

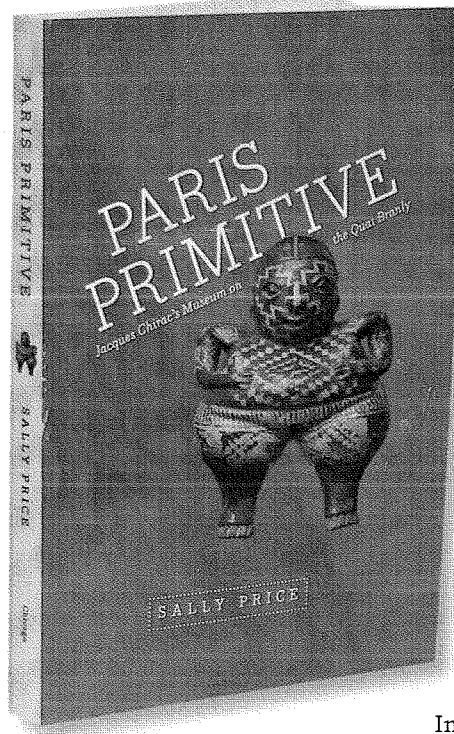
A Tale of Two Jacques

By James Volkert

Increasingly, we see the line “based on actual events” in the opening credits of Hollywood films. Now that the screenwriters’ strike is over, we have a crackling good story for them to dig into: *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac’s Museum on the Quai Branly* by Sally Price. The author outlines the development of this new museum on the banks of the Seine with scholarly thoroughness, detailing a story revolving around the President of the Country and the Art Dealer. It’s a story about the beating of a tired dogma, ad hoc committees, persistent misunderstandings, power politics in the museum world of submissive compliance, shady deals and political turns of events that culminates in the creation of the Musée du Quai Branly (MQB). It’s a story of museological colonialism in the 21st century that privileges café banter between connoisseurs and collectors over the intent of the object makers. And it’s French! That means we can shoot it in moody black and white.

Our tale begins with the 1990 meeting of the main characters, Jacques Chirac, former prime minister, then mayor of Paris and about-to-be president of France, and Jacques Kerchache, art dealer and impresario at the Royal Palm Hotel in Mauritius. Price, as art director, sketches the scene: The “Magnificent Royal Palm . . . is the epitome of understated elegance . . . with your own private infinity pool.” And the intrigue: “Did the two Jacques meet poolside? In one of the gourmet restaurants? Working out in the gym? We are not told.”

Price first develops the characters. Chirac was a museum guy trapped in politics and deeply interested in the culture of the “other.” “If François Mitterand



came across as a well-read mystic, Chirac claimed more the soul of an anthropologist, looking into the arts for explanations of the human condition,” she notes. Intellectual and erudite, Chirac spent his time conducting anthropological research. He even rewrote book labels on the attribution of objects. Price notes,

The MQB stands out for passing up opportunities for integrating non-European perspectives.

“I was dubious that the president of the Republic would have taken the time out from his official duties to research the attribution of a plumed headdress from sixteenth-century Mexico . . . But it seems equally certain that images of the president as a scholarly authority on non-Western cultures transports [sic] his reputation, like that of the plumed head-

Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac’s Museum on the Quai Branly. By Sally Price. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 239 pp., hardcover, \$47.50; softcover, \$19.

dress, into the realm of myth.” It’s hard to imagine such pronouncements coming out of the ranch in Crawford, Texas.

Chirac’s partner in forming the MQB, Jacques Kerchache, appears to be a kind of aging

Indiana Jones, a connoisseur given to playing fast and loose with objects—the type who asserts that looting is a way of saving artworks from destruction.

With a deft hand and sly wit, Price traces two paths. The relationship of these two old white men as they revel in a museological colonialism that sees objects serving a higher purpose in museums than they did in their culture of origin is set against a second story of infighting, maneuvering and breast-beating at museums and governmental agencies in France. Both trajectories end with the new museum, which Price characterizes as “Glass, Gardens and Aborigines” or “The Hairy Wall.”

