed August 6, 2025, <https://www.centerforenvironmentalrights.org/news/imposing-lunar-time-zones-a-giant-leap-toward-colonizing-the-moon>.

⁴⁹⁷ Hunfeld, "Coloniality of Time," 103; Aschale Moges Belay and Snehashish Chakraverty, "Mathematical Algorithms for Perpetual Ethiopian Calendar (E.C.) and Similar Calendars," *Engineering and Applied Science Letters* 7, no. 2 (2024): 1; Clapcott, "Out of Sync," 3.

⁴⁹⁸ Partha Mitter, "Colonial Modern: A Clash of Colonial and Indigenous Chronologies: The Case of India," in *Time in the History of Art Temporality, Chronology, and Anachrony*, eds. Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey (Routledge, 2018), 69; Belay and Chakraverty, "Ethiopian Calendar," 1-2.

⁴⁹⁹ Joanne Clapcott et al., "Out of Sync: Transforming Environmental Monitoring through Indigenous Perspectives of Time," *Earth Stewardship* (2025): 3.

⁵⁰⁰ Hunfeld, "Coloniality of Time," 102-104.

Resistance to this dominance persists. In 2016, Bolivian President Evo Morales advocated a return to the pre-Columbian Andean calendar to foster Indigenous identity and epistemic sovereignty. The system recalibrated time from the moment of Spanish invasion, which would situate the country in the year 5533 anno 2025.⁵⁰¹ While little appears to have changed in Bolivia, the calendar of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Ethiopia, a calendrical system that places it seven to eight years "behind" the Gregorian calendar according to Western measurement, continues to be used in Ethiopia instead of the Gregorian one.⁵⁰²

Additionally, in Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, traditional calendars play a vital role in guiding seasonal activities. These calendars, often based on lunar cycles and ecological cues, are used to predict natural events with remarkable precision. One striking example is the biannual harvest of the *Palola viridis* - called Palolo in Samoa and Balolo in Fiji -. The timing of this marine worm's emergence is not marked by the Gregorian calendar, but by indigenous systems that align moon phases with seasonal changes in land and sea. Such calendars remain central to cultural practices, especially in seasonal fishing, and are deeply embedded in oral traditions and local knowledge.⁵⁰³ While the increasing globalisation and (other) effects of colonisation have made the Gregorian calendar dominant, highlighting that regional calendars are still used and exist, is an important way to not only understand the people in the past and present, but also acknowledge other ways of knowing.⁵⁰⁴

In Indonesia, aside from the Masehi calendar (the Gregorian calendar system), the Hijriyah and the Javanese calendars are also used. The earliest calendar used in the Indonesian region was the Saka, or "Soko" calendar, a Hindu solar-based system marking its first year on 14 March 78, one year after the coronation of King Syaliwahono (Aji Soko) in India. Over time, the Hijri calendar, an Islamic calendar based on the lunar cycle, became widely used, particularly in everyday activities. In Java, this led to the development of the Javanese calendar, which adapted the Hijri system but continued the year count from the Saka era. Following the Dutch colonial period, the Masehi calendar, based on the Gregorian system, became the official calendar of Indonesia. However, the Hijri calendar is a National calendar as well, with State ceremonies at the Islamic Holidays, and the inclusion of Islamic holidays celebration as National Holiday, due to the large number of Muslim citizens in Indonesia.⁵⁰⁵ These are not mere symbolic acts; they are assertions of epistemic and temporal autonomy.⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰¹ "Bolivia Leader Morales Want to Ditch Gregorian Calendar," *BBC*, June 22, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-36595192>.

⁵⁰² Belay and Chakraverty, "Ethiopian Calendar," 1-2.

⁵⁰³ Miles Young, "Safeguarding Maritime Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Pacific," in *Maritime Living Heritage: Coastal Communities in the Asia-Pacific Region and Their Traditional Food System* (ICHCAP, 2021) 17.

⁵⁰⁴ Philip A. Clarke, "Australian Aboriginal Ethnometeorology and Seasonal Calendars," *History and Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2009): 101.

⁵⁰⁵ Rifki Rosyad et al. "Sacred Calendar and Expression of Religion in Indonesia," *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation* 24, no. 9 (2020): 2048-2051; Faiz Farichah, "The Java Calendar and Its Relevance With the Islamic Calendar," *Al-Hilal* 2, no. 2 (2020): 217-219.

⁵⁰⁶ Hunfeld, "Coloniality of Time," 107.

The political work of the Gregorian calendar lies in its ability to make itself appear universal.⁵⁰⁷ Its standardisation through Greenwich Mean Time in 1884 was a particularly bold manifestation of temporal imperialism. Britain, then at the height of its colonial power, was effectively declaring itself the world's centre not only in space, but in time. The replacement of local times with centralised, regulated time zones erased temporal diversity and forced colonised societies into compliance with the rhythms of empire.⁵⁰⁸

In museums, these structures endure. Western historical artefacts are often dated to the decade or even the year. Non-Western objects, however, are usually tagged with broad descriptors like "eighteenth–nineteenth century" or "pre-colonial," which reinforce a narrative of timelessness or stasis. This is a continuation of what Johannes Fabian called the "denial of coevalness," the positioning of non-Western societies as existing outside of modern time. The ethnographic present, still pervasive in curatorial practices, denies these cultures their historical dynamism and contemporaneity.⁵⁰⁹

This was clearly visible in the Pavillon des Sessions. The artworks and material culture from selected regions in Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas were described within the framework of Gregorian chronology, yet they were rarely granted the temporal precision afforded to European artefacts or even events. This reproduced the logic of developmentalism, which holds that Western societies are traditional, static, and located in the past. It subtly conveys the idea that Westerners possess history and non-Westerners do not.⁵¹⁰

Such frameworks obscure how Indigenous communities have long theorised time in complex, context-specific ways. In many cultures, time is not an abstract universal but relational and embedded in place, ecology, and community. Among the Inuit, for example, time is experienced through environmental cues and seasonal changes, rather than imposed hours and schedules. The 40-hour, five-day Western workweek—a hallmark of capitalist time—has disrupted traditional ways of life and is often used to label Indigenous peoples as "unproductive" within wage labour systems.⁵¹¹

Still, it is worth acknowledging that Indigenous and non-Western societies today also interact with Gregorian time strategically and selectively. Many communities navigate multiple temporalities simultaneously—engaging with Gregorian time in official or economic contexts, while maintaining cultural calendars and temporal practices in ritual or communal life. This hybridity complicates a binary framing of imposed versus authentic time, and reminds us that Indigenous temporalities are dynamic and adaptive.⁵¹²

Many Western institutions have reinforced these injustices and continue to do so. It has depended on the temporal distancing of subjects, often freezing them in a pre-modern "ethnographic present."

⁵⁰⁷ Hunfeld, "Coloniality of Time," 102–112.

⁵⁰⁸ Mitter, "Colonial Modern," 69; Margil, "Time Zones;" Joe Zadeh, "The Tyranny of Time," *Noema*, June 3, 2021, <https://www.noemamag.com/the-tyranny-of-time/>.

⁵⁰⁹ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 30–31.

⁵¹⁰ Hunfeld, "Coloniality of Time," 105.

⁵¹¹ Cadman et al., "Seasonal Calendar," 3–4.

⁵¹² Oluwatoyin Sogbesan, "Yoruba Concept," 68; Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Gregorian Calendar."

Museum displays continue this legacy, presenting Indigenous cultures as frozen in time, static, and traditional. They rarely accommodate the fact that these cultures have changed, adapted, theorised, and participated in global histories.⁵¹³ Maintaining the distinction of “us” and “them,” “the West” and “the rest,” distancing non-Western societies from Western ones.⁵¹⁴

Decolonising time, therefore, is not merely a symbolic exercise. It requires the creation of space for multiple temporalities to coexist and be recognised as valid. Museums must rethink their curatorial practices: rather than imposing Gregorian dates as the primary temporal reference, they should incorporate the calendars and temporal systems of the cultures being represented.⁵¹⁵ One example of decolonising the time within the (renovated) pavilion, could be implementing a form of dual dating where the primary date uses the Indigenous temporal narratives and provides the Western date as a contextual footnote, sidelining the Gregorian calendar, to avoid Fabian’s denial of coevalness. Another way could be to omit the Gregorian calendar all together, as the Indigenous calendars currently are. However, the most important thing to do is to include source communities’ concerns and involve them in their practices.⁵¹⁶

This plural approach would not only provide visitors with a more accurate understanding of how the object was situated in its original context, but also symbolically affirm the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge systems. It would challenge the idea that time is neutral and universal, and instead make visible the colonial histories embedded in museum conventions.⁵¹⁷

Incorporating Indigenous temporalities invites a vital conceptual renewal in how we understand time and relationality. Ubuntu ethics, rooted in the philosophical traditions of Southern African communities - including Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mozambique, Zambia, Malawi, Eswatini, Lesotho, Botswana, Angola, and the Democratic Republic of Congo - offers a profound reconfiguration of temporal situatedness. The term *hunhu/ubuntu* expresses a communal ideal that foregrounds interdependence and relational personhood. Rather than conceiving time as a linear sequence, *ubuntu* envisions it as a relational continuum in which the living, the ancestors (the living-dead), and the yet-to-be-born are deeply and dynamically interconnected.⁵¹⁸

Recognising and restoring these plural temporalities is not merely an academic task. It is a form of epistemic justice, a way of affirming that cultures have the right to narrate their own histories, structure their own presents, and imagine their own futures.⁵¹⁹

⁵¹³ de Jong, “Ethnographic Museum,” 181.

⁵¹⁴ Mughal, “Dichotomization of Time,” 5.

⁵¹⁵ de Jong, “Ethnographic Museum,” 178.

⁵¹⁶ de Jong, “Ethnographic Museum,” 177.

⁵¹⁷ de Jong, “Ethnographic Museum,” 178.

⁵¹⁸ Hunfeld, “Coloniality of Time,” 111-113; Fainos Mangena, “African Ethics through Ubuntu: A Postmodern Exposition,” *Africology* 9, no. 2 (2016): 67-75.

⁵¹⁹ Arfaoui, “Time and the Colonial State;” Hunfeld, “Coloniality of Time,” 101.

In Australia, Indigenous seasonal calendars are used in museum exhibitions to broaden the understanding of how Aboriginal people interact(ed) seasonally with the environment. Using Indigenous calendars could be a way for Western museums to not only educate people on the notion that the Gregorian calendar isn't the only one in use today or in the past, but also would provide appreciation to the wide breadth of relationships that Indigenous peoples have had with their surroundings throughout time.⁵²⁰

2.3 Cartopolitics: Coloniality of Maps

"Colonial maps would represent the coloniser's vision of the people, names, and boundaries of the land, projecting a colonial authority onto indigenous territory as map readers assumed that maps were accurate and objective representations of reality—an implied authentic version."

Beth Williamson, 2023.⁵²¹

Throughout the Pavillon des Sessions, maps of the African (see image 26), Asian (see image 27), Oceanian, and American continents, accompanied by the names of present-day nation-states, were employed to provide spatial contextualisation of the material culture on display, ranging from approximately the sixth century before our time to the early twentieth century.

Rather than employing the contested Mercator projection (often criticised for its Eurocentric orientation and scale distortions) the maps focused on individual continents corresponding to the surrounding displays.⁵²² A small inset world map located in a bottom corner indicated each continent's relative position on the globe.

Within each continental map, lines connected images of objects to specific locations marked with their present-day country names. Occasionally, further geographical descriptors were included, such as "Plateau de Bandiagara" for sculptures originating from what is now Mali (see image 26). However, the omission of country names for contemporary states not represented in the collection resulted in large blank areas, potentially disorienting visitors less familiar with global geography.

The African collections were contextualised geographically using two separate maps. The Americas were divided into three regions: one map for South America and the Antilles, another for Mexico and Central America, and a third for North America. Oceania was represented through a map for Melanesia, and one

⁵²⁰ Clarke, "Seasonal Calendars," 101.

⁵²¹ Beth Williamson, "Historical Geographies of Place Naming: Colonial Practices and Beyond," *Geography Compass* 17 (2023): 4.

⁵²² Mark Monmonier, *Rhumb Lines and Map Wars: A Social History of the Mercator Projection* (The University of Chicago Press, 2004), ix.

for Micronesia and Polynesia, while Asia was depicted as a unified continent, with all six displayed objects located on a single map.

At first glance, these maps may appear to challenge Eurocentric cartographic conventions by rejecting a global projection in favour of a more decentralised spatial orientation. Instead of centring Europe, the continent the surrounding area focused on was centred.

However, the use of present-day geopolitical borders and names introduced another form of cartographic bias, one closely tied to the legacies of colonialism. Labelling objects from the twelfth or fifteenth centuries as originating from “Benin” or “Nigeria,” for example, imposes an anachronistic national framework onto precolonial cultures and polities, potentially distorting historical and cultural specificities through the lens of modern statehood.

2.3.1 Contested Borders

“International borders carry significant colonial baggage, particularly in regions like Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas. The modern political map of the world is largely a legacy of European colonialism, and these borders continue to influence conflicts, identities, and governance structures today.”

Abdinor Dahir, 2025.⁵²³



Images 26 and 27. Maps of Africa and Asia

Although the maps throughout the pavilion (see images 26 and 27) decentred Europe by literally placing other continents central, this didn't mean that the maps used throughout the pavilion weren't

⁵²³ Murat Sofuoglu, “Why Borders Drawn by Colonial Powers Remain Flashpoints Across the World,” *TRT Global*, August 1, 2025, <https://trt.global/afrika-english/article/8057b2e03a5f>.

Eurocentric in other ways. The maps showed glaring alienation in their uncritical use of contemporary nation-state names as geographic anchors. Objects were linked via lines to modern countries (e.g., "Mexico," "Sierra Leone"), with no acknowledgement of these borders' colonial origins or the Indigenous territories they overwrite.

This reduces precolonial and non-state societies to static, politically imposed categories (e.g. Sapi lands were condensed to "Sierra Leone," kwakwaka'wakw territories became "Canada," slightly clarified in small print by Vancouver Island and British Columbia), while they didn't follow the lines of these contemporary nation states presented on the maps. The lack of specificity compounds this: labels rarely noted subnational regions, let alone Indigenous toponyms or ecological contexts (e.g., highland vs. coastal). Even when regions like Alaska were named, the maps fail to visualise these as part of dynamic cultural landscapes, instead presenting them as isolated dots within homogenised nation-states, about which their neighbouring contemporary countries – much less neighbouring political states at the time the material culture was dated – were.

The pavilion's geographic framing could have mitigated alienation by layering multiple spatial narratives. For example: Overlaying precolonial borders or Indigenous borders as counterpoints to modern states; including ecological or climatic context (e.g., rainforest, desert, high-altitude to highlight how environment shaped material culture).

While the object labels and maps often only provided the contemporary nation state names, sometimes additioned by a region which was not clarified further on the map, thus likely not contextualising the area further for museum visitors who were unfamiliar with the country's geography, the factsheets did show a slightly more nuanced approach. For example, on the sheet entry "Predogon sculpture?" (see image 25) visitors were informed that the sculpture derives from the village of "Yaye" and was further contextualised as being from the Bandiagara cliffs before the ancestors of the Dogon inhabitants arrived, which gave visitors some geographical context on the region it derives from, as well as that the people or person who made the sculpture likely came from the ancient Mande state of Ghana. Sadly, no visualisation of this information was given which would help visualise this trajectory.

Instead, the maps' monochrome shading and selective labelling (omitting neighbouring countries unless they "merit" inclusion via object representation in the pavilion) further abstracted objects from their cultural and historical networks. This mirrored the labels' vagueness: "Sculpture Inca" (Peru/Bolivia) or "Vase Maya" (Guatemala/Mexio) conflated millennia of Indigenous spatiality with colonial administrative units, while Western audiences, unfamiliar with regional distinctions, received no tools to bridge this gap.

