SPECTACLES OF MODERNITY:
ANXIETY AND CONTRADICTION AT THE INTERWAR PARIS FAIRS OF 1925, 1931 AND 1937

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Spectacles of Modernity: Anxiety and Contradiction at the Interwar Paris Fairs of 1925, 1931 and 1937

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My dissertation focuses on the three major international fairs held in Paris in the interwar period – the Art Deco Exposition of 1925, the Colonial Fair of 1931 and the International Exposition of 1937. Like all world’s fairs, these expositions responded to and imagined solutions to pressing economic, political, and cultural problems by offering elaborate ideological messages, shrouded in spectacle and entertainment, in an attempt to reassure fairgoers of the tenability of French values and the bright future.

Yet, I argue that despite efforts to provide coherent and reassuring answers to visitors, the narratives the fairs produced were often conflicting and inconsistent. In fact, the narratives of modernity, progress and nationhood, created by the displays, architectural representations and debates surrounding the planning stages, often problematized the dominant, officially-sanctioned visions that the fairs relentlessly promoted. I explore precisely the inconsistencies between these conflicting visions because they shed light on the process by which the fairs configured national identity and formulated images of modernity. I contend that these internal conflicts are an indication of France’s deeply problematic relationship to the modernity traditionally extolled at the fairs, and that it emerged as a serious challenge to deeply engrained national self-perception.
My dissertation is divided in two parts. In Part One, I trace the conceptual origins and history of the expositions tradition in France, dating back to the late 18th century, to which the interwar fairs are heirs. My aim there is to outline important questions and debates that continue to be defining at the interwar fairs. Part Two of my dissertation contains three chapters, each dedicated to the study of the fairs of 1925, 1931, and 1937. By situating each event within the broader historical, cultural and aesthetic context of their planning and duration, and by analyzing closely the representations of these fairs, I demonstrate how the fairs actively shaped notions of modernity and national identity, and read them as part of a broader self-presentational discourse. By pointing out the internal conflicts within these representations, I aim to show that France’s ambiguous relation to modernity in fact stems from and conceals a deep anxiety over loss of a cultural particularity, compromised at the same time by France’s desire and imperative to modernize.
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Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my husband Alex for his unwavering support and endless love.
DEDICATION

To Alex
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INTRODUCTION

“The Exhibitions are the only properly modern festivals.”¹

“EXPOSITION: sujet de délire du XIXᵉ siècle.”²

“World Exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. […] They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted.”³

“Qu’est-ce qu’une exposition officielle? C’est une nation qui s’expose. C’est l’exaltation soudaine d’un pays qui veut donner au monde un exemple de sa civilisation, de son imagination et de sa force productive.”⁴

Phantasmagoric, transitory, entertaining, distracting, the world’s fairs have occupied since their inception in the mid-19th century a prominent place in Western culture, drawing hundreds of millions of visitors, and tens of thousands of producers from hundreds of nations. In their emphatically utopic, tightly controlled context, they celebrated modernity and progress, extolled the virtues of peace, cooperation and solidarity, but also disseminated deeply nationalistic messages, endorsed through dazzling industrial exhibits the promotion of the commodity to the status of cultural fetish,⁵ and obscured through spectacle and displays inviting public consumption severe social and political problems. In France, the world’s fairs, or expositions universelles,⁶ were often organized in response to a broad range of social, economic, political, aesthetic

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⁴ Jean Giraudoux, “Fêtes et Expositions” _Le Figaro_ (July 16, 1934) 1-2.
⁶ The general term in English is ‘world’s fairs’. It is the official designation of American fairs, and of some British fairs, which use interchangeably the terms ‘fairs’ and ‘exhibitions.’ The French term exposition is more specific to the French fairs model as it implies rational organization of space and objects based on specific knowledge and linguistic practices. This term also reflects the explanatory and descriptive nature of the French fairs (Philippe Hamon, _Expositions: Literature and Architecture in Nineteenth-Century France_, tr. by Katja Sainson-Frank and Lisa Maguire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 12). The French fairs’ goal of displaying and explicating, as well as their didacticism is also invested in their designation as expositions.
or cultural crises, for which they were expected to provide solutions. As such, the
universal expositions bore the marks of their eras and contained evidence of the
ideological struggles that plagued French society at the particular moment. They offered
highly structured ideological messages intended to reassure visitors of the tenability of
French values. For that reason, studies of the world’s fairs have often focused on the
ways the fairs mirrored contemporary cultural debates, treating them as concerted,
elaborate government-sanctioned propaganda. Yet, despite efforts to provide coherent
and reassuring answers to visitors about the future, the narratives the fairs produced were
often conflicting and inconsistent, owing to the multiple and often contradictory
questions the fairs sought to answer. In fact, the narratives of modernity, progress and
nationhood woven through the juxtaposed displays and the diverse discourses that
intersected within the space of the fairs often problematized the dominant, officially-
sanctioned visions that the fairs relentlessly promoted. Thus, the fairs emerge as
autonomous symbolic spaces which not only reflected but also produced afresh cultural
concepts of modernity, progress and collective identity.

I am interested in exploring precisely the inconsistencies between these
conflicting visions because they shed light on the process by which the fairs configured
national identity and formulated images of modernity. In doing so, the expositions refute

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the idea of a homogeneous consensus or a monolithic image of modernity in favor of various notions of modernity as multilayered, complex and even fragmented or hybrid. Thus, alongside the official promotion of modernity as the nation’s future, these expositions also revealed a deeply unsettled attitude toward this very same modernity whose definition remained elusive at the fairs from their institutionalization in the mid-19th century onward. Ironically, they formally sought to define and rein in modernity through claims to absolute transparency and objective representation of ‘the universe’ or of ‘all’ of human production in a strict taxonomy; as a result, the gradual disintegration of the monolithic narrative of modernity at the fairs disrupted and ultimately led to the demise of the tradition of the universal exposition itself.

My dissertation focuses on the three major international fairs to be held in France in the interwar period – the Art Deco Exposition of 1925, the Colonial Fair of 1931, and the International Exposition of 1937. These interwar fairs, however dissimilar in theme, scope or designation,⁸ in fact belong to an almost century-long tradition of French world’s fairs, which were enormously influential in shaping the concept of modernity in the collective imagination. The conceptual and organizational differences of the three international fairs in fact could explain the lack of scholarship treating them together. It is nevertheless my belief that the interwar fairs share conceptual origins with the great 19th century fairs in that they explicitly concern themselves with formulating highly structured ideological messages – a feature distinctly lacking in smaller themed fairs whose orientation was decidedly commercial.

⁸ Technically, only the 1937 Paris fair was designated as a universal exposition. The Bureau of International Expositions (BIE), officially founded in 1928, defined universal expositions by their ‘universal’ scope which aspired to grasp the artistic and material production of the entire world. Owing to the limited focus of the 1925 Art Deco fair and the 1931 Colonial Fair, these events did not qualify as universal.
For this reason, in Part One of my dissertation, I examine the conceptual origins and history of the expositions tradition in France dating back to the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century. My objective there is to illustrate the fashion in which these early spectacles informed the genesis of the interwar fairs by outlining several – by no means all – major themes and tracing their trajectory to the interwar period. Additionally, by situating the 1920s and 1930s fairs within a broader cultural and aesthetic tradition, I also make apparent the rupture of the interwar fairs from their own lineage. This rupture, I argue, reflects the shift in the collective experience of the fairs as the excitement and optimism of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century fairs’ newly-found sense of mastery of the world, whose riches, knowledge and people could then be ordered and made available in the form of a living encyclopedia, gave way to the anxiety and sense of loss that accompanied the interwar fairs. This shift also indicated the certain, if gradual, disintegration of the very image of France the expositions strove to disseminate as integrated, culturally and politically unified, technologically progressive, peaceful and imperial in the face of a powerfully transformative, destabilizing and threatening modernity. Simultaneously, the interwar fairs illustrated the ebbing relevance of the exposition tradition that served as a vehicle to spread ideological messages.

Part Two of my dissertation contains three chapters, dedicated respectively to the study of the fairs of the 1925 Art Deco Exposition, the 1931 Colonial Fair and the 1937 International Exposition. These fairs make for a fascinating case study, because they had inherited the fascination with modernity central to the great 19\textsuperscript{th} century fairs; yet, they were shaped in the wake of the Great War, in an era whose faith in progress and modernity had been profoundly rattled. In the interwar years, modernity appeared to
fundamentally transform French society, culture and self-understanding – changes which were widely perceived as menacing and destructive, and which accounted for France’s increasingly ambivalent relationship to modernity. The growing suspicion to modernity, however, posed a conceptual challenge for the expositions which by definition anticipated, imagined, and constructed visions of modernity. How could they simultaneously celebrate this modernity and reject it anxiously? The specific goals of the expositions and France’s unease toward modernity apparently diverged and produced unstable and conflicting narratives.

To shed light on the causes of these contradictory goals, I attempt to situate the three events within the broader historical, socio-political, cultural and aesthetic context of their planning and duration, demonstrating how the fairs both mirrored and actively shaped notions of modernity and national identity through the massive propaganda whose success was owed at least partially to the sheer size of their audience. Thus, central obsessions to the interwar fairs such as class conflict, racial hierarchy and exoticism, and the idea of Frenchness, are interpreted as part of a broader self-presentational discourse. My approach to historicizing the fairs is based on a detailed narrative history of the fairs, and a discussion of the debates and negotiations surrounding their organization, of the involvement of specific institutions and individuals, and of the contemporary critiques and the general reception of the fairs. Alongside primary textual materials, such as speeches and promotional articles by organizers, official publications, advertising materials, and press coverage, I examine in depth the architectural representations and other pictorial objects, displays and spectacles to expose their central function in reinforcing the official messages and in producing specific notions of Frenchness.
Juxtaposing in this manner textual and pictorial representations of the fairs exposes the numerous inconsistencies within the expositions’ project, whose meanings often clashed with their overtly declared goals or ideology. It is in the space of these contradictions and instabilities that competing notions of modernity and national identity emerge, opening up new discursive possibilities.

**The World's Fairs and Their Narratives of Modernity**

Since their inception, the French universal expositions were concerned with weaving and displaying narratives of progress. Unlike their predecessors – the national or local trade shows which proliferated in the early 1800s and called themselves “industrial” even though they displayed and awarded individual inventions intended to facilitate labor that were hardly industrial in nature – the fairs of the mid-19th century began to collect and display artifacts, mass-produced objects, machines and materials from all over the world in a powerful affirmation that the world – and perhaps even the universe – is completely transparent, accessible, and fully knowable. It is in those mid-19th century fairs that the industrial orientation of such events took precedence in the collective imagination and came to signify modernity. The traditional concern to the trade shows with boasting of commercial success and raising revenues through sales gave way to the creation of a narrative of modernity. In other words, the modern fairs, while retaining a pronounced commercial aspect, now broadened their ideological function, specifically aiming to show the host nation (here France) as the most ‘modern,’ ‘progressive,’ and therefore commercially successful and advanced. To that end, 19th century fairs made a conscious effort to display cutting-edge machines (fully operational when possible so as
to emphasize the process of production), mass-produced items which possessed a distinct appeal by virtue of evoking industrial and technical innovations, products from the colonies, and so on. New display techniques elevated the status of the objects on display, which were quite literally placed them on a pedestal or under glass. The early exhibitions, discussed in detail in Part One of my dissertation, provided visual testimony to the idea that the world had indeed shrunk and was made more accessible through steam-powered ships, an expanding railroad network, various innovations in telecommunications, in brief, through the unfolding history of capitalism itself. New technologies of vision made the world more accessible than ever, as evidenced in the self-designations of these fairs as “world” or even “universal” in nature, implying a direct and undisputed relationship between outside reality and the exhibits at the fairs. The elaborate details in the displays, far from being superfluous, claimed to represent the real when in fact these representations obscured the fairs’ essentially phantasmagoric nature, as Benjamin described it – a phantasmagoric nature that concealed the underlying social, political and cultural conditions.

Gathering the world’s intellectual and material production in a predetermined perimeter suggested that the world was there to be viewed and experienced, even if broken into pieces and reassembled on an artificially constructed site. As many scholars

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9 “A fundamental rule, quickly learned through observation, is that no object should be placed directly on the floor, on a level with the walkways. Pianos, furniture, physical apparatus, and machines are better displayed on a pedestal or raised platform.” Exposition universelle de 1867, à Paris: Album des installations les plus remarquables de l’Exposition de 1862, à Londres, publié par la commission impériale pour servir de renseignement aux exposants des diverses nations (Paris, 1866) 5, qtd. in Benjamin, The Arcades Project, Convolote G 196.


have pointed out, the particularity of the French expositions model lies precisely in the methodology and motivation behind the collection and exhibition of these goods and artifacts from all over the world. The French model derives from the Diderotian Encyclopedic model, a legacy of rationalist Enlightenment thinking, whose objective was described by Diderot as follows: “to collect knowledge disseminated around the globe, and to set forth its general system to the men with whom we live, and transmit it to those who will come after us.” By striving to assemble and organize the world’s artistic and material production, the fairs promoted a vision of a rationally ordered cosmos, informed by axiomatic knowledge and expunged of all contradictions. They also announced the emergence of a new harmonious and peaceful civilization, based on scientific knowledge, science and progress, and emancipated from traditional and irrational modus vivendi restrained by religion, superstition and the like. (In fact, it can be noted that rituals and exhibitions at the fairs celebrated progress and rationality, slowly displacing religious ceremonies in the process. Already sidelined by the time of the 1878 fair, the first of the Third Republic, religion was vociferously and definitively struck down in 1889 by the technological and rationalist values extolled by the Eiffel Tower.) In contrast to the British fairs, which arguably promoted commercial opportunities in the main, the French tradition was less focused on commercial success and material abundance and more so on using the highly public platform of the fairs to disseminate ideas. Again a legacy of


14 Numerous French observers decried in the course of the early 19th century expositions the emphasis on products at the expense of ideas. A few of the most famous examples include the Goncourt Brothers and
Diderot’s noble concern with ameliorating the lives of generations to come through knowledge, the French expositions modeled a certain social idealism in their very form, specifically in their didacticism and evocation of broader societal conditions that could be improved through the practical application of these visions of progress. The public spectacle established an implicit connection between the content of the displays at the fairs and external reality. As Tony Bennett has argued, the exhibitionary order transferred the rhetoric of progress devised with the means of visual representation of industrial production processes and products to the visitors by positing these same displays as proof and measures of progress. (The mechanism of this practice was most evident at colonial displays, which relied heavily on the opposition of exhibits of production methods and processes associated with the participating Western economies on the one hand, and ‘primitive’ people, often displayed in traditional manual occupations on the other.)

Yet the association of modernity and progress with industrial and technological development, however common, began to be questioned in France even as early French exhibits extolled these values. Critics objected that these standards of modernization or progress were not France’s own: they were originally set forth by Britain at the 1851 World’s Exhibition in London, and France simply felt compelled to follow suit in adopting them, without regard for cultural, social, political and aesthetic differences. In

Baudelaire who criticized the fairs for privileging machines over art and morality (see chapter three of this dissertation for more), or Ernest Renan who noted that “Twice, Europe has gone off to view the merchandise and to compare products and materials; and on returning from this new kind of pilgrimage, no one has complained of missing anything” (Essais de la morale et de critique (Paris, 1859), qtd. in Benjamin, The Arcades Project, Convolute G 197. See also, e.g., Exposition Universelle Internationale de 1878. Rapport du Jury International (Paris, 1880) 134.

15 The principle of using the spectacles of progress to educate the public and to project utopian visions resting on these same images was championed and perfected by Frederic Le Play, the Commissioner General of the 1855 and 1867 fairs. For more on Le Play, see Paul Rabinow, French Modern (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), esp. chapter 3 “Experiments in Social Paternalism.”

its desire to overcome what it perceived as flailing and inadequate industrial development, France focused its efforts on surpassing Britain’s achievements at the London fairs.\textsuperscript{17} At the same time, consensus began to form that such a concept of modernity was not necessarily appropriate to the French context. For instance, Whitney Walton and Richard Kuisel have shown that in terms of production, the French model relied on alternative economic structures (small scale, scattered and often manual production, more concerned with quality standards than with efficiency) that opposed the underlying association with progress as mechanized production.\textsuperscript{18} Walton has further argued that French bourgeois culture was a much more powerful influence in formulating notions of French modernity and progress than the limited focus on industrialization. In a similar vein, Patricia Mainardi, whose research traced the beginnings of modernism to the early art exhibits at the 1855 and 1867 fairs, has underscored the role of art in formulating an alternative, specifically French notion of modernity.\textsuperscript{19}

These alternative narratives challenged the fairs’ search for a stable definition of modernity and destabilized the dominant rhetoric that surrounded the fairs. The ambivalence toward modernity as industrial, as Britain had defined it as early as the first great exhibition in 1851, remained as we will see a central issue at French expositions until the late 1930s. France’s suspicion toward this kind of modernity brought to the fore a larger cultural conflict: on the one hand was the awareness of the imperative to modernize and industrialize to shore up French competitiveness in increasingly

\textsuperscript{17}Napoleon for instance made provisions for building specifically a bigger and better Crystal Palace at the 1855 fair.


globalized markets; on the other were fears of homogenization and loss of cultural particularities. Modernity in fact presented itself as a challenge to French cultural identity. The interwar expositions thus emerged as sites of loss and nostalgia, as much as they presented themselves as shrines to progress. The question, put flatly, was whether French culture and Frenchness could survive in an era that placed ever greater emphasis on technological efficiency, given the extent to which French culture was grounded economically, culturally, spiritually, politically and aesthetically in the soil, in manual tradition of production, uniqueness and luxury. These debates found expression at both the 1925 Art Deco Exposition and at the 1937 Paris World’s Fair.

Modernity and Nostalgia at the Expositions: The Fairs as Sites of Anxiety

The central question of the exposition of 1925, as I discuss it in Chapter One of this dissertation, “The 1925 Art Deco Exposition: French Modernity as a Matter of Style,” reflected France’s anguish in the face of an industrializing and increasingly commercialized society. Organized specifically to promote French decorative arts which lagged behind other European countries such as Germany or Great Britain, the Art Deco exposition (as it became known) held the promise of reforming the domestic arts and crafts. The underlying causes of the condition of this field were identified as France’s unhealthy and nostalgic attachment to historicist styles and its reluctance to incorporate mechanical means of production for fear of abandoning traditions, a move that could limit the competitiveness of French producers, long esteemed for the quality of their merchandise. Hence, the exposition program ruled that the creation of a French ‘modern’ style ought to be rooted in opposition to historicist and cliché styles that dominated decorative practices, and ought to respond to contemporary social needs, including those
of the working class. It also promised, like all previous fairs, to reconcile French artistic traditions with the demands of modern society. Yet, I argue that, owing partially to its institutional support, and the long-held notions of French national genius and a sense of entitlement in matters of style, and traditions that cherished manual production, luxury and uniqueness, the 1925 Art Deco Exposition persistently promoted precisely the values it claimed to oppose. The abundance of handmade, heavily decorated, luxurious surfaces that all but recycled and ‘updated’ (under a new name, of course) the historicist styles that the exposition officially claimed to denounce, brought forward the steadfast perception that mechanical production – one of the legacies of rationalist modernity – proved devastating to the decorative arts. As a result, the exposition rules officially disallowed the display of industrially-made items and their makers, despite the designation of the fair as “exposition des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes.”

The fair similarly condemned works such as Le Corbusier’s *Esprit Nouveau* pavilion which derived from ideals of standardization and mass production, the new urbanism and *Esprit Nouveau* ideology, even as it purported to understand the importance of modernizing the arts and crafts. As architectural historian Danilo Udovicki-Selb put it, “1925 engulfed references to industry into ‘art’, an art that rejected any association with the machine ethos.” This is a long way from the formulations of industrial modernity at the early fairs, and from the Diderotian model that aimed harmoniously to unite industry and the arts. In fact, the resentment toward technical and industrial modernity at the 1925 fair was still very much in tune with the initial contentious reaction to Eiffel’s oversized iron

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21 Udovicki-Selb 68.
22 See specifically the entry on “Art” in the *Encyclopedia*. 
monument that overcast hundreds of years of architectural and artistic tradition of France, and whose erection three and a half decades earlier had provoked a vociferous outcry.\textsuperscript{23}

The 1925 decorative arts fair has often been dismissed as an unremarkable and mediocre exhibit of ostentatious decorative items and ephemeral pleasures. It has thus been understood largely in terms of the production of illusions and phantasmagoria, in terms of consumption culture, or as holding onto outdated ideas. In many ways it is undeniable that the 1925 fair implied a nostalgia and unwillingness to conceive of France’s future as a rupture from its long-standing artistic or political traditions (particularly visible in its reluctance to address new social needs) out of fear of cultural loss. The Exposition also demonstrates the resistance to revisiting the idea of Frenchness in a context that called for renewal. Evidence of this resistance abounds in the rejection of radically novel aesthetics, in the lack of acknowledgement of new political and social alignment, in the catering to aristocratic or \textit{grand bourgeois} visitors, and in the decorative excesses that evoked monarchical extravagance rather than “the moderation of an egalitarian age.”\textsuperscript{24}

I contend that underneath the surface and the nostalgic attachment to the past the Exposition of 1925 actively participated in the construction of an alternative vision of modernity – one stemming from the nexus of luxury, art and tradition – that challenged and essentially inverted the fairs’ dominant conception of modernity as industrial. The

\textsuperscript{23} Three hundred prominent artists, architects, composers and other public figures united to lobby against Eiffel’s project, arguing that the proposed iron tower would “profane” Paris’ beauty and tradition; would dishonor, deface and disgrace the capital; and would ruin French reputation as the leader in matters of style. See “Les Artistes contre la Tour Eiffel” in \textit{Le Temps} (February 14, 1887) 3.

I discuss the Eiffel Tower in more detail in Part One of my dissertation 62-74.

fair also elucidates the process through which France sought to renegotiate unstable notions of collective identity, traditions, or of the future.

**Greater France and the Colonial Exposition**

Anxiety over modernity also found expression in the representations of the colonized people at the interwar fairs. In chapter two, “Colonial Modern and the 1931 Colonial Exposition,” I study the 1931 Colonial Exposition and the images of the inhabitants of the colonies it produced and circulated in order to elucidate how such depictions served to define French national identity in the context of modernity.

The Colonial Exposition, long in the works, was conceived as an occasion for France to boost its standing as a leader in the postwar world by virtue of its sprawling and rich colonial holdings. France’s declining competitiveness and underdeveloped economy, combined with the debilitating effects of the 1929 crash and the ensuing world economic crisis and the vast wartime destruction made it imperative for France to reclaim its status and prestige as a world leader. By organizing a lavish and exotic public spectacle of its colonial holdings – still a prized token of political dominance and economic significance – the French government hoped to counter a prevailing sentiment of decadence and to reclaim France’s standing as a world power. True to the fairs’ educate-while-entertaining precept, the exposition aimed to teach French citizens about ‘their’ colonies as a means of building colonial consensus. The didacticism of the fair concealed a subtle political and economic goal, namely, to obtain from French citizens tacit support for further exploitation of overseas resources. The organizers’ efforts were of utmost significance, as contemporary commentators and colonial administrators increasingly linked national renewal to French empire through the image of *la plus grande France* (Greater France).
The concept of Greater France, a term preferred to that of empire, represented a cohesive union of the Métropole and the overseas territories, and imagined modern France as a true world power sprawling across five continents, with a population of one hundred million, as organizers and colonial administrators often boasted, and seemingly unlimited resources. I argue that the 1931 Colonial fair proved crucial in shaping and promoting the idea of Greater France more openly and vociferously than ever before, and offered itself as a visual and symbolic referent to that idea. Like all expositions, the 1931 Exposition claimed to establish an accurate link between the elaborately constructed display of a productive and conflict-free Greater France, unrivaled (at least within the Exposition), and the reality of postwar France, whose glorious future the exposition assured by demonstrating the breadth and triumph of colonialism and the civilizing mission heretofore.

As some scholars have pointed out, French colonial history and the civilizing mission are often excluded from discussions of modernity, even though these ill-fated projects were deeply marked by paradigmatically modern developments, such as scientific and technological innovations (e.g., firearms, steam engines, medications), and


26 The only notable absence was England, whose empire was the single one to surpass France’s. Needless to say, England’s decline to participate on the grounds that it had recently held its own colonial fair in 1924 gave France serious advantage since it could display its colonies unchallenged.

ideologies (capitalism and liberalism), discourses and institutions (civilization, universalism, anthropology, museum, etc.). The 1931 fair, I argue, demonstrated the centrality of the imperial project to French modernity, a nexus most evident in the formulation and representation of Greater France and the civilizing mission at the fair. The idea of the infamous *mission civilisatrice* derived directly from French Enlightenment ideology, which equated civilization, itself a specifically French idea, with mastery (*maîtrise*) over nature, over history and in this case over social behavior. As historian Alice Conklin puts it, for the French colonizer, “to be civilized was to be free from specific forms of tyranny: the tyranny of the elements over man, of disease over health, of instinct over reason, of ignorance over knowledge and of despotism over liberty.” It was precisely because France deemed itself free from such restraints that it had become ‘civilized’ and assumed the task of bringing civilization to the ‘unenlightened primitives’ as both a duty and a right. The logic of the civilizing mission also implied that progress and civilization can be learned, thus conveniently casting France in the role of a benevolent and successful tutor.

The exposition not unwittingly disseminated images of peaceful coexistence between a compassionate colonizer and ‘*indigènes*’ eagerly awaiting enlightenment and civilization because such images fit smoothly within the discourse of Greater France. Unlike any previous colonial displays which emphasized the radical racial and cultural alterity of colonial subjects, themselves turned into attractions, Commissioner General Marshall Lyautey insisted that in 1931 the colonies be depicted tastefully and

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authentically, while remaining at ease with French colonization. This representational shift was necessitated by the very notion of Greater France as a cohesive, solidary nation, united through a shared aesthetic, and expunged of the ideological contradictions between French Republican and universalist ideals, on the one hand, and the violent, coercive expansion of the French overseas empire on the other. The exposition argued that the symbiosis was the inevitable result of France’s postwar colonial policy of association, which in theory (though not always in practice) reversed the brutal assimilationist treatment of colonial societies. Furthermore, for the idea of Greater France to convince, colonial subjects had to be presented as integratable into and acceptable for French civilization, and not as radically different, or otherwise unassimilable.

Despite such progressive hopes, the Exposition, I argue, produced meanings that in fact reveal a lack of willingness to revisit the notion of Frenchness or of colonial cultures, instead reverting to 19th century representations of the racialized other. By analyzing major internal contradictions within the exposition, I contend that the exposition narratives revealed France’s ambivalence toward its shifting identity (including its colonies) and modernity, even as the colonies were increasingly linked to French modernity in political discourse. Thus, the exposition appeared to concern itself more with praising France’s civilizing mission and colonization than with celebrating the colonies. Despite Lyautey’s calls for tasteful and authentic depictions, representations of the colonies in 1931 did not, I show, differ dramatically from previous fairs. The image of the colonial subject as static, barbaric, manually-oriented and still very much dependent on nature was consistent with 19th century displays, and not only suggested

that the ‘indigènes’ had not yet achieved the ‘mastery’ essential to civilization but also underscored the impossibility for linear evolution owing to their immobility. The staticity invested in the images of the colonial subject and the putative authenticity of the displays, itself construed by the French colonizer as proof of the ossification of colonial traditions, then served to radicalize the difference between colonizer and colonized, making integration impossible – an assumption reflected in the physical gesture of erecting the Exposition at the Bois de Vincennes in the outskirts of the city, as if to keep the colonial other at bay. My analysis of the colonial fair demonstrates that despite the declared promise of integration and association, the visual representations of the colonies there point to contradictory attitudes and call into question the sincerity of such claims. The fair, I argue, aimed to reaffirm the superiority of French race and culture by reasserting the otherwise weakening colonial domination, and to boost French national confidence if only through spectacle. It also unveiled France’s fear of hybridity and a desire to defend certain invented notions of Frenchness as pure.

Paradoxically, the radicalization of the other and the invented ossification of colonial cultures also negated internally the very promise of the civilizing mission France lauded at the 1931 event. After all, France could claim a status as a colonizer or civilizer only as long as there were colonies, which of course precluded the possibility of declaring the civilizing mission – and by extension the Exposition – a success; instead,

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31 It is noteworthy that at the expositions colonial displays were often segregated from the main exhibit. At the 1900 exposition, for example, the enormously popular orientalist exhibition – very elaborate and commercially successful if ideologically questionable – was relegated to the Trocadero, itself a ‘racially’ and aesthetically ambivalent palace, thus separating the colonial display from the main exhibit.

This spatial segregation at the fair echoed the official policy of segregation (regimentation) of colonial workers from French society during the Great War, as described by historian Tyler Stovall, “Colonial Workers in France during the Great War,” in Conklin and Fletcher 165-173.

32 Resistance, revolts and independence movements were at the time slowly beginning to emerge, and even if weak, they managed to rattle the imperial certainty of France.
the civilizing mission was cast as an ongoing and open-ended project. This problematic premise also reveals a major contradiction at the heart of the 1931 exposition – the claim to success of the civilizing mission and the claim that France’s future was overseas, as Lyautey put it, were incompatible because the latter relied on exploitation while the former rejected it formally. Further, a successful policy of association or ‘civilizing’ was not viable or sustainable since it is precisely the exclusivity and supremacy of French civilization that was used to legitimize colonialism (unlike, e.g., British colonialism, which argued that its legitimacy derived from the long history of British presence in those locales). Therefore, I argue that the exposition – sometimes intentionally and sometimes unwittingly – essentialized racial and cultural difference between the colonies and the Métropole even as it pretended to celebrate its gradual disappearance.

These attitudes were brought to the fore at the Exposition at a time of increased desire to understand the colonial other through scientific research and increased cultural contact. Emerging social sciences, especially ethnology, had begun displacing anthropometric studies and displays which operated on the assumption of the existence of biological difference, a difference affirmed and communicated in supposedly objective terms. Ethnology, by contrast, while openly referencing the colonial project to establish its own legitimacy, sought, in its effort to provide better knowledge, to move away from biometric studies as measures of progress or civilization. Instead, ethnology began considering social institutions, religious and community relations, material culture, and linguistics, among others, in an attempt to conceptualize cultures as coherent entities, thus acknowledging the existence of alternatives to European civilization. The

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33 See Burton Benedict, “International Exhibitions and National Identity” Anthropology Today 7 (June 1991) 7. Benedict argues that French history, especially in the 19th and early 20th century, has generally been too divisive to be used to obtain a general consensus on such a contentious issue as colonization.
development of ethnology to a great extent reflected the shift toward cooperation and coexistence that association and the 1931 exposition theoretically sought to promote. For example, for the first time and as a result of the shift ethnology brought about, the exposition banned as offensive anthropological studies on colonial subjects brought to Paris for the event (much to the chagrin of some), and instead included dances, arts, religious rituals, among others, as evidence of the autonomy of colonial cultures, indicating what historian Spencer Segalla has called “a momentary openness to the historicity and variety of [non-European people]” that had the potential to challenge the very ideological foundation of colonialism. I study the way ethnology both defined the exposition as an ethnological event, and simultaneously informed and contested the views of the colonial other at the 1931 exposition. I argue that by suggesting a legitimate alternative to Western civilization, the ethnological aspect of the exposition opened up pluralistic notions of French identity and modernity in a challenge to otherwise monolithic messages of the Exposition. Also taken into account is the role of the often-neglected Surrealist counter-exposition, itself buttressed by many surrealists’ ethnological interests and by the active participation of colonial subjects, including some involved in the Négritude movement in Paris. The counter-exposition openly challenged the narrative of the civilizing mission as a benevolent export of civilization and enlightenment ideals by revealing a starkly different reality – one of violence, brutality, torture, and annihilation, thus calling into question the broader narrative of France’s progress, civilization, and genius. The counter-exposition was the occasion to launch a massive attack on the very principles of Western civilization and colonialism, and of the

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exposition model as a symbol of Western ideology. More specifically, the counter-
exposition validated the aesthetic value and revolutionary potential of alternative cultures
outside the principles of Western ordering and reason. I contend that by challenging the
1931 Exposition and by privileging the poetic value of tribal objects, the Surrealist
exposition produced alternative visions of modernity independently of the mainstream
narrative of progress the exposition promoted.

It is worth mentioning that in some ways the colonial expositions contained the
seeds of their own unraveling and of the colonial logic itself. Examples from early
colonial displays testify to the cracks colonial subjects found within the exposition space.
For example, at the 1889 Exposition, some North African subjects took full advantage of
the fair for their own commercial benefit by running their own small coffee shops or
restaurants. Their actions, even if self-orientalizing in an attempt to get more customers,
speak to their successful attempt to gain agency in an event where they were but
powerless and objectified. Further, in the years of decolonization, some colonies claimed
the right to independence by exploiting to their benefit the images the colonizer produced
of them. For example, Senegal and Nigeria made a claim to autonomous political status
precisely because at the expositions they had already been given such a status, thus
allowing them to conceive of themselves not only as autonomous entities but as culturally
and racially different from the colonizer.\textsuperscript{35} In many ways, at stake in the contradictions
within these exhibits is the optimism that such conflicts will in fact destabilize monolithic
and absolute positions and would allow their renegotiation.

\textsuperscript{35} Burton 8.
Revisiting Frenchness: Between Tradition and Modernity

While the nostalgia and anxiety over the loss of Frenchness permeated all interwar fairs, nowhere were they as acutely present as they were at the 1937 fair, which is the subject of Chapter Three, “The Last Universal Exposition and the Future of France: The 1937 Paris Exposition.” The crippling economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s, and the ensuing social unrest and domestic and international political instability amplified fears of the weakening of the liberal democratic French Republic and of the very soul of France. On the domestic front, financial difficulties and paralyzing general strikes brought down several successive cabinets in the mid-1930s, compounding the parliamentary instability of the 1920s. Partisan tensions escalated, and in 1934 extreme right factions threatened directly the stability of the Republic. On the international scene, the civil war in Spain, the swift spread of fascism and the rise of Germany were a cause of great concern. The volatility of the postwar period and painful memories of the Great War destabilized long-held cultural beliefs about modernity and progress, and gave rise to overwhelming sentiments of a ‘crisis of civilization’ and a ‘decline of the west,’ forcing a reconsideration of what it meant to be French and modern. At the heart of the 1937 fair was the same question that agitated the 1925 Art Deco exposition: how could Frenchness and French lifestyle survive the massive transformations brought on by modernity, especially by the century-long industrialization and the ensuing rise of

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36 Cf., e.g., Paul Valéry, “La Crise de l’Esprit,” Oeuvres, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard/La Pléiade, 1957) 988-1014. Edmond Labbé, the commissioner general of the 1937 Exposition spoke of a crisis of confidence that the Exposition intended to reverse (“Ce que sera l’Exposition internationale,” in Le Régionalisme et l’exposition internationale de Paris 1937 (Paris: L’Imprimerie Nationale, 1936) 123). The sentiments of loss, anxiety and decadence profoundly marked all interwar fairs, not just that of 1937, though they found different expressions at each event. At the 1925 Art Deco fair, for example, the seemingly light-hearted theme and the optimism and desire for normalcy that characterized the decade concealed an underlying anxiety. The spectacle of racial and cultural superiority at the 1931 fair similarly intended to obscure fears of loss of precisely this sense of superiority.
consumer markets, democratization, technological transformation of French life, and so on?