The Chirac/Kerchache story arc starts with the development of a Taino exhibition at the Musée du Petit Palais in 1994 when various committees scoured French collections. Their aim was to assemble objects appropriated from a number of French museums, first in their softly glowing, penultimate resting place, the Louvre in 2000, and then, with some intellectual gymnastics, in the Quai Branly. Price sets this story against a backdrop of a consolidated nationalism and a definition of culture in uniquely French terms. “The privileging of national culture (while at the same time promoting the appreciation of foreign cultures in such controlled set-

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tings as museum displays) lies behind the idea of France's famous 'civilizing mission' and lends a distinctive tone to representations of its colonial past.

"While Chirac and Kerchache were passing over Christopher Columbus in order to celebrate Taino Indians in the Petit Palais; while presidential committees were working on a plan to give cultural products from Africa, Oceania and the Americas their due in Paris museums; and while the curators at the Louvre were swallowing the idea of pagan fetishes within shouting distance of the Mona Lisa," a new museum was being formed.

But the museum was about, of course, quietude over information: "The dominant feeling within the committees was that aesthetic contemplation was best achieved through quiet communion with the object and that the distraction of ethnographic information should be kept at a distance. Kerchache was a particularly outspoken advocate of this position." This style of interpretation leads to the kind of repartee heard on *60 Minutes* when it's a particularly good segment:

Kerchache's manifesto . . . that African objects were "castrated" when they entered an ethnographical laboratory was countered indignantly by Marie-Claude Dupré [of the Musée de l'Homme]: "He seems to think we have constipated brains," she retorted. "The proposed exhibition in the Louvre will amount to nothing less than dildos for tired intellectuals."

All of this backstory foreshadows Price's thoughtful review of the MQB as a museum that has a "general tendency to privilege harmony and nation-to-nation diplomacy over social criticism and attention to the interests of particular ethnic groups." With Perry Mason precision, she uses the words of the museum-makers who seemingly have waived their right to avoid self-incrimination and issue their own indictments:

CONTINUED ON PAGE 82

BOOKSHELF

Interpreting Our Heritage By Freeman Tilden

"Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable." This principle is one of six supported in Freeman Tilden's classic 1957 text, *Interpreting Our Heritage*. It has remained a standard in the field, guiding interpreters who shape the experience of millions of visitors to America's state and municipal parks, monuments, battlefields, historic houses and museums of all types and sizes. The fourth edition is updated and expanded with new photography and six additional essays.

Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 224 pp., hardcover, \$39.95; softcover, \$15.95.

Exhibit Makeovers: A Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums

By Alice Parman and Jeffrey Jane Flowers

Watch out, reality TV: Exhibition makeovers could be the new craze! This handbook offers step-by-step instruction to update and renovate tired, faded or merely disorganized museum displays. Guidance is geared for three types of makeover: a single-case exhibit, a gallery or a small museum. Includes worksheets and careful instructions that help you choose what to redo and how—including how to determine the story and the facts, arrange and install the physical objects, design labels and overall presentation and solicit visitor feedback and participation.

Lanham, Md.: AltaMira, 2008. 144 pp., hardcover, \$90; softcover, \$23.95.

Portal to the Corps: Chronicling the National Museum of the Marine Corps

Edited by Jessica del Pilar

At the National Museum of the Marine Corps, even a visit to the museum café helps tell the Marines' story: Tun

Tavern is a reconstruction of the 18th-century public tavern in Philadelphia where the first Colonial Marines were allegedly recruited by Captain Samuel Nicholas. This lavishly illustrated book chronicles the design and building of the museum just outside Washington, D.C., inaugurated in November 2006. Images of models, renderings and photographs document the design by architect Curtis W. Fentress, which was based on the iconic image of Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima, and attest to the powerful role of architecture in constructing a museum's message. Features essays by key individuals who guided building from conception through completion.