Ultimately, the pavilion's geographic framing performed a paradox: it visually decentred Europe while replicating the epistemic violence of colonial cartography. By naturalising nation-states and neglecting

Indigenous spatialities, it sustained the modernist narrative of non-Western art as "timeless" and detached from living geographies, precisely the alienation it superficially sought to challenge.⁵²⁴

Many of the borders – although largely unnamed throughout the pavilion – are incredibly important aspects to understand contemporary politics, primarily disputes. Colonial control meant the reordering of space. Regions were carved into colonies, provinces, mandated territories, protectorates, often disregarding cultural, linguistic or ethnic considerations. In the late nineteenth century, for example, Europe's industrial powers were fiercely competing for global empires. This period of intense expansion, known as the era of new imperialism, saw European nations rapidly extending control across the world.⁵²⁵

Africa, once unfamiliar to many Europeans, abruptly became the centre of colonial attention. By 1884, Britain, France, Germany and Belgium were actively contesting territories in Africa, prompting the convening of the Berlin Conference, which ran from 15 November 1884 to 30 January 1885. Major colonial powers—Britain, France, Germany, Portugal and Belgium—gathered with the aim of averting outright warfare over African land claims.⁵²⁶ Africa was partitioned by European powers, without any African representation, which epistemises the complete disregard for Indigenous sovereignties.⁵²⁷

The colonial borders disrupted pre-existing communities and territories. Colonial powers treated African land as mere extensions of their own national interests, often ignoring the spatial and social realities of local populations. In response to these artificial borders, communities affected by territorial division, such as the Ntomou-speaking people along the Cameroon-Gabon border, actively resisted disruption. They found creative ways to maintain their traditional ways of living—crossing borders to farm, staying connected socially, and continuing cultural practices. These behaviours highlighted the weakness and external nature of colonial borders, which often failed to control local movements and loyalties. Colonial border-making was not only unstable but also inadvertently provoked performative resistance among borderland communities, who used various strategies to keep their socio-cultural fabric intact.⁵²⁸

However, to this day these borders have effect. By separating kinship groups, instead often merging hostile communities and dividing peoples, the colonial powers sowed the seeds for ongoing tensions, separatist movements, and civil wars, which the West use to highlight why their colonisation was needed in the first place; to "civilise" them.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁴ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 30-31.

⁵²⁵ Emmanuel M. Gbenenye, "African Colonial Boundaries and Nation-Building," *Inkanyiso* 8, no 2 (2016): 117.

⁵²⁶ Gbenenye, "African Colonial Boundaries," 117.

⁵²⁷ Emizet François Kisangani, *The Belgian Congo as a Developmental State: Revisiting Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2023), 36.

⁵²⁸ Dieunedort Wandji, "Rethinking the Time and Space of Resilience Beyond the West: An Example," *Resilience* 7, no 3 (2019): 292.

⁵²⁹ Rwigema Pierre Celestin, "Impact of the Berlin Conference (1884-1885) on EAC Development: 140 Year After the Divide of Africa," *Reviewed International Journal of Political Science & Public Administration* 6, no. 1 (2025): 25-47.

Like in Africa, also Latin American States have colonially-influenced borders. Newly independent Latin American states in the nineteenth century inherited borders imposed by colonial powers, ensuing disputes over territory followed, often leading to war.⁵³⁰

Many of the contemporary borders on maps are the result of colonial-era mapmaking that to today influence conflicts. In 2025 alone, there were for example border disputes between Thailand and Cambodia, as well as India and Pakistan, both tensions dating back to colonial legacy by Western powers and the legacy of colonialism (in these cases respectively influences by French and British powers, and British power). From Africa, the Middle East, to Asia and the America, many borders were invented by distant powers like France, Britain, and Italy instead of by native inhabitants. These imperial powers had little interest in cultural or ethnic cohesion, preferring imperial convenience.⁵³¹

The straight lines throughout Africa dividing countries (and peoples), as well as the border conflicts in West Asia and North Africa again exist because of Spanish, Italian, Dutch, British, and French colonial projects. The French and British forming the most significant contributors to contemporary borders, having together carved nearly 40 percent of the contemporary international borders. "Many of the borders in this region were drawn by colonial powers, particularly the French and British, without local input, often relying on outdated or inconsistent maps and failing to reflect the realities of geography, ethnicity, or local governance," American Cambodian Sophal Ear tells TRT World. "These borders were imposed without the consent, contribution, or agency of African populations, often dividing communities with no consideration for pre-colonial societal organisation or long-term development," says Abdinor Dahir.⁵³²

Aside from Southeast Asia, colonial designs also divided communities across the resource-rich African continent. Also in Africa, many border-related conflicts continue, influenced by colonial-era imposed borders which grouped (rival) ethnic groups together, forcing them to live together under shared initially colonial and later independent states. Many of the wars and conflicts across the world today are the result of seeds planted by Europe's colonialism.⁵³³ Even after formal colonialism has ended in many countries, it is still the West that has the authority to say what countries are "good" societies after decolonisation and which ones are not.⁵³⁴

Map-making continues to be used as a tool of oppression against Indigenous communities in the twenty-first century. However, as geography Reuben Rose-Redwood points out, decolonial mapping offers a powerful means of resisting neocolonial cartographic practices by reclaiming or reimagining spatial

⁵³⁰ Romain Droog, trans Charles Goulden, "Latin America Has a History of Border Disputes, but Good Fences Are Making for Better Neighbours," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (2022): <https://mondediplo.com/2022/12/06latin-american#:~:text=In%20the%2019th%20century%2C%20newly,ensued%2C%20often%20leading%20to%20war.>

⁵³¹ Sofuoglu, "Borders Drawn by Colonial Powers."

⁵³² Sofuoglu, "Borders Drawn by Colonial Powers."

⁵³³ Sofuoglu, "Borders Drawn by Colonial Powers."

⁵³⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Columbia University Press, 1994), 93.

narratives that transcend colonial frameworks.⁵³⁵ Similarly, geography PhD researcher Beth Williamson calls for challenging historical and current naming practices is essential for unsettling the influence of settlers and reclaiming place names that carry colonial legacies. The goal is to restore indigenous territorial rights and recognition. Counter-mapping has become a vital tool used by indigenous communities to oppose colonial legacies. Unlike conventional maps that serve state power, counter-maps offer alternative, representative spaces. They allow indigenous peoples to assert their connection to ancestral lands and educate future generations using knowledge that resists Western dominance.⁵³⁶

However, Williamson cautions that although counter-mapping is powerful, it can unintentionally reinforce colonial narratives by positioning itself in opposition to them. Decolonial mapping, on the other hand, goes further. It focuses on recovering and embodying indigenous place-based knowledge and present-day world-making—rather than simply resisting colonialism. Decolonial mapping does not adhere to Western standards of mapping legibility. Instead, it values culturally embedded knowledge and interpretation. It challenges the intellectual dominance and homogenising tendencies of Western geography, placing equal emphasis on both the creator and the user of the map.

Greater fairness in place-naming requires acknowledging historically silenced communities and enabling them to take part in decision-making. Decolonial mapping empowers indigenous people to reclaim their narratives and actively shape how their spaces are understood. While Western geospatial technologies can help communicate indigenous knowledge, true legitimacy doesn't come from external validation. Decolonial mapping reclaims worlds beyond colonial references and must guide the methodologies used in research conducted on indigenous land. To decolonise geographical research, scholars must critically re-evaluate research design and prioritise collaboration. Building respectful relationships with communities ensures indigenous peoples are research partners—not merely subjects. Listening, responsibility, and inclusion are key to truly transforming the discipline.⁵³⁷

2.3.2 Place Naming

"Power lies in the hands of those who have the right to name and, by extension, decide what is commemorated and ignored, what is remembered and forgotten."

Samantha JingYi Yom and Francesco Cavallaro, 2020.⁵³⁸

⁵³⁵ Reuben Rose-Redwood et al, "Decolonizing the Map: Recentring Indigenous Mapping," *Cartographica* 55, no. 3 (2020): 152.

⁵³⁶ Williamson, "Place Naming," 8.

⁵³⁷ Williamson, "Place Naming," 8.

⁵³⁸ Samantha JingYi Yom and Francesco Cavallaro, "Colonialism and Toponyms in Singapore," *Urban Science* 4, no. 4 (2020): 1.

There was an odd friction at play in the pavilion. While the objects were dated far in the past, their past place-names were omitted, and instead their contemporary nation state names were provided (see images 25-34), signalling where the material culture and art from each continent derived from. The use of contemporary nation-state names for material culture deriving from centuries ago, without clarifying the names of for example the empire or region at the time during which the material culture was dated, was another way in which the Pavillon des Sessions spatially, contextually, and historically alienated the material culture.

"Nigeria," didn't exist between the sixth century before common time and the sixth century common time, just like the contemporary state names which were found on the surrounding labels and maps throughout the pavilion were often colonially charged. Similarly, an "Incan" sculpture from 1450-1532 either came from Peru or Bolivia, instead of "Tawantinsuyu" (meaning Land of the Four Quarters), which was the Inca name for its empire.⁵³⁹

European colonialism used the process of place naming, like the Gregorian calendar, to inscribe European meaning and order on non-European landscapes. This (re) naming practice was fundamental to the imperial control extension over human and physical environments.⁵⁴⁰ Imposing an alien name of space on native land, reinforced the settler's claim to it, which helped legitimise their territorialisation. Local place names of Indigenous groups were subsequently marginalised, erased, or appropriated by their colonisers.⁵⁴¹

Indigenous names encapsulate complex dynamics of power, identity, geography and culture. They often reference communities, environment, events, and landmarks.⁵⁴² Thus, place names have layered meanings and histories and, due to colonialism, nowadays they often perpetuate colonial settle myths. They are cultural symbols that can either embody or erase Indigenous knowledges. Meanwhile, Indigenous names reflect their ancient creation and origin stories, forming mnemonic tools for Indigenous epistemologies and memory, tying them to generations of ancestors in relation with specific regions. However, the colonial imposed names haven't only removed these meanings and imposed other names with other meaning upon the native inhabitants of for example North America, they also have often naturalised racist structures, displace or entirely erase Indigenous knowledges, and perpetuate or normalise hegemonic myths, either unintentionally or explicitly.⁵⁴³

As McGill et al. state, settler colonial maps and place names naturalise white dominance and the displacement of knowledges, highlighting that even seemingly "neutral" place names often communicate

⁵³⁹ Martti Pärssinen, *Tawantinsuyu: The Inca State and Its Political Organization* (SHS, 1992), 18.

⁵⁴⁰ Williamson, "Place Naming," 1.

⁵⁴¹ Williamson, "Place Naming 2-6.

⁵⁴² Samuel Kwesi Nkansah and Emmanuel Mensah Bonsu, "Indigenous Place Names: A Literary Toponomastics Study of Suburb Names in Cape Coast," *Discourses on Culture* 1 (2024): 44; Williamson, "Place Naming 4.

⁵⁴³ Bonnie M. McGill et al, "Words Are Monuments: Patterns in US National Park Place Names Perpetuate Settler Colonial Mythologies Including White Supremacy," *People and Nature* 4 (2022): 684.

non-neutral choices to omit the violent histories of settler colonialism, ignoring that all landscapes were Indigenous spaces, keeping the marginalisation and invisibility of native people in place.⁵⁴⁴

Traces of colonialism can still be found in contemporary place names. Even in the Pavillon des Sessions colonial names are still found. The pavilion houses, for example, a sculpture from the "Philippines." Interestingly, the name "Philippines" comes from King Philip II of Spain, who authorised its colonisation in 1565. This information is not disclosed within the pavilion, nor is the fact that since the country gained independence in 1946, there have been numerous efforts to change the name, due to its colonial origins. However, none have succeeded, and "Philippines" remains. Supporters of the name argue it symbolises the country's journey towards nationhood (similar to how the Louvre, even though its monarch symbolism has become a symbol of the French republic), its fight for freedom, and its collective identity. Yet, despite millions proudly identifying as Filipinos, and many who have died under that name, "Philippines" and "Filipino" are still seen by some as deeply problematic. Over time, the terms have been linked with discrimination — racial, religious, class-based, and ethnic. A notable number of Muslims in the country have rejected the labels "Philippines" and "Filipino," considering them colonial impositions that offend their beliefs. Political scientist and activist Nathan Gilbert Quimpo argues that these terms reflect a Christian-centric bias and the dominance of Christian cultural values in the Philippine state.⁵⁴⁵

Aside from the Philippines, today, many countries, cities and landmarks still bear names of foreign origin which are often meaningless or unfamiliar to local communities.⁵⁴⁶ Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire), Cameroon, Guinea, and Nigeria are just five other examples of countries that still use their "colonial names," all five being represented in the pavilion.⁵⁴⁷

These toponyms reflect colonial attitudes, where foreign powers imposed their own names to assert dominance and reshape identity. In North Africa, colonisation by the French and Spanish led to distortion of Amazigh (Berber) place-names. Curiously, some post-independence governments then replaced Amazigh names with Arabic ones — further altering indigenous identities. One striking example is Amechras becoming "Mecht Arras," a name that translates absurdly into "head-comb" in Arabic. Missionary Influence Muslim and Christian missionaries also played a role in renaming towns and regions — replacing local names with Arabic or biblical ones — further eroding indigenous heritage. Renaming was not mere convenience — it was a strategic act of cultural and political imposition. By changing place-names, colonial

⁵⁴⁴ McGill et al, "Words Are Monuments," 686.

⁵⁴⁵ Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "Colonial Name, Colonial Mentality and Ethnocentrism," *Public Policy* 4, no. 1 (2000): 1.

⁵⁴⁶ Nna O. Uluocha, "Decolonizing Place-Names: Strategic Imperative for Preserving Indigenous Cartography in Post-Colonial Africa," *African Journal of History and Culture* 7, no. 9 (2015): 184.

⁵⁴⁷ Temi Iwalaiye, "5 African Countries Still Using Their Colonial Names - Just Like Nigeria," *Pulse*, October 8, 2024, <https://www.pulse.ng/articles/lifestyle/food-and-travel/5-african-countries-that-still-have-their-colonial-names-just-like-nigeria-2024102811061591606>; "Afrique," accessed August 8, 2025, <https://www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/collections/toutes-les-collections/le-pavillon-des-sessions/le-pavillon-des-sessions>.

and postcolonial authorities reshaped history and geography, silencing indigenous voices embedded in the land.⁵⁴⁸

Similarly in Oceania, European travellers and cartographers imposed place-names throughout the continent. The Spanish voyage led by Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan sailed into and named Mar Pacífico, or Pacific Ocean. Similarly Australia appeared on a woodcut map in the mid-sixteenth century and was officially adopted by the British government in the 1820s. Around that time, Australie was adopted by French mapmakers. Starting in 1816, French maps started to use Océanie. After 1850, the maps became more racialised than “spatial” in France, making way for Polynésie, Micronésie, and Mélanésie. These names became standard to use internationally in the twentieth century. However, Douglas notes that for example “Polynesians,” rarely identify strongly with this term, preferring local or national self-designations.⁵⁴⁹ New Guinea was first seen by Europeans in the sixteenth century and was marked on charts and maps of the Portuguese and Spanish in 1545.⁵⁵⁰

Additionally, Îles de la Société, featured on the Micronesia and Polynesia map in the Pavillon des Sessions due to the pavilion’s inclusion of a statue originating from there, is still a French overseas region, part of “French Polynesia.” Although this statue is discussed in one of the few factsheets on the material culture from Oceania in the pavilion, the continuing colonial link between the Society Islands and France is completely omitted.