On the surface, the 1937 fair, organized partially as an “exposition of civilization,” pretended to dispel the fears of decadence by emphasizing the durability of French values, most obviously embodied in the very organization of a ‘universal exposition,’ and to renew optimism in the future by displaying achievements in the arts, industries and science in the tradition of the great 19th century expositions. It also promised, again, to construct and convey an image of France as stable, forward-looking, and relevant. Yet, by focusing on its inherent contradictions, I show that the 1937 Exposition, far from sending a persuasive message, registered an unsettled attitude toward the traditionally celebrated values of urban, capitalist and industrialized society even as it claimed to display them with pride. The instabilities of the post-war period seemed to furnish incontrovertible proof that these values – stemming from the notion of modernity as industrial promoted by the fairs – were bankrupt, and the 1937 Exposition’s belief in them was similarly shaken, even if the organizers did not willingly admit as much. Capitalism, industrialism and mechanization were repudiated by a growing anti-modern rhetoric on philosophical and moral grounds, and blamed for a number of political and social ills, such as unemployment, workers’ unrest, and abandonment of the land. At the same time, fears grew that, left to run rampant, this kind of modernity would prove destructive. The fair readily supplied a negative model in the American pavilion,

37 While the 1937 exposition was conceived in the tradition of the 19th century universal expositions, specifically in its brave attempt to offer a report on the progress of civilization by uniting in theory all branches of human activity, it also decisively broke away from the model of the fairs. The 1937 world’s fair was not designated ‘universal’ as the 19th century fairs had been but as ‘international.’ Unlike previous expositions which displayed products in general areas (e.g., manufacturing or agricultural equipment), the displays now reflected splits along national lines. The affirmation of the primacy of the nation definitively trumped ‘universal’ concerns.
which, I argue, is representative of the broader discourse on America in the interwar period. In the eyes of the French, America offered a decidedly dystopian (and fairly monolithic) vision of unfettered modernity, expressed in excessive mechanization, rampant materialism, lack of individualism, obsession with efficiency at the expense of quality, and so on. I demonstrate that the normative and prescriptive value of this discourse was unmistakable in warning against the implementation of this modernity in France. My aim in examining the discourse on America in the context of the 1937 Exposition is to demonstrate that the invention of this image revealed much more about France’s lassitude than it did about America.

A pronounced shift was registered away from values hitherto promoted by the fairs as the embodiment of modernity and towards organic and humanist experience. Thus, the exposition embraced and readily reproduced the fast proliferating images of the land, regions and peasants as an alternative to a destructive and deeply alienating modernity. Specifically, the exposition constructed a Regional Center, an ensemble of regional pavilions dedicated to celebrating French provinces and local customs. In addition, an amusement park (parc d’attractions) dedicated to Old France (Notre Vieille France) put up an idealized, happy show of local life by presenting putatively authentic architecture, costumes, fairs, music, and so on, in a decidedly nostalgic manner. The fair also featured a Rural Center – a model village equipped with modern farm buildings (e.g., a silo) and facilities (e.g., irrigation systems, water and sewage, electricity), intended as an emblem both of France’s attachment to its soil and farmers, and of the country’s eagerness to modernize. The Rural Center was supposed to produce visual proof of the possibility of reconciling the exposition’s central problem: to present France
as at once grounded in tradition and forward-looking. Attacking the conception that a conflict exists between tradition and modernity, the Rural Center itself furnished proof to the contrary. A folklore museum (*Musée des arts et traditions populaires*) spearheaded by the Leftist Front Populaire was also added in the eleventh hour (and was hence unfinished for the fair) in an effort to validate regionalist and rural customs as constitutive of the national experience.\(^{38}\)

Yet, I argue that the coherence and persuasiveness of this narrative – of France as both modern and attached to the soil – was undermined by numerous contradictions within the exposition’s space, suggesting that the regionalist depictions at and around the fair expressed a nostalgia for an idealized past and national identity in the turbulent times of the interwar period. For instance, I show that the depictions of the provinces as dynamic and adaptive, rather than conservative and resistant to change – images constructed specifically by conjuring up images of industrial modernity symbiotically co-existing with an organic way of life – were problematized by the determination of the Regional Commission (responsible for the Regional Center) to present only ‘authentic,’ hand-crafting artisans and to exclude industrial displays. Thus, the Regional Commission sanctioned the image of France as rooted in hand-made, artisanal production and the land, rejecting outright industrialization or mechanization as a valid mode of production for France in favor of small, artisanal businesses. The resistance to industrialization on the grounds that it was inappropriate for French society had long been deeply ingrained in popular opinion, and had been blamed for many social problems, such as abandonment of

\(^{38}\) Even in the 1930s, folklore had been criticized for undermining the image of France as modern, industrial and republican, and was unambiguously and contemptuously equated with preindustrial, rural and provincial France. Shanny Peer, *France on Display: Peasants, Provincials, and Folklore in the 1937 Paris World’s Fair* (Albany: SUNY, 1998), esp. ch. 4 “Folklore and the Reinvention of Tradition” 135-166.
villages, overpopulation in metropolitan areas, unemployment, atrophy of manual skills and so on. As early as 1892, the Méline Tariff, a protectionist measure introduced by Agriculture Minister Jules Méline, had advocated a return to the land in the face of urbanization and industrialization, cementing this sentiment into official policy. The Great Depression, in the course of which the same problems were exacerbated to an unprecedented level, rekindled anti-industrial and anti-modernizing sentiments, as social commentators maintained that it is precisely the ‘equilibrium’ of French economy – the balance of industry and agriculture – that had mitigated the effects of the world economic crisis. Many economists today believe the contrary, yet at the time the nation’s economic crisis was widely read as a warning against the industrial model and a vindication of France’s ‘balanced’ economy.\textsuperscript{39} Therefore, the bucolic and organic images at the 1937 Exposition were deployed to obfuscate fears toward modernization and a possible loss of cultural particularities.

This symbolic space of French cultural and national identity was also claimed by extreme right factions who attempted to construct certain notions of Frenchness based on a sacred relationship to the land and cultural heritage. They tried to appropriate this space specifically in opposition to the influence of the leftist coalition of the Popular Front and its leader Leon Blum, a French Jew, arguing he would sway the country in a direction that would uproot modern France from its land, its Gallo-Roman heritage and its aesthetic

\textsuperscript{39} Richard Kuisel cites René Duchemin asking rhetorically: “Does not the relative equilibrium of our country prove that French methods, often middling but always prudent, are best and reflect the people’s genius?” The consensus took hold that France ought not to abandon its agriculture and land, or its manual production in favor of excessive industrialization, but needs to modernize prudently. See Richard Kuisel, \textit{Capitalism and the State in Modern France} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 93. Yet, it is noteworthy if somewhat contradictory to the belief in France’s ‘balanced economy’ that the rebuilding effort at the end of the war favored industrial reconstruction at the expense of homeowners, farmers and others (See Part III “The Twenties: ‘Normalcy’ or Modernity?” and specifically “Rebuilding the Northeast: Renewal vs. Restoration” 69-70).
traditions. I look at the ways their intervention, undoubtedly a powerful statement about the fairs’ potential to create meaning, plays out in the debate on how to translate the modern vision of Frenchness into architectural space in the context of the reconstruction of the Trocadero Palace.

France’s interwar expositions can be considered not only as tools for building national identity by ruling elites but also as symbolic spaces that produce and reinvent concepts of what France is in the face of modernity. These constructions of national images and regional belonging, of traditions and modernity play a significant role in shaping national consensus and consciousness as historians such as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have demonstrated. At the 1937 fair, the images of France as traditionalist, human and handcrafted, or of America reduced to a cruel, dehumanized, mass society, bore immense importance in defining and producing a valid and powerful notion of modern France, even if the existence of this France in reality was questionable. Similarly, as we shall see, the 1925 Art Deco Exposition and the 1931 Colonial Fair constructed and disseminated images of France that reflected the nation’s political desires – highly idealized and conflict-free – to obscure the fragmentation of the very idea the fairs proposed to reassert.

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PART ONE

History, Conceptual Origins and Critical Themes in the Great French Expositions

The world’s fairs, or, as they are known in France, ‘expositions,’ understood as lavish and extensive national, international or even universal displays of the material and intellectual production of human activity date officially to the late 18th century. They are heirs to a long-standing tradition of fairs in Europe, which historians have traced back to ancient Greek public spectacles (e.g., panhellenic games); to Roman exhibits of local products (e.g., the famous exhibit organized by Ptolemy Philometor in second century B.C. to showcase Egyptian products); to the medieval festivals, with which England celebrated the end of the Hundred Years War in mid-15th century, or those fairs of the century of the Great Discoveries; to the expositions of products from the French Kingdom Louis XI is said to have imagined.\(^1\) Examining the continuity between the modern fairs and their medieval or ancient predecessors produces meaningful insights into the conceptual organization and history of the fairs, and their evolution as cultural phenomena. This dissertation will focus on the expositions held in France in the early 20th century, mass spectacles that continued and revisited the 19th century tradition of the universal expositions. A historical, social, economic and aesthetic overview of the great fairs of the 19th century is needed to understand the genesis of the concept of the universal

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expositions, and to elucidate some of the conflicts and narratives the interwar fairs revisited.

*Spectacles of Nation Building*

The conceptual foundations of modern industrial exhibitions were established in 18\textsuperscript{th} century England, when privately funded associations began displaying and awarding exceptional achievements in commerce, manufacture and the arts. One such organization, whose mission was to encourage progress in those areas and which was credited with launching the idea for a world’s fair, was the Royal Society of Arts.\footnote{Founded by William Shipley, a prominent illustrator, the Royal Society of Arts was an association for the encouragement of progress in the arts, manufacture and commerce. It is credited with introducing the idea of displaying the arts next to the products of industry. It first proposed the idea of an exposition of products from all nations in 1849, a bid that would come to fruition with the 1851 London Fair. For more on Shipley and the Royal Society of Arts, cf. Greenhalgh, “Conceptual Beginnings”; Ory 34.}

At these British exhibits, progress was mainly measured comparative to economic benefits, especially for the nascent industries (e.g., textile) or those in distress (due to tougher export laws, for example). Pre-Revolutionary France by contrast only held a few similar fairs, or *foires*, all limited in scope, locality and participation (e.g., the wine fairs of Bordeaux\footnote{Philippe Bouin and Christian-Philippe Chanut, *Histoire française des foires et des expositions universelles* (Paris: Nesle, 1980) 14-15.}). A few notable French exceptions were Beaucaire in Languedoc and La Foire de St Germain in Paris, which were wider in scope and even included international producers. By designation, these *foires* aimed to enhance trade by increasing visibility for local products and producers; it is because of their narrow economic focus that they were deeply disrupted by economic policy shifts (e.g., Colbert’s taxation, protectionism) and political instabilities (the Revolution). But they also retained a festival-like atmosphere, frequently scheduled to coincide with
religious holidays, accompanied by festivities, theatrical performances and the enjoyment of food.

After the Revolution, French expositions were revived with France’s first national industrial exposition in 1798. The official designation of the event as “exposition publique des produits de l’industrie française” signaled its preoccupation with national economic growth, and emphasized its continuity with previously held shows designed to stimulate trade. Specifically, the 1798 exposition was modeled after a small scale, four-day trade fair staged two years earlier – the first such exhibit after the Revolution – by the Marquis d’Avèze, commissioner of the Royal Manufactures of Sèvres (porcelain), the Gobelins (tapestries), and the Savonneries (rugs). D’Avèze’s event was essentially a fire sale to help unload the huge inventories amassed as a result of the decline of the luxury industries precipitated by the fall of the aristocracy and the high tariffs imposed by Britain that made it too costly and difficult for France to export its goods. The stagnant growth of these industries, further undermined by cheaper, industrially-made British products that flooded French markets, stalled inventory turnover, slowed production and growth, and exacerbated unemployment among craftsmen, fueling further national discontent. D’Avèze’s show had been tremendously successful in that it had stimulated trade, increased inventory turnover and visibility for French producers, but also in that it demonstrated to the French public that the national industries were able to compete with foreign goods, offering an optimistic outlook for the French economy.

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In addition to the economic concerns at the 1798 fair, this first industrial exposition was also an important step in shaping the French exposition model. For the first time, it explicitly added a political dimension. Organized in conjunction with national festivities on the occasion of the anniversary of the French Republic, this event served to give expression to Republican ideologies. Thus, it is important to note that the exposition also shared its conceptual origins with a series of post-Revolutionary Republican festivals celebrating the establishment of the Republic, extolling its virtues, and forging a new sense of national belonging, gradually displacing religious and ancien régime rituals. The organizers, headed by Minister of the Interior (Directoire) François de Neufchâteau, took great effort to present the public spectacle of 1798 as an effort to construct and consolidate the new republic. For instance, the inaugural ceremony for the Exposition, symbolically held on the Champs de Mars where the Republic had been proclaimed with the July 14, 1790 Fête de la Fédération, was an elaborate demonstration of military displays, music, processions, official speeches, and so on, whose symbolic value, riding on the revolutionary nationalist enthusiasm of earlier festivals, was deployed for the transformation of monarchical consciousness into a new republican identity.

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5 Some of the best known festivals are the Festival of the Federation (1790), the Festival of Law (1792), the Festival of Unity (1793), the Festival of Reason (1793), the Festival of the Supreme Being (1794), the Festival of Victory (1796), the Festival of the Foundation of the Republic (1796), and the Festival of Liberty (1798). Mona Ozouf examines the role these festivals played in the creation of the edifying narrative of the Revolution and of a republican consciousness. While pre-Revolutionary France demonstrated a pronounced distaste for the wastefulness, idleness and indecency of festivals, Ozouf argues that the Revolution revived and redefined the nature of festivals. See Mona Ozouf’s preeminent study, Festivals and the French Revolution, 1789-1799 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), esp. 106ff.

6 According to Bouin and Chanut (24), and Chandler, the inauguration of the exposition was led by trumpets (once military symbol of the nobility, now fanfares of Republican festivities), followed by the cavalry evoking the spectacles recent French military victories; platoons of mace bearers, also formerly royal symbols; tambourine players, tambourines being “the people’s instrument of merry making,” as Chandler put it; a military band; infantry; heralds carrying Republican flags; some
Thus, the 1798 exposition shifted away from the narrow commercial goals toward building national cohesion and establishing a symbolic space of an idealized, united and confident post-Revolutionary France. Citizens were invited to play a role in the construction of the Republic through this mass spectacle, which allowed them to conceive of themselves as Republican citizens. As Ozouf has pointed out, festivals – simultaneously spontaneous and organized, unifying and yet exclusive – staged a utopian performance of the post-Revolutionary social bond, asserting the legitimacy of the Republic. The future of France depended on convincing in the present moment the people of the tenability and strength of Republican ideals, a function all subsequent fairs strove to perform. As Eric Hobsbawm put it, the exposition “transformed the heritage into a combined expression of state pomp and power, and the citizens’ pleasure, confirming that France was the nation of 1789.” The 1798 fair offered an emphatically utopian projection of French life after the Revolution by putting on display selected positive aspects of the institution of the state: namely, its authority, symbolized in the appropriation of military rituals; its wealth, as the fair was financed by public money; its popular appeal and support, as the exposition was launched as an open public event, free of charge, for the public enjoyment, and last but not least, the viability of the nascent capitalist economy, as the fair showed off in

7 Ozouf 9.
a spectacular and festive manner the first fruits of French industries. Under the banner of France’s scientific and artistic genius, the exposition also presented to the public scientific and technological inventions intended for the benefit of humanity. The wide array of objects on display revealed the confidence in the techno-scientific and rationalist spirit, and celebrated France’s intellectual genius. Neufchâteau underscored the social utility of the fair, insisting that its displays “have a powerful influence on the riches and happiness of nations,” positing French Republican values as universal.

I.1. The 1798 Exposition, Champs de Mars and the Temple of Industry.

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9 One hundred and ten participants vied to display their best inventions and products as testimony to French progress. The wide array of objects on display at the Temple de l’Industrie included an astronomical calendar; pasta, including a new type of vermicelli; an innovative instrument for cataract surgery; a device to aid in the conversion of Republican measures and units; a machine designed “to facilitate the extraction of wood from the river without the need for workers to go in”; colorful paintings “of non-native birds,” and others (Bouin and Chanut 24).

The displays at the Exposition expected to reaffirm positively Republican ideals and their potential to model and evoke social change by celebrating French genius, labor and intellectual ingenuity under the banner of progress and peace (albeit at times mired in bloodshed). Progress at the 1798 fair was equated with freedom and labor, or in Neufchâteau’s synthesis of the two, the ability to work freely:

Ils ne sont plus ces temps malheureux où l’industrie française osait à peine produire le fruit de ses méditations et de ses recherches, où les règlements désastreux des corporations privilégiées, des entraves fiscales étouffaient les germes précieux du génie; où les arts, devenus en même temps les instruments et les victimes du despotisme, l’aidaient à appesantir son joug sur tous les citoyens et ne parvenaient au succès que par la flatterie, la corruption et les humiliations d’une honteuse servitude.\(^1\)

Subsequent French expositions retained this political and ideological aspect, and their distinct nationalist element became constitutive of the French fairs (in contrast to the British expositions, which are generally held to be less concerned with ideology and more with ‘practical’ displays and measures of growth\(^2\)). The degree to which even economic concerns were coated in nationalist rhetoric testifies to the significance of the political and ideological aspect of the 1798 fair. Even economic concerns intersected with Republican ideology, as is made obvious by Neufchâteau’s closing comments when he declared the exposition “a disastrous campaign for the British industry and triumphant for the Republic, in which French “factories were the arsenals which furnish the most potent weapons for the maintenance and preservation of our national greatness,” and a declaration of independence from England’s

\(^1\) Neufchâteau, qtd. in Bouin and Chanut 24. The celebration of labor was a principal theme in the early Republican festivals.
\(^2\) Greenhalgh 9-12.
industrial and economic “autarchy.” The conflation of military and political rhetoric with a celebration of the Revolutionary Republic in a popular festival is a flagrant example of the degree to which the political and ideological message was woven into the mass spectacle of the fairs, now a site for generating a nationalist discourse.

In the six decades that followed the first post-Revolutionary exposition, France as well as other European countries plus the US continued to hold national expositions which retained a distinct ambiance of pageantry. Despite embracing in principle the philosophy of laissez-faire economics and free trade, none risked opening the doors of their exhibits to foreign competition.

The Crystal Palace and French Notions of Progress

at the 1855 and 1867 Expositions

By the mid-19th century, as economic policy began to shift in favor of expanding international markets by rescinding tariffs and other protectionist policies, the expositions opened up to international competition. The first and most spectacular initiative came to fruition with England’s Great Exhibition of Works and Industry of All Nations. Held in London’s Hyde Park in 1851, it immediately eclipsed all previous exhibits. Its 15,000 exhibitors from all over the world displaying tens of thousands of objects could hardly compare with the 110 exhibitors at the 1798 Paris fair or with the 4,000 participants at the 1844 Paris fair, the most recent one. For the

13 Qtd. in Bouin and Chanut 25.
14 The first half of the 19th century saw expositions by Austria, Belgium Germany, Holland, Spain, Portugal, Russia and the US.
15 Greenhalgh 9.
first time ever, the Exhibition brought together and displayed such a huge number of mostly industrial works,\(^{16}\) emanating from numerous nations in one vast, marvelous exposition hall.

In and of itself, the Crystal Palace, the centerpiece of the fair (I.2), was unprecedented in concept, style and execution, and asserted England’s world leadership in industrial and scientific matters. Designed by Joseph Paxton, a gardener by trade and a self-taught architect, this building stood as the first large-scale glass and iron building.\(^{17}\) The original plan prescribed the removal of a row of trees, a provision that drew a public outcry against “the sacrifice [of these trees] for the sake of a whim.”\(^{18}\) Paxton’s solution was to roof over the trees, encasing eighteen acres of nature in glass and steel; the supremacy of technology over nature acquired then a

\(^{16}\) Manufactured items constituted the largest part of the exhibit. The displays also included raw materials (everything from precious metals to seeds and plants to furs), and fine arts (excluding painting).

\(^{17}\) Paxton had been designing for some 30 years by then smaller greenhouses using similar ferrovitreous construction. For an excellent study of the 1851 exhibition and of Paxton’s work, see Jeffrey A. Auerbach, \textit{The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), esp. ch. 2 “Planning the Exhibition,” and 46-52 on Paxton.

very concrete visual referent. The sheer size of the Crystal Palace (approximately 560 meters long by 265 meters wide) created an even more extraordinary and powerful impression on the contemporary visitor, given that its structure relied entirely on prefabricated modular cast iron beams and glass panes (approximately four tons of glass) made possible by recent technological advances in the glass and iron industries.

The Crystal Palace, with its large and airy glass dome and its sheer enormity was unlike any previous exposition buildings, whose temporary nature was embedded in the dingy galleries constructed out of unsightly plaster. One writer remarked on the visual and symbolic impact of the Crystal Palace: “it seemed then that the world we knew from old fairy tales – of the princess in the glass coffin, of queens and elves dwelling in crystal houses – had come to life…” The Crystal Palace was a testimony to Britain’s progress, described in terms of industrial, technological and scientific advances. The machines, on display in their fully-functioning state reportedly for the first time in history, offered an even more assertive proof and experience of modernity by inviting visitors to witness the modern production process, the better to dazzle and awe them with what Britain displayed as progress.

The London Exhibition was very closely followed in France. Faced with the success of Britain’s initiative, its long-standing rival, France saw its own industrial aspirations compromised. In many ways, the 1851 fair gave England a competitive

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20 Lessing, qtd. in Benjamin 184.
21 The west side of the Crystal Palace gallery contained a section dedicated to machines in motion. It showcased railway wheel mechanisms powered by steam, sewing machines, printing and book binding machines among others, all of them powered by two enormous boilers installed on site. For map of the gallery, see *Dickinson’s Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition of 1851* (London, 1854). Machinery in motion became an official class at the subsequent London fair of 1862.
edge by giving it the occasion to promote its economic importance, political clout and even colonial expansion. Concerned with lagging behind and afraid of being exposed as second to England, French officials alleged, as if in self-defense, that England stole the idea for an international fair from France, and insisted tirelessly that the first-ever industrial exposition was held across the English Channel. Yet, both from contemporary accounts and in hindsight, it is hardly surprising that Britain should have organized the first such event. By mid-19th century, the British economy led the way in adopting new production techniques and technologies, giving it an unquestionable competitive advantage. France openly worried about Britain’s industrial prowess, especially since the international expositions invited direct and exact comparisons of products and their prices. In fact, numerous French producers declined to participate in the London fair out of fear that French products were either inferior to the British ones (because not produced by industrial means) or too

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22 One of the most talked-about curiosities brought from Britain’s colonies was the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond, a legendary 105 carat stone whose worth was estimated at millions of pounds sterling. According to a detailed history of the gem’s arrival in England, it was surrendered to the Queen of England by the Maharaja of Lahore and Punjab when he officially surrendered, ceding control to the British Empire. It would later sit in the queen’s crown. The Koh-i-noor was a reminder of that the British Empire was a power to be reckoned with. See Nahar Singh and Kirpal Singh, eds. History of Koh-i-Noor, Darya-i-Noor, and Taimur’s Ruby (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1985), esp. 28-29, 50-68, and 132-154. This volume contains facsimiles of official royal correspondence and private letters by officials involved in safeguarding and transporting the stone to England. The gem was so highly publicized that it was subject of a lecture delivered at the Exhibition (“On Gems and Precious Stones”) and proceedings from which were published in John Wilson et al., Lectures on the Results of the Great Exhibition of 1851, delivered before the Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce (London: David Bogue, 1853) esp. 80-87.

23 French accounts insist that the idea of an international fair was for the first time proposed by an often unnamed French minister in 1819, and taken up again in 1834 by the Conseil des Manufactures and again in 1849 with a proposal submitted to the Chambre de Commerce. Greenhalgh traces this idea to Boucher de Perthes, President of the Société Royale d’émulation, who proposed in 1834 that the fairs become international (10). Michel Chevalier in his report on the London fair (1) corroborated this version of events, and concluded that there is “evidence” that “les Anglais, plus heureux que nous, ont pu réaliser les premiers une idée née dans le pays qui avait vu la première réunion des produits de l’industrie” (vii).
expensive to compete. Chevalier mentions specifically the French textile and glass industries as underrepresented, and points to the lack of French machines on display at the London fair, which according to him give the false impression that French industries and industrialization were underdeveloped and inferior. See esp. 24, 25, 31-32. (4).

Chevalier 4.

Size of displays was one popular measure of success. France was the second largest exhibitor following Britain. The displays of other international participants (e.g., Prussia, Austria, Belgium) were merely half as large as France’s. Cf. Noël Regnier, L’Industrie Française au XIXe siècle (Paris: Léon Sault, 1878), 342-3. The number of prizes received was another type of recognition, and France’s 1751 individual exhibitors received 172 awards for first place, 2921 for second place, and 2093 honorable mentions (348). So impressive was France’s success that the most prominent exhibitors were also awarded national distinctions such as the Cross of the Legion of Honor, officers’ crosses or knighthood (348).
many French commentators embodied progress. One writer extolled glass as “le facteur de la civilisation,” both its emblem and its catalyst, precisely because it attested to the industrial genius of modern man:

c’est au verre que les sciences naturelles ont dû leurs plus étonnants progrès: c’est par lui qu’elles ont été agrandies, éclairées et assises sur des principes solides; c’est par le moyen du verre que l’homme a soumis à l’investigation de ses regards les deux termes extrêmes de l’infini, les atomes imperceptibles des substances terrestres et les corps innombrables qui se meuvent dans les profondeurs infinies de l’espace. N’est-il pas, en effet, l’élément principal du télescope, au moyen duquel l’homme calcule les mouvements des globes les plus éloignés, assiste même à la formation de mondes nouveaux; et du microscope…

More subdued and less common were praises bestowed on iron and steel, important elements in the erection of the Crystal Palace because such industrial aesthetic conflicted sharply with the established styles in French architecture. In a section of his report on the 1851 exhibition dedicated to iron, Chevalier unequivocally measured the progress of a nation by the amount of iron it consumed. He praised the use of iron and steel in civil engineering projects (such as railroads and bridges) and private developments (such as housing), maintaining that its availability in great quantities testified to the economic health of the country, to its capacity for growth, to a well-functioning political system which relentlessly promotes progress without interference, and not least to its healthy public which reaps the benefits of such inventions. In turn, the acknowledgement that France lagged behind Britain in iron

28 Chevalier 18.
production and use amounted to a cautiously optimistic plea and encouragement for France to catch up.  

The exaltation of science, industry and progress shaped the expositions in the mid-19th century. In the midst of the industrial revolution, accompanied by many related developments (such as the emergence of railroads and new communications that modified the experience of space and time; urbanization; industrial developments; scientific discoveries, etc.), science (and its applied form, technology) and industry came to signify modernity. Thus, the Second Empire put out a concerted effort to promote the modernization of the country based on technological, scientific, and industrial development. In the process, science and industry promised emancipation from traditional and irrational modus vivendi, restrained by religion, superstitions and provincial attitudes, and imagined a world governed by objectivity and scientific knowledge. The early expositions capitalized and mirrored the faith in industry and science as catalysts for growth and expansion for everyone’s benefit and for the establishment of a peaceful and democratic nation, echoing the utopic principles of Saint Simonianism. By the time of the interwar fairs, this abiding faith in the scientific and technological ethos would be completely reversed.

29 Chevalier 22-23.
31 The scientific discourse was also instrumentalized by Republican political theorists during the Second Empire as a means to construct notions of modern French Republicanism, and to provide legitimacy to the regime’s political goals, i.e., to promote democratic and secular values and to discourage political violence. Gavin Murray-Miller, *Defining Modernity: Mentality and Ideology under the French Second Empire* (M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University 2005).
32 Saint Simonianism profoundly shaped the early expositions, informing specifically their unshakable faith in the social opportunities and democratic and secular values technology, sciences and industry afforded. Saint-Simon imagined a reorganized society made up of productive members (i.e., intellectuals, engineers and scientists, and excluding clergy and aristocracy, whom he called “oisifs” and “parasites”). Rational organization of this industrial society, which Saint-Simon anticipated would redistribute wealth equitably, would play a key role in promoting social symbiosis and peace. Saint-
In response to the success of the 1851 London Fair, France set out to organize its own first international exposition, where it hoped to show itself as modern and progressive, even if compelled to do so on the terms defined by the 1851 fair. To this end, it undertook audacious efforts to surpass the Crystal Palace by erecting at the 1855 Universal Exposition a Palace dedicated to industry twice as big and topped with a much larger crystal dome (I.3). The message of the Palais de l’Industrie was clear if superficial: France was fully capable of rivaling England’s progress. The project that would become in 1855 the Palais de l’Industrie had in fact been underway since an earlier proposal was submitted for the construction of an exhibition building for the arts. The success of the Crystal Palace inspired Napoleon III to decree in 1852 that the long-overdue exhibition hall be constructed in the spirit of London’s Crystal Palace.33


Commissioned in 1852 to engineer Alexandre Barrault and architect Jean-Marie Viel, though still incomplete at the opening of the Exposition, the Palace intended to demonstrate that France could surpass Britain’s scientific and technological advances, and their application to industrial production.

Yet, to a great extent the Paris Palace of Industry – the first in a long line of ‘galeries des machines’ but conceptually no more than an outlandish and outsized imitation of the original Crystal Palace, fell short of its grandiose plans. The Palace of Industry failed to replicate the lightness and airiness of the London structure, because the generous use of iron and glass was concealed behind a monumental stone façade characteristic of Second Empire architecture, and because heavy abutments buttressed the slim columns supporting the ferro-vitreous dome (I.4).


The symbolic architectural ambiguity suggested uneasiness at the sight of the very modernity the Palace strove to capture, prompting architects to cover it in order
to soften it or keep it at bay. Contemporary observers denounced the Palais de l’Industrie for its massive, vulgar, and eclectic look, incongruous with the elegant Parisian surroundings, for concealing its innovations, for the abdicating of state control over a central area of Paris, and for showing objects and no ideas. Alongside Saint Simonian optimism in industry, uneasiness and caution emerged in response to modernity, which was increasingly perceived as aggressive or destructive as well as emancipating. This conflicted attitude toward modernity and toward tradition remained a central theme at all subsequent expositions and produced similarly ambivalent narratives at the interwar fairs.

The 1855 fair responded to what France saw as the limitations of the British exposition model and Great Britain’s vision of modernity. Specifically, a narrow focus on defining modernity and progress as industrial was increasingly viewed as

34 At the time, glass architecture was associated with transit or storage; glass edifices were uninhabitable. Train station architecture, for instance, also revolved around a purposeful disjointedness, with the part of the building that interacted with the urban landscape erected in a traditional, stone style, and the other that served as entry point to the trains in glass and iron. See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th century* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1986, 2nd ed.), esp. “The Space of Glass Architecture” 45-51, and Jean Dethier, ed., *Le Temps des Gares* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1978), esp. “La Gare: une nouvelle tour de Babel” 8-13, and “La Gare: décor et décorum” 33-40. Interestingly, the idea of camouflaging modernity also played out at the 1937 fair, when proposals for updating the Trocadero centered on covering it for the duration of the exposition. This moment is symbolic of France’s paralyzing fear of a modernity that threatened to destroy the very idea of Frenchness.
35 Henry Serodot, qtd. in *Livre des expositions universelles* 28.
36 Octave Mirabeau famously called it “an ox trampling trough a rose garden.” Qtd. in Arthur Chandler, “Fanfare for the New Empire” *World’s Fair* (Spring 1986); a revised version appears on the author’s webpage: http://charon.sfsu.edu/publications/PARISEXPOSITIONS/1855EXPO.html.
37 The financial arrangements of the Palais de l’Industrie provoked vociferous indignation when it became known that the building would be financed by a private business concern. The Compagnie du Palais de l’Industrie, and not by the state. In exchange, the Compagnie would be given a long term lease over the building’s use (due to expire in 1898, though the building was demolished in 1897 to make room for the Grand and Petit Palais for the 1900 Exposition). For many, this move amounted to treason as the state essentially forfeited control over the center of its capital; it literally represented the nation selling itself to industry. Eugène Delacroix wrote angrily: “They are talking about selling off the Champs-Elysées to speculators. The Palace of Industry is to blame for this. When we resemble the Americans more, we will even sell the Tuileries Gardens as a vacant lot.” See Chandler, “Fanfare for the New Empire.”
contradictory to the essence of French culture. Baudelaire famously remarked on the occasion of the fair:

Demandez à tout bon Français qui lit tous les jours son journal dans son estaminet, ce qu’il entend par progrès, il répondra que c’est la vapeur, l’électricité et l’éclairement au gaz, miracles inconnus aux Romains, et que ces découvertes témoignent pleinement de notre supériorité sur les anciens; tant il s’est fait de ténèbres dans le malheureux cerveau et tant les choses de l’ordre matériel et de l’ordre spirituel s’y sont bizarrement confondues! Le pauvre homme est tellement américainisé par ses philosophes zoocrates et industriels, qu’il a perdu la notion des différences qui caractérisent les phénomènes du monde physique et du monde moral, du naturel et du surnaturel.\footnote{Charles Baudelaire, “Méthode de critique. De l’idée moderne du progrès appliquée aux beaux-arts. Déplacement de la vitalité,” originally published in \textit{Le Pays} (May 26, 1855); reprinted in Charles Baudelaire, \textit{Ecrits sur l’art} (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1999) 259-260.}

The sentiment that any conception of progress needs to comprise aesthetic, moral and artistic achievements – and even that achievements of the material order are inferior to those of artistic and spiritual order – resonated at the French fairs. Thus, the concept of the expositions was broadened with the 1855 fair, which was designated as \textit{universal} not only in an effort to outdo the 1851 Exhibition of all nations, but also in a nod to France’s universalist values. In practical terms, the exposition was dedicated to “produits d’agriculture, industrie et Beaux-Arts.” The prominent place attributed to agriculture referenced the dominant economic model, rooted in agriculture and small scale production, and driven by the peasantry and the \textit{petits commerçants}. Some scholars have linked this cultural and sociological reality to France’s ambivalent attitude toward industrial modernity, which generated a specific image of Frenchness and profoundly influenced the interwar fairs.\footnote{Whitney Walton, \textit{France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois State and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Richard Kuisel, \textit{Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), ch. 1 “The Liberal Order of 1900” 1-31. Shanny Peer,
1855 Paris Exposition suggested that French self-understanding tied with notions of artistic genius and style making, and therefore, the exposition included a section devoted to the fine arts. While it is true that the 1851 Crystal Palace did indeed include a section devoted to the Fine Arts adjacent to the machine displays, it undoubtedly made art secondary to industry, and excluded painting, for which France voiced its grievances. Convinced of its uncontested supremacy in the field, France saw a disproportionate disadvantage in this exclusion.40 (This articulation also presented a convenient alibi for France’s lag in industrial matters.) Painting aside, France’s success in the fine arts competitions of 1851 seemed to give basis to the long-standing argument that France’s strengths, supposedly derived from its national aesthetic sensibility, lay in the arts and luxury. Yet, despite the desire of the exposition to offer a space for the arts to commingle with industry, their symbiosis was called into question. The proposal to hold the fine arts exhibit in an annex to the Palais de l’Industrie provoked anger from artists: “the works of art,” wrote Le Journal des débats, “will not be mixed in with industrial products as they were in Hyde Park. The charming Phryne of Pradier, for example, if it were to reappear here … would not be affronted [sic] with competition from the Pilon hammer or the Nillus Mill.”41 Further, some artists refused to participate in an exposition explicitly defined as industrial. These debates are very revealing of France’s ambiguous stance toward industrial modernity. This first French fair thus evinced two competing images of

40 In fact, even with painting excluded, France still received more awards in the Fine Arts section than any other nation at the 1851 fair. As Mainardi has pointed out, France’s success there evinced its strengths as located in the areas of arts, fine arts, luxury, supposedly derived from its national aesthetic sensibility (30).
41 Qtd. in Mainardi 43.
France’s modernity – one, convinced in the power of science and industry; the other, peddling notions of Frenchness based on superior artistic sensibility. All subsequent expositions would unsuccessfully try to bridge these two claims.

