Review of Sally Price, *Paris Primitive Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* University of Chicago Press, 2007, 239 pp.

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The history of few museums has been so full of intrigue and controversy as that of a new museum that opened June 20, 2006 along the Seine on the Quai Branly. In *Paris Primitive,* anthropologist Sally Price traces the convoluted and issue-fraught story of the Musée du Quai Branly, Jacques Chirac's museum of "primitive art." Her long experience critiquing the complex issues of cultural representation in museums *(Enigma Variations*, 1995, with Richard Price; *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, 1989, etc.) equips her well for this challenging task. Witty, perceptive writing, punctuated by reflective analysis and thoughtful musing, shapes a complex story of passion, intrigue, and power. Witty chapter titles—"Good-bye Columbus," "The Organ Donors," "Behind the Hairy Wall," "An Anti-Palace on the Seine"—turn out to be wry comments.

In Part One, "Jacques and Jacques," Price first addresses an initial matter of terminology, explaining her decision to use the sensitive term "primitive art," then draws readers in via an imagined conversation during an event that actually happened. In 1990 the primary players in this epic, Jacques Chirac, future French President, and Jacques Kerchache, established French collector of "primitive" art, met for the first time in the Royal Palm hotel in Mauritius. The two bonded around a shared passion for "art beyond the European orbit" and began a friendship that quickly focused into an obsessive zeal to advance the status of the art of "three quarters of the world's humanity" and see "primitive art"—*arts premiers*—stand shoulder-to-shoulder with other art traditions in the Louvre. There is no question that Chirac's passion was fueled by Kerchache, a man of vivid stories and checkered reputation, characterized by some as a distinguished connoisseur and by others as an incarnation of the devil. But the politician Chirac also had the soul of an anthropologist and, through his friendship with the art dealer, was able to weave

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his fascination with world cultures into his political aspirations. The two remained friends and collaborators until Kerchache's death in 2001.

Price's book chronicles multiple strands of a convoluted narrative that led to the Musée du Quai Branly, Jacques Chirac's monument to his role in history, a museum conceived in "a society in which politics, intellectual life, and the art world flow seamlessly together, in which the State maintains tight control over things cultural, and in which museums are key instruments in the power plays of creative and ambitious men."[1] His public support for Kerchache's 1994 exhibition in the Petit Palais of Taino sculpture from the Greater Antilles announced their alliance. Soon after his election to the presidency in 1995, Chirac appointed a committee to study options for presenting objects from the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie and the Musée de l'Homme in the Louvre. In October 1996 he made known his decision to create a Museum of Civilizations and *arts premiers*.

Price's second section, "Museums in the City of Light," begins with a painstaking explanation of the political intricacies of French museum history from its origins to the late twentieth century, when planning for a museum of *arts premiers* began, explaining a system in which museums are under the thumb of the state and their holdings are considered inalienable goods. She contextualizes events that eventually led to the Musée du Quai Branly. In 2002, when all state, local and private museums were granted the status of *musées de France* and placed under technical and scientific control of the state, the fate of museums with indigenous art holdings was sealed. A place for "primitive art" in a new department at the Louvre was to be Chirac's legacy.

In Part Three, "The Move to the Louvre," Price drops back in time to trace in copious detail the transfer of *arts premiers* to the Louvre—the discussions and debate at every level and step of the way, the legal and political twists of cultural property negotiations, and the limited successes of individuals such as anthropologist Maurice Godelier who stepped in as the new museum's scientific director. She identifies fault lines, players, personal antagonisms, and symbolic humiliations. She also points out the irony of the French policy of privileging national culture over ethnic origin while simultaneously promoting an appreciation of foreign culture in museums. After a three-year "epic battle," Godelier's plans for "interpretive spaces" and other ideas were shelved, as was he, in favor of one weaker director after another. Objects to go into the new museum were decided on grounds of "major artistic interest" and decisions were made by the aesthetic-leaning team members who depended on art dealer Jacques Kerchache, whose "infallible eye" prevailed. The new *Pavillon des Sessions* (that some considered to be a mirror of Kerchache's

soul) was inaugurated by Chirac and his Prime Minister on April 13, 2000. Some saw it as an "aggressively aestheticizing" exhibit with limited information other than on French artists such as Breton and Picasso who had once owned some of the objects. One critic commented: "Opting for an artistic presentation with an anthropological sauce might appear to be the height of consensus, but… in trying to play both ends one risks a cacophony that will please no one."[2]

Concluding this section, Price examines "Artifactual Question Marks," accusations of fakes, ethical questions surrounding Nigerian objects, and other dilemmas. Naming names, she navigates cultural and legal labyrinths of property negotiations and ethical politics of origin, the complexities and multiple responsibilities for illicit trafficking, the trade-offs involved in regulation, and thorny questions such as "the fictional nature of the essentialized, enduring ethnicities that are used to justify" attributions.[3] She points out discrepancies in prices paid, competing assessments of age in light of recent ethnographic data, and responses of anthropologists, collectors/dealers, and native people from the region.