Similarly, in North America, colonial names were imposed, which continue to obscure and ignore the relationship between Indigenous peoples and space, keeping them marginalised and invisible on the world maps. For many Indigenous peoples, the names given to rivers, forests, bodies of water, and land represent the colonisation of their native lands.⁵⁵¹

Names are political. They are used in power relations to signal the exclusion and inclusion of identities from concepts and space.⁵⁵² As Winston Churchill famously said, “Everybody has a right to pronounce foreign names as he chooses,” underscoring this attitude of dominance. Scholars cite this phenomenon as evidence of linguistic prejudice and cultural chauvinism. Forms of Deformation In regions like South-Eastern Nigeria, three common methods were used: Anglicisation – reshaping names to fit English spellings, Corruption – deliberate simplification or mispronunciation, Truncation – shortening compound names for ease. Adoption of European languages as official tongues in administration and education led to further erosion of indigenous names. As colonial maps followed this trend, toponyms from minority languages were often lost — posing a serious threat to Africa’s cultural and cartographic

⁵⁴⁸ Uluocha, “Decolonizing Place-Names,” 184.

⁵⁴⁹ Bronwen Douglas, “Naming ‘Polynesia’: Cartography, Geography, and Toponymy of the ‘Fifth Part of the World,’” *Journal of Pacific History* 56, no. 4 (2021): 375-414.

⁵⁵⁰ Bronwen Douglas, “Naming Places: Voyagers, Toponyms, and Local Presence in the Fifth Part of the World, 1500-1700,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 45 (2014): 14.

⁵⁵¹ McGill et al, “Words Are Monuments,” 686.

⁵⁵² Sambulo Ndlovu, *Naming and Othering in Africa: Imagining Supremacy and Inferiority through Language* (Routledge, 2022), 9.

heritage.⁵⁵³ The colonial names linked spaces around the world to the colonial empire's they 'belonged' to.⁵⁵⁴

Like Western temporality, people around the world resisted to the names imposed upon them. While they often couldn't control the words the European settlers used to identify their land, everyday speech, oral communication, allowed people to deviate from official or dominant language norms, offering subtle forms of resistance. Pronunciation isn't fixed—it might involve inventing new names or altering familiar ones. Unlike written forms that embed place names into discourse, spoken names happen in real time and can challenge hegemonic norms. Naming places is viewed as a performance often monopolised by authorities to assert control, especially through public displays such as signs. Yet, locals may resist by continuing to use traditional or unofficial names, challenging the legitimacy of official ones. This resistance reveals how deeply place names are tied to cultural and political meaning.⁵⁵⁵ In North America, Native Americans have resisted the imposed colonial names as well, for example in what are now national parks. Indigenous place names reflect native relationships to the waters and lands, fundamentally defining their identities and cultures.⁵⁵⁶

Colonial place names honoured the priorities and perceptions of powerful European people instead of the people who had been living in the area, often for a very long time.⁵⁵⁷ Some indigenous names remained but were changed phonetically into colonial languages—altering how they were written while preserving their sound. Although this kept pronunciation close to the original, the written form—its orthography—was distorted, losing cultural and linguistic significance. Multiple strategies were used to replace or alter place names, including translation and anglicisation. These changes disrupted connections between indigenous communities and their historical, cultural, and spatial identities.⁵⁵⁸

Naming places meant they existed, even if given a Western name, these regions were given some kind of agency. By only naming countries that are represented by material culture within the pavilion, the pavilion takes agency away from the un-represented countries, they remain unnamed.⁵⁵⁹

Throughout Africa, the distortion or replacement of traditional place-names is widely seen as a historical injustice. This has sparked a strong desire in many communities to correct these past wrongs by reinstating the original indigenous names. Since gaining independence, numerous African countries have made consistent efforts to shed their colonial naming legacies and revive native terms that carry cultural, geographical and historical significance. While a handful of nations still retain colonial names, the trend

⁵⁵³ Uluocha, "Decolonizing Place-Names," 185.

⁵⁵⁴ Ndlovu, *Naming and Othering in Africa*, 108.

⁵⁵⁵ Williamson, "Place Naming," 6.

⁵⁵⁶ McGill et al, "Words Are Monuments," 684.

⁵⁵⁷ Yom and Cavallaro, "Colonialism and Toponyms," 2.

⁵⁵⁸ Williamson, "Place Naming," 6.

⁵⁵⁹ Bronwen Douglas, "Sailors, Savants, Naming: France and the Knowing of Oceania, 1756–1840," in *IKUWA6: Shared Heritage: Proceedings of the Sixth International Congress on Underwater Archaeology*, ed. Jennifer A. Rodrigues and Arianna Traviglia (Archaeopress, 2020), 214.

across the continent has been towards renaming — replacing foreign or corrupted versions with authentic local toponyms. These restoration efforts aim to affirm cultural identity and reclaim space in public consciousness. Renaming initiatives, both symbolic and practical, have become a common feature in Africa's post-colonial landscape.⁵⁶⁰

From a mapmaking perspective, decolonising place-names is essential. Maps rely on names to reflect geographical and cultural realities. Reinstating original names helps revive indigenous cartographic knowledge systems and restores cultural identity. Whether through oral traditions, rituals or material maps, place-names are central to how societies define, navigate and validate their landscape. Renaming isn't merely symbolic — it's a concrete way of reclaiming space, language and history. By removing distorted or foreign names, African countries reaffirm their sovereignty and honour their traditional cartographic heritage.⁵⁶¹

Yet, there's a tension: even efforts to rename places, like the Salish Sea, can paradoxically reproduce colonial power structures if the state controls the process and marginalises indigenous voices. Geography isn't just about maps, it's about justice, representation, and the stories we tell about the places we live in.⁵⁶²

Like renaming country and place names in general, renaming the contemporary nation states in the Pavillon des Sessions to the names of the regions used in the time they are dated might face struggles. On one hand, people might oppose renaming, some people finding the contemporary nation state names the most correct names to geographically identify the material culture, regardless of the discrepancy between time and place created by them. Additionally, the original geographic region names (either by region, e.g. empire, or peoples depending on the socio-political reality of the time and place) might confuse people, including local and international people. Additionally, there are financial and logistic costs, it requires research and new labels and maps would have to be printed. Finally, perhaps there was just no one who pointed out to the curatorial staff how the nation state names they used were colonially charged.⁵⁶³

Nna O. Uluocha encourages African countries to develop a national toponymic policy, backed by law. A dedicated institution or steering committee should oversee the restoration, documentation, and standardisation of indigenous place-names. Nationwide projects should research, reinstate, and preserve native toponyms. Comprehensive mapping efforts (like the Menominee Place Names Map) should reflect both indigenous and colonial names. Local knowledge should be treated as an essential aspect of Africa's heritage—worthy of recognition, protection, and transmission.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶⁰ Uluocha, "Decolonizing Place-Names," 186.

⁵⁶¹ Uluocha, "Decolonizing Place-Names," 186.

⁵⁶² Williamson, "Place Naming," 7.

⁵⁶³ Uluocha, "Decolonizing Place-Names," 188.

⁵⁶⁴ Uluocha, "Decolonizing Place-Names," 190.

Involving indigenous communities in decision-making helps reduce conflict and ensures cultural authenticity. To reduce confusion, especially in official documentation, maps and signs could display local and foreign names side by side. A multidisciplinary team (geographers, historians, linguists, cartographers, etc.) is essential to: Recover original place-names, Analyse linguistic etymology, Resolve inconsistencies in spelling and pronunciation. Aligning with UN standards (1968), names should reflect local form, orthography, and pronunciation. Indigenous names should be taught in schools through: Updated curricula and atlases, A Dictionary of Indigenous African Place Names, serving as an authoritative reference.⁵⁶⁵

Similarly, McGill et al. state that by restoring Indigenous place names is a small symbolic step towards not only justice, but also restoring their powers of self-determination, while the continuing use of settler place names represent the exclusion from and colonisation of their homelands.⁵⁶⁶ However, this would be part of the larger project of making those historically invisible and silenced by Western colonisers, visible, providing them a sense of belonging and literally a place on the map.⁵⁶⁷

As Mbenzi points out, when renaming places, due to colonialism or other past injustices, it is important to propose them first to the local population, to avoid confusion and take their views into account.⁵⁶⁸

Additionally, Samuel Kwesi Nkansah and Emmanuel Mensah Bonsu state that by affirming the indigenous Mfantse place names of the Cape Coast in Ghana would recognise and honour their perspectives within the complex local multicultural heritage. It would allow the native people to celebrate and preserve their native toponyms, forming an act of cultural empowerment as well as reclamation. Local municipality should collaborate with especially chiefs and elder residents to officially recognise the longstanding Indigenous names.⁵⁶⁹

Tools like counter-mapping have helped Indigenous communities assert their presence and defend territorial rights. Yet, some argue that counter-mapping can inadvertently reinforce colonial frameworks. In response, decolonial mapping has emerged as a more transformative approach—one that empowers Indigenous peoples to reclaim ancestral knowledge and reframe spatial narratives. This shift aims to decentre colonialism and promote procedural justice, supporting Indigenous efforts to rebuild and strengthen their connections to land. Within research practices, geographers are encouraged to rethink methodologies and collaborate meaningfully with Indigenous communities, ensuring that those communities are actively involved in research concerning their territories.⁵⁷⁰

⁵⁶⁵ Uluocha, "Decolonizing Place-Names," 190.

⁵⁶⁶ McGill et al, "Words Are Monuments," 686.

⁵⁶⁷ McGill et al, "Words Are Monuments," 696.

⁵⁶⁸ Petrus Angula Mbenzi, "Renaming of Places in Namibia in the Pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial Era: Colonising and Decolonising Place Names," *Journal of Namibian Studies* 25 (2019): 67.

⁵⁶⁹ Nkansah and Bonsu, "Indigenous Place Names," 45-65.

⁵⁷⁰ Williamson, "Place Naming," 9.

As previously highlighted, it is imperative to confront the violent legacies of colonisation and the colonial museum enterprise. These institutions not only perpetuated racist and discriminatory language in their documentation of artefacts but also assigned inaccurate regional, ethnic, and linguistic attributes to items from source cultures. Such distortions reflect deeply entrenched biases towards the 'other' and were not confined to the handling of collections. They extended to the broader subjugation of entire communities, whose cognitive frameworks and systems of thought were systematically supplanted by colonial ideology.⁵⁷¹

The continued presence of colonial collections in museums — often displayed using outdated exhibition methods and discursive models — still reflects patterns of dominance according to Roque, de L'Estoile, and Sogbesan. Even institutions that attempt to reformulate their narratives by replacing terms such as "primitive arts" with "arts premiers" often perpetuate a colonial legacy by distorting the intended use, spiritual, or ritual significance, and spatial, contextual, and historical contexts of these objects.⁵⁷²

3. Non-Resolution: The Silence of Colonialism

"The museum by itself is nothing; that it means nothing, that it can say nothing, when smug self-satisfaction rots the eyes, when a secret contempt for others withers the heart, when racism, admitted or not, dries up sympathy; that it means nothing if its only purpose is to feed the delights of vanity."

Aimé Césaire, 1972.⁵⁷³

For Césaire, Europe's collecting impulse symbolised not admiration but domination. The museum, in his view, enshrined not cultures but their remains, cut off from their communities and reframed through imperial pride and racial hierarchy. True understanding, he argued, comes not from the accumulation of objects, but from respect for the people and civilisations to which those objects belong.⁵⁷⁴

Following Roth's narrative structure, the third act traditionally moves toward resolution, confronting the central problem and exploring possible solutions. In this stage, the audience is invited to consider multiple perspectives and leave with closure, or at least a clear direction forward. In the Pavillon des Sessions, however, the expected resolution was replaced by absence. Rather than addressing the colonial histories embedded in the collection, the narrative sidestepped them almost entirely. The climax is a silence: colonialism appeared only as a fleeting reference in a book few visitors would consult, while objects from colonised contexts remained contextless within the white-cube display.⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷¹ Oluwatoyin Sogbesan, "Reframing the Present," 55.

⁵⁷² Roque, "Decolonising the Museum," 66-67; de L'Estoile, "Appropriations;" Oluwatoyin Sogbesan, "Reframing the Present," 54.

⁵⁷³ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 54.

⁵⁷⁴ Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 54.

⁵⁷⁵ Roth, "Visual Storytelling," 89-90.

This section examines that non-resolution. It first identifies patterns of structural amnesia across the pavilion's texts, then analyses three contested provenance case studies to show how silence operated within the rooms at the object level, and finally considers open textual practices that could have disrupted this absence, drawing on decolonial approaches that invite multiple voices, contexts, and interpretations into the museum narrative.

3.1 Erased Pasts, Sanitised Presents

"A blanket of leaden silence spread over European museums, and their colonial past began to sink into oblivion."

Bénédicte Savoy, 2022.⁵⁷⁶

Savoy's statement brings forward the general tendency to omit colonial history and legacies in Western museums.⁵⁷⁷ Instead, as Geraldine L. Palmer highlights, museums should recognise and deal with their imperial, colonial history and acknowledge the relationship with racism, colonialism and slave trade in the countries they were located in. Cultural lootings have roots in racism and colonialism and by avoiding showing accountability, they are fracturing chances to make amends with the people harmed most by colonialism.⁵⁷⁸

However, art institutions have been slow to acknowledge their deep imperial ideological roots and the hierarchies within them that were shaped in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as clarified by Charlene Villaseñor Black and Tim Barringer.⁵⁷⁹ Pascal Gielen argues that museums tend to prefer to keep negative aspects out of the limelight in order to raise people's spirits and making visitors feel more welcome.⁵⁸⁰

Museums can choose to discuss certain issues or omit them. Museums play a role in which parts of history are remembered and which ones are not. This relates to the well-being of a society, especially after a traumatic event like colonisation, but also the perceived representational roles of museums within the society they exist in.⁵⁸¹ While often largely omitted in Western museums, even though their important role in many of the material culture in Western museums today being the result of colonialism, the horrors of colonialism, or the entire notion of colonialism is far from unusual.⁵⁸²

⁵⁷⁶ Savoy, *Africa's Struggle for Its Art*, 134.

⁵⁷⁷ Savoy, *Africa's Struggle for Its Art*, 134.

⁵⁷⁸ Palmer, "Looted Artifacts," 1.

⁵⁷⁹ Black and Barringer, "Decolonizing Art and Empire," 10.

⁵⁸⁰ Gielen, *Heritage*, 13-14.

⁵⁸¹ Thomas, "Representing Difficult Histories," 534.

⁵⁸² Vawda, "Epistemology of Injustice," 79; Susan Sleeper-Smith, "Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives," in *Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives*, ed. Susan Sleeper-Smith (University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 3.

Colonialism has impacted civilisations around the world immensely.⁵⁸³ It continues to affect many political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of contemporary life across the globe, to this day.⁵⁸⁴ This includes curatorial decisions in the Louvre, quai Branly museum, and by extension the Pavillon des Sessions. Almost all the material culture exhibited in the pavilion originated from territories that were directly or indirectly shaped by colonial conquest, administration, or cultural extraction, whether by France or other colonial powers.⁵⁸⁵ Colonialism and the horrific practices that accompanied it, are often excluded from wall texts and labels within museums.⁵⁸⁶ The pavilion formed no exception, as this context was either vaguely implied or omitted entirely.⁵⁸⁷

Throughout the various labels, colonial contexts were implied by referencing to missions and World Fairs which centred colonialism and was used to enforce the idea upon the general public that there was need for Europeans to civilise the not-European, a very harmful notion, as highlighted by Soares and Abungu.⁵⁸⁸ However, this important contextualisation was not provided, only the vague mission and exhibition names, making it appear like issues were discussed, but they were in fact not.