**Encyclopedism, Social Utopianism, Eclecticism:**

*The 1867 and 1878 Paris Expositions*

The most coherent articulation of French rationalist modernity was arguably presented at the 1867 exposition, which expressly sought to define itself against the eclecticism and lack of clarity of the 1855 event. Ambitiously, the exposition promised to collect evidence of all human endeavors in a truly universal display. This goal was most decisively manifested in the central exposition hall, an elliptical structure intended to house a carefully classified collection of supposedly every branch of human activity from machines and decorative arts to clothing and fine arts. The building, constructed in glass and iron by engineers Joseph Krantz and Gustave
Eiffel and conceived by Commissioner General Frédéric Le Play, boasted sober clarity and precise organizational logic, evocative of rationalist transparency (I.6). The Palais de l’industrie subordinated aesthetics to classification and display, with seven concentrical galleries housing products from ten predetermined exhibit groups. Participants were assigned a segment that extended from the outermost to the innermost circles, thus giving visitors the choice either to examine the exhibited products in a comparative perspective from nation to nation (by walking around the oval), or to study the exhibit of a single nation throughout all the galleries (by walking inward).

The strict taxonomical hierarchy of the exhibited objects corresponded to the building’s structure, with heavy machinery located in the outermost gallery, and fine art in the innermost. In contrast to the classificatory system at the British fairs, which arranged products by type, the items on display in 1867 were classified by their purpose of production, linking objects with their social value as a way to model the possibility for social transformation, and not just consumption.

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42 The number of groups is expanded from eight at previous expositions, and it has been suggested that it corresponded to Le Play’s mathematical ideas more readily. Seven, the number of the galleries, has been interpreted as symbolic of Le Play’s Christian background (Danilo Udovicki-Selb, “The Elusive Faces of Modernity: The Invention of the 1937 Paris Exhibition and the Temps Nouveaux Pavilion,” PhD Dissertation, MIT, 1994).

43 Erik Mattie, among others, has pointed out that this model did not work very smoothly since national exhibits varied in size, with some having a lot more objects than others. Erik Mattie, World’s Fairs (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998) 20.
At the same time, the somewhat contradictory decision to affix price tags to all items on view signaled the exposition’s objective to promote mass consumption as integral to modern experience. The price tags at the 1867 fair also submitted evidence of the fixed value of collected products, inviting visitors not just to observe but also to

44 The tension between the disinterested social utopianism of the fairs and the savvy marketing campaigns they launched persisted in all interwar fairs: at the 1925 Art Deco exposition, this conflict concerned France’s reputation as a universal style-maker (beauty for all) to be reconciled with its desperate need to sell its products; at the 1931 fair, the mission to enlighten the ‘primitive’ colonial subjects was incompatible with the mass consumption of exotic colonial products the fair promoted; at the 1937 exposition, the imperative to modernize French industry in order to shore up domestic economy provoked fears of loss of cultural particularities.
consume them.\textsuperscript{45} The very center of the Palais de l’industrie was occupied by a
garden, implicitly referencing the development of public urban spaces under
Haussmann, when public gardens emerged as preeminent places of ‘democratized
luxury.’\textsuperscript{46} Thus, the exposition both mimicked selected developments in the outside
world and actively worked to assure visitors of the existence of a corresponding
reality beyond the confines of the fair. This effort frequently revolved around
dissolving the physical and conceptual boundaries between the fairgrounds and the
urban landscape. The 1867 fair initiated this practice by developing the dry, dirt-
covered and unused field of Champs de Mars into Le Play’s rationalist and
transparent building and grounds. The transformation of the urban landscape
performed symbolically the triumph of reason and order over nature and history,
charting progress in linear fashion and offering an enviable glimpse of the future.\textsuperscript{47}

At the following exposition, held in 1878, the artificial context of the fair and the
external reality overlapped to an unprecedented level thanks to the fairgrounds’
dramatic expansion, which was tightly interwoven within urban development.\textsuperscript{48} By
constructing exposition palaces, such as the Trocadero Palace, intended for a semi-
permanent use following the closing of the exposition, the fair established a link
between the splendidly renovated city and modernity, and sought to reassure the
public that the fairs were no longer simply temporary performances staging progress

\textsuperscript{45} Similar display techniques were also transferred to the exhibitions of colonial people and cultures to
transmit idea of French ownership over the colonies and their cultural practices.
\textsuperscript{46} Luisa Limido, “Le Champ de Mars dans le sillage d’Haussmann” in Myriam Bacha, ed., \textit{Les
\textsuperscript{47} As Le Play wrote to a friend: “la vie présente est le poste où nous devons gagner le classement dans
la vie future.” Qtd. in Udovicki-Selb 47.
\textsuperscript{48} As part of the construction of the exposition, the City of Paris planned for the extension of a number
of major streets, such as Boulevard Saint-Germain and Avenue de l’Opéra, and expansion of the Pont
d’Iéna, the development of the Champ de Mars, in disrepair since the 1867 exposition, and the Chaillot
Hill across the Seine.
but catalysts for social advancement.\footnote{Many histories of the expositions in fact described them as a triumph of rationalism over historical and momentary difficulties. See for instance, \textit{Guide du visiteur}, Hyppolite Gautier and Adrien Desprez \textit{Curiosités de l’Exposition de 1878} (Paris: Delagrave, 1878) 10-13. Similarly, histories of the exposition attested to progress by providing statistical data that demonstrated growth within the expositions and implied, based on this data, that each fair, bigger and more inclusive than the previous, constituted proof of progress. See for instance chapter entitled “Chiffres” under \textit{Curiosités invisibles} in Gautier and Desprez, or for a later account Warnod’s \textit{Expo 1937}.} All subsequent fairs, including those of the 1920s and 1930s, underscored the continuity between the staged expositions and the world beyond their limits as a way to reassure visitors of their veracity and authenticity. The detailed and precise taxonomy at the 1867 fair gave the impression of having assembled and divided into preestablished exhibition groups and classes exhaustive material evidence of human activity. In its desire to grasp ‘all of reality’ as rationally organized through a coherent and strict classificatory system of fixed meanings, the 1867 fair realized in physical space the Diderotian encyclopedic model, a founding concept in the French fairs. The \textit{Encyclopedia}’s objective was described in the eponymous entry as follows:

> to collect knowledge disseminated around the globe, and to set forth its general system to the men with whom we live, and transmit it to those who will come after us, so that the work of preceding centuries will not become useless to the centuries to come; and so that our offspring, becoming better instructed, will at the same time become more virtuous and happy, and that we should not die without having rendered a service to the human race.\footnote{Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond D’Alembert, \textit{The Encyclopedia}, collaborative translation project through the University of Michigan Library. Accessed Dec 13, 2010 \url{http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/}.}

By striving to assemble and organize artistic and material production of the world, the fair promoted a vision of a rationally ordered world, informed by axiomatic knowledge and expunged of all contradictions. It also announced the emergence of a new harmonious and peaceful civilization, whose movement forward was undeterred. (As if offered as proof, a government mandate made the expositions recurring events...
to take place every eleven or twelve years, a cycle dictated by organizational concerns; progress seemed unstoppable.

The abiding didacticism of Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*, implemented cogently by Le Play, became a trademark of the French universal fairs. The fairs spawned a number of educational pavilions, initially intended to teach the visitors about new scientific and technological inventions (machines, electricity, telegraph, moving images at the 1900 fair, and radio, to name a few), foreign cultures and foreign lands, etc. Incorporated in this fashion, the pavilions still possessed the aura and the appeal of the modern and the new, yet seemed less threatening and more controllable. Such pavilions also reinforced the dominant cultural ethos of the 19th century which esteemed science and technology when they are disinterested or invested with a moral purpose, such as education, an idea that would once again make an anxious appearance at the 1937 fair. Later expositions taught visitors about art, history, the life of workers, peasants and colonial subjects through idyllic and conflict-free representations, producing in this fashion a common cultural heritage which they were allowed to experience as their own.

The didacticism of the displays targeted workers as much as the *haute bourgeoisie*. Le Play, who presided over the 1855 and 1867 expositions, was chiefly concerned with ameliorating the living conditions of workers since, he reasoned, they constituted the fundamental unit in the nascent industrialized economy.

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51 Le Play suggested that it normally took as many years to organize an exhibition as the number of months it would welcome visitors, after the necessary legislation has passed and budgets has been approved (qtd. in Benjamin 185). Expositions generally lasted 6-7 months, though discussion of previous expositions and initial proposals, and subsequently appointments, often took years.

52 Philippe Secretan traces Le Play’s ideas to Christianity, and argues that his concern with social reform was a question of morality. In other words, the reform was a moral imperative before it was an economic one. Using the family as model, Le Play called for the establishment on a social scale of
expositions offered a platform to model the possibility of social reform by simultaneously entertaining visitors through numerous colorful displays and ‘educating’ them in the supposedly universal benefits of commerce, science and industry. One such display was on the History of Labor located in the gallery immediately adjacent to the garden. Through a large display of more than five thousand artifacts different in nature and from various historic eras, such as prehistoric tools, ancient handmade household objects, and medieval exemplars of applied arts, the History of Labor exhibit claimed to offer a historical perspective on the evolution of labor from the Stone Age to modern times, and to propose a narrative of progress to workers, even though it excluded, significantly, products of their labor.

With the goal in mind of indoctrinating workers, a number of special programs and provisions were implemented that targeted workers. At the 1855 exposition, the first one to charge an entrance fee in the amount of five francs, a discounted entry was available on Fridays and Sundays of twenty or fifty centimes respectively to allow visitors from lower income groups to enjoy the marvels of modernity the fair celebrated. (It was, however, stipulated that the regular entrance fee was necessary in order to keep undesirable elements out and to allow wealthy visitors to examine the items on display, even as exposition organizers boasted remaining open on Sundays precisely in order to attract visitors who could only attend on that day, such as laborers.) The regular entrance fee at the 1867 exposition

authority similar to the father figure; in the case of workers, this role, Le Play suggested, could be assumed by the benevolent factory manager or the industrialist. See Philippe Secretan, “Le Play et son école,” La Revue des Deux Mondes (Sept 1, 1956) 310-321.


54 Pieter van Wesemael, Architecture of Instruction and Delight: A Socio-Historical Analysis of World Exhibition as a Didactic Phenomenon (1798-1851-1970) (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2001) 264-5. The 1855 Catalogue explains that the fare was necessary in order to allow the companies involved with
was set even lower at one or two francs depending on the day and time of visit, a price fully affordable for workers, Le Play argued, who frequently spent as much on entertainment “less instructive and more depraved.” Further, alongside discounted railway tickets and lodging for out-of-town and foreign workers, 30,000 free entry tickets and some weekly passes designed to encourage multiple visits were allocated for members of the working class to assure their presence at the fair, and to extend to them the opportunity to witness and experience first-hand the fair’s powerful master narrative. Some employers personally urged workers to visit the exposition; even funds for partial compensation for loss of wages were allocated.

Additionally, a special commission was founded at the 1867 exposition, the Commission d’encouragement pour les études des ouvriers, which negotiated the majority of the discounts for workers, and encouraged them to visit the fairgrounds repeatedly and to report their personal (and presumably laudatory) impressions in from the exposition in publications to be circulated among other workers. The commission similarly sent small delegations to examine and catalogue the inventions and techniques displayed in relevant occupational areas of the fair which in turn could be used both as educational and motivational tools for workers. The fair in other words offered an emphatically optimistic glimpse of the life of workers ameliorated by technology, industry and trade under the new industrial order. Now it was only a matter of selling it to them.


55 Van Wesemael 265.
56 Relying on information compiled by Le Play, Van Wesemael cites 67,000 as the number of out-of-town and foreign workers to visit the 1867 fair (319).
According to Le Play’s plan, didacticism of the fairs worked in a subtle manner. The fairs seemingly invited workers to walk around the exposition and to internalize the narrative of evolution suggested by the history of labor display, and to locate their conditions, ameliorated by machinery, at the end of the exhibition’s display, the furthest away from Stone Age laborers and their primitive tools. At the History of Labor display, as was generally the case at expositions, the machine appeared as salvation – for the industrialist, for the worker and for the consumer, as goods could now be produced cheaply, increasing the profit margin for the industrialist, with consistent quality and lack of defects for the bourgeois consumer, and, at least in theory, with less effort on behalf of the worker.

Yet, the idea that the machine represented a logical continuation or development of primitive and traditional tools rested on a faulty logic, as Marx argued at precisely the time of the exposition, since essential qualitative differences existed between the two. For instance, the machine performed with its own mechanical tools the functions an artisan or laborer did, thus replacing not the tools but the worker. Additionally, in manufactures work was organized and owned by specialized workers intricately involved in the production process, while in industry

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57 Marx published *Capital* in 1867.
59 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, chapter 15 “Machinery and Modern Industry”, section 1 “Development of Machinery,” available on [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch15.htm#S1](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch15.htm#S1), accessed October 16, 2010. On the distinction between machine and tools, Marx writes: “On a closer examination of the working machine proper, we find in it, as a general rule, though often, no doubt, under very altered forms, the apparatus and tools used by the handicraftsman or manufacturing workman; with this difference, that instead of being human implements, they are the implements of a mechanism, or mechanical implements. […] The distinction between these tools and the body proper of the machine, exists from their very birth; for they continue for the most part to be produced by handicraft, or by manufacture, and are afterwards fitted into the body of the machine, which is the product of machinery. The machine proper is therefore a mechanism that, after being set in motion, performs with its tools the same operations that were formerly done by the workman with similar tools.”
ownership was shifted to capital through the ownership of the technological means of production. Most notably, Marx diagnosed the workers’ intellectual and technical alienation, as their skills were in fact transferred to the machine, and therefore ceded to the capitalist. In other words, far from creating progressive and productive conditions for labor, capitalism, with its reliance on detailed division of labor and technological means of production, creates “new conditions for the lordship of capital over labour,” and is “a refined and civilised method of exploitation.”

Despite the bedazzling and optimistic message the fairs were supposed to disseminate, then, by juxtaposing the machines to the commodity these displays undermined the very claims they made about the liberating potential of machines and the benevolence of the industrialists, as they linked final product and machine, though, significantly and in the same vein as Marx’s argument, excised the worker from the equation. The benevolent images of the machine in fact concealed the conditions industrial enterprises created for workers. In reality, instead of alleviating the hardest tasks related to production, new technologies were implemented to perform easier tasks, given the simpler mechanic and intellectual capabilities they had, thus leaving workers with the most effort or time-consuming tasks. At the same time, workers found themselves pressured to increase their own efficiency to compete with the speed of the machine. Mechanizing the production process in other words demanded an adjustment on the part of the workers, setting off a veritable

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61 Marx in Tucker 289.
competition between humans and machines. Additionally, as Jacques Rancière shows, at expositions the superiority of the machines was often pitted against the supposed lower morality of the workers – hardly surprising given that the narrative was constructed by these industrialists. In this way, the central presence of the machines undermined the emancipatory narrative promoted by the fairs’ displays. The new paradigm in reality divorced the workers from control over their production and from their skills. From underneath the surface of the spectacle of machinery, tied to a process of indoctrination aiming to encroach on workers’ labor and existence, peeked a “spectacle of dispossession,” as Rancière calls it.

However, contrary to the notion of workers as a thoughtless and powerless mass of slaves, workers understood the impact of the expositions and their own conditions and used these occasions to their own advantage as much as they could. As early as the 1862 London fair, workers’ delegations were sent to the expositions to negotiate better working conditions and rights (such as the abolition of the livrets system, equal pay for female workers, or ten hour days). Conversely, industrialists and organizers of the fairs feared that these events may mobilize workers against the established system, and insisted on minimizing contact between international and domestic workers’ delegations and unions. (The ban on workers’ gatherings was temporarily lifted on the occasion of the 1867 exposition, with some restrictions, to allow workers to spread the word of the miracles presented at the expo to their peers.) The 1937 exposition similarly highlighted the crucial platform fairs provided for the workers’ movement when general strikes were organized to demand rights (such as

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63 Rancière 24-25.
64 Rancière 25.
the rights to strike and to unionize and salary increases), partially paralyzing the construction of the fair grounds and delaying the opening of the fair; construction resumed only after the Matignon Agreements were signed.

I.7. The Trocadero Palace, built on the occasion of the 1878 Exposition.

In line with the educational and encyclopedic principles of the French expositions, the organizers of the 1878 fair approved the erection of a lavish Palace on the Chaillot Hill to serve as exhibition hall and cultural center: it would host a number of artistic, historical and, for the first time, ethnographic exhibits, scientific congresses, and concerts. (Its broad encyclopedic program excluded, however, industrial displays; these were relegated to the temporary industrial iron and glass Galerie des machines across the Seine on the Champ de Mars, deepening the rift

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65 The commissioner general for the 1878 event was Jean-Baptiste Krantz, the engineer responsible for the construction of Le Play’s elliptical palace at the 1867 fair.

66 The congresses had a broad scope: women’s rights, conditions of the blind, international peace, copyright laws and even strategies to deal with dishonest manufacturers who falsely claimed to be winners of expositions’ medals.
between arts and industry in support of a long-held and often aesthetically conservative notion of French identity.) Architect Gabriel Davioud and engineer Jules Bourdais insisted on incorporating the Trocadero’s all-encompassing encyclopedic program in the architecture, thus including a broad variety of architectural elements, such as two towers resembling minarets though actually conceived as 16th century Italian belvederes, a large rotunda to serve as the concert hall, two curvilinear wings, a classical colonnade, exoticist elements, and so on (I.7). Yet, the final result had little in common with the rational, homogeneous and orderly modernity from the 1867 fair; blithe eclecticism had replaced the sober taxonomy and iron rationalism of the Second Empire event. Ironically, the Trocadero’s drive to encompass the entire intellectual, artistic and material production of the world signaled the early stages of the disintegration of the notion of modernity as monolithic and homogeneous. From the highly critical reception of the Trocadero – some mocking its form (its ‘belly,’ its ‘donkey’s ears’), others branding it as foreign, often with the use of disparaging racialized comments – crystallized a specific notion of French identity as heir to a centuries-long architectural and cultural tradition responsible for French exceptionalism, one that seemed increasingly under threat of being diluted. The Trocadero embodied the contradictory desires to broaden the world and to preserve some essentialized, immutable notion of France – a notion that was continually contested at the expositions. The clash between these conflicting ideas of French identity culminated in 1937 in a contentious public debate on the reconstruction of the Trocadero.
The Trocadero then also announced an important shift in the focus of the expositions: universalist concerns slowly gave way to the age of nationalism, no doubt propelled by the revanchist sentiments following France’s crushing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Nationalism would come to reign supreme in the interwar fairs. This trend was confirmed by the construction, for the first time, of a Rue des nations, a street of supposedly typical architectural façades modeling the character and values of ‘all’ other nations. The Rue des nations invited visitors to enjoy cultural diversity through the peculiar miniature world of the 1878 fair. Its carnivalesque atmosphere also suggested the growing emphasis placed on the fairs’ entertainment value (arguably at the expense of their educational value) – a trend which would culminate in the 1900 exposition, often regarded as a huge and elaborate amusement park. In many ways, the Rue des nations prefigured the nationalist expositions and the regionalist displays of the interwar period, specifically in the context of the 1937 fair.


Not incidentally, the interwar expositions saw frequent invocations of the Battle of Sedan and the proliferation of images of Germany as a terrifying conqueror which threatened not only the Republic but also humanity and progress. See especially chs. 2 and 3 of this dissertation.
The 1889 Universal Exposition:
The 300-meter Tower, Fée Electricité, and the Civilizing Mission

The 1889 exposition, although still officially designated as exposition universelle, made a decisive move toward reaffirming the primacy of the nation. It was organized to coincide with the centennial commemoration of the French Revolution, an event the fair celebrated audaciously, even in the face of the understandable reluctance of monarchic states such as Italy, Russia, and Great Britain to participate.68 These countries were nonetheless hesitant to pass up an opportunity like a Parisian world’s fair, opting instead to set up ‘unofficial’ pavilions. This move allowed France to hold the exposition under the banner of peace and international cooperation – a recurring theme in French fairs – even when confronted with a challenge to the Republic’s legitimacy. The Centennial celebration hoped to shore up national cohesion at the conclusion of two turbulent decades on the international and domestic fronts.

The 1889 exposition embodied the conflict central to all fairs, including the three fairs of the interwar period I discuss: the difficulty of negotiating between tradition and modernity, of celebrating the past and embracing the future. The 1889 fair, unwittingly faced with this duality, was fashioned in a way that reinterpreted the past to fit the needs of the present and to anticipate glorious future of the Third Republic. Yet, the conflict and ambiguity persisted, and the difficulty of negotiating between these two surfaced tellingly in the debate surrounding the question of how to represent symbolically the occasion. It was decided, in the fairs’ tradition of

68 See “Les monarchies refusent de tendre la main à la République Française,” in Livre des Expositions 84.
grandiosity, to construct a tower of an unprecedented height – 300 meters – a symbol of the heights of French history and culture. Numerous proposals were submitted for this public monument, including one for an enormous guillotine, and another for a monstrous watering can; the bid was won by Gustave Eiffel. With the goal in mind of synthesizing the past and the present, Eiffel’s tower sought to emulate the arches and the spire of the Notre Dame cathedral, and to evoke through its position on the Champ de Mars a cathedral’s nave and transept (I.8).  

Capturing the patriotic mood of the exposition, the tower also drew inspiration from the curves of the Arc de Triomphe, which stood across the Seine. It was a bold attempt to transcend both the stone-clad, opulent – and ultimately reactionary –

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69 For a superb discussion of the symbolism of the Eiffel Tower, see Deborah L. Silverman, “The 1889 Exhibition: The Crisis of Bourgeois Individualism” *Oppositions* 8 (Spring 1977) 73, 75.
bourgeois style (as expressed, for example, in Garnier’s overwrought and sumptuous Opéra nearby, or in other neo-classical, gothic or eclectic façades), and the aggressiveness of ‘factory’ architecture from which it indisputably derived. But the references to France’s religious or imperial history were dwarfed by the modern spirit of the monument. Eiffel’s tower – the first monument of note entirely constructed in iron – steered the urban skyline toward the unabashed modernity of iron rationalism, subjugating aesthetic concerns to industrial forms and efficiency.\(^70\) The unmitigated use of iron in a public monument reflected the motivation to add this new material – banished from the academic art world in exclusive charge of public monuments heretofore – to the line of acceptable and respected architectural materials, and to ruffle the aesthetic reactionism of the field, thus bridging the divide between art and industry.\(^71\) Yet, a number of prominent intellectuals publicly opposed the project in a vituperative open letter on the grounds that it spoiled French culture, taste and history\(^72\):

Nous venons, écrivains, peintres, sculpteurs, architectes, amateurs passionnés de la beauté jusqu’ici intacte de Paris, protester de toutes nos forces, de toute notre indignation, au nom du goût français méconnu, au nom de l’art et de l’histoire français menacés, contre l’érécion, en plein coeur de notre capitale, de l’inutile et monstrueuse Tour Eiffel, que la malignité publique, souvent empreinte de bon sens et d’esprit de justice, a déjà baptisée du nom de tour de Babel. (...) La ville de Paris va-t-elle donc s’associer plus longtemps aux baroques, aux mercantiles imaginations d’un constructeur de machines, pour s’enlaidir irréparablement et se déshonorer?

\(^{70}\) Up until that point, iron was used for industrial purposes only, e.g., in machines, or places associated with industrial modernity (e.g., train stations, factories, galeries des machines). The values the Eiffel Tower celebrated were unambiguous.

\(^{71}\) Udovicki-Selb 53-57, Silverman 71.

\(^{72}\) The letter was signed by three hundred well-respected French writers, architects, composers, artists, such as Guy de Maupassant, Alexandre Dumas fils, Charles Garnier, Sully Prudhomme, Ernest Meissonier, Charles Gounod, to name a few. Published originally in Le Temps (Feb 14, 1887).
A similar if more subdued reaction greeted the *Galerie des machines* (I.9 and I.10), an extraordinary engineering achievement both in structure and in size, built in iron and glass on the southern end of the Champ de Mars. Yet, comments from engineers aside, the building was decried as no less monstrous and undesirable than a train station or factory; the architectural world was still attached to the tradition of stone.\(^\text{73}\)

I.9 and I.10. The *Galerie des Machines*, exterior and interior, 1889.

Such an unfavorable reaction attests to the anxiety over a menacing modernity, and disguised calls to defend a certain bourgeois French culture from profane, industrial, foreign ideas. This initial rancor at the Eiffel Tower endured and continued to define French attitudes toward modernity at the interwar fairs, as did the discontent toward industrial architecture. It played out most notably at the 1925 fair, a

\(^{73}\) Marie-Laure Crosnier Leconte, “Grandeur et décadence de l’architecture de fer” in Bacha 115.
fair solidly grounded in the tradition of stone, sumptuousness, and aesthetic conservatism, and which disallowed a structure like Le Corbusier’s *Esprit Nouveau* Pavilion precisely because it challenged such a tradition. At the 1937 exposition, such an attitude found expression in a disturbed and anxious technophobia, accompanied by a vision of modernity as regional and heir to an old tradition, and by calls to defend an essentialized notion of Frenchness.

Nevertheless, such a reaction should not be read only in nationalist or reactionary terms. Silverman has argued convincingly that the Eiffel Tower expressed the tension between the culturally inherited liberal ideology, founded on the idea of the free individual, and its demise at the hands of the nascent mass society: technology, mass consumption, mass production, standardization and other developments that would peak in the 20th century threatened the individual with anonymity and insignificance. This idea would resonate strongly in the virulent anti-American rhetoric in the 1930s, whose principal narrative charted the new federal republic’s course from a radical uprootedness (negation of traditions) to excessive modernity, annihilating in the process the individual and traditional societal structures.

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74 Silverman 82.
75 America made a memorable appearance at the 1889 fair. Chandler reports that the USA won the largest number of medals in arts, sciences, and technologies. Thomas Edison’s pavilion of electricity drew even more crowds than it did at the 1878 exposition when he first participated in the French fairs, but more importantly his invention now illuminated the French capital and the monument of the Exposition – the Eiffel Tower itself. The tower itself relied on the reputed American elevator company Otis, giving more visibility to American participants. In the decorative and fine arts, too, American participants also made a strong appearance in the categories of painting, photography and ornamentation. See Arthur Chandler, “Revolution: The Paris *Exposition Universelle*, 1889” *World’s Fair Magazine* (Winter 1986), available on the author’s website. Accessed December 13, 2010 at [http://charon.sfsu.edu/publications/PARISEXPOSITIONS/1889EXPO.html](http://charon.sfsu.edu/publications/PARISEXPOSITIONS/1889EXPO.html).
In architectural terms, the Eiffel Tower (along with the \textit{Galerie des Machines}, ferro-vitreous train stations, \textit{halles}, arcades) announced with certitude the arrival of mass society by gradually engulfing public space with industrial aesthetics,\textsuperscript{76} and threatened to obliterate the private space of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century bourgeois – the lavish, well-kept sanctuary, shrewdly decorated with a variety of commodities. The bourgeois individual, Silverman writes, “announced his status through the variety of objects he owned, collected and displayed…. Individualism and materialism converged in the private space.”\textsuperscript{77} The surge of iron and glass, in their sober and precise efficiency, in the public space produced anxiety because it prefigured the advent of standardized, mass-produced society that would eventually come to life with Le Corbusier’s 1925 \textit{Esprit Nouveau} pavilion–manifesto and accompanying Plan Voisin.

The steadfast desire to preserve bourgeois values was expressed not only in the vehement cultural opposition to such mass ideology, but also in France’s renewed and deepening relationship with its colonies. The 1889 exposition included a colonial section more extensive and developed than that on display at any previous fairs (I.11). The goal of such an exhibit was to reassert the importance of the colonies’ resources – both material and human – to France.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{76} The growing spread of industrial aesthetics in public space is also reflected in the gradual disintegration of the series of Galerie des machines, which at the early expositions were unique, monolithic highlights of the expositions. At later expositions, the notion of grandes galeries dissolved in favor of several scattered but no less invasive machine palaces and galleries.

\textsuperscript{77} Silverman 85.

\textsuperscript{78} At the time of the 1889 Exposition, French colonies included Tunisia, Algeria, Gabon, Senegal, Cambodia and Indochina. For background on French colonial history, see Alice Conklin and Ian Christopher Fletcher, \textit{European Imperialism: Climax and Contradiction, 1830-1930} (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), “Introduction,” and the very helpful chronology and maps appended (xi-xix). Also useful is Mort Rosenblum’s anecdotal history of French colonization and civilizing mission,
The enthusiasm about overseas expansion was not, of course, shared by all; the imperial project raised questions about the potential rewards from France’s huge investment of resources in the colonies. The exposition apparently succeeded in persuading the visitors of its capital significance:

After seeing the 1889 colonial display, who is not astonished that only two or three years ago, there were bitter disputes about the utility of the colonies? The least suspecting visitors have been seized with enthusiasm by the spectacle before their eyes; the skeptics have been obliged to face the facts…. In a word, the trial of colonialism was concluded by the public opinion in 1889. 79

The debate, far from over, was rekindled in the interwar years and around the planning of the 1931 Colonial Fair. Nevertheless, the unprecedented focus placed on the colonies in a Centennial Republican celebration contributed to the construction of

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79 Louis Henrique, cited in Silverman 77.
the image of the Third Republic as all-encompassing. The 1889 exposition cast the colonial engagement as integral to the modern Republican experience, an idea that would be confirmed and expanded by the 1931 Colonial Fair. By lobbying for public support for the colonial project, the 1889 fair hoped to mobilize public support for colonial expansion, necessitated not only by the mounting importance of the colonies for the French economy but also by the desire to maintain bourgeois, and later, mass consumption. Historian Robert Rydell explains the often neglected imbrication of French imperialism and modernity in terms of the fairs’ efforts to present imperialism as “the bedrock on which modern times and modern progress depended,” specifically by making “the modernistic dream worlds of mass consumption on view at the fairs unthinkable apart from the maintenance of empire.”

Seen differently, the colonies were made to appear like the eclectic and exotic commodities through which the French bourgeois republic imagined itself.

The spatial disposition of the 1889 bespoke this relationship: from the top of the Eiffel Tower, the bourgeois citizen could observe panoramically the colonies collected in their dedicated section on the Champ de Mars, and take ownership of them visually, while reclaiming the bourgeois power whose weakening the Eiffel Tower epitomized. (Incidentally, the top of the Eiffel Tower constituted the only place from where the Tower could not be seen, as Maupassant famously remarked, and therefore stood as the only place where bourgeois power was visually uncontested, reinforced instead by the expansive colonial section beneath.) The colonies, with their colorful pagodas, temples, dwellings, reconstructed neighborhoods, and ‘authentically’ inserted subjects – like the eclectic commodities

80 Rydell, “Coloniale Moderne” 61.
inside the bourgeois abode – stood as an expression of bourgeois ideology. Through them the bourgeois republic announced its status as modern. The 1931 Colonial Exposition would expound on the strong connection between the Metropole and its future, and its colonial holdings, specifically through the guiding interwar concept of Greater France.

The experience of observing the colonial section from the Eiffel Tower conflated the anxiety-producing notion of technological and industrial modernity, and the reassuring image of France’s growing empire through one spectacular development: electric light. Electricity had had cameos at previous expositions, though at the 1889 exposition, it generously illuminated the fairgrounds, where the Eiffel Tower stood draped with myriad lights and was crowned with a rotating beam. In fact, the entire capital’s monuments and streets were spectacularly lit for the occasion, transforming the city into a veritable cité des lumières, a ville féerique, and casting Paris as the center of modernity. Electricity, embodying the technological savvy of the modern spirit and artistic genius, represented “the marriage of techné and poesis,” the union of art and industry the expositions sought.

More important, the omnipresence of electricity at the 1889 fair metaphorically and literally realized French Enlightenment ideology. The siècle des

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81 Patrice Carré (“Expositions et modernité: Electricité et communication dans les expositions parisiennes de 1867 à 1900” Romantisme 65 (1989) 37-48) studied the displays of electricity at 19th century expositions, demonstrating that until 1889, electricity was chiefly associated with technologies of communication, and specifically the telegraph and, later, the telephone. The latter, however, did not grip the population’s imagination in France as it did in the USA. At the 1881 national fair dedicated to electricity, telephone cabins were connected with concert halls of the Opéra and Comédie Française to allow visitors to enjoy performances from afar (43). The first potential use of electricity for lighting was demonstrated at the 1878 fair with the first arc lamps known as Jablochkoff candles, whose dim, yellow light was soon replaced by Edison’s bulbs. For a history of electricity in the 19th century, see also Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century, tr. Angela Davies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), esp. chapters 1-3.
lumières was recaptured in the ville lumière. In the context of the colonial section this notion was translated into an unrelenting advertising of the mission civilisatrice: France’s self-assigned duty and right to enlighten ‘primitive’ people.\textsuperscript{82} France’s role as civilizer stemmed from its confidence of having achieved through science and reason mastery over the environment, a mastery allegorically captured in successfully harnessed electricity, which now the Republic had the ‘duty’ to spread.\textsuperscript{83} In fact, the ideological underpinnings of the civilizing mission stressed constantly colonialism’s benefits to the colonized, and electricity lent itself easily as a symbol of this mission, unlike the crass, noisy, and filthy machines that fed into a culture of production and consumerism.\textsuperscript{84} The justification for the civilizing mission was visually construed at the 1889 fair through a stark contrast between the industrial aesthetics of the Eiffel Tower and electricity, signs of advancement of Western civilization, on the one hand, and the nearby anthropological and ethnographic (or pseudo-ethnographic\textsuperscript{85}) exhibits showing ‘primitive’ colonial subjects as manual workers and tool makers, living in mud huts subjected to nature’s whim, on the other.

\textsuperscript{82} Historian Michael Adas has studied the ways in which European colonizers constructed the perception of their own superiority based on scientific and technological innovations. This interplay is at the heart of the relationship between the colonies and France constructed at the 1889 Exposition. See his \textit{Machines as Measure of Men} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

\textsuperscript{83} Education was a central Enlightenment value, and commitment to it was renewed during the Third Republic and at the 1889 and 1900 expositions.

\textsuperscript{84} It is interesting that at the 1925 exposition of the decorative arts, Le Corbusier, a proponent of industrial and machine aesthetics, would attack this very same perception of the machine as generally undesirable, and would recast it in a revolutionary and emancipatory light.

\textsuperscript{85} I am referring here to an exhibit on “Habitation Humaine” set up by Charles Garnier, which reconstructed, allegedly through solid historical research and in collaboration with a history professor, human abodes throughout human history. Architecture was employed in Garnier’s pavilion as a sign of advancement, as it was at the 1931 fair.
I.12. The ‘authenticity’ of the Colonial Section at the 1889 Exposition was often contrasted to Western technological advances. Here, a visitors’ train, evocative of real railroads, traverses the Colonial section, where colonial cultures were displayed as primitive.

I.13. The Eiffel Tower’s rotating projector illuminated the fairgrounds, including the nearby Colonial section.
Hence, the exposition argued through this display the case to ‘enlighten’ these cultures through the steady application of science, reason, and education, a process already ‘materialized’ in the illumination of the colonial section by the Eiffel Tower’s rotating projector. Such rhetoric abounded: one writer praised the example France set for the colonial people at the Exposition, which they could emulate the better to become ‘civilized’:

Notre civilisation n’a pas trouvé en eux des irréconciliables du progrès bien entendu: c’est ainsi que les noirs arrivés en France dans un état presque sauvage se sont acclimatés à certaines impressions de la vie moderne. Arrivés pieds nus, ils sont repartis goûtant les bienfaits d’une paire de souliers qui protège leurs extrémités endolories.  


I.15. This Gabonais, dressed like a French gentleman and no longer barefooted, embodied the supposed benefits of French colonization and civilizing mission.

86 In Livre des Expositions 91.
For apologists of the fair, the artificial cultural contact conveniently confirmed the putative superiority of French race and culture (thus, dispelling any sentiments of crisis of liberal ideology or bourgeois identity).\textsuperscript{87} One writer remarks: “Au point de vue politique, les résultats de [l’Exposition] sont excellents: nos indigènes ont comporté l’impression que la France est un pays riche et puissant, dont ils reconnaissent la superiorité morale et dont ils seront, de moins en moins, tentés de contester l’autorité.”\textsuperscript{88} The exposition then could be used to intimidate colonial subjects and stifle potential dissent or resistance, should the ‘benevolent’ civilizing mission turn out to be unsuccessful in persuading them in the ‘goods’ of colonization.

