book review

Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly

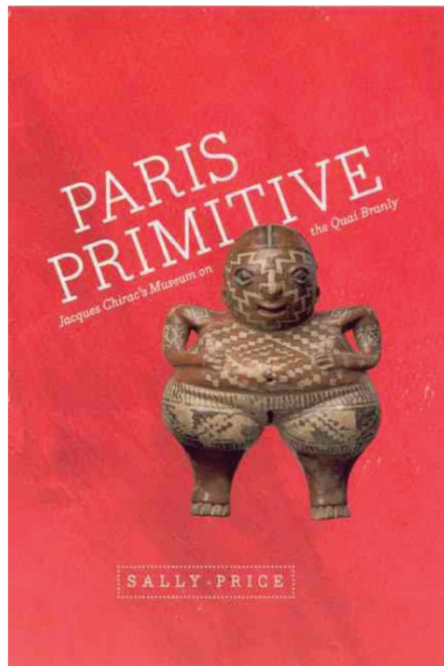
by Sally Price
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007; 224 pages, 10 halftones, 1 map; $47.50 cloth, $19.00 paper

reviewed by Elizabeth Harney

For those following the historic debates on museum representation, colonial collecting, and cultural patrimony surrounding the opening of the Musée du Quai Branly, the narrative in Sally Price's new ethnography *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* comes less as a surprise than as a sobering confirmation of the machinations involved in the museum's birth and the opportunities missed with its eventual form.

The upheavals within the French museum world caused by the bureaucratic and political maneuvers that accompanied Jacques Chirac's legacy project received frequent commentary within the Parisian press. To be sure the very public airing of grievances around the project, the political and personal repercussions it had, and the arcane, nepotistic practices of the French state that its creation highlighted have attracted the attention of a number of other scholars. Yet most accounts have seemed unable to pursue arguments beyond the much-cited public records of discord, either because the researchers have had limited access to the internal workings of these institutions or because they have given little value and time to more informal or unconventional sources.

The two best-known books in French on the subject come from Bernard DuPaigne and Benoît de l'Estoile. In his *Le Scandale des arts premiers: la veritable histoire du musée du quai Branly* (2006), DuPaigne, the former director of the Musée de l'Homme Laboratoire d'ethnologie, writes, in a wounded but dry tone, of the reshuffling and shifting of collections and resources from his museum and that of the Musée des arts d'Afrique et d' Océanie at the Porte Dorée, documenting perceived and real injustices and injuries. In *Le goût des autres: de l'exposition coloniale aux arts premiers* (2007) de l'Estoile covers many of the same topics as Price, but he is more interested in addressing a broader history of the imbrication of French universalist principles, primitivism, and exhibition practices, taking the 1931 Colonial Exposition and the creation of the Musée du quai Branly as the bookends of his study.



A recent special issue of *Le Débat* (2007) gives ready access to the array of opinions amongst French and international scholars concerning the institution and its cultural and political placement within contemporary France. Finally, broader studies of the institutionalization of power and culture and the contours of the national art world can be found in the work of scholars such as Sarah Deleporte (who organized the conference "La France, Ses Musées, son Identité / French Museums and Identity" at the University of Chicago Center in Paris, June 1–2, 2006), Nélia Dias (2001), and Daniel Sherman (2008).

While Price's book engages in similar discussions, with its focus upon the complicated and compromised genesis of this museum project and the heated debates that accompanied the reconfiguration of the museum world in Paris, it is unique amongst all of them as an engaging ethnographic study.

Price's account clearly benefits from her acceptance and enjoyment of the "improvisational process of ethnographic fieldwork as it happens in real time" (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007). Her fast-moving, accessible prose makes palpable the pleasures and frustrations inherent in her research practice while emphasizing the humanity of her subjects. As the author notes in the "Back Matter" of her book,

> My research over the past couple of years has frequently required the negotiation of contradictory documentation (on dates, places and events) and potentially apocryphal stories (autobiographical and journalistic, self-aggrandizing and defamatory). Had I eschewed all attention to these twists and turns in the record and limited myself to the exclusive use of officially certified documents, I could have produced a dutiful account in the style of a dry scientific report, but it would have been leeched of almost everything that captured the imagination of those both inside and outside the process as it was unfolding (p. 180).

Price's epilogue, "Cultures in Dialogue" provides perhaps the most concise discussion of what she sees as the value of this ethnographic exercise. She argues that the creation of a new museum in the twenty-first century could and should have provided an unprecedented opportunity for a postcolonial dialogue between cultures, thereby facilitating the management of difference, identity, and cosmopolitanism in contemporary France.

Price identifies four options for presenting the cultural artifacts of former colonial peoples in a post-imperialist institution. First, one could choose the formalist approach taken by the curators of the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre, in which objects are valued for their aesthetic prowess using a universalist (Western) measure of quality and taste. Secondly, an institution could choose to acknowledge and honor autochthonous voices and rights, an approach best exemplified by the Te Papa museum in Wellington, New Zealand, or the American Indian museum at the Smithsonian. Thirdly, exhibition narratives could articulate postcolonial theoretical models, encouraging visitors to think reflexively about the history of colonial encounters and collecting practices. And finally, institutions could continue the older ethnographic models that favored a vision of "primitive authenticity" linked to an unmitigated pre-contact past that must be salvaged or reconstructed if lost to broader cultural encounters.