Indeed, certain textual cues suggested the presence of colonial legacies — for example, references to “missions,” or named collectors known to have worked under colonial auspices. But these cues required specialised prior knowledge; they were legible only to the informed or the initiated. For most visitors, the museum provided little scaffolding to link these terms with the political conditions under which many of the objects were extracted.⁵⁸⁹

3.1.1 Colonial Pasts: The United Kingdom and Spain

Throughout the pavilion’s texts, the only times colonial contexts were discussed “more elaborately,” – although that is a stretch – these pertain the contexts of other countries, namely the United Kingdom and Spain.

⁵⁸³ Fauziya Isa, et al., “The Architecture of Colonialism,” *Civil Engineering and Architecture* 10, no. 3 (2022): 118; Jiat-Hwee Chang and Puay-Peng Ho, “Editorial Introduction: Colonial Spatial Orders,” *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 5, no. 1 and 2 (2021): 4.

⁵⁸⁴ MacQueen, *Colonialism*, xii.

⁵⁸⁵ Kwame Opoku, “Can Looted Art Remain in France;” Mark, “Parisian Public Museums,” 1-7; Corbey, “Arts Premiers,” 6; Petridis, “Recent Exhibitions,” 74.

⁵⁸⁶ Gielens, *Heritage*, 13-15.

⁵⁸⁷ Petridis, “Recent Exhibitions,” 75-76; Mark, “Parisian Public Museums,” 1-7; Corbey, “Arts Premiers,” 6

⁵⁸⁸ Bruno Brulon Soares, “Harmony and Dissonance: Cultural Transactions in the Museum of Violence,” *ICOFOM Study Series* 39 (2010): 94; Abungu, “Museums,” 69.

⁵⁸⁹ Petridis, “Recent Exhibitions,” 75; Mark, “Parisian Public Museums,” 7.

*Establishing Provenance: the Case of the court arts
from the Kingdom of Benin*

The museum has undertaken extensive research into the provenance of its holdings in order to document the context of their acquisition. The court arts of the Kingdom of Benin (present-day Nigeria), in copper alloys or ivory, are part of the collections that are being examined. For the most part, their displacement can be related back to the so-called punitive expedition led by the British army in 1897 during the colonial wars. After the capture of the city, the royal palaces of Benin were looted and several thousand pieces were deposited in British museums including the British Museum or were dispersed at public auction in London from 1897 onwards. Bought by museums, art dealers and collectors, they were dispersed across public and private collections around the world. On the initiative of Nigeria, the National Commission of Museums and Monuments, as well as the Oba (king) of Benin and the Edo State, who wish to see this dispersed heritage returned in the form of loans, deposits and restitution, the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac is networking with international institutions to map these collections, to study them in dialogue with Nigerian scientific teams and to make them accessible to all.

Image 28. Wall Text "Establishing Provenance: The Case of the Court Arts from the Kingdom of Benin"

One of the only texts within the exhibition space to briefly reference colonialism-related theft or events was one which reference to the 1897 expedition was framed not as an ethical rupture in the institution's past, but as archival or logistical points in an object's itinerary. One wall text in the Pavillon des Sessions, titled "Establishing Provenance: The Case of the Court Arts from the Kingdom of Benin," (see image 28) briefly acknowledges this British Punitive Expedition and the looting that followed in both French and English, but not Spanish.

It noted that the museum "is" collaborating with Nigerian institutions to trace, document, and possibly return some of these objects. While this appeared to mark a gesture of transparency, the text carefully circumscribed responsibility: it named British museums and the art market as the principal agents of dispersal, leaving France's own role conspicuously underexamined.

The fact that France acquired, exhibited, and continued to exhibit material culture which was rather well established as looted, highlights France's slow progression in the desire French President Emmanuel Macron (°1977) stated in his 2017 "Africa speech" at the University of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) to

facilitate the permanent or temporary return of African cultural heritage to Africa (notably not to other continents).⁵⁹⁰

Interesting to note, the foreign diplomacy website of France notes that “some African cultural heritage is located outside of Africa,” as the first sentence of the page on the “Return of Cultural Goods.” This is a striking contradiction to the Sarr-Savoy report which states that according to exports “over 90% of the material cultural legacy of sub-Saharan Africa remains preserved and housed outside of the African continent,” while journalist in looted art Annabelle Steffes-Halmer goes a step further, stating that “80-90% of Africa’s cultural heritage can be found in European museums, or rather in their storage,” according to experts.⁵⁹¹

The museum, in the wall text, assumed the stance of a neutral custodian — a passive inheritor of global patrimony rather than an active participant in its redistribution. Labels like these operate as technical annotations, not as invitations to reckon with the structural violence foregrounded by many scholars, including Toni Morrison, Césaire Aimé and Frantz Fanon, just to name a few.⁵⁹²

More recently, scholars like Chiara De Cesari and Lora Sariaslan, Vawda, Tolia Kelly, and Elizabeth Fitzpatrick have highlighted the need for museums to actively engaging with the uncomfortable histories tied to their collections, including the systemic and structural violence that accompanied the processes of colonialism.⁵⁹³

Existing methods must be reconsidered, and the ongoing impact of colonial violence cannot be ignored simply because it is uncomfortable to confront. Museums are not neutral spaces, disconnected from wider society. Their role should be to listen to their audiences and to remind visitors that objects from the past remain deeply connected to the present, instead of omitting this important contextual, situational, and (colonial-)historical context.⁵⁹⁴

⁵⁹⁰ Paul Basu, “Re-Mobilising Colonial Collections in Decolonial Times: Exploring the Latent Possibilities of N. W. Thomas’s West African Collections,” in *Mobile Museums: Collections in circulation*, ed. Caroline Cornish, Felix Driver and Mark Nesbitt (UCL Press, 2021), 44; Oumar Ba, “Discourse de Ouaga,” published November 29, 2017, <https://africasacountry.com/2017/11/should-africans-care-for-emmanuel-macrons-africa-speech-in-ouagadougou>.

⁵⁹¹ Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics* (Ministère de la culture, 2018), 3; Annabelle Steffes-Halmer, “Africa’s Art Goes Back Home,” *Deutsche Welle*, November 11, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/africas-lost-heritage-and-europes-restitution-policies/a-59763966>

⁵⁹² Toni Morrison, “Home,” in *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (Pantheon Books, 1997), 3; Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (Monthly Review Press, 1972), 21-22; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Grove Press, 1966), 170.

⁵⁹³ De Cesari and Sariaslan, “(Post)Coloniality and Museum Failure,” 3; Vawda, “Epistemology of Injustice,” 79; Tolia-Kelly, “Feeling and Being at the (Postcolonial) Museum: Presencing the Affective Politics of ‘Race’ and Culture,” *Sociology* 50, no. 5 (2016): 906; Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, “Colonial History, Contemporary Artists, and the Museum,” *Washington College Review* 32, no. 1 (2025), <https://washcollreview.com/2025/04/30/colonial-history-contemporary-artists-and-the-museum/>.

⁵⁹⁴ Fitzpatrick, “Colonial History.”

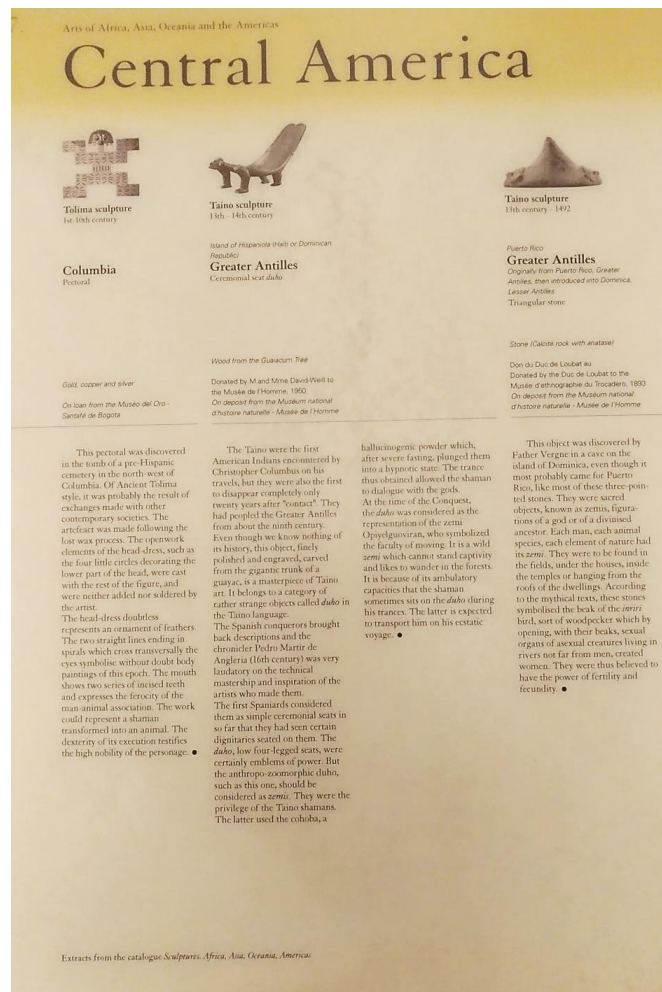


Image 29. Factsheet Central America

Additionally, a single factsheet (see image 29) implies colonialism in its contextualisation section. However, this remains vague, as the label informed visitors that “The Taino” were the “first American Indians” which were encountered by Christopher Columbus, disappearing completely after their “contact.” They created finely polished and engraved sculptures as the accompanying statue illustrates. Spanish conquerors brought back “descriptions” of them. The “first Spaniards” considered them as simple ceremonial seats. Further in the text, it refers to the time of the “conquest,” which, like any of the other colonial-related terms, remained unclarified.

Aside from the lack of true identification of this colonial context as “colonial” and rather than conquest, the use of “American Indians,” is rather odd, considering that this was back in 2023, when scholarly publications on terminology already were well established. For example in 1997, Barbara E. Munson from the Oneida Nation already made it clear that the term “Indian,” was not a name indigenous people identified with, as it was given to indigenous people on the entire continent by an explorer who was looking for India, which led to the subsequent exploitation of indigenous people – which is not discussed within the factsheet -. Instead, Indigenous people request the of the names of their Nations, e.g. Oneida, Hochunk, and, Potawatomi. There are many different Indigenous nations with vastly different cultural

practices and languages and generalising them is just as odd as generalising practices found in a single city in Spain to the entire of the European population.⁵⁹⁵

However, the 2018 publication *Words Matter* states that there is no consensus about whether to use it or not, although it highlights that the term has a divisive history in the United States of America. The book suggests adopting the accepted and used terminology by people themselves out of respect, however, this description is rather vague.⁵⁹⁶ Additionally, as the Taino have all passed away according to the factsheet, it is hard to determine what terminology they would have preferred.

Colonial looting was overwhelmingly a one-sided affair, with foreign rulers taking from the lands they dominated without consent. The era of European colonialism marked a peak in the systematic plundering of art and cultural objects—a legacy that remains visible and deeply felt across both the Global North and South. Museums and storage facilities in the North are still filled with human remains and cultural artifacts, often disconnected from their origins and identities, while colonial records—both official and local—remain contested. Meanwhile, countries, communities, and individuals in the Global South continue to experience the absence of cherished heritage that was taken from them.⁵⁹⁷



Image 30. Television in the Pavilion's Interpretation Space

3.1.2 Colonial Past: A Selective French Story

Although throughout the pavilion some aspects hinted at the colonial contexts surrounding many of the material culture and art's journeys to the pavilion, by using phrases like "Collectée par la mission," and just "Mission," these aspects remained implicit. However, in the interpretation room, the looping video (see image 30) acknowledged colonialism relating to France more than the labels stating "mission" and

⁵⁹⁵ Barbara E. Munson, "Common Themes and Questions About the Use of 'Indian' Logos," (handout, Wisconsin Government, 1997), https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/study/2008/special_committee_on_state_tribal_relations/040_june_4_2009_meeting/munson_zhandout

⁵⁹⁶ Wayne Modest and Robin Lelijveld, eds., *Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector* (National Museum of World Cultures, 2018), 116.

⁵⁹⁷ Jos Van Beurden, *Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 11.

Word Fairs, Aurélien Gaborit highlighting in the video that from the sixteenth century onwards (referred to as the “discovery of new worlds,”) Europeans took an interest in non-European culture. This situated the French (or Europeans as this is not very clear), within the historical context of Western appreciation of non-European material culture appreciation. Although not explicitly stated, the video featured the flags of the United Kingdom, France, Portugal, and Spain, and illustrating on an old Eurocentric world map how the different trajectories of “discovery” went for each of these countries. The Sculpture from Sierra Leone – earlier discussed due to it being the only object with an elaborated object label – is discussed again, highlighting how it was decorated with both Portuguese and African motifs, etched by African sculptors, commissioned from the Africans by the Portuguese, and sculpted locally in Africa, ending with the notion that these pieces were brought back to European courts for European nobles and aristocracy.

Gaborit continued by highlighting that the material culture also reached cabinets of curiosity, which gradually became small museums, and, seized during the French revolution, entered the Central Museum of Art (meaning the Louvre as we know it today).

Next, Emmanuel Kasarhérou discussed the explorer-geographers from the eighteenth century. Highlighting a statue likely brought back from James Cook’s (1728-1779) third “voyage.” These “discovery” voyages were mainly French and English. Their objective wasn’t to find gold or conquer new territories, instead promoting the knowledge on the world’s geography. And whether there was any land that “counterbalanced” the already known land in the Northern hemisphere.

Gaborit provided more information on “Dominique Vivant Denon inaugurates the nineteenth century.” Denon (1747-1825) had a personal collection including many objects from Egypt. He worked closely together with Napoléon Bonaparte (1769-1821) for the creation of Musée Napoléon, which would evolve into the contemporary Louvre and he had a specific “Taino piece” (displayed in the Pavilion decennia later) very early in his collection, before 1826. In the video they state that the Taino culture disappeared, but not why, which is clarified in the factsheet section discussed previously.

These discovery voyages continued into the nineteenth century, Kasarhérou highlighting various voyages like the Voyage of Dumon d’Urville (1790-1842) and that of Duperre (1786-1865), who brought back a number of material culture and art, including the “Korwar.” Some of these voyages started off as military expeditions which explored sections and brought back material culture which was presented in the pavilion.

Then the video reached the “nineteenth century colonial and ethnographic,” which was the second major period related to the collections in the pavilion: the age of the creation of ethnographic collection museums, including the bringing back items from colonial conquests. In particular soldiers brought material culture back, perceived as testimonials rather than art, showing the progress of the overseas conquest.

Within the video Aurélien Gaborit highlights that this happened in many European countries in the late nineteenth century, when the first museums were being created, and these objects were displayed. Numerous objects were collected also in the French setting and entered collections. Other pieces were brought back by missionaries after catholic missions according to Emmanuel Kasarhérou, disrupting their religion and contributing to the loss of the traditional ways of depicting their deities. Others were not soldiers, but just enjoyed collecting material culture overseas and financed their own voyages, according to Gaborit. There were also photographers like Désiré Charnay (1828-1915), who was one of the first Europeans to discover a number of Mexican sites, again collecting a number of objects displayed in the pavilion. Kasarhérou focusses on Western appreciation of the objects by the collectors rather than the violent appropriation, conforming with what L'Estoile identifies the Western practice of "appropriation" of Indigenous material culture and art.⁵⁹⁸

The omission of colonialism in general throughout the pavilion, and about the violence related to it in the video was not incidental. Rather, it reflects a broader institutional logic: one that favours the aesthetic elevation of material culture over a historically accountable framing of its provenance.⁵⁹⁹ Although label texts often faced spatial and editorial constraints, the near-total absence of colonial context is not a neutral curatorial choice — it was a strategic one.⁶⁰⁰ As Bénédicte Savoy so aptly phrased it, "a blanket of leaden silence spread over European museums, and their colonial past began to sink into oblivion."⁶⁰¹

As Hooper-Greenhill and others have argued, the museum is never just a place of display; it is a site of knowledge production, authority, and power. What it chooses not to say is as significant as what it does.⁶⁰² This interpretive detachment functions as a form of historical alienation. The museum presents itself as a pedagogical institution — a space for learning and cross-cultural appreciation — yet avoids confronting its own entanglement in histories of domination and dispossession in a critical and meaningful way.