The civilizing mission remained a central theme at colonial displays in subsequent fairs with little modification, evidence of France’s desire to maintain the colonizer-colonized paradigm. Every subsequent colonial display, despite escalating rhetoric of solidarity and unity, cemented the unbridgeable rift between the Metropole and the colonies, producing claims of the colonies’ ultimate and insurmountable racial and cultural difference, rather than of the faulty premises of the civilizing mission. The conflict between the indefatigable advertising of the civilizing mission and the fact that France’s status as modern and as superior relied on the colonial project emerged full-fledged at the 1889 fair and would again define the 1931 colonial exhibition.

\textsuperscript{87} Less industrially developed nations visiting the expositions often reported being intimidated by the notions of progress displayed at Western fairs. See, for example, Aleko Konstantinov, \textit{Do Chikago i Nazad} (1894), a travel account of the author’s visit to the 1893 Exposition in Chicago. See \textit{To Chicago and Back} (Sofia: National Museum of Bulgarian Books and Polygraphy, 2004).

\textsuperscript{88} Qtd. in \textit{Livre des expositions} 90.
Welcoming the New Century or Celebrating the Old?

The 1900 Exposition Universelle

By all measures, the 1889 exposition was a crowning success for the French expositions, a peak many feared could not be repeated. Therefore, the proposal for a new, ever-more-extensive exposition provoked controversy, not least because the discussion was initiated in 1892, only three years after the triumphant exposition of 1889. Nevertheless, circumstances seemed to necessitate such a decision, as Germany announced plans to hold its own international exhibition in 1900. The symbolic repercussions reverberated loudly: “The exposition of 1900,” wrote the organizing committee, “will define the philosophy and express the synthesis of the 19th century.” An exposition showcasing German industrial and military successes was sure to cast a shadow over the achievements of French culture and civilization. With the decision to hold a turn-of-the-century exposition, patriotically announced on the eve of Bastille Day, 1892, France entered the competition for the last word of the 19th century and for a central place in the new century. In response, Germany suspended its plans for an exposition. But the decision to hold the fifth universal exposition in Paris was met with anger and outrage from the provinces, which saw their interests compromised by the uneven allocation of funds and the limited visibility they received. A raucous campaign ensued against the proposed exposition, unveiling a deep fissure within the conflict-free image of the nation the expositions displayed. Needless to say, Paris won out, and in an appeasing if deprecating gesture intended to

80 In a similar fashion, the misgivings Marseille had about the 1931 Colonial Fair undermined the official representation of a united and cohesive Greater France.
cover up the conflict, the Paris-based organizers invited mayors from the provinces to a splendid and solemn banquet, known as le banquet des maires (I.16). The 1937 exposition, partially in response to the revolt of the provinces, would again try to dispel the distrust of the regions by affording them a major place in the exposition; yet again, the exposition would reveal even deeper disagreement.

The law which approved the 1900 exposition described its goals in the following ambitious terms:

En votant le projet de loi, les Chambres accompliront un acte de haute politique et de patriotisme. L’Exposition de 1900 réveillera les initiatives, ranimera le mouvement des affaires, donnera une impulsion nouvelle à l’industrie et au commerce, assurera une ère de travail aux classes laborieuses, provoquera les inventions et les progrès, constituera un vaste foyer d’études et d’enseignement pour le public, développera notre exportation, affirmera les intentions pacifiques du Gouvernement, attestera une fois de plus le relèvement matériel du pays, et, ce qui vaut mieux encore, ajoutera à sa gloire et à son rayonnement extérieur. Paris et la France entière sortiront grandis des
The law described the dual objective of the exposition, both as a recapitulation of the century, a grandiose apotheosis of its scientific, industrial, and artistic advances, and of a half century of universal expositions (thus uniting in a seemingly exhaustive fashion all themes broached by previous fairs); and, at the same time, as a glimpse of the glorious future of civilization, spearheaded by France. Yet, France itself was shaken by serious political crises, most notably the Dreyfus Affair, for which foreign nations, seeing obvious anti-Semitic attitudes, condemned France, and threatened to boycott the exposition. As Chandler notes, only after the Dreyfus Affair had been resolved could the exposition be understood as sincere effort to bring peace and international cooperation, to prevail over adversity and to send a message of optimism in the future.

Once inaugurated, the 1900 fair was indeed a stunning culmination of the popular fairs: it attracted fifty million visitors – the greatest number ever – and eighty-five thousand exhibitors (half of which French); it spread over 120 hectares in the heart of Paris and 110 hectares in the Bois de Vincennes (half of which was allotted to the host, compared to a third of the total territory retained by France in 1889). Visitors could examine pavilions dedicated to a range of topics including transportation, agriculture, electricity, various industries, decorative and fine arts,

“instruments et procédés des lettres, sciences et arts,” a category that included photography, surgery and musical instruments. Clearly, the rigid classification from the early fairs had definitively collapsed. Visitors could enjoy panoramic and ethnographic exhibits, new technologies and scientific discoveries such as cinema (cinéorama-ballon, I.17), a ‘maréorama’ – a simulated underwater expedition, a tour of the world, extraordinary art retrospectives, majestic buildings (e.g., the Grand and the Petit Palais), educational exhibits on contemporary social issues and colonization, and so on. These exhibits registered a shift in their objective from serious instruction characteristic of the early fairs to a more entertaining, lighter atmosphere. Acknowledging the rise of mass society, the exposition catered to the grand public: as one commentator put it, “pour réussir, il faut s’adresser au grand public; pour le retenir, il faut l’amuser…”.

Yet, beneath the veneer of exciting entertainment and unshakable faith in the future, the 1900 Exposition was astonishingly reactionary and confused, and concealed a number of conflicts and crises. Questions arose about the utility of

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94 In the cinéorama-ballon viewers were placed on a platform set up as the gondola of a hot-air balloon, and the cameras and projectors were positioned under the gondola. As the balloon ascended, the attached cameras simultaneously filmed and projected the ascension onto the all-around screens, allowing viewers to experience cinematically a bird’s-eye flight over Paris.

95 Qtd. in Livre des expositions 111.
expositions: “A quoi bon des expositions?,” asked one journal; another inquired rhetorically, “Doit-on répéter en 1900 la kermesse de 1889?” This confusion was revealing about the larger uncertainty with regard to the future, despite the optimism the Exposition projected, and was reflected, most notably, in the stylistic incoherence of the Exposition:

On a cette première impression qu’une horde d’artistes a été lâchée sur l’espanade avec ces seules instructions: ‘Bâtissez, sculptez et peignez.’ Et chacun a bâti, sculpté et peint au gré de sa fantaisie. […] Cet amalgame burlesque vient de quelqu’un ou de quelque part, [il y a] un style. Mais quel style? 

The Porte Monumentale at the Place de la Concorde (I.18) was a prime example of the aesthetic hodge-podge; critics attacked its minarets which framed an opulent, gilded and over-elaborate arc, adorned with stylized bas-reliefs and topped with the famous statue La Parisienne.

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96 Qtd. in Livre des expositions 106-7. The word “kermesse,” or town festival, has decidedly negative connotations, referring to provincial rituals and festivities, clearly in sharp contrast with the image of the capital the fairs strove to present.

97 Livre des expositions 108.
The statue itself was target of much criticism and ridicule, called a “résumé des caractéristiques du funeste ‘art nouveau’” for its flowing dress, its “manches parasol, style Mucha,”98 for its “coiffure boursoufflée comme un saint-honoré”; “Elle était bien laide la pauvre Parisienne qui fit l’admiration des foules!”99 exclaimed one critic. Many pavilions, such as the famous Pavillon Bleu (I.19), a restaurant, donned similar exaggerated art nouveau eclecticism despite being praised for its ‘bon goûт’ and its discreet harmony.100


Even the two permanent buildings, the Grand Palais and the Petit Palais, concealed any architectural and artistic innovations under heavy ornamentation and pompous masonry. The revolutionary ferro-vitreous style that left an indelible mark on the 1889 exposition hardly had a place in the 1900 fair. As critic Eugène Melchio

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98 Alphonse Mucha was a well-known Art Nouveau painter best known for the pastoral, calm and healthful images of women, to which this critic refers.
99 Cléo de Mérode in Livre des expositions 109.
100 Livre des expositions 109.
de Vogüé put it, “Aujourd’hui, le fer s’enveloppe d’étoupes [illegible] de plâtre.”\textsuperscript{101}

The Grand Palais and the Petit Palais represented the failure to reconcile French tradition of ‘grand art’ with industrial aesthetics, again emphasizing the unbridgeable rift between art and industry,\textsuperscript{102} and prefiguring, as it were, the retrograde architecture of the 1925 exposition. The schism was reinforced by the definite disintegration of the concept of the Palais de l’industrie, with the original 1855 exhibition hall demolished to make room for the Grand Palais; art displaced industry. A new temporary Galerie des machines was constructed, to be frequently used as hall for food and wine-tasting events. Despite efforts to prove the contrary through pavilions celebrating, for example, metallurgy or heavy machinery, industry was secondary at the 1900 fair. (German and American industries stole the show.) Instead, France constructed an elaborate image of the French 19\textsuperscript{th} century modernity and of the future by showcasing vast art displays and retrospectives: French fine art was represented through some 4000 works compared to 300-400 items on display by other leading nations. Nevertheless, the art exhibits included mainly academic art, much like the art at the 1889 exposition, with a limited number of impressionist works on view in a small exhibition room on the side. A series of exhibits dedicated to decorative arts reclaimed the notion of France as a center of style, luxury and art, in contradiction to the promise to develop an all-encompassing exposition and to address contemporary questions – a scenario that would repeat itself at the 1925 fair.

\textsuperscript{101} Eugèné Melchior de Vogüé in Livre des expositions 109.
Thus, overall, the 1900 exposition inaugurated the century and prefigured the tensions of the interwar fairs with its decisive return to tradition in architecture and art, and by validating the erstwhile notions of French culture as embedded in luxury and art, keeping industries at bay.
PART TWO: THE INTERWAR FAIRS
CHAPTER ONE

The 1925 Art Deco Exposition: French Modernity as a Matter of Style

The Exposition des arts décoratifs et industriels of 1925 was not, properly speaking, a universal exposition. It has garnered relatively limited scholarly attention, most of which treated it as little more than a buoyant exhibit of decorative arts,\(^1\) themselves traditionally dismissed as inferior to the fine arts. Yet, I would like to suggest that when read in conjunction with the other major expositions of the interwar period, specifically the Colonial Fair of 1931 and the International Exposition of 1937, the event of 1925 reveals the particular historical circumstances in which France began to revisit and negotiate its national identity in relation to modernity and in the wake of the Great War. Thus, the 1925 Art Deco Exposition, as it came to be known later, refashioned some of the looming debates about national identity and modernity at the time.

**Genesis of the Exposition**

The Art Deco exposition opened on April 28, 1925, and spread over 23 hectares in the heart of Paris from the Grand Palais, which served as its ceremonial and administrative center, to the Petit Palais constructed concurrently with the Grand Palais for the 1900 Exposition, to the Cours-la-Reine, over Pont Alexandre III, transformed into a *Rue des boutiques* for the occasion, and to the Esplanade des Invalides. The French section, which occupied two thirds of the exposition grounds, was situated mostly on the Left Bank of the Seine. The foreign pavilions, with some very notable absences, stood on the Right Bank. The overwhelming presence of France reflected in a sense the new type of exposition heralded by the 1925 event – the *international* exposition, as compared to the *universal* fairs of the 19th century. Here, nationalism had replaced the traditional to the French expositions desire for universality, privileging French domestic commercial interests. In this exposition, there were no references to France’s civilizing mission and few signs of its universalist ideology so prominent at previous events. Still, the Art Deco Exposition was conceived with the hopes that it would bring nations together under a new style, an internationally shared aesthetic that would reflect post-war modernity.

The Art Deco Exposition opened after more than a decade of planning interrupted by the war of 1914-1918. The initial motivation for an exposition dedicated to French decorative arts came in 1910 in response to their perceived crisis, a crisis rooted in the long-standing view of decorative arts as inferior to fine arts. This prejudice had long justified the lack of serious institutional framework and financial support for the field in

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2 Germany was conspicuously not invited to participate, a decision which not only underscored France’s victory in the war but also eliminated a serious competitor in the decorative arts. South and North America declined to participate, practically defining the Exposition as a European affair and allowing France to position itself as the leader in decorative arts unchallenged.
France. In the meantime, Germany and England had emerged as serious challengers to France’s self-assigned role as a leader in all matters of style. The division between the arts also accounted for the ancillary and less favorable place afforded to the applied arts in expositions until the 1890s. The spread of industrialization and commercialization posed additional challenges for France, whose resistance to the mechanization of production and the growing commercialization of a domain traditionally considered artisanal and manual, had also contributed to the decline of decorative arts there. In economic terms, French crafts – expensive and hand-made – could not compete with Italy, Germany, Spain, which seriously encroached on French commercial interests. France had long been concerned about the extraordinary progress of other European countries, to which recent expositions held in Turin, Liège, London, Saint Louis, Milan and elsewhere testified, and feared losing its position as a leader in stylemaking, a position it invented and assumed since the 17th century. Concerns about loss of dominance in the decorative arts had been widespread since the mid-19th century and

3 Promoting the decorative arts and manufactures had become a matter of policy in Britain as early as the 1830s. See Albert Edward Richardson, Georgian England (1931), ch. IX (“The Decorative Arts”). By the 1850s, a museum dedicated to the decorative arts was founded in London. In late 19th century Germany, a series of initiatives led to the growth of the decorative arts. These efforts included the creation of arts and crafts associations that united artists, craftsmen and manufacturers; educational workshops to supplement craftsmen’s apprenticeship; incentive programs that encouraged originality and the adoption of new methods of production; creation of institutions, such as museums, art societies, or expositions, among others. In 1908, an exposition of the decorative and industrial arts was held in Munich, adding the city to the list of German artistic centers, and securing Germany’s lead over France in the field of the decorative arts. This exposition drew critical attention in France and mobilized efforts for the 1925 exhibit.


6 Joan DeJean has chronicled the process through which France fashioned its image as the leader of luxury and chic, with Paris as the capital of elegance and sophistication. She traces the gripping history of the making of fashion, gastronomy, and tourism as distinctly French. See The Essence of Style (New York: Free Press, 2005).
tended to receive more exposure around international fairs because the comparative perspective sharply brought forward collective insecurities. In the early 20th century, these concerns were supported by statistics that claimed to document France’s dwindling exports and climbing imports of decorative items. For example, reports estimated French exports of furniture to have decreased by a third to two-thirds, and imports to have risen fivefold. Minister of Commerce Lucien Dior summed up the state of the French decorative arts as follows:

French taste was law, and the effects of this were felt in both the public coffers and the private accounts of manufacturers, sellers, and artists. All this did not endure. Why? Because all around us, the English, Germans, Belgians, Italians, Scandinavians, and even the Americans themselves reacted, and sought to create for themselves – for better or worse – an original art, a novel style corresponding to the changing needs manifested by an international clientele. During this time, what did we do, apart from a few valiant efforts by an isolated few? Nothing, except to copy our own old-fashioned styles. The result? In 1912, people were talking of a “Commercial Sedan.”

This statement accurately summarized the state of the decorative arts in France as it was perceived at the time – a major defeat, like the one at Sedan in 1870 sustained by the French Army by German troops that led to the downfall of the Second Empire and the occupation of Paris by German troops. As already mentioned, burgeoning decorative art centers in Germany (Dresden, Berlin, Darmstadt, and the newest one, Munich) and

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7 For example, one of the first and most often quoted reports on France’s was written by the Marquis Léon de Laborde, the official French envoy to the 1851 Great Exhibition in London (Exposition universelle de 1851. Travaux de la commission française sur l’industrie des nations, 8 vols (Paris, 1856-1873)). Michel Chevalier was similarly startled by the extraordinary progress Britain demonstrated at the early fairs. See his Exposition Universelle de Londres en 1851 (Paris: Librairie Scientifique-Industrielle, 1851).
8 Silverman 54-5.
10 A direct catalyst for the French Art Deco Exposition was in fact Germany’s growing presence in the field of decorative arts. The large and impressive displays of Bavarian crafts at the 1908 Munich Ausstellung
rising sales of German products in France, provoked alarm and very real fears of invasion of a domain held to be French. An important factor blamed for France’s lagging industry was its reluctance to let go of past styles, resulting in unoriginal, eclectic, old-fashioned pastiches. Further, Dior implied that France’s attachment to historical styles was representative of its failure to adapt to new social and economic circumstances, and caused it to lag behind other countries in trendsetting. Not only did the crisis of decorative arts cast France in an unfavorable light, but also its financial repercussions were devastating. Dior’s statement confirmed the belief that France’s preeminence in artistic matters was an issue of national honor, prestige and growth, as he described France’s sense of entitlement to the leading position in the domain of style and arts, as well as the real sense that France was being displaced.

A number of reports on the status of the decorative arts compiled by leading decorative arts associations and professionals confirmed Dior’s assessment of this serious crisis, and called for action. In 1912, the Société des artistes décorateurs, the Union centrale des arts décoratifs and the Société d’encouragement à l’art et à l’industrie, all important artistic societies, joined by some fifty smaller and regional art associations, formally endorsed the organization of an exposition of the decorative arts. They hoped

and at the 1910 Salon d’Automne in Paris, heightened the perception of crisis in France in the years before the Exposition. French writer Jules Huret wrote a lengthy review of the Munich Ausstellung expressing his admiration of the event and the products, and at the same time noting with alarm the rise of German decorative arts (“En Allemagne, Munich; Les arts décoratifs à l’exposition” Le Figaro (January 19, 1909) 5.

11 Cf. Gustav Roger Sandoz and Jean Guiffrey, Exposition française d’art décoratif, Copenhague 1909: rapport général précédé d’une étude sur les arts appliqués et industries d’art aux expositions (Paris: Comité français des expositions à l’étranger, 1909); Édouard Louis Déverin, “Crise de l’art décoratif en France” in La Revue (15 June 1909), 433-452; François Carnot, Rapport au Ministère du Commerce et de l’Industrie, commission préparatoire de l’exposition internationale des arts décoratifs modernes (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1923). These critics examined causes as varied as the structure of apprenticeship, the decline of professional education, the focus on aesthetic theory rather than on practical skills, the dissolution of professional associations and guilds, the advent of the machine, foreign competition, attachment to historical styles, etc.
such an exposition would be an important step in reforming the decorative arts by providing an opportunity for France to develop them competitively, and to funnel resources for the establishment of museums, schools and other institutions. The exposition had an ideological agenda as well: to demonstrate the nation’s ability to adapt to changing tendencies and to create modern styles, thus regaining the leadership. As the 1913 Sandoz report on the decorative arts in France put it, “Tomberons-nous à n’être plus qu’un people de mouleurs et de copistes? … Nous nous devons de renouer avec notre tradition et de rester des créateurs. Il est d’un devoir premier pour la République d’aider à la réalisation des styles modernes.”\textsuperscript{12} Renewal was a national and moral imperative, and was only possible by stirring the creative national genius: France is not a nation of imitators. Marx also assigned a role for the state as a facilitator of such a renewal. Interestingly, both Dior and Marx implied that modernity was but a matter of style, and that France could wholeheartedly call itself modern once it has created a new and ‘modern’ style. Yet, this interpretation hinted at an inherent contradiction in the definition of modernity, since renewal was attached to the already existing aesthetic tradition.

The war only underscored the need for France to present itself to the world as a leading power in the post-war context economically, politically and last but not least artistically. It also revealed its real fear of losing international prestige and importance. France’s anxiety was amplified by the fear that among nations, the US in particular was vying for France’s position of leadership in matters of style: after all, the US emerged unscathed from the war; its economic prowess was considerable; and it demonstrated its willingness to invest large resources to host successful expositions, as it had done most

\textsuperscript{12} Sandoz and Guiffrey 188.
recently in 1904 in St Louis and in 1915 in different cities. The American takeover of cinema production provided a disconcerting precedent: before the war, global cinema production was vastly controlled by France, whereas in the postwar years, the US came to dominate the market, leaving France behind. Hence, the imperative that France take up the challenge with determination, despite its dwindling enthusiasm for expositions there. Therefore, the proposal for the exposition was redefined as an effort in reconstructing, literally and figuratively, the image of France – and not just the old, traditional France but a modern France, ready, willing and able to take the lead in defining a new national and international style. The proposals also broached important debates about what it meant to be French and modern at the same time. With these goals in mind, a budget for the exposition was approved in 1921 and ground was broken in 1924.

The Search for a Modern Style: A Visit to the French Section

The Exposition was conceived as a search for a new, modern style. With the emphasis placed on fashioning a new aesthetic, it was ruled that the main criterion for admission to the exposition would lie in the novelty and originality of the work: “Sont admises à l’Exposition les œuvres d’une inspiration nouvelle et d’une originalité réelle

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13 In 1915, the US held several expositions the most prominent of which was the multi-city Panama-Pacific Exposition in California. By 1925, the US had organized 7 other fairs.
15 The exposition of 1900, the last major exposition before the 1925 event, was considered to be the most audacious and extensive undertaking in the history of the fairs; the efforts and the result were similarly considered unsurpassed and any new project was considered bound to fall short. Hence the scant enthusiasm for planning a new exposition. In addition, the financial burden of organizing an exposition on any scale proved difficult to justify in an era that demanded huge reconstruction investments. Another reason for the public reticence was the fact that planning for another major exposition – a Colonial Exposition that would ultimately open in 1931 – was also underway.
exécutées et présentées par les artistes, artisans, industriels, créateurs de modèles et éditeurs et rentrant dans les arts décoratifs et industriels modernes.” This rule asserted that being modern for France was a matter of national honor, while leaving open the question of what exactly it meant to be modern. The exposition provided varied and at times contradictory and elusive answers to this question, which revealed France’s uneasiness about modernity. As it turns out, it was easier to declare modernness than to create it.

The official rules stipulated that all copies and imitations of old styles be excluded from the exposition. By banishing all references to historicist styles, such as the ‘macaroni’ and the florid ornamental aspect of Art Nouveau, as well as imitations of old styles and stylistic pastiches, such as the eclecticism that had drawn strong criticism at the 1889 and 1900 expositions, the official rule buttressed the broad consensus that this tendency played a major role in the decline of decorative arts in France since it purportedly perpetuated creative stagnation. At the root of the problem, the reasoning went, was that the artificial revival of such styles, facilitated partially by the growing technological possibilities which made it possible to produce copies indistinguishable from originals, divorced the decorative arts from the historical conditions of their production. A significant number of leading representatives of the field, such as art dealer Siegfried Bing, were convinced that the decorative arts could no longer retain their

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17 The French word used, “contrefaçons,” implied fakeness in relation to the imitated styles.
18 This argument has been eloquently and famously advanced in the 1930s by Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) esp. II, III and IV.
dominant position unless they embrace work in the spirit of their own age.\textsuperscript{19} Thus, the official fair rules advocated the creation of a new style that would reflect rigorously the current times. It was in recognition of this idea, in an effort to demonstrate France’s acceptance of the inadvertent – if controversial – transformation of its traditional artisanal nature by the growing industrialization and commercialization, that the exposition’s rules specifically extended an invitation to manufacturers to participate in the fair.

Yet, this invitation, as well as the very idea of official state sponsorship of an exclusively modern style, alarmed many who saw this move as advancing the interests of manufacturers at the expense of craftsmen and artists, and of French artistic tradition. They argued that in response to the rising industrial strength of foreign competitors, France should uphold and patronize its unmatched tradition of quality. In fact, the discussion about the status of the decorative arts in France was largely defined by the social, economic and production changes occurring at the time in France. French crafts were rooted in an artisanal and manual tradition, where uniqueness and originality were most highly valued, and there was a pronounced resistance to adopting the new industrial methods of production and commercialization of design. In economic terms, however, manual and artisanal production methods could not compete with machine-produced design elements in Italy, Germany or Spain in terms of efficiency, production costs or prices. Skillful French artisans and artists were being passed over for cheaper, machine-produced, foreign-made crafts, not only affecting negatively French commercial interests but also causing ‘atrophy’ of those same artisans’ skills. Prominent decorative artist Eugène Grasset lamented: “The métiers have been murdered, finished off, annihilated

and replaced by what is called industry. Industry speaks with equipment that is expensive but expeditious. The results are economical, uniform, of mediocre quality and, in general, ugly. The rapid incorporation of industrial methods of production was widely seen as another major reason, alongside France’s steadfast attachment to historicist styles, for the decline of artistic quality, and proliferation of historical stylistic pastiches that produced an ugly final product. Instead of facilitating the production of high-quality goods, technology had supposedly vulgarized the decorative arts, and ruined in the process the authentic and erstwhile artisanal structures accountable for France’s artistic accomplishments.

Hence, many blamed the advent of manufacturing for the decline of French decorative arts and of the Republic’s loss of dominance; in turn, protecting the arts from the destructive rise of industrialization became a priority for the leading artistic associations (e.g., the Société des Arts Décoratifs, or the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs, discussed later in this chapter). The decorative arts were transformed into a battleground where French artistic prestige and national patrimony had to be vehemently defended, but also into a stage for France to define modernity and itself in relation to it.

The official rule admitting only unambiguously modern items seemed to oppose modern inspiration to past aesthetic conventions, suggesting that modernity stood as a

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20 Eugène Grasset qtd. in Troy 53. See also Silverman 53-56.
21 The rate of mechanization of the decorative arts is hard to measure because of its nature and because it did not progress evenly in all strata of artisans. There is a general consensus among historians that the ever-expanding market share of department stores increased pressure on artisans to produce large quantities at low cost, a demand that had various consequences on the labor and social structure of artisans. According to a study of the cabinet-making Parisian circles by Pierre du Maroussem in the late 19th century, the pressure of these new production demands seems to have fallen disproportionately onto the lower tiers of artisans, precisely because they could not afford to incorporate time-saving technologies, and craftsmen were turned into sweatshop workers. Interestingly, the haute luxe industry flourished even as it incorporated basic machinery to facilitate production. See Pierre du Maroussem, La question ouvrière (Paris: 1892), esp. Vol. 2: “Ébénistes du faubourg St. Antoine.” For an extensive study of Du Maroussem’s research, see Silverman 56-62. The implications of Du Maroussem’s study are twofold: first, its conclusions challenged the French belief in the inverted relationship between industrial competitivenes and tradition of quality; second, it demonstrated the hold of French technophobia and its role in conceptualizing Frenchness.
rupture. It seemed to echo the position of Roger Marx, one of the earliest and strongest advocates for a decorative arts fair, who declared the objective of the fair as follows: “Cette exposition […] nous voudrions […] qu’elle fût moderne, que toute réminiscence du passé s’en trouvât exclue sans pitié, les inventions de l’art social n’ayant d’intérêt & de raison d’être que dans la mesure où elles s’adaptent rigoureusement au temps qui les voit paraître.” 22 Here, Marx defined “moderne” as a rupture from past traditions, and encouraged openly embracing modernity while casting aside without sentimentality all references to the past. Art, according to him, was a reflection of and invention of the present moment exclusively, and that moment demanded that art have a social purpose. 23 This understanding of the decorative arts as a social tool reversed the long-standing attachment of the latter to the luxury industries, and aimed to encourage the creation of socially-oriented, democratic works. Yet, Marx’s enthusiasm for the modern was met with ambivalence. France’s relationship to modernity was tied with notions of national identity and history that were not easy to discard. In fact, even staunch supporters of reform called for a renewal within tradition (“nous nous devons de renouer avec notre tradition” 24). Writer and art critic Paul Géraldy, in his review of the Art Deco exposition in L’Illustration, addressed France’s reticence to embrace modernity wholeheartedly as prescribed by Roger Marx and the official rules of the exposition. According to him, the word modern had acquired negative connotations because it meant a confused, misguided effort in destroying France’s history and heritage for the sake of fashion: “On était

23 Marx, “De l’art social et de la nécessité d’en assurer le progrès par une exposition” 131.
24 Full quote on p. 6 of this chapter.
tellement moderne alors que les architectes nouveaux détruisaient sans scrupules les œuvres édifiées par leur prédécesseurs, même quand elles étaient admirables, simplement parce ce qu’elles avaient cessé d’être l’expression du moment.”

To make his point, Géraldy recounted an anecdote about a friend who, asked to sit on a jury, observed the lack of rigorous criteria about what constituted a modern work. The friend took his concerns to the president of the jury: “Mais […] à quoi reconnaît-on qu’une œuvre est moderne?” The president’s response captured the spirit of the confused and destructive sense about modernism discussed by Géraldy: “A ce qu’elle ne ressemble à rien.” The uneasiness with such an explanation about a modern style caused the aforementioned friend – “cet honnête juré, abasourdi” – to resign from the jury. The term modern had been misappropriated by various artists and movements to the effect that it had become meaningless: its only characteristic lay in the negation of everything hitherto appreciated. Therefore, modern resulted in a regress to rudimentary forms, stylistic métissage, and a rejection of the skills of French artisans. (It is for that reason that prominent artist Jacques Émile Ruhlmann whose work was centrally featured at the exposition similarly refused the label ‘modern,’ preferring instead to be called contemporary, underscoring his preoccupation with the past while supposedly looking to the future.)

Another incident that underscored French ambivalence toward the meaning of modern occurred specifically during the planning of the fair, bringing to light the difficulty of negotiating between modernity and tradition. L’Art vivant, a journal dedicated to the decorative arts, reported on a “scandal” surrounding the refusal on behalf

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of the exposition commission to accept a harpsichord decorated by Bernard Naudin, a respected illustrator. The harpsichord was rejected because it did not qualify as modern, according to the commission. Critics of the decision argued that “une oeuvre de Naudin est une oeuvre de Naudin, par conséquent une oeuvre d’aujourd’hui.” At the heart of the matter was the distinction – if such existed at all – between ‘modern’ style and ‘contemporary’ one. *L’art vivant* mockingly continued:

Entendent-ils qu’un instrument doit avoir une forme nouvelle, cubiste, néo-dadaïste, néo-nègre ou néo-Babouin? Alors nous admettrons sans discuter qu’un artiste qui peut se réclamer des maîtres les plus délicieux de notre art français ne se risque pas à décorer un tel instrument. Mais alors, aussi, il faudra, pour que cette caisse d’emballage soit vraiment moderne, qu’il n’y entre aucune des matières dont les clavecins du XVIIIe siècle étaient faits, ni cordes d’accès, ni touches, ni pinces, rien! Et en appliquant jusqu’aux dernières limites la loi de modernisme promulguée par MM Joubert et Caressa [illegible], on devra modifier le vocable *clavecin*. Par conséquent, le clavecin n’aura pas ses entrées dans la classe XVIII.

Géraldy’s review and the harpsichord incident made a very important point that became critical for the exposition: that this kind of modern style, the modern style conceived as a rupture, seen, accurately or not, as a rejection of everything, was inappropriate for France, did not reflect French national identity, and was therefore unacceptable. Instead, Géraldy favored the creation of a modern style that would “rattraper la civilisation, retrouver le goût, la mesure, l’exposition précise et nuancée de la logique.” In other words, French modern style must be built on long-standing aesthetic tradition, and not against it.

Many contemporary commentators supported Géraldy’s articulation of modernity as congruous with French traditions. André Véra, a young critic and designer, saw the

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possibility for renewal in a reinvention of the classicism of the 17th century, whose rationality and intelligence could successfully counter what he saw as the vulgarization of art. René Lalique, a famous designer best known for his glasswork and as the creator of the Porte Lalique as well as a number of pavilions at the 1925 exposition, maintained that the future of the decorative arts lied in a return to an elitist notion of art, which, he argued, had been responsible for the creation of art forms and works that constituted the national patrimony, and which alone could usher in a new era of French leadership. Elsewhere Roger Marx and others called for a reattachment to provincial traditions as part of the broad regionalist ambitions at the time. This definition of modernity echoed the position of the preliminary report for the fair from 1912 which called for a renewal not through abandonment but reaffirmation of traditional aesthetic values. Of course, that position problematized the central premise of the exposition, namely to create a truly modern and new style, and reflected France’s struggle to define itself in relation to tradition and modernity.

France’s ambivalence toward modernity was in fact visible throughout the exposition. The choice to hold the fair in a section of Paris where previous expositions had been held problematized the promise of the exposition to offer a new vision of modern France as it forced the new project into old routines. The space limited the possibility of creating fresh urban and artistic forms as it inadvertently invited a comparison with previous expositions and artistic representations. Some contemporary observers, like journalist Gabriel Mourey, had called for the creation of a new site, or a

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30 For more on the ways in which classicism was appropriated by the right, see ch. 3 of this dissertation.
different neighborhood, in the spirit of the fair, since such a project would address the emerging social, economic and urban realities (e.g., demographic change, the growing metropolis, social problems, etc.).\textsuperscript{32} This idea was rejected under the pretext of budgetary limitations and logistical concerns. Yet, in the eyes of many this rejection was symbolic of the refusal to acknowledge the new social demands and conditions, such as the need for modern libraries, hospitals, banks, parks, and living quarters for the working class. It also epitomized the resistance to the fresh interpretation of the decorative art as social art intended to encourage the creation of democratic artworks to celebrate everyday needs.\textsuperscript{33}

Instead, this rejection was a throwback to the erstwhile association of the decorative arts with luxury. The vision of the exposition, beginning with its choice of site, expressed France’s uneasiness toward the unavoidable modernity. The site physically demanded that anything newly constructed for the 1925 event fit within the older, 19\textsuperscript{th} century style of the area, again exaggerating artificially the contrast between old and new forms. Equally problematic for the proponents of truly innovative exposition was the lack of any durable constructions at the fair: unlike previous expositions, which had retained at least some permanent buildings, monuments or museums, all constructions of the 1925 fair would be demolished. It was as if Paris was already perfect as it was, and any new edifices would only ruin that perfection.

These conflicting attitudes toward modern design largely defined the 1925 exposition: while the fair promised to find a new expression of modernity, it sought to do so only within the traditionally defined parameters. To a large extent, it retained and presented the anti-industrial bias characteristic of the era, shunning references to science.


\textsuperscript{33} Marx, “De l’art social.”
or industry, or to “industrial arts,” despite the title of the fair. Many observers, who saw France’s anti-industrial bias as utopian if not outdated and detrimental to the condition of the crafts in France – criticized this attitude. Art critic Waldemar George, for example, pointed to what he considered a monumental error in the principles of the exposition: by focusing on art exclusively, the exposition was bound to fail to offer a well-rounded and exact image of modernity, since “the modern world depends completely on scientists. Mechanization, which regulates the rhythm of our lives, and which is the determining factor of civilization, leaves a mark on the 20th century. The organizers of the 1925 exposition have not understood it.”

Gabriel Mourey, writing for *L’Amour de l’Art*, accused the organizing commission of being reactionary and incompetent in artistic matters. Critic Marie Dormoy noted that, regrettably, only “official” artists and academic works were allowed in both the French and foreign sections, thus hindering the creation of new styles. Still others, such as Waldemar George, felt that the true innovators, such as members of the Dutch group *De Stijl* or of the German *Bauhaus*, were unfairly banished from participating, precisely because they challenged the dominant notion of modernity the organizers wholeheartedly promoted. Thus, the exposition produced a very ambivalent image of modernity, one that maintained a strong attachment to a pre-war worldview in social terms, avoiding new social realities, and one that was aesthetically reactionary, encouraging the reinterpretation of past styles, thus invalidating

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35 Gabriel Mourey, “L’Exposition des arts décoratifs et industriel de 1925” in *L’Amour de l’art* (August 15, 1925): “rien n’est plus comique et plus triste à la fois que de voir figurer dans la liste des hauts fonctionnaires et des members des jurys d’admission et du Comité consultatif de l’Exposition, dans une proportion véritablement ahurissante et qui constitue un véritable défi au bon sens, des gens qui non seulement n’ont jamais été ni de près ni de loin au courant du movement artistique contemporain mais s’en sont montrés, depuis des années, surtout en ce qui concerne l’art decoratif, les adversaries déclarés et n’ont rien épargné pour en entraver le succès” (294).
the effort to create a new aesthetic. In architectural and design terms, this aesthetic conservatism was immediately obvious: of all French pavilions, only a handful were truly innovative in spirit: the Lyon and St Etienne pavilions designed by Tony Garnier, Robert Mallet-Stevens’ Pavilion du Tourisme; and Le Corbusier’s *Esprit Nouveau* pavilion, which drew particularly sharp criticism. Most pavilions in the French section presented an ‘updated’ classical style, or were completely devoid of a distinct style.