Part Four, "The Organ Donors," focuses on how this upgrading of "primitive art" affected the Parisian museum world as a "Musical Chairs" of fluctuating plans relocated certain collections into Chirac's lavishly-funded museum with its sharply-altered character. Price relates the politics and struggles over the future of the Musée de l'Homme "vegetating in a dust-ridden museography"[4] after falling victim to anthropology's mid-twentieth-century move in emphasis away from material culture toward focus on kinship, myth, religion, etc. The museum's anthropologists took an ideological stand against the racism and colonialist legacy they believed Chirac's museum represented, the level of decontextualization, and its imposition of the western idea of "fine arts" where it did not exist. They were appalled that a collector/dealer was the mastermind behind the plan for the Musée du Quai Branly. The Musée de l'Homme's ethnographic galleries were closed in spring 2003, continent by continent. Chirac also eyed the collections of the Museum of African and Oceanic Art at the Porte Dorée, created for the 1931 Colonial Exposition to consider the economics, cultural and natural history of French expansion. Already redefined by André Malreaux in the 1950s as the MAAO, its collections were emptied by early 2003, destined for the Quai Branly Museum.

Part Five, "An Anti-Palace on the Seine," details the construction of the new museum, a multimedia conglomerate to act as a research center, educational institution, and theatre/concert hall "a springboard for exploration of cultural creativity and self-affirmation."[5] Price plies the reader with fascinating details: the state-of-the-art preparation of some 300,000 transplants from the Musée de

l'Homme and the Museum of African and Oceanic Art, an overview of plans by the architect, landscape architect and "lighting juggler," and how the vertically planted exterior wall was achieved. She then moves "Behind the Hairy Wall" to explore more weighty issues such as the museum's approach to repatriation, which is handled at the level of international diplomacy and disallows claims based on religion or ethnicity. She critiques the "innocence" that exhibits in this and other French museums convey, the "deceptively comforting impression that harmony among cultures of the world can be achieved through respectful treatment of their material objects,"[6] and the privileging of nation-to-nation harmony over social criticism, so striking at a time of increasing social unrest among France's immigrant populations.

Moving inside the museum, Price provides a compilation of audience critiques and observations, musing over the meandering "panexotic" leather river that visitors traverse to arrive at the four geographical areas of display in which the architect's plans for object installation are privileged over correct museological display. Price concludes with discussion of comments from reviewers and visitors to the new Musée du Quai Branly—calling the exhibition a "heart of darkness," an outmoded cliché, a peep show "cringingly, even insultingly, condescending."[7] Comments noted a general lack of labels and explanatory information presented in the ethnographic present as contributing to a fun house effect. When I, a Native North American art specialist, visited the museum in 2007, I was startled by misattribution of some material and the artless Levi-Straussian-style explanations, especially of Northwest Coast art. A paucity of information devalued some of the world's earliest-dated examples of ornamented Native American objects. Information in other parts of the museum was straightforward and generally not quite so sparse.

Price's epilogue, "Cultures in Dialogue?" explores four possible models for institutionalized presentation of the material culture of other cultures, and repeats an earlier- voiced conclusion that the controversies and decisions associated with the Quai Branly Museum were "as responsible as any single factor for bringing about the subsequent shiftings in the Paris museum world and changes in the delicate relationship between traditional European based art history and the works it once unquestionably excluded."[8]

Paris Primitive is a must-read for those interested in the Musée du Quai Branly, museum representation, museum history, or aspects of the twentieth through twenty-first century recontextualization of objects of indigenous cultures from curio to scientific specimen to art. As have other of Sally (and Richard) Price's books, this one makes a major contribution to the critical literature. Invaluable in museum

studies and other courses examining the politics of representation, Price's wealth of information and lively, adroit writing will also delight a broader audience.

1 Sally Price, *Paris Primitive, Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), x.
2 Price, 54.
3 Price, 71.
4 Price, 87.
5 Price, 115.
6 Price, 128.
7 Price, 151.
8 Price, 3.