

## Exhibitions as visual mapping of knowledge

In this post I would like to compare three cultural relevant museums adopting the interpretative gaze of the knowledge production and visual mapping: I have visited two of them, the Musée de l'Histoire de l'Immigration and the Quai Branly Museum, three years ago; the last one, instead, at the beginning of the 2015, during my permanence in California. All of them are very interesting because of their intent to represent the historical narrations which are transmitted firstly visually. Hence, I decided to make evident how, behind these exhibitions, is possible to discover various narrative forms of hegemony. What a surprise when, after my visit to the [Musée de l'Histoire de l'Immigration](#) based at the Palais de la Porte Dorée in the Paris' 12<sup>e</sup> arrondissement -- I realized where French cultural administrators and curators decided to "build up" this museum. I could not believe, but it was true. Mosaics and paintings on the walls of that building represented African, Asian, Middle Eastern every-day-life scenes. When I was backing to my hotel I realized that that building was constructed for the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931, and external bas-reliefs, by sculptor Alfred Janniot, were charged to represent the life in the French colonial lands, over the seas and oceans. At the first floor one can visit a long, multimedia exhibition dealing with the history of migration in France and the migrants' stories with several videos of people from Asia, Africa, Oceania and Caribbean. The second floor, then, was consecrated to visual art of French-not-native artists about migration, diaspora and displacements from other countries to Europe. The key-visual-concept of these expositions was to capsule migrant stories -- as visual/oral expressions by migrants and artists -- in a larger colonial-national history that didn't end with the decolonization. From another point of view, one can see in this cultural project the visual attempt to give a representation of a chronological "line of continuity" from the colonial period to the present condition. During my permanence in Paris, I decided to spend a day to visit the [Quai Branly Museum](#). I was informed about the huge debate around it. Quai Branly Museum opened in 2006 and its aims were to collect artistic artifacts from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas. With more than 450.000 objects, it becomes the major museum in Paris for visitors. Its story is very interesting. During the Nineties, Several French intellectuals called for a huge and collective non-European arts and cultures' museum, such as André Malraux, André Breton and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Ethnologist and art collector Jacques Kerchache, in a 1990's newspaper "Libération" article, proposed a Manifesto for an exhibition-space able to collect arts from all the corners of the world. When Jacques Chirac was elected, in 1995, this project became possible. The museum has been organized for continents, and, one can see a "legend" with the place of origin (which is expressed with the current nation) and the era for every artifact -- such as old masks or reliquaries. Several intellectuals commented the exposition as the highest expression of a new colonial order and Franco-centrism. Indeed, the attempt was to collect various cultures' artifacts in order to affirm a concrete and pervasive national power. In particular, the visual representation in Quai Branly's exposition is similar to a huge geopolitical map developed on two axes: space and time. France is the museum itself, a center that host and attract -- with a centripetal force - other de-centered narrations: continents and nations go around it, both in term of state-

nations – the places where every object has been discovered – and past. This other important dimension concerns the assumption of the universalistic action considered able to collect and resume every nation's history, but also their mythological and foundational past of every community. According to this gaze, Quai Branly is a powerful kaleidoscopic tool in order to impose French as cornerstone in the reading of the world. Now, I would like to compare these two museums with another one that I have visited this year (2015), several years after my permanence in Paris: the de Young Museum, in San Francisco. Located in the Golden Gate Park, it is one of the most important and popular cultural sites in the US. One of its sections hosts the exhibition [“Embodiments: Masterworks of African Figurative Sculpture”](#). Visitors can see 120 pieces from the collection of Richard H. Scheller composed by masks, sculptures, ceramics, and a lot of other materials from several places in Africa. As Quai Branly, every object has a description, a dating and the place of finding – which is expressed in terms of contemporary nation. There is not a space organization of the exhibition in relation to the geographical position. In fact, the intent is to collect and present the **eyema byeri**, the image of African ancestors. The goal of this visual representation is not only to collect reliquaries – something that passed away -- but the imaginative archive of a community lived several centuries ago. This is a cultural operation of appropriation, different to Quai Branly and Musée de l'Histoire de l'Immigration. In fact, the historical connection of the US with Africa is evidently represented by the slave trade. As several black intellectuals, since W.E.B. Du Bois and Garvey, pointed out Africa is the place where the imaginary roots of a black community started. Hence, a collection without and historical contextualization of these icons – across whom African people interpreted the world – is the evident expression of the attempt to pose an indirect dominion onto past stories but also the affirmation of a direct role in writing history in the present