To the dismay and surprise of many, the Quai Branly opted for the final approach, perpetuating what the author dubs "a 1950s style ethnographic present" (p. 174). Indeed, Price argues, the Museum is notable "for the extent to which it passes up opportunities for integrating non-European perspectives" (p. 172), eschewing an institutional political correctness that the French regard as "hyperrelativist." Price quotes the concerns of the Museum's president, Stephane Martin, around "becoming an 'apology' museum." Instead, the museum's leadership had hoped to promote a "more objective vision of culture," one that was "free from instrumentality" (p. 125).

While clearly the author sees these choices as disappointing and shortsighted, she stops short of examining, in any great depth, the implications of these failures on public culture and scholarship, noting simply, "from an early twenty-first century perspective, the MQB has missed precious opportunities for meaningful cultural dialogue ..." (p. 177).

Her narrative, however, hinges on the need

to determine why the MQB passed up these new directions and opportunities as a postcolonial institution. In detailing the origins of the project, Price identifies a "primal moment" that unites two powerful men whose thoughts and actions will become central to the unfolding of the story: Jacques Chirac and Jacques Kerchache. These two outsized personalities are the engines that drive her narrative. In a series of short, punchy chapters (no more than two or three pages each), Price examines the extent of Chirac's interest in Eastern religions, material culture, and anthropology and traces Kerchache's life as dealer, lover of arts, and "explorer collector."

The middle section of the ethnography deals with the "prominent place of culture in French national identity" and the intertwined fates of the nation's "family of museums" (p. 27). It details the reconfiguration of the museum world in Paris from the controversial establishment of a new department at the Louvre with the Pavillon des Sessions, to the special commission created by Chirac in 1996 to prepare for the opening of the Quai Branly, to the debates surrounding the conceptual and physical parameters of the new institution and the repercussions of its mandate for the existing museums. The strength of this mid-section is its ability to convey the magnitude and complexity of the scale and cost (monetary, personal, and political) of these undertakings.

Perhaps given its high profile and its birth at the dawn of a new century, this institution was always going to disappoint. But what makes Price's account so lively and ideal for undergraduate seminars is the extent to which she is able to capture the intensity of disagreements that seemed to characterize the process of its creation. She is keenly aware of her impact as an anthropologist on the tenor and character of the discussions she enjoys within the museum where concerns for aesthetics are downplayed on her behalf; she notes, "It quickly became clear that my presence was cause for mild concern."

Like her earlier work in *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (1989), Price deftly maneuvers through a plethora of controversial subjects, from an examination of the ethics surrounding the acquisition of archaeological materials to the debates over urban planning and architectural design to contemporary French discourses on Otherness, racism, and representation. And yet she discusses these topics with a lightness of touch and tone that at times threaten to undercut the profundity and complexity of her observations. At times one is left yearning for more of her witty and incisive analysis.

A case in point is the fascinating set of discussions on *laïcité*, which Price defines as the "uniquely French version of church/state separation," and its direct relevance to the handling of links between art, cultural difference, and postcolonial, institutional politics (pp. 38–41). As she rightly notes, "… the silences in a museum's galleries speak volumes" (p. 74). This unwillingness to recognize cultural, religious, and racial identity within French national discourse and policy is transferred onto the displays at the Quai Branly and the Pavillon des Sessions. The French state insists on the belief that all citizens are made equal through erasure of difference and that communitarianism is "a divisive force that endangers the unity and harmony of one society" (p. 126). Following this logic, President Chirac is able to declare "there is no more of a hierarchy of arts than there is among peoples" (p. 36).

Writing recently in the *International Herald Tribune*, Michael Kimmelman quotes the founder of an organization that collects the statistics on immigrant communities that the French government will not:

> The idea behind not categorizing people by race is obviously good—we want to believe in the republican ideal. But in reality we're blind in France, not colorblind, but information blind, and saying people are equal doesn't make them equal (Kimmelman 2008).

It is clear from Price's discussion of *laïcité* that she holds a nuanced understanding of these issues. That she chooses not to address them more fully in this project detracts only slightly from the reader's enjoyment of this work, such is the richness of the material she does cover.

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book review

Luba

by Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts
Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2007. 145 pp., 63 b/w photos, bibliography. $34.95 paper

reviewed by Mutombo Nkulu-N'Sengha

Luba art has been popularized through books and exhibitions on African art but serious academic studies that address the meaning of Luba art remain scattershot and largely superficial. Moreover, there is a notorious absence of an insider voice, as doctoral dissertations on Luba art, religion, and politics are scarce and most published studies of Luba art, culture, and history were produced by Western missionaries and scholars from the very countries that colonized the Congo. This is why the unconventional work by Mary Nooter and Allen Roberts is so important and also calls for careful scrutiny.

In a sense, *Luba* is a segue from the Roberts' already well-known *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (Prestel, 1996), an edited volume which explored Luba worldview from various angles through fieldwork and the expertise of local and Western scholars. However, the new book is a different type of work. Published in the series "Visions of Africa," *Luba* is written solely by two American authors who have specialized in the art and culture of the Luba and Lubaized people. Allen Roberts conducted his doctoral research in anthropology on the Batabwa (one of the Lubaized peoples), while Mary Nooter focused her doctoral dissertation on the art of the Luba heartland. Together they bring their expertise to bear on the Baluba and have done impressive work in this region over the last twenty years.

The book can be divided in three sections: the first offers a systematic essay on the nature, function, and meaning of Luba art. *Luba* is articulated around the central themes of beauty, power, and spirituality. It proposes a theory of art referred to as an "aesthetics of efficacy" (p. 58). It is followed by color plates of sixty-three Luba sculptures. These magnificent large photos are followed by captions providing some description and explanation of the art objects. The book ends with an excellent annotated bibliography of some of the most important authors and books on Luba culture.