1.2. Austrian pavilion designed by Josef Hoffman; 1.3. Melkinov’s Soviet pavilion.

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38 The ambivalence toward modernity and a respective innovative aesthetic was also visible in the foreign section, most of which promoted local and historicist styles – not a shared modern style. A few notable exceptions were the Austrian pavilion designed by Josef Hoffman (1.2), the USSR pavilion designed by constructivist Konstantin Melnikov (1.3), and the Danish pavilion conceived by Kay Fisker.
Luxury as Index of Modernity:

Hôtel d’un riche collectionneur and Une Ambassade Française

This was certainly the case with one of the most celebrated pavilions at the Art Deco exposition, Jacques Emile Ruhlmann’s *Hôtel d’un riche collectionneur*. Ruhlmann, a prominent designer who ran his own well-reputed workshop, designed a private residence for an imaginary collector who supposedly did not content himself with living in a décor of the past.³⁹ The choice to make a collector the central figure of the pavilion is not coincidental: the image of the amateur collector had occupied a central place in the French decorative arts discourse since the 19th century, and evoked a particular relationship between the decorative arts and French national identity, as Silverman has demonstrated.⁴⁰ The superior aesthetic sensibility of the true collector is defined by taste and erudition (as opposed to the newly-acquired wealth of the crass nouveau riche); it is derived from the national goût that accounted for France’s supremacy in the arts. In turn, the collector was concerned with elevating national taste as much as with building a private collection. As Silverman puts it, “[t]he amateur [collector] was not a passive consumer but an active re-creator of the past, and his efforts at reassembly were like the creative work of an architect or poet.”⁴¹ This definition of the collector underpinned conceptually Ruhlmann’s pavilion. By choosing to propose a model residence for a collector, Ruhlmann already expressed a desire to shift away from the present to the past. The pavilion also promoted luxury and exclusivity as fundamental to the modern collector, and established a link between fine art and everyday life as a particular feature of Frenchness.

⁴⁰ Silverman, esp. 111-118.
⁴¹ Silverman 111, 116-117.
While the building (conceived by Pierre Patout, Ruhlmann’s architectural associate, 1.4) and its interior décor contained some modernized elements (such as elongated lines, and streamlined, plain moldings), the private residence was filled with hand-made furniture, crystal chandeliers, lavish tapestries, exotic wood encrusted with ivory, and bas reliefs, reminiscent, as Deshairs noted, of an 18th century residence (1.5 though 1.9). Ornamentation and expensive materials added to the palatial ambiance of the Hôtel d’un riche collectionneur, and evoked elitism and grandeur, despite its claims to modernity in concept.

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1.5 Dining Room. 1.6 Bedroom

Deshairs n.p.
1.7 and 1.8 Grand Salon: the expensive crystal chandelier, the opulent wall coverings, rugs and furniture contributed to the luxurious ambiance of the pavilion.

1.9 Ruhlmann’s famous *Table araignée* designed especially for the 1925 pavilion. Below, a pearl-encrusted credenza designed by Ruhlmann for the pavilion.

While the *Hôtel d’un riche collectionneur* was acclaimed as a peak in the decorative arts, it certainly fell short of the ideals of the exposition. Excessive ornamentation, such as the omnipresent floral or vegetal decoration of the already defunct Art Nouveau from the turn of the century, was seen by progressive artists and critics as concealing a lack of artistic depth and as a sign of conservatism. In that vein, Auguste Perret declared that true art does not need decoration, and that even geometrical
ornamentation was no better than the floral one of 1900. Art and architecture critic Marie Dormoy agreed, writing that:

En 1900, c’était le triomphe du macaroni, des tortillons, de l’ornement. Maintenant on a l’air de supprimer l’ornement, mais l’air seulement. On ne parle plus que de la ligne droite, de la chose essentielle, de la construction. Mais, à y bien regarder, ce sont les ornements qui deviennent la chose essentielle tant on en veut mettre, et finalement il y a encore plus de choses inutiles que jadis.*

By affording such a central place to the past, the model private residence undermined the Exposition’s promise to create a modern style. Its focus on opulence and wealth, “[témoin] d’un esprit cynique ou d’une rare inconscience,” suggested that the decorative arts were disconnected from the demands of modern life, and contradicted the stated goal of the exposition to democratize art and to address the needs of the general population, and not those of the cultured and moneyed elites. As Waldemar George put it, “L’art décoratif moderne, essentiellement conservateur et rétrograde, fait fi ou semble faire fi de la clientèle populaire. Il méconnaît ses besoins. Il produit pour les riches.”

Not only did Ruhlmann’s pavilion – and the Exposition as a whole – cater to an aristocratic public, but it was also largely created by state-approved artists, who in Dormoy’s view were but “mauvais pasticheurs” preferring the interpretation of traditional styles to innovation, undermining in the process the effort to draw young and innovative artists to the field. More importantly, Ruhlmann’s pavilion suggested that luxury – and not industry, technology or science, or consideration for the social aspect of

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44 Dormoy 134.
47 Dormoy 132.
art – serve as an index of modernity, a defining attitude of the 1925 event, even though such a formulation clashed with the ideals of the exposition.

Defining modernity in terms of luxury is only partly surprising because this conception garnered significant institutional support, notably from the Société des artistes décorateurs and the Union centrale des arts décoratifs, two institutions that had helped shape the expositions and the decorative arts for decades. They were particularly influential in defining the style of the exposition, not least because they subsidized the erection of some very important pavilions. (The charges for displaying at the exposition were reportedly very high, and few individual craftsmen could afford them without institutional support.48)

The Union centrale des arts décoratifs, originally founded in 1864 under the name Union centrale des beaux arts appliqué à l’industrie, united French artists and manufacturers in an attempt to compete with British decorative arts (whose rise was reported with alarm at the 1851 London Exposition). It included artisans, craftsmen, manufacturers, etc. as it sought to promote unity between the arts and the crafts, and between the arts and industry. Its program was defined as follows:

Our goal is to honor, encourage, and stimulate in industrial works everything that contains art. . . . to propagate in France . . . the realization of beauty in utility; to aid men in the elite in their efforts to raise the standards of work, from apprenticeship to mastery; to encourage the emulation of those artists whose works, while vulgarizing the sense of beauty, also maintain the just preeminence attributed to our industrial arts by the world.49

By the last decade of the century, however, the Union centrale des beaux arts appliqué à l’industrie had undergone profound transformation, as reflected in the change of name to

49 Qtd. in Silverman 110.
Union centrale des arts décoratifs. References to industry and to manufacture were evacuated from its program, and its membership was now almost exclusively formed by wealthy aristocratic collectors, museum curators, luxury goods producers and cabinet ministers, who praised exclusivity and uniqueness. This shift completely redefined the goals and initiatives of the Union centrale des arts décoratifs, which now sought to maintain a notion of beauty and the crafts as aristocratic and luxurious.

Similarly, the Société des artistes décorateurs, which formulated one of the initial proposals for the exposition, was also founded in an attempt to address the conflicts faced by the decorative arts in late 19th and early 20th century. Established in 1901 as the first professional association since the dissolution of professional corporations in 1791, it hoped to bring together artisans, decorative artists and manufacturers; to encourage the creation of a modern style; to democratize art, to make it more relevant and to educate the public about it. As its founder René Guilleré put it: “Luxury in a democracy must no longer hide in pictures and statues in a gallery, it must show itself in the broad light of day, on the façades of houses, embellishing the streets and public squares. […] art takes on real importance and a true nobility when it responds to ‘social needs’.”

Yet, these noble and progressive goals were undermined at the very first salon of the Société des artistes décorateurs, held in 1904. It was proposed that the central ensemble for the salon display a dining room for a restaurant, because it provided the opportunity to put in action the ideological agenda of the Société des artistes décorateurs: it would bring together various decorative artists and craftsmen; it would provide an

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50 The corporations were abolished at the end of the monarchy; with them was gone the quality control they provided, as well as the legal and administrative framework. The Société des artistes décoratifs hoped to assume these functions.
51 René Guilleré qtd. in Yvonne Brunhammer and Suzanne Tise, French Decorative Art 1900-1942 (New York: Rizzoli, 1991) 15.
opportunity for collaboration between arts and crafts and manufacture; it would be useful in the course of the salon; and afterward, it could be sold to a restauranteur entrepreneur. Yet, this proposal met with some resistance because it raised questions about the role of industry and commercialization of the arts: the perception grew of a tradeoff of quality for efficiency; of inappropriateness and lack of decorum, as it was too commercial and pedestrian for the French arts. In response, the project was completely reconsidered and the 1904 salon of the Société des artistes décorateurs at the Petit Palais presented instead an elegant tea-room. Despite its promise to democratize art, the tea-room appealed to an élite much more than a restaurant hall; it also institutionalized the Société’s approval of luxury – a position it rarely abandoned afterward; finally, the tea-room defined the mostly anti-industrial and anti-commercial bias of the Société des artistes décorateurs, and brought forward the conflicting attitude toward industries and commercialization of the arts.

These ambiguities were very visible at the pavilion put up by the Société des artistes décorateurs at the 1925 fair. The pavilion was a visual expression of the image France desired to disseminate of itself to the world, insofar as it was a model embassy “to be installed at an indefinite date in some unnamed foreign capital,”52 and linked the construction of national identity with the decorative arts. Despite promises that the Embassy would show a stylistically coherent approach to the theme, the project rather shed light on the ideological struggle around the decorative arts and their importance for the construction of national identity.

The Embassy was housed in a building designed by one of the preeminent modernist architect and designers of the interwar period, Robert Mallet-Stevens.\textsuperscript{53} Having worked from early on in his career with such modernist designers as Djo-Bourgeois and Francis and Frantz Jourdain,\textsuperscript{54} and influenced, by his own admission, by Joseph Hoffman,\textsuperscript{55} Adolf Loos, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier, Mallet-Stevens signaled his preoccupation with functionality, favored orthogonal architecture and geometric forms, employed new materials, and staunchly opposed all ornament. He expounded on these principles in his work for the Art Deco Exposition, where in addition to the Embassy, he presented a \textit{Pavillon des Renseignements et du Tourisme}, a studio for the \textit{Société des Auteurs de Film}, a pavilion for the \textit{Syndicat d’initiative de Paris}, and a fascinating project known as the \textit{Jardin Cubiste} for the Jardin Jean Goujon in front of the

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\textsuperscript{53} On Mallet-Stevens’ popularity and significance, see Richard Becherer, “Past Remembering: Robert Mallet-Stevens’s Architecture of Duration,” \textit{Assemblage} 31 (December 1996) 16-41.

\textsuperscript{54} Djo-Bourgeois (1898-1937), an architect and designer, was a student of Mallet-Stevens. At the 1925 Exposition, he was involved with designing sections of the Pavillon du Louvre, given his extensive experience in design for boutiques.

Frantz Jourdain’s (1847-1937) and Francis Jourdain (1876-1958), the notable father-and-son architects and designers, were widely viewed as innovative in their times. Frantz Jourdain was best known as the architect of the department store \textit{La Samaritaine} (1905). See Bernard Marrey, \textit{Les Grands Magasins des origines à 1939} (Paris: Librairie Picard, 1979), esp. pp. 123-200 and 209-214. Francis Jourdain embraced rectilinear lines, machine-production and an anti-ornamental stance. Deploring the erstwhile association of the decorative arts with luxury, he claimed to be interested in producing adaptable furniture for the mass market, setting up a workshop where, ironically, his clients were the wealthy, and symbolically, he left the \textit{Société des Artistes Décorateurs} with Mallet-Stevens and Pierre Chareau to found the \textit{Union des artistes modernes}. At the 1925 exposition, Francis Jourdain designed the Smoking Room at the French Embassy and a Salle de Sport.

\textsuperscript{55} Joseph Hoffman (1870-1956) is one of the most celebrated Austrian architects. During his long career, his style evolved from curvilinearity to rectilinearity and abstraction of forms in the 1920s. He helped found and worked in the Wiener Werkstätte, a collective workshop for architects and artists, whose perhaps best-known creation was the Stoclet Palace, a private residence belonging to Adolphe Stoclet, Mallet-Stevens’ uncle. For more on the relation between Mallet-Stevens and the Austrian workshop, see Christiana Volpi, “Formation, Influence et Premiers Travaux” in \textit{Robert Mallet-Stevens: L’Oeuvre Complète} (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2005), 18-23. At the 1925 fair, Hoffman was responsible for designing the Austrian pavilion.
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Grand Palais, for which he designed a series of trees in cement each five meters tall (1.10 and 1.11).  

![Image](image1)

1.10 (left) The Pavilion of Tourism.

1.11 (below) Concrete trees for the *Jardin Cubiste*.

![Image](image2)

1.12. Photo and stamp of the Rue Mallet-Stevens.

The choice to commission Mallet-Stevens to design a modernist exterior was partially an attempt to reaffirm the exposition’s commitment to modern styles.  

The following year, Mallet-Stevens put these ideas in practice in the urban context in what is widely considered his architectural manifesto at the Rue Mallet-Stevens, an exclusively residential complex in the 16th arrondissement, aiming to provide functional yet pleasant and healthful living to its middle-class occupants (1.12). For more on Rue Mallet-Stevens, see Richard Becherer, “Monumentality and the Rue Mallet-Stevens” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (March 1981) 44-55. See also Robert Mallet-Stevens: *L’Oeuvre complète* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2005) 136-7. Some scholars have suggested, based on a letter to Le Corbusier dated February 4, 1924, that Mallet-Stevens’s family connection to Paul Léon, the vice commissioner general on the exposition may have been...
interior, designed collaboratively, proved much more fragmented and ambivalent, and contradicted the exterior. The Embassy featured some 25 rooms grouped in reception spaces, private apartments for its inhabitants (the Ambassador and his wife) as well as a gallery and a display hall for small objets d’art and sculptures. Incorporating fine art as decoration of living spaces made it possible to circumvent the regulation that no fine art be displayed for its own sake at the Art Deco Expo. It also promoted a particular notion of Frenchness by linking everyday context with fine arts, and by featuring prominently the figure of the amateur collector as arbiter of national taste, much as Ruhlmann’s Hôtel d’un riche collectionneur did. The stylistic coherence of the private apartments and reception spaces was further undermined by the broad range of styles and visions of modernity brought by the various designers and decorative artists who participated in the pavilion’s construction. For example, the Dining Room and the Grand Salon (1.13) designed by Henri Rapin and Pierre Selmersheim respectively in a solemn style and decorated with bas-reliefs, luxurious rugs, silk coverings and hand-crafted furniture, sharply contradicted the austerity and cubism of the Smoking Room (by Jean Dunand) or the Library (by Pierre Chareau, 1.14). Those overtly modernist spaces used geometric forms proposed new conception of space, lacked ornamentation and championed a clean, simplified style.

1.13 Grand Salon at the Ambassade Française by Selmersheim. 1.14 Study (bibliothèque) by Pierre Chareau.

While the luxurious ambiance of parts of the Embassy (e.g., the Dining Room) drew criticism for failing to respond to new social conditions and needs, for promoting an elitist conception of the decorative arts, and for rehashing historicist styles instead of innovating, the truly modernist spaces (e.g., the Smoking Room) were by contrast considered “morose,” “obsessed with the geometrical, the massive and the angular,” and their designers accused of acting as “ingénieurs-constructeurs plutôt que coloristes-décorateurs.” Gabriel Mourey went even further noting with regret the lack of ‘French’ character and charm lost in the obsessive search for originality. A caricature published in *L’Art Vivant* captures the lack of enthusiasm for this new proposed style (1.15). Entitled “Le Retour des Arts Décoratifs,” it features two bourgeois couples returning from the Exposition unsatisfied with what they have seen. One of the gentlemen turns to

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58 Paris 383.
59 *Encyclopédie des arts décoratifs*, vol. 4, 1-52.
his wife and says: “Tout ça, c’est des meubles et des maisons des pauvres. Chez nous, s’pas Julie, on n’a qu’un buffet mais il est tout garni de sculptures.”

This reaction is all too real outside the caricature: it suggests that modern style is incomprehensible, but also establishes opulence as a central characteristic of the French decorative arts, and implies that any modern style can exist only insofar as it is rooted in French tradition. The consensus among French designers at the time was that the decorative arts should preserve a connection with an individual, craft tradition (either in terms of production techniques or in terms of specific stylistic motifs referring to the past). Even those like Roger Marx who understood the ineluctability of industrial means of production still hoped to produce unique items of special quality, even if they had to be cheaply produced with the help of machines. The emphasis was placed on developing a new aesthetic out of traditional forms and modes of production for already existing objects.

In the context of the Embassy project, this position became all too obvious in what became known as the Léger-Delaunay Affair. The scandal involved architect Mallet-Stevens’ decision to engage the prominent modernist artists Fernand Léger and
Robert Delaunay to decorate the vestibule of the Embassy. (He also invited Henri Laurens who displayed a cubist bas-relief.)

1.16 and 1.17 Vestibule for the *Ambassade*. On the left photo is visible Barillet’s ceiling light fixture, as well as the geometric pattern on the floor. In the center toward the hallway is Laurens’ cubist bas-relief barely visible in the photograph on the right.

The vestibule, separated from the adjacent spaces with smooth yet sharp surfaces, fragmented the space by establishing several angles/perspectives. The verticality of the space was interrupted by the presence of a mezzanine level and the sharpness of inward openings, creating a very cubist perception of the space, further amplified by the geometric patterns on the floor (1.16 and 1.17). The square plates of the hanging light fixtures placed next to the leaded stained glass ceiling fixture by Louis Barillet, as if folded in the form of a harmonica on the ceiling added to the modernist look Mallet-Stevens intended to produce. Léger’s and Delaunay’s murals would add even more poise to the rigorously geometric space.

1.18 The two murals hung at the opposing ends of the vestibule. Delaunay’s in the photo on the left, Léger’s in the photo on the right.
Delaunay presented an abstract mural of the Eiffel Tower (*La femme et la Tour*) (1.19) that captured the dynamism of the modern metropolis through an interplay of geometric forms and lines. Léger’s *Peinture Murale* (1.20) was an abstract, non-representational composition of interlocking polychromatic forms intended to counter the coldness of the surrounding geometric forms. The mural possessed a flatness and asymmetry that still evoked movement by interacting dynamically with the clean, streamlined surfaces of the vestibule of the pavilion. Léger’s and Delaunay’s murals were tremendously significant independently from the pavilion they decorated. Representative of the machine and geometric aesthetics of the time, they intended to capture the rapid and fragmented experience of modernity. With his *Eiffel Tower*, one in a series of paintings of the Eiffel Tower, Delaunay seized the sense of dynamism found in the urban environment, emphasizing simultaneously the impossibility to stop it and the desire to order it and to slow it down.61

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Léger’s mural, reminiscent of his earlier *Eléments mécaniques* (1923-24) (1.21), invoked the spread of mechanization which transformed human experience: “modern man lives more and more in a preponderantly geometric order…,” he had written in 1924.62 Léger’s and Delaunay’s works signaled the advent of a new order – the machinistic or the geometric order, whose beauty they sought to reveal. The objective, Léger wrote, was to create a beautiful object with mechanical elements. It was an attempt to capture the present epoch, which Léger felt, “for us French painters […] is escaping us.”63 Léger was also very much aware of the subversive potential of the geometric machine aesthetic: the machine, he wrote, was a weapon to intimidate tradition, and threatened insistently “the breasts and curves of woman, fruit, the soft landscape.”64 His assessment was correct, as the scandal at the 1925 fair proved. On a visit to the pavilion, Paul Léon, director of Fine Arts, deemed the murals and their “cubisme outrancier et offensif”65 unsuitable to the Embassy’s style, and ordered their removal. Despite assurances that the murals were modern and therefore in accord with the Exposition’s program, and that they were created by two preeminent modernist artists, the murals were taken down within twenty-four hours. The modernity proposed by the fragmented, abstract and uprooted visions of Léger and Delaunay, extolling no less a monument of industrial modernity, was deemed incompatible with the exposition’s conception of it.

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64 Qtd. in Green 262.

65 Originally published in *Excelsior* (May 24, 1925). Cited in Robert Mallet-Stevens, *Oeuvre Complète* 117. Not surprisingly, the commission Léon headed included mostly traditional architects who were ultimately responsible for the overall image of the 1925 Exposition, such as Maurice Dufrène, chief architect of the Rue des Boutiques discussed below.
Rue des Boutiques

The Ambassade française and Ruhlmann’s Hôtel d’un riche collectionneur portrayed modern France as inextricably linked to the concept of luxury, exclusivity, elitism and high art, casting aside the image of industrial and scientific modernity central to the 19th century expositions. This image of luxury promoted a specific notion of the capital and of Frenchness, an image that was in sharp opposition to the one the exposition set out to disseminate. Nowhere was this more obvious than on Pont Alexandre III, which was transformed for the occasion into a Rue des boutiques, a street of temporary shops (1.22).

The decision to present such a central part of the exposition through a series of boutiques reveals the significance of the latter for constructing the image of Paris and French identity championed at the Exposition. Indeed, in the post-war period, the boutique was touted as an example of reconstruction effort that symbolized urban revitalization and affirmed the health of French industries and arts, particularly the Paris-based decorative arts. To that end, many competitions were organized to promote the boutique as a significant and central architectural and urban form in the years after the
In addition, the boutique was represented as a particularly French phenomenon: many writers and travelers had commented on the special quality of Parisian boutiques that seemed impossible to replicate in other European cities. An article in London’s *Architectural Review*, for instance, published an enthusiastic review of the “little shops of Paris,” as its author wondered “why the shopkeepers of fashionable Paris should have this sense of quality […] and why those of London should lack it.” The taste for luxury and artistic quality embodied in the boutique are then posited as essential elements of national identity, and the *Rue des boutiques* suggested a particular notion of Frenchness that linked modernity with luxury and consumption.

The *Rue des boutiques* was conceived by Maurice Dufrène, a prominent architect and designer, and one of the early members of the *Société des artistes décorateurs*, though each boutique façade was designed by a different, distinguished architect (such as René Herbst and Gabriel Guevrekian). The shops that lined the bridge fit well within the larger business agenda of the exposition by encouraging spending and publicizing national products, particularly fashion, which in 1924 brought in 2.5 billion francs in

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66 For example, the City of Paris organized a series of architectural competitions with projects and prizewinners detailed in the journal *Construction Moderne*. See *La Construction moderne – les Concours de façades de la ville de Paris 1898-1905*; and *Les Concours de façades de la Ville de Paris 1906-1912*, available on gallica.bnf.fr. In 1924, the Salon d’Automne’s section of Urban Art devoted special attention to shop fronts. It is on this exhibit that the 1925 *Rue des boutiques* was based, and the parameters of the two expositions were very similar. For more on the Urban Art exhibit, see Tag Gronberg, *Designs on Modernity: Exhibiting the City in 1920s Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) 63-64.

67 Qtd. in Gronberg, “Little Shops” 57.

68 Maurice Dufrène (1876-1955) was one of the early members of the *Société des artistes décorateurs*. Having worked in the Art Nouveau style at the 1900 exposition, in the 1920s he favored a more streamlined and simplified lines. For the 1925 fair, in addition to the *Rue des boutiques*, he designed the petit salon at the Ambassade, on the subject of which he was interviewed in *Bulletin de la vie artistique* (Oct 1, 1925), 282-3. In many ways, he was representative of the general population of designers participating in the exposition who had trained in the old tradition and struggled to come to terms with the new aesthetic demands.
exports, according to the *Encyclopédie des arts décoratifs*. Further, fashion was promoted as an effort to assert national prestige and French leadership in matters of style, as it was widely claimed that French supremacy remained uncontested in that domain. (In recognition of the importance of fashion, the Exposition dedicated a large section to “La Parure” and included a *Pavillon de l’Élégance* and fashion shows organized by acclaimed designer Paul Poiret on three barges on the Seine (1.23), besides the fashion boutiques on the Pont Alexandre III). The underlying justification for the central place attributed to fashion were numerous claims equating it to art, thus reinforcing the image of Paris as the artistic capital of the world.

1.23 Paul Poiret’s barges *Amours, Délices* and *Orgues*.

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70 The *Encyclopédie des arts décoratifs* admitted in a somewhat dismissive fashion the possible exceptions of London as the center for men’s fashion (reinforcing the image of Paris as a woman’s city), of Brussels as growing jewlery center, among others (Preface).
71 Entitled *Amours, Délices* and *Orgues*, the three nouns in French that are masculine singular but feminine plural, they featured respectively interior furnishings and décor; perfumes; and fashion displayed around an illuminated organ.
Yet, the choice to construct specifically a row of boutiques raised brows, as the Rue des boutiques seemed to contradict in many ways the overall ideological and aesthetic agenda of the exposition. Despite the significance of the boutique as an urban form in the 1920s, the Rue des boutiques frustrated the political and social ideals the Exposition aspired to convey, specifically its explicit goal of democratizing the decorative arts and of making them accessible to the general public. It also fell short of the exposition’s aim to formulate modernity through a new aesthetic, since the boutique had a very specific symbolic value at the time. Art historian Gronberg has studied the connotation of exclusivity the word boutique carried in the 1920s. This connotation was expressed in the common characterization of boutiques as small, narrow, and discreet; the same description remained valid for the display methods at the boutiques, which normally emphasized limited quantity of high quality, exquisite items, showcased in a judicious manner. (By contrast, the department stores “disgorged” large quantities of mass-produced commodities onto the street, in a vulgar attempt to attract consumers with huge quantities of goods.) In other words, the displays and the language used to describe boutiques suggested exclusivity and luxury, by explicitly rejecting large-scale production and mass consumption; therefore, the boutique emerged at the crossroads of art and luxury consumption.

The connotation of the boutique as luxurious and exclusive was further reinforced at the Art Deco Exposition with the displays of goods the boutiques offered in their shop windows – couture, one-of-a-kind accessories, handmade products for the home, jewelry,

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furs, and so on. This focus on luxury goods, an expression of the “national love of ‘la richesse’ and ‘la somptuosité’” as one British visitor put it, is representative of the rest of the exposition, as already discussed in relation to the Ambassade française and Hôtel d’un riche collectionneur. It expressed the tension between the social and political goals of the exposition on the one hand, and the desire to attract the traditionally wealthy clientele such boutiques depended on, on the other. In fact, art historian Judith Gura has argued that it was precisely the allegiance to this clientele and its more conservative tastes that steered the exposition architecture and design away from innovation and toward reaffirmation of luxury as a central economic, aesthetic and national feature, though assuredly the Rue des boutiques also expressed deep-seated cultural attitudes about modernity and Frenchness. The Rue des boutiques constructed an image of Paris as modern by invoking not its role as center of the modern arts or of industry but as a center of consumption, a claim validated by the physical space of the bridge and its relation to the urban context. The Rue des boutiques privileged the street level as a central mode of display, casting aside the traditional viewing platforms used at expositions. The Eiffel Tower, for instance, an emblem of industrial and technological modernity since its completion in 1889, was downplayed in the visual hierarchy, as suggested by one widely circulated postcard (1.24).

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The photo, which focused in the foreground on the Rue des boutiques, captured the Eiffel Tower through one of the arches of the shops on the Pont Alexandre III, implying that the Eiffel Tower was but a picturesque backdrop to luxury, high fashion and consumption. The unabashedly industrial nature of the Eiffel Tower was pushed aside from the image of Paris as a center of luxury, as it arguably did not ‘fit’ within the vision of France the Art Deco Exposition promoted. For the duration of the fair, the Tower was used as an illuminated projection screen for advertisements for Citroën (1.25), in a nod to the emerging field of marketing, and in a dual attempt to incorporate the modernity incarnated by the Eiffel Tower into the overall vision of the exposition by associating it, first, with the automobile, and second, with advertising. Yet, even though Citroën evoked the automobile as an emblem of new aesthetic, it was immediately spurned and replaced by the image of Paris as the city of the flâneur – and not of the driver – suggested by the Rue des boutiques, thus keeping references to industrial modernity at bay. Instead, the boutiques on the Pont Alexandre III, itself evocative of Paris’s grandeur, had come to serve as important icons of a specifically French modernity formulated in terms of consumption and luxury, even if in contradiction to the goals of the exposition.

The appeal of the Rue des boutiques to the wealthy did not go unnoticed by contemporary critics. Charensol noted with disappointment that the pavilions fell short of
expectations. With regard to one pavilion, journalist and writer Georges Charensol remarked that the pavilion “[veut] être de haut luxe, alors qu’on désirerait seulement qu’il[…] puisse[…] se faire en série, car le public restreint des pièces uniques qui veut acheter du moderne ne fera pas plus faute d’aller les chercher là qu’une femme très élégante ne préfèrera aux robes de confections, celles de Patout ou de Chéruit.”\textsuperscript{75} Waldemar George called those responsible for the creation of the Rue des boutiques “[des] réactionnaires par leur dévotion aux ‘puissances d’argent.’”\textsuperscript{76} He criticized the shops for being disconnected from social reality: “c’est en vain qu’on cherchera dans toute l’exposition un projet de maison ouvrière ou seulement de logement pour travailleur intellectuel. […] Pas une boutique du Pont Alexandre III […] ne contient des objets accessibles aux petites bourses,” concluding that “l’art décoratif moderne […] est anti-social, antidémocratique.”\textsuperscript{77}

Further, the Rue des boutiques was attacked for failing to present any original architectural visions, and for recycling instead old stylistic elements. That aesthetic experimentation was absent was hardly unexpected given the organizers’ choice to invite mostly mainstream and well-established architects and designers to shape the Rue des boutiques.\textsuperscript{78} Charensol noted with regret in his review of the Rue des boutiques in the influential journal L’Amour de l’art, “le Pont Alexandre III […] aurait pu être la ‘rue moderne’ [mais] n’est qu’un passage orné de boutiques sans originalité.”\textsuperscript{79} The criticisms toward the Rue des boutiques, which at times were very harsh – Waldemar George, for

\textsuperscript{75} L’amour de l’art 318.  
\textsuperscript{76} George 285.  
\textsuperscript{77} George 285.  
\textsuperscript{78} Dormoy.  
\textsuperscript{79} Charensol 327.
example, went so far as to call it “la honte de l’Exposition”\textsuperscript{80} – described it mainly as traditional, boring, “hardly satisfactory” or “inadequate in design,”\textsuperscript{81} and riddled with excesses. The architecture and design of the Rue des boutiques supposedly tried to incorporate the newly fashionable elongated, simplified and streamlined lines, but there was no true innovation in place. Instead, many, like avant-garde artist Auguste Perret, felt that the new geometric forms had merely replaced the exaggerated floral ornamentation so vehemently decried at the 1900 exposition.\textsuperscript{82} Decoration, at the time deemed a sign of pastiche, of attachment to historical styles, or an attempt to conceal the construction and function of the element, still abounded, exaggerated to a point of abuse, according to Waldemar George,\textsuperscript{83} on the main structure designed by Dufrène, as it did on the shop façades (1.26).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{An example of the decoration on the Rue des boutiques.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{80} George 288.
\textsuperscript{81} Smith, \textit{Reports on the Present Position and Tendencies...} 40.
\textsuperscript{82} Auguste Perret in Dormoy.
\textsuperscript{83} George 288.
Even the shops themselves were perceived as a sort of street level decoration, as evidenced by the description provided by Charensol. The perception that Rue des boutiques failed to deliver a new tendency in urban design was also supported by the relative stylistic homogeneity, the “ensemble”-like look of the Rue des boutiques. In design, the traditional notion of ensemble had been denounced as a sign of aesthetic conservatism; in architecture and urban planning, the exaggerated stylistic coherence had also become a much critiqued symbol of Haussmanized Paris. The outdated and reactionary look of the Rue des boutiques further undermined major – and by many accounts very successful – efforts to camouflage the identifiably 19th-century opulent look of the nearby Grand Palais, or specifically its Grand Staircase, Hall and Vestibule, by building temporary walls and stretching canvases to form ceilings that allow sunlight to pass through (1.27). It is then in a conflicting gesture that the Rue des boutiques embraced precisely the aesthetic and ideology the Grand Palais supposedly did away with; these values, it seemed, were instead displaced onto the Rue des boutiques.

1.27 Grand Palais updated for the 1925 Exposition.

84 Charensol, “Les intérieurs” 325.
86 For example, the official British report of the exposition (Reports on the Present positions and tendencies...), which deployed compliments sparsely, declared that “[the entirely new] effect created here was the result of the finest architectural idea in the Exhibition” and that no photograph could do it justice (46ff).
The Rue des boutiques promoted a particular version of French identity and modernity by linking luxury, exclusivity, and consumption. By positing these values as central to the formulation of French identity, the Exposition brought forward France’s ideological ambivalence toward modernity, as the debate on what it meant to be modern already demonstrated, and revealed the inherent tension between the desire to formulate a new aesthetic and the inability to welcome the prospect of what seemed an inevitable modernization. The boutique epitomized luxury shopping as opposed to mass consumption; it extolled the hand-made, small-scale production or unique exemplars, contrasted by the growing and inexorable mass production and its accompanying anonymity; it cultivated a wealthy clientele, rejecting the growing masses. At the same time, the Rue des boutiques problematized the initial promise of the exposition to bring reform to the field of the decorative arts, and to render them relevant again, instead reaffirming precisely the values it promised to leave behind. It is exactly for that reason that many observers wondered how – if at all – the Exposition could be considered modern since “tout ce qui est moderne est banni de l’exposition.”

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One notable exception on the Rue des boutiques was Sonia Delaunay’s Boutique Simultanée, which drew critical acclaim for its originality and modernism (1.28). Delaunay’s boutique, set up in a space she shared with distinguished couturier and fur designer Jacques Heim, was already distinctive from the others in that it was the creation of a well-known member of the Parisian avant-garde, unlike other exhibitors who worked specifically in fashion and related fields. Of course, the gender implications of her work were of monumental importance, specifically in the context of the Exposition, where
women were present only as consumers. Despite the strides made in the war and post-war period, traditional gender roles persisted, and the visions at expositions remained forcefully gendered. The 1925 exposition was perhaps more open to women than any previous and following fairs, though the reason for that had less to do with social transformation than it did with the association of its themes, especially fashion, with women. The significance of the presence of female designers such as Sonia Delaunay or Jeanne Lanvin, the coordinator of the fashion section and the Pavillon de l’élégance cannot be overstated, however exceptional it may be, for it presented women as creators and not only as consumers of decorative arts.

1.28 Shop window of Sonia Delaunay’s *Boutique simultanée*.

This distinctiveness of Delaunay’s boutique was immediately visible in the visually striking and dramatically different shop window. Most shop windows on the *Rue des boutiques* showcased judiciously arranged goods, drawing the desiring gaze of fair visitors directly onto the products without any external distraction. By contrast, the focal point of the *Boutique Simultanée*’s window were several long swathes of abstractly

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patterned textile that took up most of the window display (some space in the lower tier was conserved for the display of actual goods). These colorful fabrics were masterfully lit and slowly moving across the shop window with the help of an electric roller device invented and patented by Robert Delaunay in 1924, when the boutique simultanée was first put up at the Salon d’Automne. (At that time, the shop window was entirely taken up by the “simultaneous textiles”). Although these lengths of fabric were used for the creation of clothes or accessories, at the boutique’s shop window it is their very form – their polychromatic, non-figurative nature exaggerated in size – that came to stand as a referent for the goods of the boutique; it is the powerful visual effect they produced that was on display, much more than the particular objects for sale.