While the rhetoric of the universal museum purports to elevate "non-Western" cultures and their artistic achievements, the refusal to contextualise these objects within colonial histories reinforces older hierarchies of interpretation: it aestheticises the trace of empire while erasing its infrastructure.⁶⁰³

Crucially, this erasure is not merely a matter of historical amnesia but also of ongoing institutional self-preservation. The Louvre and the Musée du quai Branly are deeply invested in projecting themselves as stewards of world culture — a role that depends on their perceived neutrality and intellectual legitimacy.

⁵⁹⁸ "Pavillon des Sessions;" Musée du quai Branly, "Le Pavillon des Sessions;" de L'Estoile, "Appropriations."

⁵⁹⁹ Baudez and Jamin, Letter to Viatte and Godelier; Mark, "Parisian Public Museums," 1;

⁶⁰⁰ De Cesari and Sariaslan, "(Post)Coloniality and Museum Failure," 3; Vawda, "Epistemology of Injustice: From Colonialism to Decoloniality," *Museum International* 71, no. 1-2 (2019): 79; Tolia-Kelly, "(Postcolonial) Museum," 906; Fitzpatrick, "Colonial History."

⁶⁰¹ Savoy, *Africa's Struggle for Its Art*, 134.

⁶⁰² Hooper-Greenhill, "Changing Values in the Art Museum," 31; Wróblewska, "Creating Visibility," 22; Vázquez, "The Museum," 182.

⁶⁰³ Ruiz-Gómez, "Primitivism and the Musée du Quai Branly," 425.

Explicitly acknowledging the violent or exploitative means by which many objects were acquired would undermine this claim. Thus, transparency, when it occurs, is often tightly circumscribed: it is transparency without institutional implication. This lack of true openness is likely also partly in order to protect the pavilion from receiving criticism which could undermine the museum's authority.⁶⁰⁴

This is, of course, not to suggest that no efforts are being made to discuss colonialism. As highlighted throughout this dissertation, the pavilion was mainly the product of Kerchache's vision and although many people wanted to add context (although the extent as to how colonial-related this would be remains unclear), including Godelier and Rosenberg, they simply were unable to achieve this.⁶⁰⁵

Even so, the omission of colonial context cannot be attributed solely to ill intent or denial. It also reflects deep institutional contradictions. On one hand, curators and museum professionals may be genuinely committed to cross-cultural education and public engagement. On the other, they work within bureaucratic, legal, and political frameworks that limit the extent to which institutional complicity can be foregrounded. The result is a curatorial discourse caught between pedagogical ambition and ideological constraint — one that produces selective visibility and calculated silence.⁶⁰⁶

The decontextualised presentation of objects, particularly those originating from other cultures, is deeply problematic as it obscures the colonial entanglements—the “determining weight of History.” Exhibition strategies that prioritise aesthetic form tend to flatten the intricate histories and cultural significance of the works, inadvertently revealing the West itself as the fetishist—a designation so often imposed upon the very cultures the museum claims to honour. Museums operate as “institutions of memory;” and even when the colonial past appears effaced through the aestheticisation of the artefact, it inevitably resurfaces. The varying strengths and deficiencies within the collection have long been directly linked to France's colonial undertakings. By privileging visual appeal, the Musée du quai Branly continues to consign the “civilisations oubliées”—to borrow Chirac's phrasing—to the margins of remembrance.⁶⁰⁷

Many museum collections come from collectors who benefitted from colonialism and donated their collections.⁶⁰⁸ Collection practices play a pivotal role in shaping the presentation and interpretation of African objects in museums. These collections were historically acquired through exploitative means by subjugating agents such as explorers, commercial entrepreneurs, government officials, and missionaries. Museum narratives have subsequently become temporally fixed—curated in ways that neglect the

⁶⁰⁴ Magdalena Wróblewska, “Embracing Vulnerability,” in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples*, eds. Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska (Amsterdam University Press B.V., 2022), 97.

⁶⁰⁵ “Conseil Scientifique,” 4; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 73.

⁶⁰⁶ Gielens, *Heritage*, 17-18; Alivizatou, “‘Arts Premiers,’” 44-56.

⁶⁰⁷ Ruiz-Gómez, “Primitivism and the Musée du Quai Branly,” 425.

⁶⁰⁸ Elisa Schoenberger, “What Does It Mean to Decolonize a Museum? The Answer Might Surprise You,” published July 2, 2024, <https://www.museumnext.com/article/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonize-a-museum/>.

perspectives or worldviews of the local cultures represented. Rather than foregrounding indigenous interpretations, such narratives tend to reflect the curator's own cultural biases and lived experiences.⁶⁰⁹

Museum collections are more than historical legacies—they serve as valuable resources for present-day research and education, as well as enriching people's knowledge about the past and how past events continue to influence the present. Thanks to digitisation, their roles as repositories of knowledge and culture for future generations. These collections fulfil a wide range of functions, some ambitious and others more questionable—such as offering basic public entertainment. An exhibition without proper labelling is largely incomprehensible to anyone outside a small circle of experts. Museum labels, therefore, must serve a dual purpose: they should be easily understood by general visitors, while also providing curators with essential information for tasks such as reorganizing displays, selecting objects for new exhibitions, returning items to their proper locations after loans, or, in rare cases, reconstructing lost documentation when inventory records are missing or destroyed.⁶¹⁰

3.2 Case Studies in Silence: Contested Trajectories and Object Histories

"Does the admiration of an African statue by French artists justify the keeping of a looted object that is an essential figure in the culture and religion of a people whom the French have exploited and subjugated with excessive colonial violence?"

Kwame Opoku, 2025.⁶¹¹

Opoku's question underscores the ongoing provenance dilemmas surrounding museum collections that contain material culture linked to colonial or otherwise unequal contexts.⁶¹² While many works displayed in the Pavillon des Sessions can be traced to France's colonial history, it is important to stress that not all entered through direct colonial plunder or from territories under French control.⁶¹³ Nigeria, for instance, was never under French rule but rather under British colonial administration.⁶¹⁴

Nonetheless, the legacies of colonialism and the opacity of historical collecting practices complicate the status of these works. International conventions designed to safeguard heritage often, paradoxically, legitimise acquisitions that would today be deemed ethically problematic. As Maya Lucyshyn observes, "the

⁶⁰⁹ Sogbesan, "Reframing the Present," 54.

⁶¹⁰ Anna Karpiewska, et al., "Analysis of Museum Labels Description," *Opuscula Musealia* 26 (2019): 144.

⁶¹¹ Opoku, "Looted African Treasures."

⁶¹² Opoku, "Looted African Treasures."

⁶¹³ Constantine Petridis, "Recent Exhibitions: Arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas," *African Arts* (2001): 74.

⁶¹⁴ Corbey, "Arts Premiers," 5; Jacob Festus Adeniyi Ajayi et al., "Nigeria as a Colony." Last modified, August 10, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria/Nigeria-as-a-colony>.

international community essentially views theft of cultural property as wrong from a moral perspective but right in a legal sense,” capturing the fundamental tension at stake.⁶¹⁵

This section examines three well-established contested provenance cases to explore how they either challenge or reinforce spatial, contextual, and colonial-historical alienation, as well as the pavilion’s claim that all masterpieces are born “free and equal.”⁶¹⁶

1.3.1 A Nok Statue



Image 31. Label of “Sculpture de la Culture Nok”

While the contested provenance of the Benin plaques are at least briefly addressed in an explanatory wall text, this Nok terracotta (see image 31) was not. As one of the sculptures illegally exported from Nigeria, as documented by Kwame Opoku, Neil Brodie, and Donna Yates, it provides a strikingly interesting first case study.⁶¹⁷ Despite awareness of their illicit provenance, France acquired several such objects at a Brussels auction. Following international criticism, French authorities retrospectively negotiated an agreement with the Nigerian government, permitting display on the condition that the objects be labelled as “Nigerian property deposited in the museum.”⁶¹⁸ Although never a French colony, Nigeria was colonised by the British.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁵ Lucyshyn, “Legacy of Imperialism,” 145.

⁶¹⁶ “Artworks.”

⁶¹⁷ Opoku, “Looted African Art;” Neil Brodie and Donna Yates, “Nok Terracottas,” last modified August 21, 2012, <https://traffickingculture.org/encyclopedia/case-studies/nok-terracottas/>.

⁶¹⁸ Kwame Opoku, “Revisiting Looted Nigerian Nok Terracotta Sculptures in Louvre/Musée du Quai Branly, Paris,” published July 20, 2011, <https://www.africavenir.org/revisiting-looted-nigerian-nok-terracotta-sculptures-in-louvre-musee-du-quai-branly-paris/>; Folarin Shyllon, “Negotiations for the Return of Nok Sculptures from France to Nigeria – An Unrighteous Conclusion,” *Art Antiquity and Law* 8, no. 2 (2003): 135-148.

⁶¹⁹ Jacob Festus Adeniyi Ajayi et al., “Nigeria as a Colony,” last modified August 10, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria/Nigeria-as-a-colony>; Corbey, “Arts Premiers,” 5.

The museum's label omitted the object's contested provenance, complex trajectory, as well as its former colonial governance by the British. Instead, it merely identified the piece as a "Sculpture de la culture Nok," dated between the sixth century BCE and the sixth century CE, noted its Nigerian origin and terracotta medium, and indicated that it is part of a deposit from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. There was no supplementary interpretive material addressing its fraught history (e.g. factsheet entry).

Yet the biography of this sculpture is emblematic of broader structural issues in the circulation of African cultural heritage. The Bauchi Plateau of central Nigeria—occupied by the Nok culture from approximately 500 BCE to 200 CE—is its likely origin.⁶²⁰ The Nok are renowned for terracotta figures depicting humans and animals, often featuring elaborate hairstyles, jewellery, or signs of illness. However, widespread looting has stripped most examples of archaeological context, hampering scholarly understanding of their original function.⁶²¹

The first Nok figure surfaced in 1928 during tin mining operations near the village of Nok. Additional finds in the 1940s and excavations at Taruga in the 1960s confirmed the antiquity of these objects through radiocarbon dating. Meanwhile, reports of illicit export intensified, reaching a peak in the 1970s amid a proliferation of forgeries on the international art market.⁶²²

In response, Nigeria passed Decree No. 77 in 1979, establishing the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and prohibiting the unlicensed sale or export of antiquities—broadly defined as artefacts created before 1918. Despite this, enforcement has proven difficult. Critics highlight the NCMM's failure to publish lists of export permits and the ongoing ease with which objects exit the country illicitly.⁶²³

In 2000, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) added Nok terracottas from the Bauchi Plateau and surrounding regions to its Red List of endangered African cultural property. ICOM noted that such works were protected under Nigerian law, barred from export, and should never be acquired. It also emphasised the absence of complete Nok figures in Nigerian public collections, contrasting starkly with their abundance on the international market—clear evidence of systematic looting.⁶²⁴

Under President Jacques Chirac, France renewed its ambition to elevate the so-called arts premiers within national institutions. While these collections ultimately found a home in the newly constructed Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac (2006), a preview exhibition was inaugurated in the Louvre's Pavillon des Sessions in April 2000. Among the selected objects were two Nok terracottas, purchased in 1998 from

⁶²⁰ National Geographic Society, "The Nok Culture," last modified February 9, 2024, <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/nok-culture/>; Price, *Paris Primitive*, 67.

⁶²¹ Brodie and Yates, "Nok Terracottas," National Geographic, "Nigeria."

⁶²² Brodie and Yates, "Nok Terracottas," National Geographic, "Nigeria."

⁶²³ Zacharys Gundu, "Looted Nigerian Heritage – An Interrogatory Discourse Around Repatriation," *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* 7, no. 1 (2020): 56; Brodie and Yates, "Nok Terracottas."

⁶²⁴ Ece Velioglu et al., "Case Three Nok and Sokoto Sculptures – Nigeria and France," (paper, University of Geneva 2012), 2-3; Gundu, "Looted Nigerian Heritage," 51-52.

Brussels dealer Samir Borro for 2.5 million francs—despite their clear violation of Nigerian heritage law, the 1970 UNESCO Convention (ratified by Nigeria in 1972 and France in 1997), and ICOM guidance.⁶²⁵

Following diplomatic pressure, the Nigerian Minister of Culture retroactively authorised the sale in February 2000. Yet the Nigerian Embassy in Paris contested the approval, noting that it lacked NCMM authorisation and that no valid export licence had been issued. A settlement was reached in 2002, with Nigeria agreeing to loan the pieces to France for 25 years—later reportedly extended to 37 years in 2005.⁶²⁶ While some defended the agreement as pragmatic, lawyer and leading Nigerian expert Folarin Shyllon condemned it as a “smuggler’s charter” and described it as an “unrighteous conclusion” that retrospectively legitimised the illicit trade.⁶²⁷

Additionally, Opoku – who visited the pavilion –, criticised the lack of express mention that the displayed Nok sculptures were there by virtue of the consent of the Nigerian government to the French purchase. Furthermore, the history of the objects was also not recounted in a way by which the average museum visitor would know how these Nigerian sculptures came to the French museum. Highlighting that its note “Deposit of the Federal Republic of Nigeria” was too vague. “What can this mean to the average visitor? A museum visitor might think that Nigeria had deposited the object there for safekeeping because of fear of rampant burglary in Nigeria. Another visitor might consider the “Deposit” as some sort of security presented by Nigeria for a loan from France. There is no where a specific statement that these objects which France bought from the illegal market are recognized as property of Nigeria and the history of the purchase by France disappears.”⁶²⁸

As of July 2012, the Musée du quai Branly listed eight Nok terracottas in its collections database, none with documented provenance predating the 1979 NCMM Decree. In August of 2025, the contested provenance was still not acknowledged in the pavilion’s database. This raises serious ethical and legal concerns regarding their acquisition.⁶²⁹

The label which accompanied this Nok figure offered no indication of this complex history. It suppressed the sculpture’s status as an object of contested ownership, ignored the violations of international law underpinning its acquisition, and bypassed the broader diplomatic tensions it had provoked. Such omissions perpetuate a Eurocentric narrative of cultural accumulation divorced from the histories of colonial exploitation and postcolonial resistance.⁶³⁰

⁶²⁵ Brodie and Yates, “Nok Terracottas;” Opoku, “Nok Terracotta Sculptures.”

⁶²⁶ Brodie and Yates, “Nok Terracottas.”

⁶²⁷ Shyllon, “Nok Sculptures,” 148; Brodie and Yates, “Nok Terracottas.”