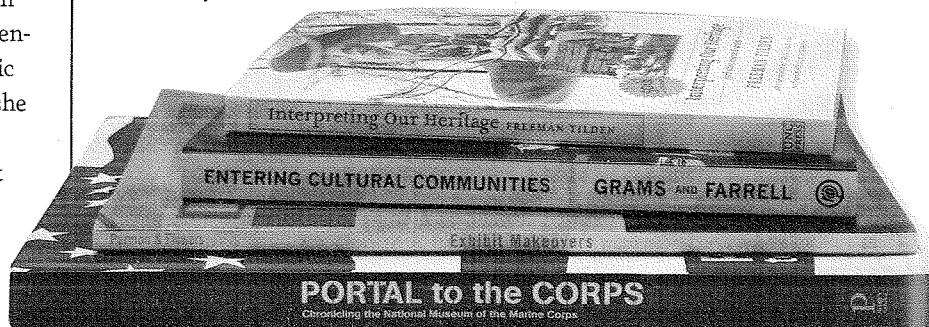
Victoria, Australia: Images Publishing, 2007. 240 pp., hardcover, \$60.

Entering Cultural Communities: Diversity and Change in the Nonprofit Arts

Edited by Diane Grams and Betty Farrell

If your goal is to attract more racially, ethnically and economically diverse audiences at your museum (or orchestra, dance company, theater, library or other cultural center), then this collection of essays is for you. It offers examples of arts and cultural leaders from 85 nonprofit organizations "looking beyond [traditional audiences and patrons] to embrace the needs, interests, and spending habits of a broader American public." Case studies, drawn from large institutions—such as the Smithsonian, the Walker Art Center and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston—and small, such as the Armory Center for the Arts, AS220, Appalshop and the Western Folklife Center, touch on efforts to draw on existing connections with communities as well as to create new ones.

New Brunswick, N.J., and London: Rutgers University Press, 2008. 298 pp., hardcover, \$24.95; softcover, \$19.95.



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A TALE OF TWO JACQUES
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 24

From the head of International Relations on human remains: "First, the bodies never functioned as human remains. Secondly, they were (for the most part) given to the explorers who brought them back, not stolen. We don't know who they belong to. Thus, they have become art objects."

From museum staff on repatriation: "We at the Quai Branly . . . have decided to respect the principle of laïcité [separation of church and state]. . . We are a public institution, a secular institution operating in the public domain. If you allow the legitimacy of one religion, you allow them all, then they all cancel each other out. . . If you really believe that these things have a profound meaning, well, the museum isn't made for that."

From a member of the MQB planning committee: "Certain anthropologists claim that an African or Oceanian who is deprived of his fetishes is a person who dies spiritually. Well, that's not true. If you take away a Sicilian woman's crucifix that she inherited from her grandmother, she doesn't give up her Catholic faith! She doesn't mope away in sadness. She goes to the next town, she buys a crucifix."

From Stéphan Martin, the museum's president: "We are not in the business of buying ourselves a clear conscience vis-à-vis the non-Western world or becoming an 'apology museum' . . . the way museums in Canada and the United States do for Indians. In France we have a more objective view of culture."

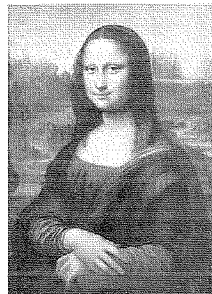
Or from the head of exhibitions: "We want to privilege [a sense of] mystery, to allow people to discover the work in itself . . . putting as much distance as possible between the object and the information relevant to the object."

Like a really smart college friend who told jokes that took you two beats to understand, Price concludes, "In the context of museums around the world in the 21st century, the MQB stands out for the extent to which it passes up opportunities for integrating non-European perspectives."

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