The effect operated on several different levels. The colorful “simultaneous textiles” were novel and remarkably attractive in an era of mostly monochromatic fabrics, whose style had changed little over centuries. (Print patterns on fabric, a relatively new invention, were limited to floral elements and were deployed sparsely; abstract and stylized designs remained the work of avant-garde artists.88) This bold use of color constituted in fact the primary way of expression and innovation in Delaunay’s fashion designs, as Apollinaire had noted as early as 1914:

You have to go to Bullier’s, to see Monsieur and Madame Robert Delaunay, who are busy bringing about the reform of clothing. Simultaneous Orphism has produced sartorial novelties that are not to be sneezed at. They would have given Carlyle a curious chapter in Sartor Resartus. M. and Mme Delaunay are innovators. They are unencumbered by the imitation of old styles, and as they wish to be of their time they are not attempting to make any innovations in the shape of the cut, but are rather trying to influence it by using the new and infinitely varied material of colours.

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Here, for example, is a suit by M. Robert Delaunay: violet jacket, beige waistcoat, dark-brown trousers. And here is another one: red coat with a blue collar, red socks, black and yellow shoes, black trousers, green jacket, sky-blue waistcoat, tiny red tie. Here is the description of a simultaneous dress by Mme Delaunay: violet suit, long violet and green belt and, under the jacket, a blouse divided into areas of bright, delicate or faded colours, combining old rose, tangerine, ‘nattier’ blue, scarlet, etc., appearing in juxtaposition on different materials such as woollen cloth, taffeta, tulle, flannelette, moiré and matt silk. Such variety has not gone unnoticed. It lends fantasy to elegance. And if, having gone to Bullier’s, you do not see them immediately, you should be aware that these clothing-reformers are generally to be found below the orchestra, studying, without a hint of scorn, the monotonous clothes of the dancing men and women...  

The modernism of Delaunay lay precisely in this original assertion of the primacy of color over form, or of their simultaneous, interdependent existence. Robert Delaunay, like Apollinaire, saw Sonia Delaunay’s work not as artistic interpretation but as creation of new forms altogether, a creative process which accounted for the success of her boutique at the 1925 exposition. Incidentally, Sonia Delaunay, who had explored the relationship between color and form in her early polychromatic abstract paintings (e.g., her 1913 *Bal Bullier*, the simultaneous illustrations for Blaise Cendrars’ poem *La prose du Transsibérien* from the same year, or the 1914 *Prismes électriques*, 1.29), decided to adapt her modernism to fashion after she noted the “cubist look” of a quilt she made from bits of fabrics, as if a collage of textiles. This observation underscored the belief of avant-garde art in the beauty in everyday objects. In other words, by adapting artistic modernism to everyday objects, Delaunay responded to the progressive call of the

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90 Delaunay’s artistic modernism was admired both for its nature and for its bold crossing between art and fashion and decorative arts, and in 1925, she was the subject of a publication by the Librairie des Arts Décoratifs. Entitled “Sonia Delaunay: ses peintures, ses objetsm ses tissus simultanés, ses modes,” it was both a retrospective of her work as an artist and designer, and an hommage to her work by avant-garde figures such as Cendrars, Tzara, and Soupault.

Exposition for the creation of democratic and socially-minded art. Further, by deploying references to avant-garde art onto everyday objects (such as a quilt or fabric or car, 1.30), Delaunay’s work suggested an overlap between fine art and decorative arts.

The *Boutique Simultanée* also captured the gaze of passers-by with the geometric abstractions of Delaunay’s textiles, precisely because they were non-referential, and produced the sole meaning of the boutique’s display. The non-representational patterns
on the simultaneous textiles, by definition pure in form, corresponded to and amplified the rectilinearity of the stretched textiles, and stood as the sole item to be gazed upon. Further, their non-referentiality produced a certain degree of autonomy of the shop window. Gronberg has pointed out to the function of the shop window as a stage in the 1920s. Delaunay’s the shop window stood not simply as a display of goods but as a stage of modernity: there, the lighting and the movement of textiles, powered by electricity – the preeminent symbol of modernity and a constant presence at expositions – evoked cinematic imagery. The shop window blurred the boundary between the shop window and the urban scene of the lively Rue des boutiques, turning the the commodity into art object and the city itself from commodity to be consumed to art, and avant-garde art at that.

**Le Corbusier’s Esprit Nouveau Pavilion**

The ambivalence toward modernity generally present at the Exposition characterized the reception of another important pavilion, Le Corbusier’s *Esprit Nouveau*, hailed by some as one of the few truly innovative elements on show at the Exposition. The organizers were openly hostile to Le Corbusier’s project from the beginning, first refusing to grant him terrain, then, after much lobbying, allotting him one of the worst and least visible spaces, tucked away between the wings of the Grand Palais, in the Cours-la-Reine. Additionally, Le Corbusier had much difficulty securing financial support, finally receiving the sponsorship of Gabriel Voisin and Henri Frugès. The

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92 Gronberg 88-91.
93 Gabriel Voisin was an early aviator and inventor. In the interwar period, he designed and manufactured top-of-the-line automobiles known as Avion Voisin. It is as a nod to him that Le Corbusier titled his 1925 urbanist plan to reconstruct Paris “Plan Voisin.”
antagonism between the organizers and Le Corbusier stemmed from Le Corbusier’s program which openly challenged the very ideology and object of the exposition. In a now notorious passage of 1918, Le Corbusier announced that “There is an artistic hierarchy: decorative art [is] at the bottom.” In 1925, he attacked the Exposition as backward and stuck in the past and all but irrelevant, calling it a “‘Marathon’ international des arts de la maison.” He further declared the program of his proposed Esprit Nouveau pavilion to be as follows:


Le Corbusier’s disdain for the decorative arts and for what he saw as pseudo-modernism of contemporary art, design and architecture were just as disquieting for the organizers as was his standardized, industrial vision of modernity. For Le Corbusier, the modern spirit was profoundly transformed by the machine, and so were social conditions through the increasingly scientific methods of production, which Le Corbusier endorsed

Henri Frugès was a wealthy industrialist from Bordeaux who admired the modernist architectural vision of Le Corbusier and who had commissioned him to construct an experimental standardized workers’ housing complex in Pessac outside Bordeaux. There Le Corbusier built prototypes of the kind of housing he advocated in Esprit Nouveau. See Brian Brace Taylor, Le Corbusier at Pessac (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

96 Le Corbusier, qtd. in Livre des expositions universelles 132.
97 Le Corbusier, qtd. in Livre des expositions universelles 135.
98 Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, “After Cubism” 142.
assertively as early as 1918. Yet, he noted, in artistic and architectural discourse the machine remained a symbol of ugliness, filth and cruelty, and was seen as a threat to long-standing cultural traditions. Art and architecture resisted this new machine-defined modernity, choosing instead to long for an idealized image of the past, and thus rendering themselves obsolete and irrelevant. Le Corbusier saw this effort as meaningless and nostalgic: after all, the past too produced alongside beautiful things ugly ones (e.g., excessive ornamentation) that did not always merit the attention and admiration, and even less so in a context that called for truly new modern style: “everything has its time and place and […] nothing from the past is directly of use to us. For our life in this world is a path on which we can never retrace our steps.” Instead, in a series of essays and articles from the early 1920s, he called for a much needed reassessment of fundamental urbanistic and architectural principles to confront the real challenges of modern society. Further, as Mary McLeod has convincingly shown, Le Corbusier saw the machine – a symbol of rationalization and industrial efficiency – as a social tool, making architecture

99 In “After Cubism,” Le Corbusier wrote: “The War over, everything organizes [sic], everything is clarified and purified; factories rise, already nothing remains as it was before the War: the great Competition [sic] has tested everything and everyone, it has gotten rid of aging methods and imposed in their place others that the struggle has proven their betters (133). […] By revolutionizing work, the machine sowed the seeds of grand social transformations by imposing different conditions on the mind, it prepared it for a new orientation. […] This transformation seems to us an advance; it is an important factor in modern life. Current evolutionary trends in work lead through utility to synthesis and order. This has been called “Taylorism,” and it a pejorative sense. In fact, it is only a matter of the intelligent exploitation of scientific discoveries. Instrictent, trial-and-error, empiricism are replaced by scientific principles of analysis, by organization and classification” (142).

Le Corbusier’s interest in Taylorism was more than theoretical. Soon after his relocating to Paris in 1917, he became involved with the Société d’Application du Béton Armé, and shortly after, founded his own enterprise, which included a small brick factory. He wrote with admiration: “The scene magnificent: enormous gas meters, four huge chimneys to the east. I breathe proudly on my site: the bureaucrat, the agent, the functionary, the eunuch architect will be obliterated one day, finally. I will make beautiful prints of my factory and I will be able to talk of ‘my stocks’ and ‘my sales’ like a rice or coal merchant.” (Letter to William Ritter, October 16, 1917, cited in Taylor, Le Corbusier at Pessac 6.)

100 Le Corbusier, “Decorative Art of Today” 42, 134.

101 Le Corbusier, “Decorative Art of Today” 42.
inexpensively and widely available to all, and democratizing art and design thanks to mass production. He writes, “today the rich know what poverty is because they can see it unvarnished. The poor have a fair idea of what wealth is because they can access it directly or indirectly.”

The *Esprit Nouveau* pavilion first shown at the 1925 Exposition was conceived as a manifesto of these ideas. The pavilion was designed as a model residence for an imaginary middle class of a future technocratic society, extracted theoretically from a row of apartment buildings in a planned project for a modern contemporary city of three million residents. Both the residential unit and the larger proposed living complex claimed to offer solutions to the pressing social problems of modern urban society.

The *Esprit Nouveau* pavilion consisted of a cube, designed to serve as living quarters, juxtaposed to a rectangular prism whose sides were rounded to form a rotunda, and which housed an exhibition on urbanism (1.31 and 1.32). The link between the model

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103 Le Corbusier, “Decorative Art of Today” 42.
apartment and the exhibit on the city of tomorrow established an explicit conceptual connection between modern living conditions and urban reorganization, between interior and exterior. The sharp geometric formulation of living space was motivated by Le Corbusier’s search for greater efficiency (a more efficient use of resources and space) and claimed to respond to human aspirations toward order: “On lutte contre le hasard, contre le désordre [...] on aspire à l’ordre, et l’ordre est atteint par l’appel aux bases déterminantes de notre esprit: la géometrie.”¹⁰⁵ And further, “man’s tendency is toward pure geometry.”¹⁰⁶ The geometric order of living space in Le Corbusier’s view supposedly appealed to human rationality and imposed a rigid and reassuring order on an otherwise irrational and chaotic universe.¹⁰⁷ By contrast, he considered curved and twisted spaces a manifestation and cause of weakness and limitations.¹⁰⁸ Scientific and technological advances promised to eliminate such conditions – specifically the “ruinous, difficult and dangerous” curve, and to usher in the era of the straight line and right angle. Le Corbusier’s stance was that the same design and construction principles used in the manufacture of automobiles and ocean liners – not only emblems of modernity but also a peak in industrial, economic and operational efficiency – should be applied to living space.¹⁰⁹ The Esprit Nouveau residential unit was modeled after these principles. The key premise of the pavilion was made obvious by a sign at the entrance that declared “INDUSTRY TAKES OVER BUILDING,” a statement confirmed by the austere geometry of the pavilion which gave it a sense of being engineered rather than designed in the French building and decorative tradition. The fact that the pavilion was entirely

¹⁰⁷ See City of Tomorrow, ch. 2 “Order.”
¹⁰⁸ Le Corbusier, City of Tomorrow 24.
¹⁰⁹ Troy 220.
constructed from prefabricated and standardized elements (e.g., concrete frames, windows, and doors), tools and techniques (e.g., a new cement-gun advertised in *Esprit Nouveau*, 1.33) helped conceptualize it as a mass-produced machine for living, a “cellule habitable pratique, […] véritable machine à habiter.”\(^{110}\) Its box- and machine-like form, structure and function was symbolically compelling, for it evoked the possibility of “repetition and gridding as ways of building up the whole from its parts.”\(^{111}\) (Of course, its initialization presupposed fragmentation.) As such, the living cell was placed in the service of a new way of living and state of mind, namely, what Le Corbusier called “a mass-production state of mind”:

We must create a mass-production state of mind:

A state of mind for building mass-production housing.

A state of mind for living in mass-production housing.

A state of mind for conceiving mass-production housing.\(^{112}\)

\(^{110}\) Le Corbusier, qtd. in *Livre des expositions* 135. Similarly, he saw furniture and other daily objects as machines, e.g., the chair as a machine for sitting.

\(^{111}\) Paul Overy,”The Cell in the City” in *Architecture and Cubism* 117.

Of course, this formulation and the multiple forceful imperatives puts in question his assertion of the naturalness of order, geometry and efficiency. Le Corbusier’s famous formulation of the home as a machine hinted at the degree to which he conflated design and industry, challenging the conventional notion promoted by the Art Deco Exposition that design was an artistic practice at all. Le Corbusier’s radically innovative idea critiqued the general representational and ideological tendencies at the exposition.

This thinking extended to the interior design as well. The living space was divided horizontally by a slab of concrete, forming an interior mezzanine loft accessible through a tubular metal staircase imitating the kind found in ocean liners (1.34).¹¹³

¹¹³ Le Corbusier noted its versatility and usability in factories, sports complexes, garages, exhibitions halls, etc. in “Procédés et matériaux nouveaux” in L’Almanach d’architecture moderne (Paris: CRES, 1926 [1925]).
The inclusion of elements conventionally not associated with interior spaces undermined the apartment’s status as the family abode and asserted its new status as a machine for living. The model apartment was furnished sparsely, with box-like, mass-produced and commercially available furniture (e.g., the Thonet bentwood chairs, again a staple of outdoor cafés and not the home, or the modular storage units Le Corbusier designed himself). Highly versatile, these elements eliminated the need for separate pieces such as buffets, sideboards, etc. Le Corbusier maintained the use of unconventional materials for home furnishings, particularly metal, which he employed for a simple dining table and for the modular furniture units. As Troy has noted, by combining versatile furnishings from seemingly disparate contexts, the Esprit Nouveau

114 Troy 220.
interior rejected the harmonious ensemble in the decorative arts. These pieces, whose form evoked the Purist object, were conceived as tools, équipement de la maison (or “human-limb objects,” so called because they were intended to “supplement our natural capabilities”), emphasizing functionality over style (or rather, functionality as style), as well as the logic modern design shared with machines. While seemingly in accord with the decorative arts’ effort to incorporate industrial methods in the production of decorative arts, Le Corbusier took the idea to an extreme, conflating decorative arts and industry, and dislodging the conventional premise — dominant at the exposition — that design is an artistic practice. Thus, these “tools for living” openly flaunted their industrial origin in sharp contrast to the general tendency of the decorative arts at the exposition, which sought to conceal their method of production, and emphasized their anonymity, in opposition to the custom made, handcrafted, signed and unique furniture hailed at the Expo. The irony in Le Corbusier’s interior design lay in the fact that the Esprit Nouveau pavilion was more a manifesto than a realization of his ideas since most of the items were in fact custom made, including the commercially available products, e.g., Maple’s leather clubchair, which turned out to be too big for Le Corbusier’s ‘standard’ doors.

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115 The organizers had warned against the “fortuitous reunion of a large number of display objects that are disparate and without purpose. […] In order to make decorative art understood, and to give a clear idea of its existence and particular value, it is necessary that every object participates as much as possible in the logical constitution of a homogeneous ensemble” (Troy 218-226).
117 Le Corbusier, “Type-Needs” in “Decorative Art of Today” 72.
118 Le Corbusier’s enthusiasm for industrially produced design was at odds with even those who supported a closer collaboration between arts and industry since they limited the use of machines only as a way to facilitate production but insisted on the limited-scale, unique or small number products based on original designs.
119 McLeod 141.
The *Esprit Nouveau* pavilion critiqued the image of modernity promoted at the exposition – a modernity associated with luxury, exclusivity, and uniqueness. In opposition to the practice of abundant decoration common among decorative artists at the exposition (e.g., Ruhlmann), ornamentation in the *Esprit Nouveau* pavilion was similarly very scarce and manifestly modernist, displaying sculptures of Jacques Lipchitz and paintings by Fernand Léger, Juan Gris, Amédée Ozenfant, and Le Corbusier himself.\(^{120}\)

\[\begin{align*}
\text{1.35 } & \text{*Esprit Nouveau* pavilion, exterior. Statue by Lipchitz on the right.} \\
\text{1.36 } & \text{Interior of *Esprit Nouveau* pavilion. The painting visible on the right wall is the work of Juan Gris. A painting by Le Corbusier hangs over the dining table on the right.}
\end{align*}\]

\[^{120}\text{Interestingly, Troy has noted that while Le Corbusier collapsed the distinction between decorative arts and industry, he maintained the distinction between art and industry, since the paintings and sculptures that hung on the walls differed dramatically from the anonymous, mass-produced objects he praised (Troy 195-196).}\]
as well as some African and Asian *objets d’art* which broke away in another significant way from the Exposition and French decorative arts tradition (1.35 and 1.36). Le Corbusier, influenced by Austrian modernist Adolf Loos,\(^{121}\) rejected ornamentation as an expression of the fascination with an earlier state of development, “a captivating encounter by our animal spirit with its own image lingering in the products of a developing culture [...]. Gilt decoration and precious stones are the work of the tamed savage who is still alive in us.”\(^{122}\) Ornament for him was anachronistic, as it no longer expressed the modern spirit and the new social demands, and he protested against the uncritical acceptance of decoration as if it were a religion.\(^{123}\) By contrast, Le Corbusier found new principles of decoration in the machine not only in the method of production but also in the appropriation of the purist object. To the opulent, luxurious home he opposed the aesthetic of the automobile or the ocean liner: “pure, simple, clear, appropriate, healthy [design]. Contrast: the rugs, the cushions, the canopies, the damask wallpapers, the gilded and sculpted furniture, the vieille-marquise or ballets-russes colors; dismal gloom of our Western bazaar.”\(^{124}\)

For Le Corbusier, it was geometry, order and standardization inspired by the technocratic drive for greater efficiency and productivity rooted in Taylorism that would modernize dwellings, as proposed by the *Esprit Nouveau* model residence. Le Corbusier insisted on the tremendous social implications of his proposal. The living conditions for

\(^{121}\) Adolf Loos attacked the idea of ornamentation in his famous 1908 essay “Ornament and Crime” [*Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays*, tr.by Michael Mitchell (Los Angeles: Ariadne Press, 1997)]. In it, Loos argued that “the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use” (167). But ornamentation was not only an index of development; it also had the power to shape cultural progress. Thus, Loos attacked the state for promoting the development and revival of ornament in an effort to hinder cultural progress, because primitive people are presumably easier to rule than cultured citizens (168-169).

\(^{122}\) Le Corbusier, “Decorative Arts of Today” 12.

\(^{123}\) Le Corbusier, “Decorative Arts of Today” 7.

\(^{124}\) Le Corbusier, “Des yeux qui ne voient pas…. Les Paquebots.”
the growing working masses were deplorable: inadequate and unhygienic, they were remnants of medieval hierarchical structures and signs of grossly uneven wealth distribution, and threatened to incite discontent, class conflict and even revolution: “la sécurité du logement est la condition de l’équilibre social.”

In other words, clean and orderly architecture could be used as a social tool to appease the working classes and avoid class conflict. The same principles needed to extend to plans for reorganization of the metropolis. This is not to say that his plan provided a viable solution for resolving class conflict or disproportionate wealth distribution. As Richards has shown, the solution lay in Le Corbusier’s unshakable belief in Taylorism’s presumed power to regulate or transform hierarchical social structures – by, e.g., excluding shifting from subjective rule to administration of things, by replacing ‘natural’ hierarchies with a merit-based class system, by adopting efficient methods of production that would allow for greater wealth-creation which would trickle down to the working classes, and thus eradicate class conflict and social unrest. (As an additional fail-safe, Le Corbusier imposed a strict segregation between the managing class and the working class, discussed below.)

At the Exposition, Le Corbusier underscored the interdependency between an individual dwelling and the larger urban context with the accompanying exhibit on urbanism in the Annex to the *Esprit Nouveau* pavilion. Le Corbusier drew parallels between the changed conditions that necessitated the transformation of the home and the new social reality that called for a reorganization of the metropolis. He claimed the

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126 “Architecture or Revolution” was the slogan at the end of his book *Vers une architecture*. “Revolution can be avoided,” Le Corbusier wrote.
stuffy, unsanitary, gilded homes deprived of air and light corresponded the crooked, disorganized, narrow streets, which he saw as oppressive, unmanageable, and unable to adapt to new transportation or business needs; therefore the transformation of living conditions had to extend to the city. The exhibit displayed projects for the Plan Voisin (1925) and the Contemporary City, a model city of three million residents, which offered a new vision of the modern city and from where the model apartment that the Esprit Nouveau pavilion represented was theoretically extracted. The Plan Voisin was essentially a proposal to modernize a section of the center of Paris, about two square miles on the Right Bank of the Seine (1.37).

The proposed ‘modernization’ involved bulldozing the existing center and substituting it with a new neighborhood. His audacity was undoubtedly accompanied with a totalitarian attitude. For Le Corbusier, Paris was anachronistic and unable to meet the demands of modern society and modern man. This backwardness was manifested most powerfully in the image of the Parisian street: crooked, messy, and narrow, once “[des] plancher[s] des vaches’ sur le[s]quel[s] on a posé du pavé, sous le[s]quel[s] on a creusé quelques

\footnote{127 In “Une ville contemporaine” Le Corbusier referred to the medieval streets as “rue en corridor” to emphasize these characteristics.}
métros,”

These streets were only appropriate for cattle or donkeys. They also imparted a backward and provincial air on major European cities like Paris that had grown around them. The omnipresence of such medieval streets did not alter their unnaturalness, according to Le Corbusier; their outdated and zigzagging course presented major obstacles for modern city-dwellers hindering them from living their lives rationally and productively. “The winding road is the Pack-Donkey’s Way, the straight road is man’s way,” he famously wrote in The City of To-Morrow. Further, their structural particularities obstructed the flow of air, creating unsanitary conditions, and prevented the streets from accommodating modern transportation and business needs. In his Plan Voisin, so titled in a nod to the Voisin automobile manufacture and a symbolic dedication in anticipation of an era centered around the automobile, Le Corbusier imposed his vision of austere, ordered and pure forms characteristic of an automobile onto the unruly Parisian center, proposing instead to replace it with a massive grid of streets, intended to streamline air circulation, traffic, and business. This new center would be constructed with automobiles in mind, as testified by the immense multi-level street system planned to accommodate most efficiently the growth of automobile traffic and public transportation. This transportation hub was intended to replace the conventional portes as entry points to the city. Pedestrian spaces, now assigned only the function of connecting carefully chosen points, were sidelined, as if to eliminate occasional and random human interaction. The central functions attributed to this transportation infrastructure testifies to the radical shift in the ways citizens wold relate to the urban context of this future city: direct contact with the urban environment, the visual and physical process of walking

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128 “Une ville contemporaine” 160.
129 Le Corbusier, City of To-morrow 12.
around the city would be substituted for access mediated by automobiles and grid of roads.

A similar concern with orderliness and social control characterized the residential quarter and the business district of the Plan Voisin. In the business quarter, eighteen cruciform skyscrapers two hundred meters tall (sixty stories) would accommodate many more businesses and employees than spread out business districts (1.35). Yet, the higher concentration will be mitigated precisely by the verticality of the business skyscrapers, which, according to the plan, would only take up five percent of the land (in line with Le Corbusier’s drive for efficient use of space). The rest of the space would be occupied by parks, within which pedestrian spaces, including shops and cafés, will be developed.  

Yet, the plans look staggeringly devoid of life, as if suggesting that individual, too, has been ‘ordered’ in their appropriate places, that individual and social behavior conformed to spatial order. The lack of public buildings and ‘unregulated’ spaces for social activity revealed Le Corbusier’s obsession with technocratic administration and social control. 

A series of low, private immeubles-villas in the residential quarters would be erected to accommodate the managerial class employed at the business district. The Esprit Nouveau pavilion, minus the annex, is a model of such a villa: a prefabricated, standardized yet comfortable, airy and luxurious unit. Interestingly, the Plan Voisin does not specify details on the workers’ housing, nor do the plans allocate specific areas for such developments, hinting at the rigid class segregation Le Corbusier maintained. However, the plans for a Contemporary City developed in 1922, offer a look into his

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vision. While workers’ dwellings are relegated to the outskirts of the center, they were
developed as spacious, airy, hygienic garden-city complexes, with central water, heating
and electric systems. As Richards has pointed out, the Plan Voisin offers substantial
improvements in working and living conditions to the latter.\(^{132}\) Yet, it is also undeniable
that this urbanist vision which relied on idealized class relations, sustained a rigid division between these classes, revealing its authoritarian nature.\(^ {133} \)

The urban vision Le Corbusier proposed both in the exhibit on urbanism in the
annex and through the Esprit Nouveau pavilion openly challenged the image of the city
put forth by the Exposition, namely, the metropolis whose modernity is defined through
luxury. His participation at the exposition rejected outright the reinterpretation of
conventional notions of urban space and modern architecture and decorative art, and saw
them as a refusal to address the real issues of housing and urbanism, to which he
attempted to respond by rejecting a tradition that valued craftsmanship, uniqueness and
originality. Challenged by Le Corbusier’s vision, the organizers were horrified when they
saw the Esprit Nouveau pavilion. They found his vision of modern man disquieting; they
also saw it as a threat to French national heritage because the Esprit Nouveau pavilion

\(^{132}\) Richards 32.
\(^{133}\) In the 1920s, Le Corbusier, under the sponsorship of Henri Frugès, built a community of houses in
Pessac in Bordeaux called Quartiers Modernes Frugès. The complex included private, semi-detached and
detached houses, as well as several-stories tall apartment buildings in a project that had a lot in common
with his plans for the contemporary city discussed above. The Pessac project was attacked as a failed social
and aesthetic experiment, and produced apocalyptic interpretations of the architecture of the future. In early
1981, intrigued by a book by an architectural historian Philippe Boudon (Lived-In Architecture, Le
Corbusier’s Pessac Revisited (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972)) discussing Le Corbusier’s work in a positive
light, the architectural critic of The New York Times Ada Louise Huxtable visited Pessac in search for an
assessment, decades later, of the project. Much to her surprise, she found out the apocalyptic views of the
complex to be exaggerated, commenting specifically on the way in which dwellers had appropriated what
was considered rigid, engineered and cell-like space quite smoothly and successfully, and still praised the
original layout and proportions (of light versus structure and of houses versus green spaces). “There is no
sense,” she wrote, “of the architect’s will imposed,’ or of an unyielding, authoritarian design.” See Ada
(March 15, 1981).
proposed to usher in a total rejection of the decorative arts, of organic forms, of the connection to an individual artist or crafts tradition in favor of an abstract, standardized, geometric aesthetic that was at odds with the image of France the exposition wanted to promote. So unacceptable was his vision that the organizers had a fence seven meters tall built around it to hide the pavilion from sight. After much lobbying, the fence was removed and the pavilion was even awarded a prize by the international jury, though the prize may have been more remedial than authentic, because, as the president of the Jury, the artist Auguste Perret declared, “There is no architecture here.”

Conclusion

The 1925 Art Deco Exposition was conceived in the hopes of renegotiating France’s attitude toward modernity in the post-war period. It promised enthusiastically to create a new, modern style and innovative aesthetic tendencies in an effort to reclaim France’s position as a leader in style making, also hoping to improve its economic standing. The Exposition was also intended to address the new social, political, economic and urban realities, explicitly identifying the dissemination and democratization of beauty as a primary goal. The exposition project also fit within the larger effort to reform the decorative arts in France, which lagged behind other European countries, e.g., England, Germany, Italy and Spain, since in France they lacked institutional and financial support, held to traditional notions of design and crafts, resisted incorporating new methods of production from fear of losing a quintessential element of Frenchness.

However, the images produced at the exposition frustrated these goals and expectations. The exposition chose to present an image of luxury, handmade and unique

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134 Qtd. In Le Corbusier, *Decorative art of today.*
craftsmanship, and to appeal to the rich élite, casting aside any considerations for the new social circumstances. It revealed France’s anti-industrial and anti-commercial bias, just as it revealed that the Exposition was a matter of defending national prestige, and cast doubts on the intention to create a modern style for France, proposing instead luxury as an index of modernity.
CHAPTER TWO

Colonial Modern and the 1931 Colonial Exposition

2.1 Plan of the 1931 Exposition.

When the International Colonial Exposition opened on May 6, 1931 in Paris, it spread over 110 hectares in the Bois de Boulogne around the Lac Daumesnil. Its pavilions imagined and reproduced what was advertised as a tour of the world in one day (le tour du monde en un jour), an unknown and fascinating world accessible to Parisians by the new metro line 8 extended especially for the occasion to the Porte d’Honneur, the official exposition entrance. Right there, the Cité des Informations welcomed the visitors with various information stalls on France’s and other nations’ overseas territories. The Cité des Informations, a major pavilion in the Section métropolitaine, was meant to educate the French people about ‘their’ colonies and to raise awareness about the various opportunities they offered, but also to greet visitors with the powerful advertising
campaign and to prepare them for the wonders of the French colonies that could be seen in the *tour du monde* that followed.

From the *Cité des Informations*, visitors were invited to take a ride on a finocular, driven by an ‘indigène’ coiffed with an English colonial hairdo,\(^1\) to circle through the pavilions of French and foreign colonies in the *Section métropolitaine*, the *Section étrangère*, and the *Section Française*. The ‘indigène’, cast as well-adjusted to the modern age and to Western life, testified to the success of the *mission civilisatrice* and to the monumental achievement that was France’s colonial project. This theme was celebrated in the nearby *Musée des Colonies*, which, contrary to its name, focused not so much on the colonies as on the contributions France’s colonization had purportedly made in the overseas territories.

The visitors’ itinerary then took them to the Avenue des Colonies, where most of the French colonial pavilions stood. There,

> the charming habitations of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Reunion […] contrast with the rude lodgings of the fishermen of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, the forest pavilion of Guyana, the evocative Palace of the French Indian Establishments, the shadowed houses of Tahiti, New Caledonia and their dependencies, and the pavilion of the Somali Coast.\(^2\)

The *Avenue des Colonies*, not unlike the *Musée des Colonies*, had little to do with celebrating the colonies and their individual histories and merits; rather, it stood collected and organized the latter to suit the fancy of France. The *tour du monde* was a tour of the world according to France’s logic and desire. As if to make up for the suspension of reality there, the exposition had plotted indigenous people, pretending to continue their

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\(^1\) Catherine Hodeir, “Une journée à l’Exposition Coloniale…” in «*Le temps des colonies*”, special issue of *L’Histoire* 69 (July-August 1984) 41.

daily activities unaware of the gaze of visitors, in order to underscore the authenticity of
the exhibit.

Visitors strolling around the Exposition experienced the *tour du monde* as a
seamless and harmonious display of cultures, people, and artifacts, truthful to the colonial
reality and the civilizing mission’s success. The exposition was praised as a success by
the press and visitors, as an event that showed convincingly the merits of colonialism to
both colonizer and colonized. It also constructed a seemingly convincing reflection of
how France saw itself: as a strong power, economically solid and internationally
respected, a great nation with 100 million inhabitants on five continents that united in the
idea of *la plus grande France*.

While it is true that the exposition was international in nature, it is also true that
France seized the opportunity to stage its own colonial power and size, and to emerge as
a world leader in the post-war period, overshadowing the rest of the nations. Not
surprisingly, the French sections constituted a large part of the exposition, and in addition
to its own dedicated *Section Française*, France planted pavilions representing its empire
throughout the entire exposition grounds. For instance, the North African section, which
included the pavilions of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria – all dependencies of France,
pierced the Southern meadow of the *Section étrangère*, as did the pavilions celebrating
France’s North American holdings (Saint-Pierre and Miquelon). The Protectorates of
Togo and Cameroon, Syria and Palestine, were also represented in France’s foreign
section, although they had been transferred to France only recently after Germany’s
defeat in the Great War. All of these examples show the organizational intent on behalf of
France to make itself present everywhere throughout the exposition grounds and to amplify the sense that its empire was indeed spread throughout the world.

The circumstances of the exposition decidedly favored France: its archrival at the expositions and the only larger colonial power, Britain, declined to participate (apart from a stall at the Cité des informations), as it had organized its own imperial exposition in 1924. Furthermore, France dominated the highly ambiguous and labile displays of the exposition’s foreign participants. For instance, Italy celebrated its colonial presence with monuments from Ancient Roman times, revealing its eagerness to cast itself as an heir to Ancient Roman imperialism but also exposing its insecurities about the recently unified nation, its present-day colonial and international prestige (Italy’s imperial ambitions were halted in the interwar period). Similarly, Portugal tried to resurrect its Golden Imperialist Age by erecting two 15th century châteaux. The United States, initially reluctant to take part in an event labeled “colonial,” chose to reconstruct George Washington’s Mount Vernon home, to put up an homage to LaFayette and to display a number of artifacts that underlined the intellectual and historical connection between France and the United States (e.g., a key from the Bastille, Louis XIV tapestries, etc.). Only a relatively small part of the American display was devoted to its dependencies Puerto Rico, Guam, Hawaii and Samoa because of lack of popular support for framing those dependencies as “colonies” per se. The American display, purposely avoiding colonial references, served to obfuscate the country’s present status as a colonizer and to focus instead on the nation’s colonial past. At the Exposition Holland and Belgium were the only true competitors to France’s colonial ambitions, with their growing dependencies

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3 For a detailed overview of Italian colonialism, see Ruth Ben Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds. *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2005).
in Africa and Asia. Holland erected reproductions of Javanese and Balinese temples with materials imported specially for the occasion from Asia. Belgium’s expansive territories in Africa were represented by Congolese huts with thatched roofs whose exterior was painted with the Belgian colors and interior with traditional Congolese blue and gold to promote cohesiveness between the modern nation and its territories.

While the Exposition was a chance for France to cast itself as a great leader in the post-war period with its imperial expansion guaranteeing international prestige, it also revealed a shift in priority in the tradition of the expositions from purely aesthetic to mainly political. The explicit connection between national renewal, economic and military strength, and international standing, on the one hand, and the empire, on the other, was more strongly and openly argued at the 1931 exposition in relationship to modernity than ever before.

*The Invention of La Plus Grande France: The Exposition Narrative*

The official purpose of the 1931 exposition was to educate the French population about their Empire and to raise awareness and support for the French colonial project. Since their inception, the expositions had served to promote elaborate ideological notions, as defined by a ruling elite, and to disseminate them to the masses through the classic formula of educating while entertaining. Frédéric Le Play, the commissioner general of the 1855 and 1867 great universal expositions held in Paris, was responsible for

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4 Marcel Olivier wrote in the *Rapport Général*: “Sous sa forme première, encore bien imprécise, [l’exposition] visait à des fins plus esthétiques que nationales. [...] Dès lors, à mesure que l’importance du fait colonial se précisait dans les esprits, la conception initiale d’une Exposition de l’Exotisme s’enrichissait, s’amplifiait, tendait vers des buts plus élevés. Il ne s’agissait plus de reconstituer artificiellement, par des pastiches architecturaux et des cortèges de figurants, une ambiance exotique, mais de mettre sous les yeux des visiteurs un raccourci impressionnant des résultats de la colonisation, des réalités présentes, de son avenir.” *Exposition coloniale internationale de Paris, Rapport Général* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1932-34), vol. 1, xi-xii.
for applying this formula to the expositions. The 19th century faced a modernity that introduced rapid industrialization and the birth of the working class, a modernity that boasted scientific and technological advances which unsettled the existing worldview at the same time as they defined progress. For Le Play, the Expositions offered a powerful platform to weave together a narrative of progress and modern civilization. Arguing that technological and scientific advances correlated with the rise of Western civilization, he used the expositions as a vehicle to ‘educate’ workers about their role in the grand scheme of progress.\(^5\) As Della Coletta put it: “Workers thus enjoyed as spectacle what they normally experienced as work, and pedagogy and ideology joined arms to emphasize a tale told for the sake of national prestige, industrial might, and interclass pacification.”\(^6\) Right from the beginning, the potential of fairs as a vehicle to disseminate propaganda was recognized and put to use.