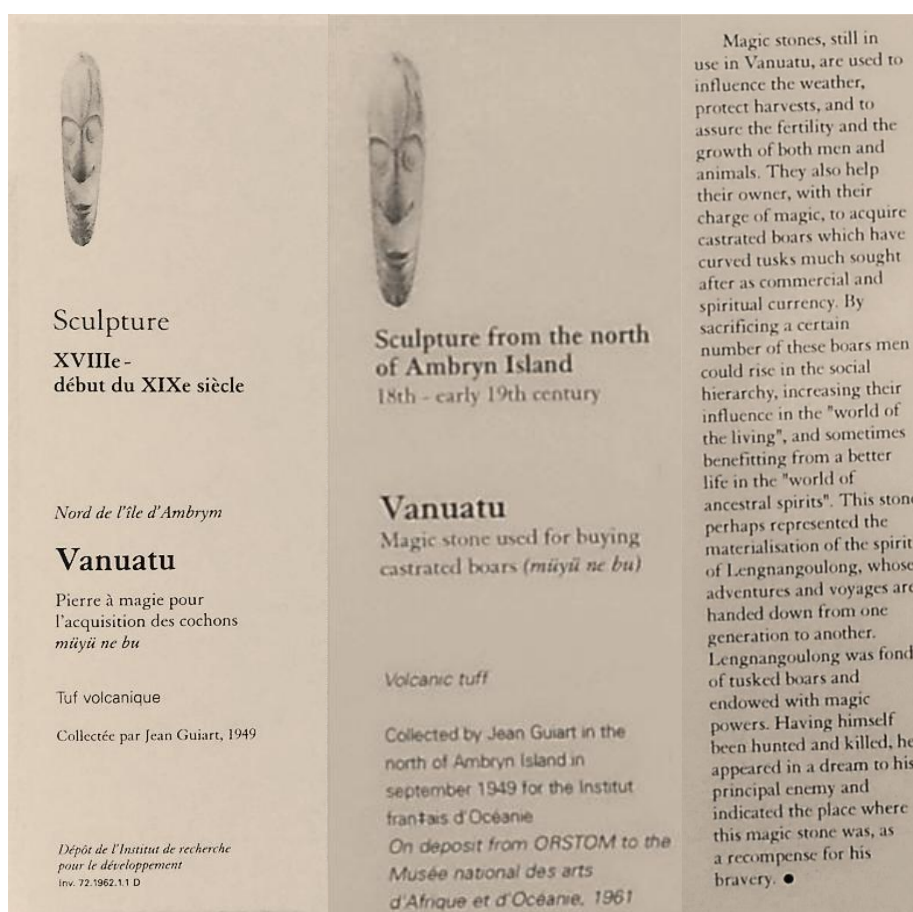
⁶²⁸ Opoku, “Nok Terracotta Sculptures.”

⁶²⁹ Brodie and Yates, “Nok Terracottas;” “Nok,” accessed August 11, 2025, <https://collections.quaibrantly.fr/>; “Sculpture Nok, Style de Katsina Ala,” accessed August 11, 2025, <https://www.quaibrantly.fr/fr/collections/toutes-les-collections/le-pavillon-des-sessions/le-pavillon-des-sessions/notice/557?referer=search&chash=83554f75e0a86991b20ff5df759699ae>.

⁶³⁰ Marilena Alivizatou, “Intangible Heritage and Erasure: Rethinking Cultural Preservation and Contemporary Museum Practice,” *International Journal of Cultural Property* 18 (2011): 53.

More than an oversight, this erasure constitutes complicity. It reflects not only curatorial reluctance to engage with the uncomfortable politics of restitution, but also a continued institutional investment in neutrality as a mode of depoliticisation. The label's silence is not innocent—it contributes to a broader museological pattern of obscuring the violence embedded in the global circulation of African heritage. In doing so, it forecloses opportunities for critical engagement, historical accountability, and ethical museology, instead perpetuating coloniality, inequality, containment, and spatial, contextual, and (colonial)historical alienation, ultimately diminishing the cultural and historical value of the Nok sculpture.⁶³¹

1.3.2 The Lengnangulong Sacred Stone



Images 32 and 33. Label "Sculpture" and Factsheet Close-Up "Sculpture from the North of Ambryn [sic] Island"

The Nok sculpture discussed previously is far from a unique case, as the Lengnangulong Sacred Stone highlights. The Lengnangulong — or "Lengnangouloung," as rendered on its factsheet contextualisation within the pavilion,— Sacred Stone from North Ambryn Island (rendered "North Ambryn"

⁶³¹ Modest, "Museums Are Investments," 71; Jennifer Harris, "Globalisation, Post-Colonialism and Museums," *ICOFOM-Study Series* 37 (2008): 129.

island) (see images 32 and 33) was displayed in the Pavillon des Sessions since 2000. Its object label identified it generically as "Sculpture," while the longer wall text described it as a "sculpture from the north of Ambrym Island," stating only that it was "collected" by Jean Guiart, 1949. These sparse details belied the object's contested provenance and exemplified how curatorial language obscured the ethical and historical dimensions of acquisition. No reference was made to the colonial context of its removal or to the source community's persistent repatriation efforts, as highlighted by anthropologist Hugo DeBlock.⁶³²

Despite growing calls for decolonial transparency and restitution, especially since the murder of George Floyd in 2020 which resulted in a wave of antiracism movements and protests. People around the world recognised the necessity for governments and other institutions in the West to recognise and deal with their imperial, colonial history and acknowledge the relationship with racism, colonialism and slave trade in the countries they were located in. Cultural lootings have roots in racism and colonialism, the object label's omission constructed a misleading sense of neutrality — one that erases the asymmetrical power relations through which the object was extracted.⁶³³

The longer descriptive text, found on the factsheet (see image 33) attempted to contextualise the stone by referring to magical practices in Vanuatu, explaining that such stones were "still used" to ensure the growth of "both men and animals," – notably not women –, fertility, influence weather, and protect harvests. Additionally, the text inconsistently shifted between past and present tenses — noting that by sacrificing a number of commercially and spiritually sought-after castrated boars with curved tusks, men "could" instead of "can" rise in the social hierarchy, making it unclear whether this was an error or highlighted cultural change — which ambiguates the continued vitality of the practices described. This linguistic instability contributes to the impression that the object belongs to a distant, "disappearing" culture, as highlighted by Katharina Hunfeld.⁶³⁴

The factsheet text further explains that the sacred stone possibly represents the materialised spirit of "Lengnangoulong," whose voyages and adventures "are" handed down from one generation to another. He was endowed with magic powers (it is unclear what powers) and was fond of tusked boars. After he was hunted and killed, he appeared in a dream of his (unclarified) "principal enemy," to reveal the stone's location, to reward his bravery. While evocative, and at times informative, this mythological framing is left unanchored from its cultural and historical context. For example, it remains unclear how many magic stones are still in practice, which group mainly uses them (everyone, only men, only men from a certain age group), and in addition to how men could use the stone to rise in the social hierarchy, and increase their

⁶³² DeBlock, "Lengnangoulong Sacred Stone," 111-127.

⁶³³ Palmer, "Looted Artifacts and Museums," 1.

⁶³⁴ Katharina Hunfeld, "The Coloniality of Time in the Global Justice Debate: De-Centring Western Linear Temporality," *Journal of Global Ethics* 18, no. 1 (2022): 104.

influence in the “world of the living,” how is the stone used to influenced to influence fertility, harvests, and weather? Did it have a set place or was is carried around?

Additionally, there was no information about the conditions under which Jean Guiart “collected” the object, whether consent was given by the relevant source community the stone was taken from, or what authority — if any — permitted its removal from its place of origin. These omissions deprived visitors of the opportunity to engage with the object as a living, contested heritage rather than an inert aesthetic artefact, as it is currently framed as within the pavilion.⁶³⁵

By contrast, DeBlock’s article “Property and Ownership in Vanuatu: The Lengnangulong Sacred Stone from North Ambrym at the Pavillon des Sessions of the Musée du Louvre,” offers a detailed and culturally grounded account. DeBlock describes Vanuatu as one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse nations in the world, with a population of roughly 250.000 and over 110 Indigenous languages. Since the late twentieth century, Indigenous movements have increasingly articulated disputes around cultural heritage using concepts of *kalja* (culture), *kastom* (custom), and *tedisin* (tradition). In this context, the Lengnangulong stone (notably differently spelled in DeBlock’s article) is not merely an ethnographic or aesthetc object, but a spiritual and juridical emblem of community identity and continuity, which was omitted from the museum texts.⁶³⁶

Guiart “acquired” the stone in 1949 from individuals outside the proper “*kastom*” lineage, during a period when colonial and missionary influence encouraged communities to dispose of sacred objects. Under Ambrymese customary law, however, sacred stones such as this one are inalienable and may only be passed through hereditary lines. Selling such an object — especially to outsiders — constitutes a profound violation of *kastom* and is regarded as theft.⁶³⁷ This context is strategically omitted from the object label and wall text within the pavilion, as well as the quai Branly’s website.

Calls for repatriation began in 1997.⁶³⁸ Since then, the villagers of Magam, supported by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and National Museum, have made multiple appeals for the stone’s return. These appeals have stressed the spiritual, cultural, and legal importance of the object. Nevertheless, the Louvre and Musée du quai Branly have cited French law, which classifies national museum collections as “inalienable state property,” thereby precluding restitution. Local leaders have proposed alternative forms of redress, including symbolic rent, cultural exchange, or compensation, but to date, no agreement seems to have been reached.⁶³⁹

⁶³⁵ Tolia-Kelly, “(Postcolonial) Museum,” 906; Simpson, “Indigenous Resurgence,” 32;

⁶³⁶ DeBlock, “Lengnangulong Sacred Stone,” 111.

⁶³⁷ DeBlock, “Lengnangulong Sacred Stone,” 113-117.

⁶³⁸ DeBlock, “Objects as Archives,” 92.

⁶³⁹ DeBlock, “Lengnangulong Sacred Stone,” 113-120.

Despite the ethical weight of these claims, the Louvre's presentation of the object continues to foreground its aesthetic and anthropological significance while disregarding its contested provenance. Its identification as a "magic stone used to obtain castrated boars" reduces it to an exoticised artefact, stripping it of its social, legal, and spiritual embeddedness within Vanuatu culture (kalja). Meanwhile, Jean Guiart dismissed repatriation requests, arguing that the stone was obtained from Ralitor village through legitimate channels. However, both anthropologists and local leaders contest this narrative, reiterating that, under kastom, legitimacy is derived not from the act of sale but from lineage and community sanction.⁶⁴⁰ Yet, as a self-proclaimed expert on the whole of Oceania, wouldn't it have been expected for him to be aware of these laws?⁶⁴¹

Until its temporary closure in late 2024, the sacred stone was displayed as one of the "150 Masterpieces" of the Musée du quai Branly's collection in the Louvre, exemplifying the structural contradictions at the heart of the universal museum, not to mention the pavilion. How can they proclaim that all masterpieces are born "free and equal," while the stone appears to be neither of those two. Additionally, the unwillingness to return a still-used example of cultural heritage by the Louvre and quai Branly museums, as well as the arrogant attitude Guiart showed by dismissing the repatriation requests as – according to himself – he – as a self-proclaimed Oceania specialist – shows the deeply rooted tangents of colonialism in the form of coloniality.⁶⁴²

As highlighted by de L'Estoile, by recontextualising – in this case Oceanic – within a largely aesthetic framework, rather than confronting the (continuing) colonial violence through which the The Lengnangulong Sacred Stone from North Ambrym was acquired by unfair means, the institutions reasserted their authority over global cultural heritage while simultaneously disavowing their complicity in the histories of extraction and dispossession.⁶⁴³

Western institutions like the quai Branly, Louvre, and their pavilion continue to celebrate objects for their visual or ethnographic appeal while silencing the cultural and historical conditions under which they were removed, therefor alienating a large part of their identity.⁶⁴⁴ As both Igor Kopytoff and Paul Basu highlight, cultural artefacts – especially ones displayed far from their places of origin, hold complex biographies. The Sacred Stone is at once an example of contested provenance, of heritage its source community desperately wants back and is open to discuss with the Louvre and quai Branly to find a solution, even in forms of payment and rent, to right the wrongs done by displaying it and continuing to profit from it (perhaps even in the new pavilion set to open in late 2025), beautiful to look at, and can help people

⁶⁴⁰ DeBlock, "Lengnangulong Sacred Stone," 113-116;

⁶⁴¹ Marc Tabani and Lamont Lindstrom, "Jean Guiart: ethnography as a life marathon," *Journal de la société des océanistes* 154 (2022): 7-14.

⁶⁴² Rolando Vázquez, "The Museum," 183.

⁶⁴³ Benoît de L'Estoile, "From the Colonial Exhibition to the Museum of Man," 342.

⁶⁴⁴ Dias, "Double Erasure," 304-306; Alivizatou, "Arts Premiers," 53.

lean more about cultural practices in North Ambrym when contextualised correctly, just to name a few. This highlights that depending on the time and space in which visitors look at objects, they might interpret the object – in this case the Sacred Stone – very differently.⁶⁴⁵

However, in the pavilion, as identified by Alivizatou, the gallery communicated the message that non-Western material culture and art were equally important as the masterpieces of Western civilization. While this step has been widely heralded as breaking down colonial and racist walls, the celebration of these objects as universal art silences their previous lives and social meanings and expresses Eurocentric views that often further perpetuate the divide between the non-West and the West. Indigenous identity and heritage in this context are very much negotiated as precolonial traditions and practices that are fragile and threatened by globalisation and development.⁶⁴⁶

The Lengnangulong case demonstrates the limitations of current museum frameworks for addressing provenance and restitution, even in instances where harm is clearly articulated and alternatives have been proposed.

By failing to include this layered provenance and the claims of the Magam community, the Louvre sustains a curatorial model that privileges institutional authority and aesthetic framing over ethical responsibility. In doing so, the museum not only fails to decolonise — it reinscribes colonial power by continuing to determine the meaning and legitimacy of contested heritage.

1.3.3 The Sculpture of Gou Attributed to Akati Ekplékendo

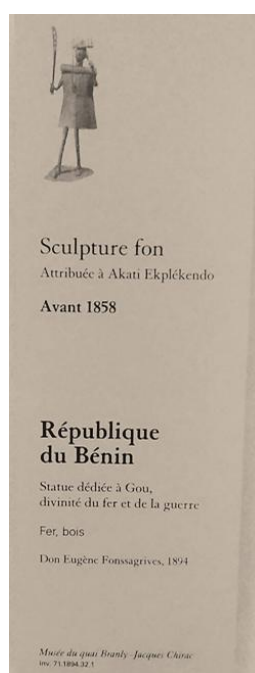


Image 34. Label "Sculpture Fon"

⁶⁴⁵ Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things," 64-94; Basu, *The Inbetweenness of Things*.

⁶⁴⁶ Alivizatou, "Intangible Heritage and Erasure," 53.