In that respect, the 1931 exposition did not differ from its predecessors. Just as Le Play used the didactic potential of the great Universal Expositions to address the working class, so the organizers used the 1931 Exposition to respond to the general apathy of the French public toward the empire. Historians agree that while the 19th century saw unprecedented expansion of the French colonial empire in Asia, Africa and the Pacific, the French population lacked awareness of the French colonial reality. The attitude of the public was marked by indifference, ignorance, even hostility. Politically and economically, too, the management of the overseas territories was most often

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uncoordinated, short-term, lacking in deliberate initiatives, and often disrupted by serious debates: They centered on the cost and scale of economic development overseas, with the Métropole unwilling to pay for the modern empire it wanted – and claimed – to have; on the military role and significance of the colonies; on how to govern the territories. In the early 20th century, as the economic interdependence of the colonies and the Métropole grew immensely, the need to promote better understanding of and to assert the importance of the colonies to modern France became a priority.

The economic case for integration of the colonies was at the forefront of the exposition. Olivier emphasized this idea in his Rapport général: “Plus les difficultés économiques s’accumulaient, plus il devenait évident que, pour un pays comme le nôtre, coloniser n’est pas un luxe comme on l’a trop souvent répété, mais un besoin.” One of the most prominent proponents of the case for consolidation, Albert Sarrault, Minister of the Colonies at the time, proposed the most elaborate plan for integration, which included extending the republican legal-political framework and the creation of a common market. Although his legislative proposal failed initially, ironically to be resurrected and put in practice right before decolonization, he articulated a vision of la plus grande France based on reevaluation of its relationship to the colonies in a policy proposal that came to

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8 In the interwar period, the colonies became France’s number one trading partner, driven by consumer demand at home for more imported (exotic) products and by the need for manufactured goods and services in the colonies (in 1900, they were France’s third largest partner). Exports increased more than twofold; significant capital investments were redirected toward the colonies and the state moved to pass necessary legislation to facilitate market expansion. While this information was prominently included in the Exposition’s exhibits, it is worth noting that for the majority of visitors, the riches of the colonies were out of reach. The phantasmagoric quality of the fairs, much like the 19th century events which taught visitors to “look at everything; touch nothing,” disguised a lesson in social class hierarchy at the 1931 fair as well. Cf. Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, tr. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002), “Convolute G” 201.
9 Olivier xiii.
be known as “mise en valeur” (economic development).\textsuperscript{10} Sarrault’s argument was explicitly predicated on the strong link between the future strength of the nation and the economic development and wealth of France’s overseas holdings, if only because consolidated, France would stand on 5 continents, in a territory 20 times bigger than the Métropole, with a population of over 100 million.\textsuperscript{11}

The Exposition similarly sought to turn the colonies, long viewed as a liability, into an asset, into France’s only possibility of salvation. Governor-General Marcel Olivier wrote in the \textit{Rapport Général}:

\begin{quote}
Le désarroi du monde s’aggravant, ce n’est plus seulement la France, ce ne sont plus seulement les nations colonisatrices, c’est tout le monde occidental qui se tourne aujourd’hui vers les territoires coloniaux. À ce monde en train de se cambrer, M. Joseph Caillaux montrait, il n’y a pas lontemps, comme une ultime planche de salut: l’Afrique.\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

Olivier’s message was echoed by Henri Bonnamaux, who expressed his hopes at the 1931 Congress of Colonial Education that the Exposition would educate “the entire nation” about the fact that “its very life depends on the preservation of its colonial domain, on its economic development [mise-en-valeur], on ever closer soul to soul contact with the native.”\textsuperscript{13}

The image of the colonies as salvation for the West initially seems to be in sharp contrast to French paternalism toward its colonies: how could it be that the French colonizer, who, driven by Enlightenment ideas and a sense of moral obligation stemming from the superiority of consciousness, benevolently saves the primitive from self-

\textsuperscript{10} Albert Sarrault, \textit{La Mise en valeur des colonies françaises} (Paris: Payot, 1923).
\textsuperscript{11} This argument resonated in the most important debates at the time, namely the economy and national security. Cf. Thomas, ch. 2 “Colonial Planning and Administrative Practice,” esp. 56-62.
\textsuperscript{12} Olivier xiii.
destruction, and relies on the colonies for the salvation of France? It is clear that France speaks of its reliance on the colonies from a political and economic aspect: France’s colonies boost its riches with the immense material, labor and territorial resources – i.e., these are given, and not signs of cultural advancement, and the colonizer/colonized hierarchy is preserved intact. This ambiguity in the attitude is also revealing of French efforts to appropriate the colonial other: the colonies’ resources are French, just as production in the colonies and by the colonies is equally French. This appropriation is equally present in the field of cultural production.\textsuperscript{14}

The \textit{Cité des Informations} in particular and the Exposition in general sought to bring the idea of \textit{la plus grande France} home, by demythologizing it and offering it as a reality.\textsuperscript{15} Right at the gate of the exposition grounds, the \textit{Cité des Informations} (2.2) greeted the visitors with a load of “practical information,” as Marshall Lyautey, the Commissioner General, thought of it,\textsuperscript{16} about the investment opportunities the colonies offered. The complex, which featured a TSF office (\textit{Télégraphe sans fil}), a cinema, a series of informational boutiques and a documentation center, offered numerous statistical, legal, geographic data, and information on the resources and the economic


\textsuperscript{15}In this respect, the metaphor of travel contributed to making the colonies feel real and close. Many accounts identified the visit to the exposition with travel to far-away lands (e.g., the official catalog advertised the fair as a world tour), and praised the exposition for abolishing distances. On the metaphor of travel, cf. Zeynep Çelik, \textit{Displaying the Orient Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World’s Fairs} (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1992), esp. Introduction. See also Morton, \textit{Hybrid Modernities}, ch. 1 “Tour du monde en un jour.”

\textsuperscript{16}Hubert Lyautey, in \textit{Rapport général}, preface vi.
viability of the colonies that promised “to give to the businessman the maximum facilities to put together projects.”

Lyautey write about the Cité des Informations:

2.2 Cité des Informations, 1931 Colonial Exposition.

Au cours de l’Exposition, toutes les autorités françaises, auxquelles j’exposai, sans répit, cette conception, se montrèrent chaleureusement partisans de la création de ce grand centre d’action coloniale, accessible à tous, tenant bureau ouvert à toute demande de renseignements sur les domaines d’outre-mer français et étrangers: foyer d’idées, de réunions, de congrès, de propagande, bref le plus beau et pratique Lendemain [sic] que pût laisser, derrière elle, l’Exposition Coloniale Internationale.

Lyautey’s words give a sense of the colonies as being within reach and on view, accessible to all, open and welcoming “colonial action” – appropriation or exploitation. The emphasis on facts and statistics sums up the view of the colonies as a space reducible

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17 Albert Laprade, architect of the Musée Permanent des Colonies, in a review of the 1931 Exposition. Qtd. in Morton 24.
to the Western understanding of them (facts, numbers, concepts). The reality effect of those facts assured the success of the message that the imperial project was already a fact (as opposed to a still developing and unsettled process), and that in return, the representations of the colonies showcased further in the Exposition were in fact objective truths which themselves guaranteed the veracity of the facts in the Cité des Informations. The decision to include a TSF and a cinema assert that the images of the overseas lands correspond perfectly to a knowable and accessible reality.

Furthermore, Lyautey’s vision linking the colonies to a productive future for France and other colonizing powers rests on the understanding that the colonies are already a fait accompli while simultaneously being a sort of a tabula rasa, waiting to be written, defined and explored. The economic crisis and the devastation of the Great War had underscored the need to reevaluate the colonial project, and to acknowledge its role in constructing modern France, at the same time revealing anxieties about France’s confidence in its future. In this context, the idea of la plus grande France emerged as a figure of political desire that would transcend the republican crisis, reaffirm France’s

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imperial status and legitimacy, and counter economic fluctuations. The colonial project then became identified with national growth and revival.\textsuperscript{21}

Thus, the \textit{Cité des Informations} summarized and brought the colonies, ripe for exploration, to Paris; the TSF played the role of witness of the “network,”\textsuperscript{22} as Lyautey called it, constituted by the Métropole and the colonies; and made it available, “in the form of \textit{fichier économique colonial},” to the public.\textsuperscript{23} Sarrault’s opinion resonated loudly in the message that “la structure économique de l’Europe repose sur des pilotis coloniaux,” and Lyautey took it a step further saying that the future for France lay overseas.\textsuperscript{24}

The new discourse of Greater France therefore created an idealized image of modern France, flushed of all conflicts and contradictions. The Exposition was a powerful channel for the dissemination of this idea, and it employed various strategies to posit this image as an already fulfilled reality, rather than a figure of political desire. Greater France, as suggested by the emergent discourse and by the representational means employed at the Exposition, was projected as a space constructed as “an aggregate of heterogeneous colonies, each of which was distinct from metropolitan France but which together constituted a more or less coherent imperial formation, diverse but unified.”\textsuperscript{25} National collective identity understood modern France and its commitment to the imperialist project as a unifying force that transcended cultural and essential heterogeneity for the triumph of this ‘greater’ nation.

\textsuperscript{22} Lyautey, \textit{Rapport général} vii.
\textsuperscript{23} Lyautey, \textit{Rapport général} vii.
\textsuperscript{24} Sarrault, \textit{La Mise en valeur des colonies françaises} 23. Qtd in Olivier viii.
\textsuperscript{25} Wilder 30.
At the same time as the notion of collective and political consciousness supposedly broadened to include increasingly the colonies, it also narrowed the meaning of what it meant to be French. The discourse of Greater France, insisting on finding unity within difference, forced a revision of the notion of French identity at home, and theoretically erased the differences within the Republic itself. National identity took precedence over regional loyalty, in order to sustain the opposition to the colonies. It suggested a reconceptualization of Frenchness as homogeneous and immutable, thus making it impenetrable from the outside. In addition, the meaning of modern France put forward France’s commitment to colonial expansion as consistent, unswerving and fully congruent with national identity; it cast the colonial consensus as a fact.

The Exposition expounded on those notions of national identity, imperial expansion and national revival. It, too, reaffirmed the veracity of the myth of Frenchness and la plus Grande France as a seamless reality. In that picture/myth, France was culturally, politically and economically unified, and this unity was expressed in the consensus for the colonial project. The Exposition also placed Paris in the role of the uncontested imperial center, myopically – if conveniently – omitting from the myth the ongoing struggle for recognition on behalf of Marseille, which punctured the smooth and conflict-free Exposition narrative.

Marcel Olivier called the Marseille-Paris conflict “honorable rivalry” although the passions and desire to claim status as the imperial capital of France engendered a debate that ran deeper. The Southern French city had publicly asserted its imperial significance at the 1906 National Colonial Exposition. Marseille cast itself as the gate of Empire, geographically positioned at the crossroads of the Métropole and the overseas; as a
unique space where “no element, no person was deracinated.”

This suggested that the colonies – as objects, resources and people – joined the Métropole through and in Marseille with ease, and also that Marseille was the geographic, cultural and administrative center of the Empire. Paris could claim – as it had done – the status of the capital of the arts, of pleasure and of capitalism, but to Marseille ‘naturally’ came the title of capital of the colonies.

That is why the proposal to hold the next colonial exposition in Paris was met with resistance and a sharp response. As Marseille’s Chamber of Commerce explained, a national exposition in Marseille “would represent a date in history not only for [this] ancient city, but above all a time for the whole Nation, saved in its entirety, joyously to affirm her rebirth, her resurrection.”

Holding an international exposition in Paris was to undermine Marseille’s centrality in the French Empire and within the French nation; it was, after all, Marseille’s liminality that established its privileged place as mediator between the Colonies and the Métropole. Culturally, too, Marseille claimed to represent the crossroads between the perceived sophistication of French and Western culture and civilization, and the colorful, diverse and warm-loving peoples from overseas. Yet, Fletcher argues compellingly, it is this duality that disqualified it as a representative of French civilization. She quotes a contemporary writer, Charles Régismanset:

Suddenly, on the docks of Marseilles, the liveliest, most colorful of French cities, one could see going about soldiers and workers from all our colonies, North Africa, West Africa, Madagascar, Tahiti, Somalia, even Indochina. This Babel-like procession certainly constituted the greatest colonial event since the beginning of the century, a veritable reverse crusade.

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26 Yaël Simpson Fletcher, “‘Capital of the Colonies’: Real and Imagined Boundaries between Metropole and Empire in 1920s Marseilles” in Felix Driver and David Gilbert, eds., Imperial Cities (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) 139.
27 Fletcher 139.
28 Fletcher 144.
Marseille was viewed as too ‘colonial,’ and not French enough, but most of all as lacking cohesion and strong links to either France or the colonies, as implied by the Babel reference. Its marginality, instead of helping it bridge the two worlds, denied its belonging to either. Hybridity could have no place in modern France.

The debate around the bid for the Colonial exposition problematized the theme of unity in heterogeneity – not only between the Métropole and the colonies, but also within the Métropole. To resolve the dispute, it was mandated that a national colonial exposition be held at Marseille and an international one (initially titled *interalliée*) in Paris. The myth of unity and colonial consensus was restored at the surface. The arguably successful bid from Marseille decentered Paris’ self-assigned location as the colonial capital of the French Empire and as the head of Greater France. Furthermore, the conflict between Marseille and Paris showed ambivalence – very much present despite contemporary rhetoric – toward alterity both in the colonies and in France.

**Othering the Colonies**

If France’s future was believed to be overseas, as asserted by the cultural logic and political opinions in the 1920s and 1930s, it was less clear what place the colonies and their people would have within greater France. If Sarrault’s policy of colonial development was lined with rhetoric of integration, cooperation, solidarity and unity, he resisted the idea of extending citizenship to colonial people, as Britain began doing at the time; instead, France compensated with “a sincere tenderness… Paternally against our breast, we softly press the humble face of our black or yellow brother, who hears our
hearts beating in unison with his.”

Similarly, even though after the war images of the colonial soldier – a *tirailleur sénégalais*, a North African in the trenches, a fierce ‘*indigène*’ infantryman – circulated widely in oral accounts and in popular literature, contributing to what Girardet has called the broadening of colonial consciousness, the “*indigènes*” remained the objects of the typical Western curiosity and gaze, and in 1931 became objects of an exhibition. In the way that I will explain below, the display practices undermined the political and ideological message sanctioned at the expositions, thus undermining the unproblematic narrative of Greater France, and turned the exposition into a site of display of those unintended meanings and contradictions as the colonies were brought into Paris.

Timothy Mitchell’s important work *Colonising Egypt* opens with an anecdote recounting the visit by four Egyptians to the 1889 Paris Exposition. Their first impression concerned the eagerness of the French to stare at just about anything and anyone. The Exposition provided plenty of material for that purpose (displays of machinery, new products, various pavilions). The one that most unsettled the Egyptian visitors was the Cairo street display, intended to replicate a street in the old part of town, with its bustling crowds of merchants and customers, noises and aromas; faded paint and dirt; even imported Egyptian donkeys and a mosque – except that the display in Paris was most definitely artificial: the paint was noticeably “made” to look dirty; the donkeys were there to rent for a ride down the street; the merchants and sellers were Frenchmen dressed and made up as Egyptians. Even the mosque only was a mosque from the outside: the interior housed a display of an Egyptian coffee shop with dervishes twirling and girls dancing.

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29 Sarrault 122, qtd. in Wilder 33. For more on the paternalist metaphor, see Wilder, ch. 2 “Framing Greater France.”
The Egyptians marveled at this Western way of (re)producing the world. At the same time, they found it surprising that the set-ups were perceived as authentic because, although they were manipulated to look real, the distance between the representations and reality remained.

The exposition further made the Egyptian visitors uncomfortable because in the course of their voyage, they, too, became part of the spectacle. Like many non-Western travelers before them, they were also subjected to the Western gaze, because of their authenticity: in the streets, they were often surrounded by curious locals; at Orientalist Congresses to which they had been invited as honorary guests, they were frequently turned into living evidence of exotic cultures and far away places; even monarchs were not spared the degradation of Western gaze. Such accounts abound: they are mostly witness accounts although the theme of being stared at has also penetrated the non-Western fictional domain. What those foreign travelers articulate is very significant: the concern with arranging and displaying the world as a knowable and visible object, or as a narrative in images is a particularly Western practice. The underlying assumption of the conception of the world in terms of images – “the world as exposition,” to borrow Mitchell’s concept – assured spectators of the perfect correlation between representation and reality, and made them believe that the outside world lay willing to be known and appropriated. By rendering these foreigners and their cultures in display-ready terms, and abolishing the distance between representation and reality, the expositions appropriated non-Westerners within the Western order, and made them physically and

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31 For more on the fictionalization of the gaze and display in Middle Eastern literature, see Mitchell 4-5.
32 Mitchell notes that spectacle was a topic of much debate in Middle Eastern literature: the word did not have an Arabic equivalent and the concept was non-existent.
33 Mitchell revises Heidegger’s idea of the world as image (222).
visually available. Just like the city was made accessible for the observers and visitors with the help of new visual technologies like the o-ramas and bird’s-eye views, so were other cultures and racial differences rendered ‘objective’ – that is, transformed into objects in this visual taxonomy. “One of the beliefs of Europeans is that the gaze has no effect,” one Egyptian wrote.\textsuperscript{34} Certainly, the Egyptian writer is commenting on the power dynamics between the observer and observed: to the all-appropriating and penetrating gaze of the observer corresponds an “objectness”\textsuperscript{35} attached to the displayed objects, whether artifacts, people or cultures.

This “objectness” disavows the displayed object’s intrinsic value, and its ability to negotiate its own meaning. A display necessarily decontextualizes, fragments and detaches the objects from their physical, social and cultural setting, and then the task of producing a display narrative and of reinvesting a meaning into it becomes the prerogative of the collector. As Kirschenblatt-Gimlett has argued in her important essay on the ethnographic object:

[… ] those who construct the display also constitute the subject, even when they seem to do nothing more than relocate an entire house and its contents, brick by brick, board by board, chair by chair. Just as the ethnographic object is the creation of the ethnographers, so, too, are the putative cultural wholes of which they are a part.\textsuperscript{36}

Kirschenblatt-Gimlett’s comment is particularly insightful for the display of otherness in Western modes of representation, given the history of colonialism and the tradition of ‘native’ exhibits. Just as the autonomy of the object of display is handed over to the

\textsuperscript{34} Mitchell 2. \\
\textsuperscript{35} I am borrowing this term from Mitchell, esp. 219. \\
collector and authenticity derived from the collector’s authority, the colonized other is constituted entirely by and in the imaginary of the Western colonizer/collector. Edward Said has analyzed in depth the production of such discourse of the Other, which he termed Orientalism, as an alternative mode of the West to create, dominate and rule over the (Oriental) other, because, as he argued, owing to Orientalism, “the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action.”

The 1931 Colonial Exposition, like all previous displays of ‘native’ people, followed the principle of cataloguing the world, as if in an encyclopedia, realized spatially and visually in the tradition already established by institutions such as the museum, the library, o-ramas, among others. The exposition classified objects, people and cultures in categories such as technical, labor practices, Metropolitan, colonial, and so on. The employed classificatory system necessarily reduced the objects, people and cultures to the political desire of the collector by means of creating an image of the colonial world not as it existed in reality, but as the collector – the organizers of the Exposition within the larger discourse of Greater France – imagined it to be. The fragmentary and decontextualized nature of the collected objects and their metonymic value were superseded by the collector’s narrative within the collection. At the same time, the collection narrative also renegotiated the meanings of the cultural wholes the objects represented. The collection displayed an idealized colonial world, based on difference made visible within the collection. The exposition thus showcased the colonial world in a way that justified the colonial project and France’s civilizing mission. As Marcel Olivier put it in his Official Report:

38 See the introduction of this dissertation, esp. 13-20 and Part One, esp. 62-74.
39 Kirschenblatt-Gimblett.
On a vu [à Vincennes] que la somme des bienfaits qu[e la colonisation] a répandus sur la terre l’emporte de beaucoup sur la somme des maux qu’elle a pu causer; on y a vu enfin que sa tâche, pour si féconde qu’elle fût, n’était pas encore achevée. En Afrique, en Asie, il reste encore des étendues incultes et des populations en léthargie. N’aurait-elle que ces raisons à faire valoir, l’Europe est en droit d’éconduire ceux que la somment d’abandonner son rôle de tutrice.  

This quote reveals an attitude that links the desire for material appropriation of the overseas with the moral imperative to enlighten the uncivilized indigenous people – or in Olivier’s words, to teach the incultes (the primitive, uncivilized, uneducated, uncultivated, ignorant), suggesting again that they are readily available to be taught, civilized, enlightened, appropriated. Such paternalism is predicated on the view of ‘inferior races’ as “civilisations dans l’enfance, perfectibles par les moyens métropolitains, si efficacement utilisées pour assimiler le Caussenard ou le Bigouden.” Olivier’s quote echoes French thinking on the need to save the unenlightened ‘indigènes’ from themselves. This attitude explains the persistence of displays whose focus fell on extreme savagery and barbarism. Recurring motifs that were enormously popular throughout the tradition of expositions included ferocious African war chiefs caged at the Expositions, and cannibalistic practices of African tribes. What such displays achieved was to amplify the extreme difference (even as the chiefs’ and cannibals’ authenticity was replaced by an orientalizing imagination) and to underline the unacceptability of hybridity or métissage. Despite the rhetoric of brotherhood or solidarity within Greater France, they also reasserted the superiority of the West, a convenient idea for a nation whose self-confidence and belief in progress had been rattled – as they suggested that even the most ferocious and courageous members of indigenous societies remain inferior

40 Olivier, Rapport général xviii.  
41 Pascal Ory, L’Exposition Universelle (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 1989) 95.
to the Western soldier, and symbolic of the imperial triumph over natives who resisted ‘pacification.’  

As explained in Part One, the 1931 consciously attempted to break away from this tradition and to turn to a more modern thinking on the matter where the discourse on colonization was replaced by a discourse of integration and solidarity. I hope it has become clear by now that the 1931 exposition achieved this with only mixed success – the presence of images and attitudes were so deeply seated that they permeated collective consciousness and therefore resisted rearticulation. The message of the displays was also intended to legitimate colonialism and the civilizing mission:

Ce que nous avons apporté tout d’abord dans nos possessions, c’est la paix. En Afrique du Nord, dès 1830, notre expédition étouffait ces redoutables foyers de piratelier semés sur toute la côte algérienne, en Indochine, nous avons libéré les peuples de l’oppression des mandarins et des pirates, nous avons en Afrique surtout, le plus infortuné des continents, on peut le dire, littéralement sauvé toute une race vouée à l’extinction.

In this sense, the colonizing mission is justified in terms of salvation of the primitive societies, lest they be destroyed by their own backwardness and uncivilized practices. The call to preserve them was also a warning mechanism against métissage. The means of salvation are determined by the colonizer and carried out as integration of the colonial other into the realm of universal rule. As Jones correctly argues, the integration of colonial possessions into Greater France would become symbolic of the unquestionable success of the civilizing mission, which not only pacifies colonial subjects by extending

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44 Patricia Morton and Elizabeth Ezra have both argued that fear of hybridity was a powerful cultural force for keeping the colonies and their people at bay. Cf. Morton and Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), esp. ch. 4 “‘Miss France d’Outre-Mer’ Beaty Contestants” 38-97.
French universalism over primitive societies, but also reforms them, as exemplified by the ‘salvation’ of the areas whose troubled past is mentioned above.  

2.3 “L’armée apporte à l’Afrique du Nord la paix française, gage de la civilisation,” presented at an exhibit at the Musée Permanent des colonies for the Exposition.

The exposition display rewrote the narrative of the civilizing mission as a benevolent effort of salvation, as an encounter of metropolitan modernity and unthinkable barbarity, as a debate between universal reason and total irrationality, editing out the violence imparted on the colonized by the colonizer, as suggested by the above photograph (2.3). To the small extent that the fairs referenced the violent triumph of imperialism, they always framed those references as a response to the extreme barbarism of the colonized that could only be dealt with respective brutality but for the good of humanity.

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45 Jones 62.
Incidentally, the Exposition took place at a time when the political dominion of the Métropole over the colonies was being challenged in Morocco, Algeria, Western and Central Africa, and Indochina\(^\text{46}\); hence, the need to justify the French colonial project was particularly acute. For that reason, Olivier, along with other contemporary observers,\(^\text{47}\) insisted on framing the question of colonization in terms of not only benefits for the colonizing nations but mainly of bringing civilization to the ‘uncivilized,’ modernity to the backward. What better image than technology in service of humanity:

La Machine, la froide Machine elle-même, dont on nous dit qu’elle risque de réaliser, avant peu, la légende de l’Apprenti-sorcier, gardait, à Vincennes, toutes les vertus dont ses créateurs l’avaient parée à ses débuts. Elle venait au secours des peuples qui traînent, depuis des millénaires, une existence de bêtes traquées. On la voyait fertilisant la savane, ouvrant dans la nuit de la forêt de larges trouées lumineuses. Elle abattait l’un des plus grands obstacles qui, dans les pays


\(^{47}\) E.g., Albert Sarrault, Léon Archimbaud (undersecretary for Colonial Affairs), and other administrators and intellectuals.
The narrative of enlightenment and progress brought to the ‘indigènes’ was yet again justified in the name of the good of humanity and of the ‘indigènes’ themselves. The only sign of the colonizing violence appears at the exposition in the figure of the docile and submissive ‘indigènes’: as Jones argued, the representations of the ‘indigènes’ harmoniously coexisting within Greater France, different but united, that the Exposition tried carefully to construct was undermined by the fact that, unlike the notion of association and compromise created by the union of the opposites – the Métropole and the colonies – creates a new form (Greater France), superior to the sum of its parts, the colonized was completely erased, absent and subjected to the colonizer. The unity of Greater France was achieved not through association but through brutal assimilation.48

48 The terms assimilation and association are often used to discuss the policies of governance in the French colonies. According to Raymond Betts, whose book Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Policy, 1890-1914 (1961) [Nebraska, 2005] is widely held to be a challenging historical analysis of French colonial doctrines, assimilationist governance was characteristic of the first period of colonization by France. The assimilation doctrine was predicated on the Republican traditions and the belief in the superiority of French civilization; by extension, it assumed that colonized people could only benefit from accepting French culture in lieu of their own. The period was marked by violence in the name of creating a united greater France so that the colonies would “become an integral if noncontiguous part of the mother country, with its society and population made over – to whatever extent possible – in her image.” (8) Association, adopted in late 19th century following the positive results in British and Dutch colonies, emphasized the “retention of local institutions [that would] make the native an associate in the colonial enterprise” (vii). It favored governing indirectly, through local élites, creating a more a more efficient and less resistant environment.

Lyautey was representative of the new intellectual élite, who saw association as a means to ameliorate the social conditions in the colonies and political stability: “I conclude that unless we return to a more civilized, humane and sensitive system, the insurrections will continue to occur like clockwork” (qtd. in Rabinow 114). Thus, association is seen as a more humane form of government, crucial to France’s growth and stability.

The main criticism to the division Betts proposes is that these two doctrines were never applied in the pure theoretical form Betts suggests. As Morton put it, “In practice, the old policy of assimilation continued as the implicit agenda of French colonization due to the persistence of belief in the ‘civilizing mission’ and the advocacy of republican ideology in certain segments of the colonial bureaucracy. Governmental and cultural structures established under the assimilationist regime endured in Algeria, Senegal, and other old colonies.” (Patricia Morton, “National and Colonial: The Musée des Colonies at the Colonial Exposition, Paris, 1931” Art Bulletin (June 1998) 2).
**Constructed Authenticity: The Role of Architectural and Visual Representations in the Construction of the Image of Colonial Subjects**

The colonizing and civilizing ethos required that the colonized non-European cultures remain uncivilized and inferior in order for the never-ending civilizing mission to be justified. The expositions have traditionally subscribed, willingly or not, to this view of the colonial people as barbarians and uncivilized. A cursory look at representations at the fairs shows the persistence of certain “colonial” imagery to portray the colonies ever since the earliest colonial exhibits, which, by contrast, is juxtaposed to the constantly evolving style of representation of France. The architectural and spatial representations at the 1931 testify to the persistence of images of the colonial other as primitive, backward in evolutionary terms and radically different, and therefore unassimilable, despite the official desire to use this exposition to usher in a new era supposedly dedicated to cooperation and respect for the colonized. Here, I intend to focus briefly on the role of spatial, architectural and visual representations at the exposition because they unintentionally yet assertively challenged the official message of the fair.

On May 13, 1931 *Le Canard Enchaîné* published a caricature commenting on the idea of *la Plus Grande France* and offering an image of the new French citizen (2.5). The caricature, with the Exposition in the background, showed an elderly, well-dressed French gentleman approaching a black youth, dressed in a traditional Muslim robe and wearing a fez, and asking him a question in an exaggeratedly broken French: “Toi y en être vini à Paris, pitit nègre … Toi y en être content?” The jolly African quickly replies back in perfect French: “Pardon, Monsieur, vous ne pouvez pas parler comme tout le monde?”
The Frenchman’s expressly broken speech was intended to signify his willingness – and metaphorically that of the nation – for cultural compromise to demonstrate the openness, benevolence and sympathy of French people to the ‘indigènes.’ The response of the young African in perfect French was a reference to the discourse on the putative perfectibility of colonial people, central in the conceptualization of the civilizing mission. The space of the Exposition – the event that supposedly promoted such symbiotic cultural exchange – evoked Greater France where different cultures “associated” peacefully and productively. In fact, the caricature mocked the disingenuity and hypocrisy of French bourgeoisie and, by extension, of the core principles of the civilizing mission and Greater France. Of course, this image critiqued the French bourgeoisie’s attitude toward the colonies and their people by exposing deep-seated bias, expressed here in the traditional and explicitly religious attire, alluding to the opposition between religion and reason outlined by French Enlightenment ideology. The bias was similarly present in the space
of the exposition: geographic and physical intermingling was not a sufficient condition for cultural ‘advancement’ of the colonial subjects, as the Exposition repeatedly emphasized, and their marginalization at the Bois de Vincennes excluded even that possibility.

Such critical images notwithstanding, the general narrative of the Exposition was committed – with conviction and unwavering determination – to buttress the idea of Greater France as a unified and solidary colonial nation, and of the colonial project, somewhat refashioned as central to French modernity. It had to show convincingly its colonial subjects as acceptable, not just as nègesses throwing themselves tastelessly, but to show that the natives were susceptible to civilizing, that their aptitudes could be shaped through education and through a civilizing process. “Coloniser c’est civiliser,” announced Lyautey in the Rapport général, but also added that “coloniser [c’est] construire des quais, des usines, et des voies ferrées.” Lyautey implied a connection between architectural physionomy of living/social space as a measure of civilization. For that reason, it is worth discussing briefly the architectural and visual representations of the colonial other at the Exposition, which, I contend, undermine the sincerity of the goals set for the Exposition, and hint at France’s growing anxiety over loss of dominance – anxiety which found expression in a veiled rejection of the colonial other and implicitly of Greater France in the rhetoric of solidarity since the realization of that notion would destabilize even further France’s self-understanding.

To begin with, the choice of site for the exposition deserves attention. Traditionally, since the mid-19th century expositions had been held on the Champ de

49 Lyautey in Livre d’or de l’ exposition.
50 Livre d’or des expositions 137.
Mars within Paris proper. The Champ de Mars was a symbol of French strength and unity: it is there that in the 9th century the Normands, dressed as monks, attacked Paris, which was celebrating a previous victory of Robert le Fort over the Normands. Miraculously, the surprised French Army of Eudes, Robert’s son, gathered strength and won the battle. Centuries later, in 1790 when France was preparing to celebrate its newfound freedom, the Champ de Mars became the site of yet another miraculous expression of national strength and unity: The construction works for the festivities were seriously delayed and were threatening the planned event. A newspaper published an appeal to Parisians to volunteer and help the construction, and suddenly:

300,000 volontaires de tout âge, de toute condition, revêtus des costumes les plus divers, et du matin au soir, dans la douce ivresse d’un commun désir, avec cette harmonie qui naît d’elle-même de l’accord des âmes sous la loi d’une cordiale égalité, au bruit des chansons, creusant, renversant la terre avec autant d’ardeur que les soldats de mettre à ouvrir une tranchée. Courage! Courage, c’est la fête de la Patrie qu’il s’agit de préparer. Que les vieillards s’animent! que les jeunes garçons s’accourent! Que les fiancés viennent par leur présence faire de la fatigue un enchantement et sourire aux plus braves! Ce fut un prodige!  

The Champ de Mars was historically a site to celebrate the Republic and its achievements, a site for affirming national identity at regular intervals (every eleven years since the 1867 fair). The fact that the 1931 Colonial Exposition was not situated there reveals unexpected meanings in and of itself. The decision to hold the Colonial Exposition at the Bois de Vincennes was justified by the need to not inconvenience Parisian residents, who had just recently suffered from construction noise and dust that accompanied the erection of the Arts Deco exposition in 1925. It is, however, noteworthy that the following exposition, the Exposition Internationale des arts et des techniques

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modernes, held only six years later in 1937, was again organized on Champs de Mars.\textsuperscript{52} The choice of site contained a lot more meaning than was admitted for practical reasons.

Morton reminds us that the Bois de Vincennes, at the time, was the “other” Parisian park, in contrast with the well-maintained Bois de Boulogne. Furthermore, situated within the eastern part of Paris, the Bois de Vincennes was associated with lower classes and local communist groups. Thus, the choice of site implicitly described colonial subjects as subversive, dangerous to the country, contagious; they did not belong within Paris proper and can only be let in marginally, while at the same time keeping them at bay. Minimizing contact between colonial people (and even non-French European immigrants) and French citizens had been a matter of official policy,\textsuperscript{53} and now was culturally required in response to fears of national decline.

The “diverse-but-unified” motto of Greater France resonated in the architectural expressions at the exposition. The organizers insisted on constructing authentic “reconstructions of tropical life with all its color and truly picturesque qualities,” instead of “those vulgar displays that have brought discredit upon many another exhibition of the colonial sphere.”\textsuperscript{54} The caricature in \textit{Le Canard Enchaîné} made a visual reference to this ideology: in the background stood indigenous pavilions from Africa and Asia, and front and center a tent with indigenous totems and primitive masks. Cultural diversity is phrased first as acceptable and even desirable; and second, as a matter of difference, not inferiority in keeping with the official line. As Olivier wrote in the \textit{Rapport général}:

\textsuperscript{52} Cf. Chapter three of this dissertation.
\textsuperscript{53} See Tyler Stovall, “Colonial Workers in France during the Great War,” in Alice Conklin and Ian Christopher Fletcher, eds. \textit{European Imperialism, 1830-1930} (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999) 165-174. In a paradoxical reversal of traditional paternalist attitude which pretended to protect the \textit{indigènes} from corrupting influences, such as morally objectionable behaviors (prostitution) or political activism, at the 1931 fair the colonial subjects brought for the occasion were in fact geographically associated with the troublesome workers’ movement, bunching them in one group to be kept at bay.
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Exposition coloniale internationale à Paris en 1931, Guide officiel} 17-18. Qtd in Lebovics 52.
Dans tous les pavillons de Vincennes, il était parfois si difficile d’établir une discrimination qualitative entre l’apport des uns et celui des autres qu’il ne peut pas être question, dorénavant de classer les races en races dites supérieures et races inférieures.\textsuperscript{55}

Analysis of the architectural and visual representations, however, tells a different story.\textsuperscript{56} Traditionally, French sections at expositions were built in the fashionable architectural style at the time of the exposition. For instance, the Crystal Palace in London in 1851 launched a new era of building in iron and glass (2.6).