While the Sacred Stone from North Ambrym was at least accompanied by some additional information in the form of a factsheet entry – albeit minimal, omitting the contested provenance of the stone, and problematic in its own account –, the “sculpture Fon” (see image 34) in the Pavillon des Sessions was – just like the Nok sculpture – accompanied only by a basic object label. This label included the name of the work, attribution to Akati Ekplékendo, a pre-1858 date, its origin from the Republic of Benin, identification as a statue dedicated to Gou, the deity of iron and war, a list of materials (iron and wood), its donor (Eugène Fonssagrives, 1894), and current ownership by the musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

What the label omits, however, is the object’s fraught provenance and layered biography. As Kerstin Schankweiler details in her article “Double Trophy: Gou by Akati Ekplékendo,” Akati Ekplékendo was an artist from “Doumé” (now in the Republic of Benin), who was enslaved and forcibly relocated to the royal court of Dahomey around 1860.⁶⁴⁷

In 2018, Sara Tassi wrote that the sculpture was either created for King Ghézo, Glélé, or Béhanzin.⁶⁴⁸ In 2021, Kersten Schankweiler noted that the statue was once believed to have been commissioned by King Glèlè (1859–1889) as a tribute to his father, King Guezo (1818–1858). More recent research suggests that Glèlè seized both the statue and its maker during a military campaign. After a diviner attributed Doumé’s military resilience to the power of Gou, the king dispatched spies to investigate, and ultimately appropriated the statue and the artist to protect his court.⁶⁴⁹

The statue was picked up on a beach in Ouidah by Colonel Eugène Fonssagrives, during the colonial conquest of “Daxomé” (in the current Republic of Benin) in the early 1890s.⁶⁵⁰ The sculpture was subsequently brought to France, where it was displayed in successive institutions before being installed in the Louvre’s Pavillon des Sessions in 2000.⁶⁵¹ The statue’s first description dates back to 1894, when Maurice Delafosse wrote a first article in which he describe the Gou sculpture.⁶⁵²

Little is known about the statue’s original function, but it may be understood as a bocio, an object activated through offerings to mobilise spiritual forces, often before battle. Its portability and scale suggest it was carried into combat, possibly mounted on a hill to serve a protective or alarm function—its nickname,

⁶⁴⁷ Kerstin Schankweiler, “Double Trophy: Gou by Akati Ekplékendo,” in *Reading Objects in the Contact Zone*, eds. Eva-Maria Troelsenberg, Kerstin Schankweiler, and Anna Sophia Messner (Heidelberg University Publishing, 2021), 142.

⁶⁴⁸ Sara Tassi, “Vers une ‘Mésologie des Savoirs.’ Le ‘Gou du Louvre’: Tours et Détours d’un Chef-d’Oeuvre Postcolonial,” in *Création Contemporaine et Patrimoine Royal au Bénin*, eds. Didier Houénoué and Maureen Murphy (HICSA, 2018), <https://jcea.hypotheses.org/1179>.

⁶⁴⁹ Schankweiler, “Double Trophy,” 142.

⁶⁵⁰ Tassi, “Gou du Louvre.”

⁶⁵¹ Schankweiler, “Double Trophy,” 144–146.

⁶⁵² Tassi, “Gou du Louvre.”

“agojie,” is said to derive from its warning cry. A bell affixed to the figure may have contributed to this function, adding a performative and acoustic element frequently neglected in Western displays.⁶⁵³

Formally, the sculpture is constructed from European scrap metal—rails, steel plates, possibly even slave chains—demonstrating an early example of artistic recycling. Ekplékendo employed diverse techniques: hammering, forging, riveting, and spiking. In Dahomey and other African polities, materials held hierarchical significance, and blacksmiths, particularly those working with iron, were often highly respected. The creative use of salvaged materials belongs to a long-standing tradition of récup-art, reflecting West Africa’s engagement with global material flows well before the formal colonial period.⁶⁵⁴

Notably, the attribution of this work to a named artist—Ekplékendo—is highly exceptional in the context of African (and arguably Indigenous material culture altogether, considering the lack of attributions in museums like the quai Branly, British Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum...) art displays. This is the only such attribution within the Pavillon. As Schankweiler observes, Ekplékendo’s status as an enslaved Yoruba artist situates him within the royal blacksmith workshop, and his forced relocation exemplifies a translocal art history shaped by war, migration, and power dynamics long before European colonisation.⁶⁵⁵

As a “spoil of war,” the Gou statue has been (re)introduced to numerous Western fields of thought since its arrival in the West.⁶⁵⁶ Schankweiler stated that the sculpture’s biography is defined by successive acts of violent appropriation. First seized by Glèlè as a war trophy and reframed as a royal symbol, it was later appropriated by the French military. Captain Fonssagrives claimed to have found the statue in Ouidah, a major slave-trading port, where King Behanzin is said to have brought it for spiritual support in battle against the French. When his troops were defeated, the sculpture was deemed powerless and left behind. Its symbolic power had been neutralised through military defeat.⁶⁵⁷

The Gou sculpture then passed through three of France’s major museums: the Trocadéro, the Musée de l’Homme, and ultimately the Louvre. Each institution imposed a distinct interpretive frame, according to Schankweiler: colonial-ethnographic, anthropologic, and artistic. At the Trocadéro, it was classified as a scientific specimen and imperial trophy. By the 1930s, it was reframed as an artwork, showcased in major exhibitions including the Exposition d’art africain et d’art océanien (1930) and African Negro Art at MoMA (1935). This repositioning aligned the piece with avant-garde aesthetic categories, further divorcing it from its context of origin while increasing its symbolic and market value.⁶⁵⁸

From 2000 until late 2024, the Gou sculpture was one of the select few works of African material culture displayed in the Louvre, aside from the “Egyptian arts.” Though canonised as a “masterpiece,” the

⁶⁵³ Schankweiler, “Double Trophy,” 142-146.

⁶⁵⁴ Schankweiler, “Double Trophy,” 143-144.

⁶⁵⁵ Schankweiler, “Double Trophy,” 141-146.

⁶⁵⁶ Tassi, “Gou du Louvre.”

⁶⁵⁷ Schankweiler, “Double Trophy,” 144-145.

⁶⁵⁸ Schankweiler, “Double Trophy,” 145-146.

work is far more than a fine example of African craftsmanship. Schankweiler convincingly argues that the Gou statue should be seen as a “modern” artwork in its own right, even at the time of its creation. Its anthropomorphic form, shaped by transcultural encounters and war-time innovation, diverged from traditional representations of Gou—once embodied as mounds of earth embedded with iron—and signals aesthetic experimentation.⁶⁵⁹

In 2018, Tassi wrote that because of the ongoing repatriation discussions at the time, the statue was expected to be returned to its home in Abomey, Benin during 2020, accompanying 25 other objects.⁶⁶⁰ However, this was not the case, as the online database of the quai Branly still notes that the Gou statue is in the Louvre’s pavilion.⁶⁶¹

The Gou figure is thus a material condensation of multiple contact zones, Schankweiler points out the local politics of Dahomey, transregional African interactions, and global colonial entanglements. This charged status became politically visible in 2016, when the Republic of Benin formally requested the restitution of looted objects, including the Gou statue. That the Louvre and Musée du quai Branly have not responded publicly to this claim reveals the limits of their engagement with provenance politics.⁶⁶²

The current display erases the sculpture’s violent history—its connections to slavery, colonial warfare, cultural displacement, and artistic innovation. By withholding this context, the museum not only distorts the object’s significance, but perpetuates a broader structure of postcolonial injustice. The Gou statue’s biography, shaped by trauma and transformation, remains unacknowledged. Its inclusion in the Louvre affirms not a history of restitution or reconciliation, but of silence.

3.3 Towards Open Textual Practices

“Art, to be art, must be both alienating and integrating. On one level, there is no art without alienation [...]

On another level of understanding, however, art transcends its condition of alienation only if it is creative in the sense that it adds something to the world which was not there before”

Paul M. Laporte, 1968.⁶⁶³

Art contains a built-in tension according to Laporte: it both creates distance and fosters connection. A meaningful work stands apart from the flow of everyday life, allowing the artist to shape, reflect, and

⁶⁵⁹ Schankweiler, “Double Trophy,” 146.

⁶⁶⁰ Tassi, “Gou du Louvre.”

⁶⁶¹ “Collections,” accessed August 11, 2025, <https://collections.quaibranly.fr/>.

⁶⁶² Schankweiler, “Double Trophy,” 146.

⁶⁶³ Laporte, “Art and Alienation,” 158.

interpret human experience. Yet in that act of creation, the distance begins to close. True artistic creation goes further still — it adds something new to the world.⁶⁶⁴

Historically, art was inseparable from collective life, woven into ceremonies, rituals, and communal functions. Over time, however, especially from the nineteenth century onwards, “art for art’s sake” reframed it as a vehicle for personal expression, detaching works from their social and spiritual contexts. In museums, this alienation is compounded: objects once embedded in living worlds are isolated behind glass, reduced to visual data points for an external gaze.⁶⁶⁵

Yet their presence here can also be an opening. When acknowledged through narrative, spatial design, or community voices, these works can transcend isolation. They can act not as aestheticised colonial trophies, but as vessels of memory and encounter — altering how the museum itself is understood. The question, then, is whether these objects merely exist in displacement, or whether they contribute to the museum’s ecosystem by offering renewed perspectives and bridging histories.⁶⁶⁶

This section argues that the Pavillon des Sessions could overcome spatial, contextual, and colonial-historical alienation by adopting textual practices that reflect its own motto: that “masterpieces” from around the world are born “free and equal.”

Drawing on my earlier research from my bachelor’s dissertation, I distinguish between two communication strategies: a closed approach, grounded in colonial practice, which avoids difficult issues, clings to outdated Western narratives, and delivers guarded, object-focused, and often wilfully silent interpretation — as is the case in the pavilion — and an open approach, rooted in decolonial practice, which confronts such issues, invites critical engagement, centres non-Western perspectives, and remains transparent, inclusive, and empathetic.

While the pavilion’s current texts (and broader curatorial practices) align with the closed mode, this section focuses on how an open mode could be meaningfully applied through decentring communication, contextualising material culture and art, and meaningful collaboration.⁶⁶⁷

3.3.1 Decentring Communication

Decolonising museum communication requires more than rearranging displays — it demands structural change.⁶⁶⁸ Following Audre Lorde’s logic, the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s

⁶⁶⁴ Laporte, “Art and Alienation,” 158.

⁶⁶⁵ Laporte, “Art and Alienation,” 158.

⁶⁶⁶ Laporte, “Art and Alienation,” 158.

⁶⁶⁷ Rowena Dossche, “The Museum Is the Message,” (Bachelor’s dissertation, Ghent University, 2023), 21-22.

⁶⁶⁸ Oluwatoyin Sogbesan, “Reframing the Present,” 52.

house; therefore, colonial frameworks cannot be undone using the very structures that created them.⁶⁶⁹ The Pavillon des Sessions' current texts centre French collection histories and French tastes in Indigenous material culture and art, rather than the civilisations from which these works originate. This focus reflects not only Eurocentric tastes but also Eurocentric worldviews, rooted in disguised racism and discrimination. By continuing to centre the West, such texts dictate who feels welcome, who feels excluded, and whose cultures are celebrated or diminished, thereby reinforcing colonial power structures.⁶⁷⁰

To decolonise the exhibition space means challenging the categories, hierarchies, and epistemologies shaped by colonialism.⁶⁷¹ This begins by actively provincialising Europe, as Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests — shifting Europe and its perspectives into a subaltern position.⁶⁷² Indigenous heritage must be exhibited free from bias, prejudice, and the suppression of traditional practices of collecting, conserving, and displaying.⁶⁷³ Decoloniality is not about token recognition; it is about allowing omitted worlds to regain their agency and inhabit the present alongside other knowledge systems.⁶⁷⁴

Museums today are often perceived as complicit institutions of colonial oppression, especially when they retain cultural artefacts inaccessible to source communities. These collections evoke complex emotions for Indigenous peoples — from sorrow and anger to joy — as they simultaneously represent traumatic histories and connections to pre-colonial cultural life. Yet museums also have the potential to safeguard traditions, amplify marginalised voices, and provide platforms for re-evaluating historical narratives.⁶⁷⁵

Decolonisation is not limited to the repatriation of artefacts, although restitution remains vital. It involves rethinking institutional aims, structures, and narratives; exposing and dismantling practices of "othering"; and addressing legacies such as the Doctrine of Discovery. It is a process — one that requires museums to interrogate and replace hierarchies of power that replicate colonial structures.⁶⁷⁶

Decentring means moving away from outdated norms that privilege dominant perspectives. This can be as simple as using Indigenous place names instead of colonial ones, or beginning narratives earlier than European contact. While potentially uncomfortable for dominant groups, decentring fosters critical thinking, broadens representation, and helps historically excluded groups feel included.⁶⁷⁷

Language is a powerful tool here. For example, replacing "slave" with "enslaved person" not only restores humanity to the individual but also identifies the active perpetrators of enslavement. Such changes undermine ingrained expectations and open space for more inclusive narratives.⁶⁷⁸

⁶⁶⁹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112.

⁶⁷⁰ De Cesari and Sariaslan, "(Post)Coloniality and Museum Failure," 2; Smith, "Theorizing Museum," 478.

⁶⁷¹ Barbara Niniano, "Necessary Anachronisms: Rethinking Spaces for the Present," (Essay, Nero, 2025),

<https://www.neroeditions.com/necessary-anachronisms/>.

⁶⁷² Chakrabarty, "Provincializing Europe," 351-52.

⁶⁷³ Sogbesan, "Reframing the Present," 58.

⁶⁷⁴ Vázquez, "The Museum," 191.

⁶⁷⁵ Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice*, 26; Ariese and Wróblewska, "Introduction," 12.

⁶⁷⁶ Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice*, 26.

⁶⁷⁷ Ariese, "Decentering," 53-54.

⁶⁷⁸ Ariese, "Decentering," 53-54.

Museums can build trust and foster empathy by showing vulnerability — openly acknowledging their colonial pasts and the harm caused. This includes taking a self-critical stance, inviting criticism, and creating interpretive materials that encourage compassionate, emotional, and intimate engagement with history. Vulnerability involves openness to encounters with communities represented in the museum, and a willingness to change entrenched perspectives.⁶⁷⁹

Collaboration with external partners — such as artists or community experts — can strengthen this approach, but must avoid tokenism. Done sincerely, vulnerability becomes a foundation for understanding, community building, and social justice.⁶⁸⁰

In the twenty-first century, museums are expected to be transparent institutions of social justice and trust. This extends beyond provenance research into how artefacts were acquired, to include openness about authorship of labels, decision-making processes, and internal power relations. Visitors and stakeholders alike are increasingly demanding clarity on how collections were formed and how colonial-related artefacts will be addressed.⁶⁸¹

Transparency means sharing knowledge about artefacts' histories, acknowledging power imbalances in acquisition, and recontextualising collections.⁶⁸² This is not simply administrative openness — it is a key element of decolonising museum practice, ensuring that narratives are accountable and inclusive, accepting that instead of only Western truth, there might be numerous ways to tell a story.⁶⁸³ As well as accepting that displayed objects multiple, sometimes conflicting meanings across different contexts and that this should be disclosed to visitors, thus, embracing multiple interpretations and empowering people to share their own experiences.⁶⁸⁴

3.3.2 Contextualising Material Culture and Art

From their inception, museums incorporated objects from other cultures, stripping them of their original meanings and recontextualising them within aesthetic frameworks that served to legitimise Western hegemony and imperial expansion. The continued presence of colonial collections in museums — often displayed using outdated exhibition methods and discursive models — still reflects patterns of dominance. Even when institutions replace terms such as “primitive arts” with “arts premiers,” they often

⁶⁷⁹ Wróblewska, “Embracing Vulnerability,” 97.

⁶⁸⁰ Wróblewska, “Embracing Vulnerability,” 97.

⁶⁸¹ Magdalena Wróblewska, “Improving Transparency,” in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples*, eds. Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska (Amsterdam University Press B.V., 2022), 81-82.

⁶⁸² Wróblewska, “Improving Transparency,” 82.

⁶⁸³ Tolia-Kelly, “(Postcolonial) Museum,” 907-908; Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Sara Araújo, and Orlando Aragón Andrade, “Introduction: The Constitution, the State, the Law and the Epistemologies of the South,” in *Decolonizing Constitution: Beyond False or Impossible Promises*, eds. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Sara Araújo, and Orlando Aragón Andrade (Routledge, 2024), 2; Shahid Vawda, “Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice: From Colonialism to Decoloniality,” *Museum International* 71, no. 1-2 (2019): 78.

⁶⁸⁴ Wintle, *Colonial Collecting and Display*, 3; Hills and Middleton “Colonial Imagination,” n.p.; Roth, “Visual Storytelling,” 86.

perpetuate a colonial legacy by distorting the intended use, spiritual, or ritual significance of these objects. This colonial imprint remains particularly evident in the widespread refusal to engage in meaningful dialogue with source or descendant communities.⁶⁸⁵

Decolonising museums requires moving beyond evolutionary, hierarchical, or positivist exhibition models towards co-curatorship practices, where the voices and narratives of source communities take precedence. This means involving these communities directly in the management, interpretation, display, and mediation of their own heritage. While some museums have adopted shared curatorial models that centre local communities as the primary knowledge holders and authoritative narrators, progress across Europe has been slow and uneven, with universalist museums often the most resistant.⁶⁸⁶

At its core, decolonisation demands a critical re-examination of the colonial past. While history cannot be undone, it must be interrogated, contextualised, and its consequences acknowledged. Integrating this historical scrutiny into museum discourse is essential — recognising that both the objects and the evolution of museology are inseparable from colonial legacies.⁶⁸⁷

Within the Pavillon des Sessions, objects were largely decontextualised through: a lack of information or use of Eurocentric information, reliance on coloniality hidden in “neutral” practices such as Western geographic and temporal framing, and a privileging of visual appeal over cultural context.⁶⁸⁸

This approach consigns the “civilisations oubliées” — to borrow Chirac’s phrase — to the margins of remembrance, reducing them to static, aestheticised artefacts framed through an imperial lens.⁶⁸⁹ Such framing denies these cultures their historical dynamism, complexity, and right to self-representation.⁶⁹⁰

Relics of “traditional” Indigenous culture, for example, are frequently appraised through a lens privileging their artistic value over their functional or spiritual significance. This has prompted calls for new descriptors and interpretive frameworks for African collections that respect their original contexts.⁶⁹¹

Empathy — the ability to share and understand others’ emotions — is particularly necessary in a globalising world, especially toward those perceived as different. Increasingly, museums are becoming emotional storytelling devices, featuring personal stories rather than only generalised group narratives. Visitors connect more deeply with named individuals, which fosters empathy not only for them but for their broader communities.⁶⁹²

⁶⁸⁵ Roque, “Decolonising the Museum,” 66-67.

⁶⁸⁶ Roque, “Decolonising the Museum,” 66-67.

⁶⁸⁷ Roque, “Decolonising the Museum,” 66-67.

⁶⁸⁸ Linda Tugiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (University of Otago Press, 1999), 55; John M. Mackenzie, *Museums and Empire: Natural History, Human Cultures and Colonial Identities* (Manchester University Press, 2009), 6-8.

⁶⁸⁹ Natasha Ruiz-Gómez, “The (Jean) Nouvel Other: Primitivism and the Musée du Quai Branly,” *Modern & Contemporary France* 14, no 4 (2006): 425.

⁶⁹⁰ Tolia-Kelly, “(Postcolonial) Museum,” 906.

⁶⁹¹ Tolia-Kelly, “(Postcolonial) Museum,” 906.

⁶⁹² Csilla E. Ariese, “Championing Empathy,” in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples*, eds. Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska (Amsterdam University Press B.V., 2022), 67-68.

Communication in museums is both a concept and a process, influencing every aspect of their work.⁶⁹³ As financial, social, and political landscapes shift, museums must reconsider their roles — not only as keepers of the past but as actors in the present and future.⁶⁹⁴ This means including source communities as active participants in shaping museum narratives.⁶⁹⁵

Historically, museum objects were instrumental in advancing colonial agendas, silencing non-Western voices to uphold a hegemonic Western worldview. This included: racist and discriminatory language in documentation, inaccurate regional or ethnic classifications, and the imposition of colonial ideology over local knowledge systems.⁶⁹⁶

Today, however, these same objects can be re-engaged to help “untangle the present-day colonial hook” by recontextualising them through Indigenous perspectives. This validates knowledge systems that were long obscured or dismissed.⁶⁹⁷

Clement Emeka Akpang’s Five-Step System of Art Appreciation offers a useful framework for deepening engagement: Description (formal visual attributes of the artefact), Analysis (subjective interpretation of the formal elements), Context (religious, environmental, and historical background), Meaning (purpose of the artefact then, now, and in future), judgement (evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses).⁶⁹⁸

While Akpang’s model is primarily applied to (post)modernist art, its principles can inform decolonial practice by emphasising context and maker perspectives alongside aesthetic considerations.

Decolonisation in museums is not limited to restitution or the superficial inclusion of Indigenous narratives — it is a mindset change and paradigm shift. It begins by confronting colonial legacies, admitting institutional complicity, and building frameworks in which source communities are not only heard but are central decision-makers.⁶⁹⁹ Only by reuniting objects with their full histories — social, spiritual, and political — can museums move from being static repositories of colonial power to dynamic spaces of shared knowledge and reconciliation.⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹³ Jane K. Nielsen, “Museum Communication and Storytelling: Articulating Understandings within the Museum Structure,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 32, nr. 5 (2017): 443. (440-455)

⁶⁹⁴ Jane K. Nielsen, “Museum Communication and Storytelling: Articulating Understandings within the Museum Structure,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 32, nr. 5 (2017): 445. (440-455)

⁶⁹⁵ Oluwatoyin Sogbesan, “Reframing the Present by Recontextualising the Past: Towards Decolonising Nigerian Museums,” *Museum International* 74, no. 3-4 (2022): 55.

⁶⁹⁶ Geraldine L. Palmer, “Looted Artifacts and Museums’ Perpetuation of Imperialism and Racism: Implications for the Importance of Preserving Cultural Heritage,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2023): 3; Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 55.

⁶⁹⁷ Oluwatoyin Sogbesan, “Reframing the Present,” 58; Cadman, et al., “All Kinds of Seasons,” 3-4; Amy Lonetree, “Museums as Sites of Decolonization: Truth Telling in National and Tribal Museums,” in *Contesting Knowledge: Museums and Indigenous Perspectives*, ed. Susan Sleeper-Smith (University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 330.

⁶⁹⁸ Clement Emeka Akpang, “Writing About Art: Addressing the Problem of Art Appreciation and Criticism in Nigerian Universities/Colleges,” *International Journal of Education and Research* 8, nr. 2 (2020): 41.

⁶⁹⁹ Mary Bouquet, *Museums: A Visual Anthropology* (Berg, 2012), 91; Oluwatoyin Sogbesan, “Reframing the Present,” 52.

⁷⁰⁰ Sanjoori, “Culture and Space,” Sogbesan, “Reframing the Present,” 58.

3.3.3 Collaborating Meaningfully

Internal museum staff, often working at a remove from source communities, may lack the nuanced cultural understanding necessary for authentic interpretation. It is therefore essential that museums actively foster the participation of source groups, empowering them to reveal the hidden dimensions of their heritage.⁷⁰¹ Museums should function as spaces of both collaboration and, where needed, constructive contention.⁷⁰²

To decolonise effectively, they must avoid non-participation—such as manipulation or superficial “therapy”—and resist tokenism, including perfunctory informing, consultation, or placation. Instead, they should embrace what Arnstein terms citizen power: partnership, delegated authority, and community control.⁷⁰³ Onciul advances this further, proposing the concept of an engagement zone to replace the “contact zone.” In museum contexts, engagement zones are spaces where institutional and community voices interact—sometimes in tension—but with the potential to transform the narrative. Unlike the contact zone, which centres collision and negotiation, the engagement zone promotes co-creation, mutual respect, and long-term relationship-building. Such work is inherently cross-cultural and inter-community, requiring ongoing negotiation as each participant brings distinct needs, values, and expectations.⁷⁰⁴

Challenging colonial legacies through anti-colonial language and decolonial practice is a path that more museums are beginning to pursue. Yet decolonisation is neither a simple nor a uniform process. It must be co-developed and led by Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC), whose expertise must be respected, valued, and fairly compensated. Their generosity provides the foundation for positive transformation. Because colonialism and museums’ roles in it have affected communities in different ways, decolonial work demands time, sensitivity, and a commitment that extends beyond the constraints of funding cycles. Above all, it is a continual, collective process—one that must remain adaptable to evolving priorities and needs.⁷⁰⁵

As publicly funded institutions, museums have an obligation to ensure that the communities they serve feel represented and welcomed. Many hold artefacts acquired without consent, often interpreted through a Western lens.⁷⁰⁶ Increasing inclusivity requires more than new hires—it demands that these positions be substantive, not tokenistic, and that staff are empowered to shape institutional narratives rather than simply diversify appearances.⁷⁰⁷

⁷⁰¹ Sogbesan, “Reframing the Present,” 58.

⁷⁰² Philipp Schorch, “Contact Zones, Third Spaces, and the Act of Interpretation,” *Museum and Society* 11, no. 1 (2013): 68.

⁷⁰³ Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice*, 74.

⁷⁰⁴ Onciul, *Museums, Heritage and Indigenous Voice*, 82-87.

⁷⁰⁵ Brandie Macdonald, “Decolonizing Museum Practices,” 10-11.

⁷⁰⁶ Ariese, “Increasing Inclusivity,” 38.

⁷⁰⁷ Ariese, “Increasing Inclusivity,” 40.

Museums also make deliberate and inadvertent choices about what histories to address and what to omit. Silence can take many forms: structural amnesia, repressive erasure, external political pressures, respect for communities that choose not to speak, uncertainty about interpretation, or simple lack of knowledge. These decisions shape both societal remembering and societal forgetting, influencing collective well-being after traumatic events such as colonisation.⁷⁰⁸ Museums, as contact zones, hold a responsibility to foster dialogue around difficult histories, though some topics—particularly those tied to deep trauma—may require sensitive handling or may remain too painful or complex to address publicly.⁷⁰⁹

Whether through remembering or forgetting, museums are powerful cultural transmitters of accepted history. Their responsibility is therefore not only to decide which stories to tell, but to make those decisions with the communities most affected, not for them. As Suzy Thomas reminds us, forgetting can be just as crucial as remembering—yet both require shared authority if they are to serve justice.⁷¹⁰

⁷⁰⁸ Thomas, "Representing Difficult Histories," 534.

⁷⁰⁹ Thomas, "Representing Difficult Histories," 535-540.

⁷¹⁰ Thomas, "Representing Difficult Histories," 542.

Conclusion

The public museum, as it exists today, emerged alongside the formation of modern nation-states, often serving as a tool of ideological and political dominance. Rooted in imperial conquest and colonial expansion, encyclopaedic museums such as the Louvre amassed collections through looting, coercive diplomacy, and exploitative trade. Once acquired, these objects were reframed through Western epistemologies, transformed into “art” and abstracted from their original meanings. The Pavillon des Sessions, as this dissertation has shown, inherits and reproduces many of these dynamics despite its positioning as a space of inclusion and equality.

Situated in the heart of Paris, within one of the most prestigious cultural institutions of the Western world, the pavilion demonstrates that physical inclusion does not necessarily produce symbolic inclusion, equality, or decoloniality (the active dismantling of coloniality’s enduring power structures and Eurocentric hierarchies).

By analysing the pavilion’s curatorial practices on the macro level (institutional history), meso level (mise-en-scène), and micro level (museum texts), this dissertation addressed the central research question: How did the curatorial choices in the Pavillon des Sessions (Louvre) before the current renovation (c. 2024–2025) avoid or perpetuate spatial, contextual, and (colonial) historical alienation? Two sub-questions guided the analysis: (1) In what ways did the curatorial practices avoid or perpetuate coloniality? and (2) In what ways did the curatorial practices succeed or fail to display the “world’s masterpieces” as “free and equal?”

The findings reveal that the pavilion constituted a “perfect storm” in which spatial, contextual, and colonial-historical alienation reinforced one another at every level, perpetuating coloniality and failing to display material culture from selected regions of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas as either free or equal.

Spatial alienation began with the displacement of objects from their source communities. Their physical inclusion in the pavilion — shaped by the Louvre’s political and cultural legacy — elevated them to the status of Western masterpieces while further detaching them from their contexts. This aestheticising approach is inherently Eurocentric, reframing Indigenous material culture within Western categories and thereby “assimilating” it to dominant narratives. The pavilion’s marginal location within the Louvre reflected the political compromises surrounding President Chirac’s insistence on including non-European works in the Grand Louvre project. This physical marginalisation was compounded by minimal signage, an unclear institutional relationship with the quai Branly museum, and maps whose vague or imprecise naming further

alienated the works. Such conditions made clear that these so-called “masterpieces” were neither free nor equal.

Contextual alienation extended the detachment. Labels, maps, wall texts, and factsheets attempted to situate the artefacts geographically and institutionally, but often relied on contemporary nation-state names for works predating such entities, employed unclarified regional terms, and omitted visual or narrative cues to historical environments. The vision of Jacques Kerchache — to present non-Western works as “born free and equal” — was undermined by his selective exclusions (notably much of Asia) and his commitment to the white-cube aesthetic, physical separations, and classical Western ideals of beauty. Contextual information, when present, was minimal, inconsistently translated, hidden in marginal spaces, and lacked meaningful input from source communities.

Colonial-historical alienation compounded both. Artefacts were presented outside of their temporal and political realities, with timelines often beginning only at the point of Western contact. Provenance details foregrounded Western collectors and institutions while erasing the colonial conditions of acquisition. In the French context — where colonial legacies continue in the form of overseas territories — this omission silenced critical perspectives that might have reshaped visitors’ understandings. Even available interpretive resources mentioned colonialism only in passing, without critical engagement, reinforcing the pavilion’s embedded coloniality.

In sum, spatial, contextual, and colonial-historical alienation did not operate in isolation but converged into a mutually reinforcing cycle: a perfect storm of museological detachment, coloniality, and inequality and containment.

Within the broader field of decolonising museology, these findings highlight the necessity of engaging source communities from the earliest stages of exhibition planning and sustaining that collaboration throughout the curatorial process. The analysis also shows that coloniality remains deeply embedded in museum practices — from Eurocentric mapping and dating systems to the reluctance to acknowledge these frameworks’ origins and implications.

This study contributes to the field by demonstrating that even relatively recent museum spaces — including those created under the guise of decolonial intent — can replicate the very structures they claim to dismantle when collaboration is superficial or absent. It also calls for greater engagement with the wealth of scholarship produced globally, especially from the countries and diasporas whose heritage is displayed. Ethical, decolonial display strategies must explicitly confront the colonial roots of dominant museological practices and seek to dismantle them. Finally, this research aims to provide insights that can inform more inclusive curatorial strategies, ultimately enhancing the visitor experience and fostering a deeper connection to the histories represented in the museum.

Future research could include targeted case studies on how specific exhibition elements either perpetuate or disrupt alienation and coloniality, as well as comparative analyses within Paris (e.g., between the Pavillon des Sessions and other permanent or temporary exhibitions) and across national contexts (e.g., the Asian Pavilion at the Rijksmuseum). An in-depth study of the renovated pavilion, or a before-and-after comparison, could reveal whether — and why — substantive change occurs.

More broadly, this research underscores that curatorial practices often assumed to be neutral are in fact deeply political. As the Pavillon des Sessions undergoes transformation, the patterns it embodied remain widespread across the museum sector. Decolonial thinking must be integrated into every stage of exhibition-making, supported by both source community perspectives and visitor feedback to identify what strategies are most effective, what should be preserved, and what must be rethought.

This study also has limitations. Time constraints precluded interviews with museum officials, visitors, or community representatives — perspectives that could offer valuable complementary insights. Additionally, my focus on English-language sources necessarily excluded some relevant scholarship in other languages.

As Audre Lorde famously wrote, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” We should not expect truly decolonial results in the museum sector so long as inherently colonial display strategies remain unquestioned, and as long as meaningful engagement with source communities is the exception rather than the rule.

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