2.6 The London Crystal Palace, 1851.

\textsuperscript{55} Olivier, Rapport général 16.
\textsuperscript{56} My research does not take into account the degree to which individual countries had a say in, or endorsed, the final architectural representation of their country, nor does it deal with commercial or unofficial pavilions. This is a fascinating aspect of the expositions, but my chapter focuses only on important pavilions that were shaped by Europeans (mainly by the very important official commission). For the case of representations of the Near East and the interplay between various official and unofficial players, cf. Mehrangiz Nikou, “National Architecture and International Pavilions: Pavilions of the Near Eastern Nations in the Paris Exposition of 1867” (Ph.D. diss, Columbia University, 1997).
France’s 1855 and 1867 expositions followed immediately with their own steel and glass pavilions (2.7 through 2.12). In the 1880s, the expositions built their pavilions in the popular Beaux-Arts style.  

2.7 Main Building of the Paris Exposition in 1855.

2.8 Restaurant and promenade along the exterior of the Main Building at the Paris Exposition of 1867.

2.9 (left) A Gallery at the 1867 Exposition.

2.10 (right) The Palais d’industrie during an award ceremony at the 1878 Paris Exposition.

Such architectural choices expected to symbolize France’s inevitable progress based on scientific and technological discoveries. The displays of the expositions in the mid-19th century categorized the universe according to various categories (arts, agriculture, technologies, etc.), not by countries, as became common in the 20th century expositions. The importance of erecting the pavilions in a progressive architectural style therefore relied on the Enlightenment ideal of and unshakeable belief in universal progress in all domains, progress that is assured by modern advancements. At the 1931 exposition, the Section métropolitaine, dedicated to France, and its main buildings (e.g., the Cité des Informations and the Porte Dorée) were erected in the prevalent Art Deco
style (2.13 through 2.16), \textsuperscript{58} characterized by simplicity of forms, elongated profiles, lack of ornamentation, emphasis on geometric forms.

France’s evolving style is sharply contrasted to the putatively authentic indigenous style of colonial pavilions. Interest in the material life of colonial people

\textsuperscript{58} I explore in more detail France’s relationship to Art Deco in Chapter One 83-146.
appeared consistently beginning with the 1867 exposition, when pavilions celebrated mainly the French fascination with the Orient. Eye-witness accounts and visitors’ guides from that fair describe in detail the Palace of the Tunisian Bey, with its rounded doorways and filigree ceilings – rich and abundant decoration that theoretically reflected the oriental customs of excess and exaggeration, incarnated in the oriental people brought in for the event. A visitor observed:

they [the orientals] lounge on piles of thick red cushions all round the walls, and smoke pipes that make a fellow sick, and drink what they call sherbet, that tastes like honey, water, and rum, and talk about its being cooled with snow from the mountains of the Moon, though bet your boots that it is nothing but common ice from Norway or New England, and not the cleanest at it either.59

Narratively and spatially attached to the Palace of the Tunisian Bey was the Summer Palace of the Viceroy of Egypt, and next to it a miniature of the ancient Egyptian Temple of Edfou and a Turkish mosque.60 The representation of the Orient was constituted concurrently as an architectural hodge-podge (both in terms of regional and historical particularities) and as a monolithic entity (i.e., “the Orient”), evacuating cultural differences between the various ethnic and cultural groups – all of this at a time when colonization and increased interaction with the colonies sought to bring back more detailed knowledge home.61 The North African pavilions were juxtaposed to a French military hospital model and a pavilion celebrating heating and lighting gas, amplifying the suggested civilizational difference. Overall, though, the native pavilions served

60 Morford 142.
61 As Nikou argued, the time of the 1867 exposition also saw efforts to distinguish and classify between the various cultural and ethnic groups that constituted “the Orient” (6).
mostly for entertainment and not so much as a statement of national-imperial power or colonial intent. In 1889, however, the focus shifted: native pavilions were more numerous and arranged in a way that offered a more extensive visual summary of France’s holdings under the subcategory “colonial exposition” (Africa, Asia, Miquelon, French Indian colonies, etc.) Since then, the emphasis has been placed not so much on the industries and artistic production of these places but on the display of difference in terms of evolution.

In that regard, one particularly interesting moment at the 1889 Exposition was the pavilion dedicated to the *Histoire de l’Habitation* conceived by Charles Garnier, the architect of the Opéra in Paris. It testified to the construction of the mythology of evolution and the place of French civilization in it, advancing a nationalist point of view — a view that would reappear at all subsequent colonial displays, including the 1931 fair. The pavilion sought to provide a visual summary of the evolution of human residences from prehistory to today, focusing on housing of the general population, “habitations usuelles, non pas palais ou autres monuments exceptionnels.”

Drawings and photographs of the pavilions show a row of houses, diverse in materials and construction style. On the leftmost end of the row stands a low, windowless hut-like structure, made of what appears to be mud or some other natural material. Described as a simple abri, it is constructed roughly, without much precision or skills. Several other houses line up next to this hut, e.g., la Maison Perse (a reconstruction modeled after Sassanian Ctesiphon), culminating in a Beaux-Arts style 3-story house, with elaborate decorations (moldings,

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62 For an analysis of the specificity of the 1889 exposition, cf. Deborah Silverman’s excellent article “The 1889 Exposition: The Crisis of Bourgeois Individualism” in *Oppositions* 8 (Spring 1977) 71-91. Not coincidental was the erection of the Pavilion of the Ministry of War nearby.
63 For an excellent discussion of the architectural forms of Garnier’s pavilion, see Çelik 71ff.
windows etc.) and magnificent windows – all in all, a building that would be common for Parisian bourgeoisie at the time. The display was clearly conceived as a visual comparative axis of the level of development of cultures; it was a visual tool to demonstrate evolution. As the *Rapport général* put it, Garnier’s goal was

... de faire revivre l’humanité, de montrer son développement progressif à travers les âges, de jalonner ses étapes successives dans la voie du progrès matériel, moral et intellectuel, de mettre en lumière tous les degrés qu’elle avait dû franchir pour arriver de ses humbles débuts au merveilleux épanouissement de l’époque contemporaine.  

That Garnier undertook this ‘retrospective’ as an ethnographic project is further evidenced by the fact that he relied extensively on unspecified archaeological documents and on Monsieur Ammann, introduced in the *Rapport général* as “prof agrégé d’histoire et de géographie au lycée Louis le Grand,” whose expertise furnished archaeological evidence to support the underlying principle of the pavilion, namely, that French civilization is the highest stage of development, as illustrated by its material culture.  

The pavilion reveals not only the French/Western ideological bias but also illuminates the intended ethnographic aspect of the exposition, which I will discuss at length below. Garnier’s pavilion therefore clearly established an architectural model of evolution, a measure of development.

Thus, at the 1889 Exposition and the following one in 1900, where colonial displays featured prominently, the representations of colonial cultures could be measured...
against Garnier’s “scientific” architecture. It is notable that the expositions’ worldview included a hierarchy of the colonial people on display (with Near Eastern colonies cast as most closely related to the Europeans and black Africans and tribal cultures furthest removed on the evolutionary scale, as expressed in terms of the architectural representations). It is also noticeable that, contrary to France’s constantly evolving style, the architectural representations of colonial cultures are strikingly static (2.17 and 2.18).

One of the most noteworthy examples of the staticity of indigenous architecture is the Tower of West Africa, an underwhelming tower of less than 30 meters (in the post-300-meter-tower era), built in earthy, low-tech clay-like materials. Neither the tower, nor the surrounding huts show intricate design in stark comparison to the surrounding steel-and-glass constructions celebrating aerodynamics, radio and communications. The tower itself, sometimes described as a minaret, emits no sense of power, and row of bas reliefs of what appear to be European profiles (of colonizers perhaps), above the entrance only
further discredits it. The phallic shape, instead of suggesting masculinity, evokes a space of animalistic behavior, guided by primal instincts and intellectual and civil backwardness. This image is further underscored by the few supposedly ‘native’ people idling around, dressed in ‘traditional’ robes, ready to be observed in a fashion that undermines their agency.

This image of the African colonies is practically reproduced at each subsequent exposition (2.19 through 2.23). For instance, the 1922 exposition in Marseille cast the French African section in a strikingly similar manner with an almost identical tower, topped with a French flag, rising above low clay huts and tents; so did the 1906 colonial fair in Marseille. Similarly, a visitor’s guide to the 1878 exposition describes and prints a drawing of the Algerian Palace, which bears striking similarity to the representational model described above. Furthermore, as Morton correctly points out, those images testify to the tendency to homogenize the colonies into “a unitary architectural entity”: the French African section, with its consistent style of representation, included not only West African colonies but also East African and North African pavilions. To the French eye, the colonies were a hodge-podge: arabesque filigrees, straw huts, berbers on camels, skimpily dressed indigenous people, minarets in desert landscapes, etc. – all in need of enlightenment.

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66 Morton 255.
2.19 Tower of West Africa, 1906 Exposition in Marseille;  
2.20 Tower of West Africa, 1922 Exposition in Marseille

2.21 French West African Section, 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris 
2.22 (above right) Detail of the main building of the West African Section, 1922 Exposition, Marseille 
2.23 (below) Detail from the main entrance to the French African Section, 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris
It is important to mention briefly the French fascination with the Temple of Angkor. This monument of Khmer civilization had entered the imaginary of the French colonialists since its discovery in the 1860s; numerous publications circulated images and drawings of the Angkor Wat. In the French imagination it conjured up the image of a once advanced civilization (purportedly related to the Aryan race) with magnificent intellectual potential, as evidenced in the Khmer high art and architecture, whose collapse was caused by its lack of contact with equally advanced cultures. Its decadence was visible in the ruins of the Angkor Wat. (Of course, this narrative functions as a case in support of the civilizing mission and paternalism, which underscored the importance of intercultural contact for ‘evolution’ from ‘barbarism’ to ‘enlightenment.’) In response to the French fascination with this temple, each exposition since 1878 had offered an interpretation of it. The early ones displayed only drawings or miniature models and architectural elements (e.g., molds). The 1889 exposition reproduced it very loosely, as a rather generic and edited-out version of Khmer architecture appropriate for the French context, a representational tendency that continued at the national colonial expositions in Marseille in 1906 and 1922. The organizers and the officials of the Indochinese section at the 1931 Exposition, however, expressed their commitment to reconstructing faithfully and accurately the Temple at Vincennes. To that end, a team of archaeologists and scholars of Cambodian history and culture, headed by Victor Goloubew of the École Française de l’Extrême-Orient, went on location to collect molds, to measure, to map out and to draw the monument so as to “give to the world’s public a magnificent and exact

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vision of Indochina.” This was a major investment on behalf of the Exposition and the colonial élite in obtaining systematic and accurate knowledge of the monument, and by extension of the culture it represented.

Benoît De L’Estoile and Mehrangiz Nikou read such efforts as a sincere desire on behalf of the colonizer to restore the glory and the value of non-European civilizations as awareness of other cultures was growing – no doubt necessary and useful in the current political context calling for associative policies – and not as a crucial motivation of imperialism. Yet, scientific sincerity can hardly obscure the dynamics between colonizer and colonized, and the appropriating impulses on behalf of the former. The reproduction of the Temple of Angkor echoes the principal narrative of the French civilizing mission, namely, that colonialism is beneficial for the colonized and that through technological, intellectual and moral advances, the colonizer seeks to bring (renewed) glory to indigenous cultures. In exchange, then, in the ultimate gesture of cultural appropriation, France could claim the artistic production of the colonies as a potential contribution to its own: colonial masks, statues or even performing arts within the context of Greater France are in fact French, the Exposition contended.

The Temple of Angkor, then, also helped to support what Lebovics has called the “simulacrum of Greater France,” by claiming continuity between ancient Khmer culture and the modern imperial nation-state of France. Lebovics discusses the visual process of constituting this continuity, arguing that in contemporary images of the Exposition, the Angkor Wat was equated to Notre-Dame, as if it were French. Cf. True France (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), esp. “The Seductions of the Picturesque and the Irresistible Magic of Art” 51-97.
through which the Khmer Temple is appropriated as a French monument, its cultural significance evacuated and taken over by the colonizer/exhibitor. One striking image that speaks to the way in which the Khmer Temple and all it signified was consumed by the French appeared in *Le Monde illustré* and showed hundreds of French visitors crowded in front of the Angkor Wat, waiting to penetrate it on the Day of Pentecost, as if it were a French Christian temple (2.24).

It remains true, however, that even at the 1931 Exposition and despite the organizers’ promise not to set up “those vulgar displays that have brought discredit upon

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72 Cf. Lebovics 59. Numerous were the analogies of the Angkor Wat to Notre-Dame. For instance, Lebovics quotes André Maurois as saying, “I also love Angkor as seen from the Tonkin Pavilion, a confusion of towers, a riotous mass like Notre-Dame viewed from the Ile-Saint-Louis.” Similarly, Guesde juxtaposed the two of them: “The palace [Angkor Wat] will preserve its two floors, its 150 meters of extension of façade and its 60 meters of height, the dimension of the Notre-Dame towers in Paris.[…]” qtd. in Morton 246.
many another exhibition of the colonial sphere” but to represent rather authentic
“reconstructions of tropical life with all its color and truly picturesque qualities,”73 i.e., to
show the colonies as acceptable and assimilable into French sensibilities, the colonial
pavilions did not differ dramatically from those offered at earlier expositions. Colonial
people remained exaggeratedly ‘primitive,’ inferior in evolutionary terms, as testified by
the architecture of the Exposition’s pavilions, and most of all passively accepting of their
place within the exposition, readily availing themselves to be stared at and examined by
the curiosity of the European visitors, and the world that lay outside of it.

In turn, this paradigm is very telling of how static and slow to change French
perception of the colonies and their people was. The persistence of representational
hierarchy perpetuates the view of these foreign cultures as ontologically immutable and
unable to adopt progressive tendencies; the difference between the European and non-
European is emphasized as essential and irreconcilable. That such a view undermines the
very logic of the civilizing mission is not questioned at the 1931 exposition; neither are
its repercussions for the idea of Greater France. Rather, this position serves to radicalize
otherness and to sanction the segregation of the colonized from the metropolitan
populations. As Morton has rightly put it, “the Exposition collected and placed persons
and things in their ‘proper’ places according to classifications of ‘primitive’ and
‘civilized.’”74 The cumulative result of the display practices and the Western concern of
grasping the world as exposition leads to believe that an essentialist difference persists
and therefore the integration of the colonies is impossible.75

74 Morton 84.
75 Ezra examines how this cultural logic is exhibited in literary and cinematographic works, thwarting the
acceptance or the integration of the other. Cf. her The Colonial Unconscious, esp. “Introduction.”
The very claim that the traditions of ‘primitive’ or ‘backward’ cultures are unchanging deserves particular attention. I read such a claim, especially within the context of the discourse of Greater France, as a symptom of the increasing anxiety about France’s own fast-paced cultural and social transformation. The destabilization of historical continuity and traditions in France was countered by the conception of the colonies as pre-industrial, ritualistic, a kind of a ground-zero for evolution of Western society. The invention of unchangeable traditions is paralleled by the process of collecting indigenous objects as evidence of a savage state of existence in Western collections, as documents of humanity’s earlier evolutionary stage. In turn, this view invited calls to preserve those cultures as witnesses to the evolutionary state of (native) people before they entered history and civilization. At the same time, then, the claim of immutability of native cultures served to underline the alleged modernity, progress, superiority of French civilization in contrast to indigenous cultures, even as it acknowledged the destructive powers of modernity on cultures and offered a glimpse of France’s own anxiety toward that very same modernity.

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68 Pascal Ory discusses the ways in which the discourse on progress was communicated to the public at the 1889 exposition. He examines Garnier’s *Histoire de l’habitation humaine* and *l’exposition rétrospective du travail et des sciences ethnologiques*, which featured human skulls as a tool to demonstrate the shared ancestry between humans and apes, as well as a grateful acknowledgement to the “arts militaires, sans lesquels une histoire du travail n’eût pas été complète, surtout à une époque où l’armée embrasse la nation entière.” Further, for Ory, the exposition revealed a hierarchy among the continents and their cultures: “L’Océanie, ou la race humaine dans son état primitif; l’Afrique, ou les premiers effets de la pensée au contact de la civilisation, l’Asie, odalisque mollement couchée dans une pose sensuelle, l’Amérique, à la recherche de la fortune et de la suprématie commerciale, l’Europe, enfin, telle qu’en elle-même la pensée spéculative la magnifie, fermement appuyée sur les attributs qui lui reviennent de droit : le livre et la presse d’imprimerie” Ory 19-22.
My concern here is along the lines of Terence Ranger’s and De L’Estoile’s argument that the ossification of traditions is necessary for the colonial order as it gives legitimacy to colonial institutions of control and, by extension, to the colonizer. It is necessary to posit the difference between France and the other as essential in racial, evolutionary, cultural and socio-economic terms in order to justify the open-ended nature of France’s imperial project. In other words, it is precisely because the native traditions never evolve that those cultures need the civilizing mission (never mind that if the traditions remain fixed, then the success of the civilizing mission becomes dubious), reaffirming colonialism’s *raison d’être* as ahistorical and universal. In turn, positing the “pure traditions” as untouched by history also evoked the urgency to preserve their authenticity and organic nature lest they get erased by modernization and colonialism (2.25). The expositions mirror the efforts to preserve “pure” cultures, shedding light on the nexus of visuality, sciences and nation-building. In the next part, I propose to examine the nexus between anthropology and ethnology and the exposition culture, and the use of science as a tool for legitimating colonial dominion.

2.25 “Le baptême d’air.” The original caption reads: “Des musiciens de la Côte d’Ivoire, qui ont reçu le baptême de l’air, photographiés à leur descente de l’avion.”
Scientific Colonial Policy and the Political Stakes of Ethnology

The connection between colonization, colonial rule and scientific knowledge had existed long before the expositions were established. As historian James McClellan put it,

The rise of modern science and the colonial expansion of Europe after 1492 constitute two fundamental and characteristic features of modern world history… The story is a dual one. One of its aspects concerns how science and the scientific enterprise formed part of and facilitated colonial development. The other deals with how the colonial experience affected science and the contemporary scientific enterprise.79

In the 18th century, the connection between colonization and science was brought forward in early imperial military expeditions (e.g., Egypt, Morea, Algeria or Mexico), which included teams of scientists, such as cartographers, geographers, zoologists, anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, etc.80 They collected specimens and samples, observed and measured natives, constructing ‘categories’ to classify them. In other words, they produced scientific knowledge of the colonial subjects, thus turning indigenous cultures into ethnographic objects,81 and making the colonies readable and graspable in Western terms, i.e., bringing the colonies into the rational order of the West. Collection and classification efforts were central to the production of anthropological knowledge and were the focus of early expeditions. In turn, this knowledge promised to aid the civilizing and colonizing efforts.

At the same time, scientific knowledge of the 19th century created contempt for cultural alternatives, and translated into a strong policy effort aimed at ‘correcting,’


81 Sherman, “The Arts and Sciences of Colonialism” 712.
'civilizing’ or assimilating indigenous people, i.e., making them into the image of the French. Science pretended to establish an ‘objective,’ i.e., empirically proven and fixed difference between the European colonizer and non-European colonized people. Scientific knowledge, posited as rational and universal, and therefore transcending cultural circumstances and beliefs, implied that the European civilization was the universal model (curiously rendering science itself as a sign of its progress) thus equating difference to inferiority – a claim reinforced by colonial displays which amplified difference and linked it to authenticity. In the course of the 19th century, anthropology, both fueled by and enlisted to disseminate this ideology, promoted studies on different groups based on the collected specimens, concluding that cultural difference was biologically (racially) predetermined. Particularly popular were studies that relied on measurements using specific instruments, conventions and indices – be it of the cranium (Daubenton in the 1780s, or Samuel George Morton in 1840s), or the facial angle (Virey in early 19th century) – that aimed at making detailed scientific comparative analyses between races and individuals. Such an approach, based on tangible and measureable evidence, allowed anthropology to establish itself as an academic and scientific discipline as it moved away from personal impressions and descriptions toward an established methodology.

One particularly important development was the emergence of ethnographic collections. They appeared as a response to the need of anthropology to create a material

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82 Thus, Ernest Renan called for the organization of humanity scientifically. Auguste Comte conceived of European civilizing mission in his *Système de philosophie positive ou traité de sociologie*.
database that would enable further research on the racial – and by extension cultural – differences. As Dias has pointed out, the anthropological collection then not only grew out of an \textit{a priori} conception of racial difference but also became a primary vehicle for communicating this difference, as the collection made difference \textit{visible}. Similarly, the visual process of constituting racial difference – “under a disciplined gaze and with the assistance of instruments of observation and measurement”\textsuperscript{84} – also made it an object of anthropology, and thereby gave it scientific legitimacy.

Anthropological displays instantly grew in popularity outside the academic domain as well, and the 19\textsuperscript{th} century expositions were quick to include them as important didactic tools of the “educate while entertaining” precept. The inclusion of ethnographic displays in the expositions had important consequences because it not only allowed difference to be made visible but it exhibited it to the public, thus inscribing it into collective memory, which in turn won over public support for the colonial project. In addition, ethnographic displays at the expositions were regarded as scientific and educational because they purported to teach visitors about their past as humans – rather than to teach them about different cultures. The educational rationale therefore necessarily maintained notions of racial and cultural hierarchy.

The expositions not only included anthropological/ethnographic displays; in a sense, they were staged as ethnographic displays themselves, and the various guides and official reports often included ethnographic and anthropological descriptions and data.\textsuperscript{85} The Expositions then attracted the interest not only of the general public but also that of scientists. It is no mere coincidence that since 1889, ethnographic conferences were

\textsuperscript{84} Dias 33.

organized to coincide with the expositions; the exposition grounds and collections served as fieldwork for the scientists. Various anthropometric studies were conducted on the indigenous people brought in for the expositions, the results of which were used as basis for the creation of theories of racial difference and superiority.  

The natives were not only turned into objects of display and Western gaze, but also into objects of study. There is an interesting interplay here: the displays drew scientific interest because organizers claimed authenticity and accuracy in reproducing the living conditions; in turn, the scientific interest gave legitimacy to the displays. The emphasis on representing the colonies in their true color and in a realistic setting was intended to reveal the sincere interest in and the deepening knowledge of non-European cultures. Yet, authenticity became a measure of difference because the displays were seen as a reflection of a specific way in which a racial and ethnic group had adapted to the physical environment, and therefore, as a reflection of its aptitudes.

It needs to be acknowledged that the 1931 exposition attempted, at least on the surface, to break away from exposition practices deemed unacceptable or offensive. This necessitated a break from its predecessors, the great 19th century expositions, which were the product of a different political and cultural reality. The discourse of Greater France in the 1920s and 1930s relied on notions of integration and cooperation, and the traditional use of exoticism and orientalism was not deemed suitable to portray the new relationship between the Métropole and the overseas territories. Along the lines of the reconceptualization of the exposition, the organizers suspended, for instance, the use of

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86 Cf. Joseph Deniker, *The Races of Man: An Outline of Anthropology and Ethnography* (Paris: 1900?). Deniker and Laloy were the first anthropologists to use systematically the resources of the expositions for scientific work.
rickshaws drawn by natives out of concerns that the practice was inhumane,⁸⁷ and, much
to the chagrin of some,⁸⁸ banned all anthropometric work, acknowledging it to be offensive.

Still, the 1931 exposition could be read as an ethnological event – it is noteworthy that the leading anthropological journal at the time devoted a lengthy and detailed review of the anthropological and ethnographic aspects on view in Paris – in which science and colonial policy continued to interact, and which played a pivotal role in constructing images of modern France and shed light on France’s increasing ambivalence toward modernity. Historians Gary Wilder and Véronique Dimier argue convincingly that in the interwar period colonial administration grew increasingly scientific and rationalized.⁸⁹ Jules Brévié, the governor of French Western Africa and Indochina, and a strong proponent of the “scientific approach” to colonial governance, would summarize it aptly:

Colonization has entered its scientific phases … […] Black Africa’s agricultural growth depends on agroeconomic studies, sustained and impartial experiments, but also equal investment in knowledge of the native environment, including African peasants and their mentality, methods and aptitudes.⁹⁰

In other words, better governance and economic development depended on in-depth scientific knowledge, rather than on ad-hoc decentralized initiatives; and supremacy stood to be gained through science. Commissioner Lyautey, himself a

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⁸⁷ Hodeir, “Une journée à l’Exposition coloniale” 42.
⁸⁸ Henri Vallois, the editor-in-chief of L’Anthropologie, the leading anthropological journal at the time, wrote: “Reste maintenant à considérer le côté de l’Anthropologie physique, mais, sur ce chapitre, je devrai malheureusement être très bref. Certes, l’Exposition avait réuni un nombre d’indigènes beaucoup plus grand que ce n’avait jamais été le cas, et quand on se souvient des belles études faites par Deniker et Laloy sur les sujets venus pour l’Exposition de 1889, on pouvait espérer, qu’ici, il serait possible de réaliser beaucoup plus. Cet espoir a été en vain […]” 60.
member of the new colonial élite that saw as beneficial the implementation of an
associationist policy, and that distinguished indirect rule as enlightened and beneficial
form of colonialism, reiterated the same position in the *Rapport général*:

Native souls are infinitely more complex than the first contacts with them had
anticipated. It is necessary, in order to apply the policy of collaboration which is
the basis of our colonial methods – which involves the protection of customs, of
native rights and interests, and of native participation in the exercise of public
power – to scrutinise these native souls very closely and to do our best to
understand them.  

Lyautey acknowledged the need for a new colonial policy based on systematic
knowledge of the colonial subjects. In the 1920s and 1930s, such knowledge was
facilitated by the emergence of a new and distinct academic discipline – ethnology – and
its peripheral institutions (ethnographic museums, colonial ethnographic missions,
academic and administrative institutions), which were devoted to learning about,
understanding and, in a somewhat paternalistic and contradictory gesture, preserving non-
Western cultures. In the 1920s and 1930s, anthropology in France was undergoing
profound transformations, just as colonial governance was. In the early years of the 20th
century anthropology in France found itself in a state of decline and internal
fragmentation. It was still very closely attached to the anthropometric traditions
established by Pierre Broca, even as their scientific value was beginning to be
questioned.  

Cf. Lebovics, “Integral Culture” in *True France*; and William Schneider, *Quality and Quantity: The
Quest for Biological Regeneration in Twentieth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2002).
rivaling Société d’Ethnographie, which was becoming increasingly associated with conservative politics, came to be viewed as amateurish and unscientific, mostly because it relied on description and non-theoretical – and therefore speculative – investigations. On the theoretical and methodological plane, France was falling behind the rest of Europe in adopting the developments initiated by Emile Durkheim’s work. Durkheim’s work was an investigation into the question of what holds cultures together, and he identified two models of social integration – mechanical solidarity, characteristic of “primitive” cultures that cohere because of their high degree of homogeneity (shared values and mythology), and organic solidarity, where diverse social elements are united by formal institutions. Durkheim’s work considered social integration in terms of “social facts” which are “collective representations of the collective consciousness.” Social facts, or cultures, are realms within themselves, and are not determined by biology.

In addition to the theoretical and methodological backwardness of anthropology in France, the situation was further complicated by the fact that there was an acute lack of institutions (such as teaching institutions, museums, research councils, etc.), a lack that, as Durkheim’s nephew and student Marcel Mauss lamented, resulted in a disconnect of the discipline from its object of study.

Mauss became the main force behind modernizing and renewing the discipline in France. Mauss’ conception of modern anthropology was based on the newly-discovered and growing interest in ‘primitive’ cultures – an interest that was informally gaining

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93 Lebovics, esp. 19-32.
96 While there were others who called for a renewing of the discipline, Mauss managed to take the lead because of his personal and professional connections and institutional influence. For thorough biography of Mauss, see Marcel Fournier, *Marcel Mauss* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).
ground in numerous amateur ethnographic societies. Mauss argued that the new discipline of “ethnology” should recognize the limitations of the branch of physical anthropology, which still had institutional clout and determined the boundaries of anthropological science, and should develop following Rivet’s injunction as a “science of man in its totality,” including history, archaeology, material culture, linguistics, etc. Mauss’ own work reflected this new orientation.

While he continued to explore social cohesion as based on solidarity, he added an important aspect – reciprocity, which he discussed in his seminal essay *The Gift*. Under the rubric of the “gift,” Mauss considered exchanges not only of goods and services, but also favors, rituals, courtesies or women in very diverse geographical and temporal parameters, arguing that such “gifts” were in fact not spontaneous and voluntary but rather expected and highly regulated by social norms and rituals. That is, the gift is not just one form of exchange within an economy but rather an example of “total social fact.”

Lévi-Strauss describes the impact of Mauss’s theories:

For the first time in the history of ethnological thinking… an effort was made to transcend empirical observation and to reach deeper realities. For the first time the social ceases to belong to the domain of pure quality – anecdote, curiosity, material for moralising description or for scholarly comparison – and becomes a system, among whose parts connections, equivalencies and interdependent aspects can be discovered.

Cultures then were to be considered as coherent wholes by ethnography. As Mauss put it:

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We are dealing then with something more than a set of themes, more than institutional elements, more than institutions, more even than systems of institutions divisible into legal, economic, religious and other parts. We are concerned with "wholes," with systems in their entirety... It is only by considering them as wholes that we have been able to see their essence, their operation and their living aspect, and to catch the fleeting moment when the society and its members take emotional stock of themselves and their situation as regards others. ⁹⁹

By treating them as wholes, ethnology allows alternative views, acknowledges the existence of alternatives to European civilization and calls into question the primacy of the latter. Of course, this approach called into question the validity of ethnographic displays and of colonial exhibits whose meaning in fact was fractured and recreated by the collector colonizer.

Mauss’ comprehensive approach to studying primitive cultures went beyond the traditional boundaries of physical anthropology or orientalist philology; the new ethnology was characterized by an interdisciplinary and normative fluidity, as is reflected in the main actors behind the efforts to reinvent and restructure the discipline. Mauss, famously erudite with a formal background in religion and admirable command of wide range of languages (English, German, Russian, Ancient Greek, Sanskrit, Latin and Celtic), ¹⁰⁰ was joined in his efforts by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, a professor of philosophy at the Sorbonne, and Paul Rivet, the chair of the National Museum of Natural History, who had been trained as an anthropologist at the turn of the century in the methods and theories of the 19th century physical anthropology but had practiced a more ethnological approach, focusing on material culture and languages during his famous missions to

⁹⁹ Qtd in Moore 130.
¹⁰⁰ James Clifford writes that Mauss was said to “know it all.” Moore further points that his studies were complete and detailed, featuring footnotes or sections on evolution of money; ancient Sanskrit commercial vocabularies; nuances of Germanic law; forms of Kwaikutl wealth; political and historical analyses, etc. Moore, ch. 9, esp. “Background.”
South America. The three of them sought to establish an institute of ethnology that would encourage fieldwork, create new publications to boost exchange of ideas, offer courses of ethnology and establish a consortium in conjunction with prominent institutions of higher education (e.g., the University of Paris, the Ecole des Langues Orientales, the Ecole Coloniale, even the Museum of Natural History), whose students could in turn take courses at the institute. All of them had university and institutional connections which proved valuable in securing institutional status for ethnology.

This is not to say that Mauss and the circle of ethnologists around him were not aware of the potential ethnological research held for the imperial state. Mauss, for instance, indicated as early as 1913 (when the restructuring of ethnology was still in its theoretical stages) that ethnologists should focus on ‘primitive societies’ like the ones found in the French colonies, and emphasized that the production of systematic ethnological knowledge would aid colonial administration. Similarly, Lévy-Bruhl linked ethnology and colonial rule, insisting that it would lead to a more rational and humane modes of colonization. With respect to the Institute of Ethnology, Lévy-Bruhl described its mission as a dual one: first, “to work toward progress of the ethnographic science” and two, to “put the results of ethnology in service of our native policy when needed.” That is, ethnology was founded on a pragmatic orientation as much as on a

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theoretical framework.\textsuperscript{104} Georges Hardy, the director of the Ecole Coloniale, joined in by urging colonial administrators “to create ethnographic and psychological institutes; to circulate the results of this research widely in the form of local journals; [and] to support functionaries who would encourage the widespread study of indigenous languages and customs.”\textsuperscript{105}

Historian Alice Conklin has examined in detail the “degrees of complicity” between ethnology and colonial administration.\textsuperscript{106} The mandate for the Institute of Ethnology, founded in 1925, begins to hint at the degree to which ethnology and colonial administration intertwined. It was most pronounced in the fact that financing for the new ethnological institute would come mainly from the Ministry of the Colonies – not from the University of Paris or from the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, it also established that colonial administrators be allowed to teach there,\textsuperscript{107} and that students of the Ecole Coloniale, which prepared Frenchmen for colonial service, and colonial official \textit{en congé} be allowed to take courses at the Institute free of charge.\textsuperscript{108} In turn, as Lévy-Bruhl affirmed, there was a new eagerness on behalf of colonial administrators to learn about their subjects with policy ends in mind, which was later echoed in Lyautey’s words: “The light ethnology can shed on the mentality of the natives has never been more invaluable


\textsuperscript{105} Georges Hardy, \textit{Rapport Général du Congrès international et intercolonial de la Société indigène} (Paris, 1931). For a comprehensive review of the context and process through which colonial administration grew rationalized, cf. Wilder and Dimier.

\textsuperscript{106} Conklin, “La situation coloniale.”


than today. Fortunately, our administrators are increasingly aware of the usefulness – one might even say the necessity – of such studies and lend them all the support they can.”

In this sense, the Institut d’Ethnologie emerged as an institution with a pronounced colonialist orientation. In practice, the imbrication of ethnology and colonial governance resulted in numerous *missions d’enquêtes*, fieldwork and publications equally important for their scientific values as for their application to policy. One specifically important use was the ethnographic reports about various colonial areas commissioned by the colonial administration. These reports (*monographies*) identified and classified the primitive populations into ethnic groups, drew ethno-demographic maps, studied the material and linguistic cultures, and were published in annual reports, bulletins and other publications on the administration in colonized territories. Such uses of scientific knowledge achieved several important goals: for one, knowing and understanding the colonial subjects could serve to explain the difficulties the French administration encountered in pacifying and civilizing the native populations; i.e., a direct causal link was seen between the accumulation of highly specific knowledge and successful native policy. Further, relying on systematic scientific knowledge for designing and implementing colonial policies provided a new legitimacy for the colonial project because the use of science asserted that domination was rational and rendered it less arbitrary. As De L’Estoile put it, “Support for science provides evidence that the state is guided by the principle of rationality – that it has not only law but reason too on its

In this sense, paradoxically, ethnology, which strove to validate cultural alterity, played a role in legitimating France’s self-assigned right to its colonies.

But this is not to suggest, either, that there was explicit support lent to the colonialist project – and, therefore, culpability – by ethnologists and the discipline in general. While Wilder has contended that ethnology supplied the colonial administration with specialized knowledge to control colonial subjects, and that it remained largely a metropolitan science, it is also true that ethnology attempted a break from physical anthropology and orientalist perspectives on non-European cultures. In addition, the fluidity of the field of ethnology, as historian Spencer Segalla pointed out, “produced a momentary openness to the historicity and variety of non-European people that had the potential to challenge the very ideological foundation of colonialism,” just as Mauss’ work rejected the notion of the singularity of European civilization (while at the same time neither he nor Durkheim justified their view of Aborigines as fossilized civilization, nor defined what constituted ‘primitiveness’). At best, “ethnologists deliberately fostered the hope, however illusory, that correct knowledge about colonized cultures could produce a more humane and more efficient colonial policy.”

In a sense, the Colonial Exposition could be read as an ethnological event because of the multidisciplinary perspectives it showcased (a multidisciplinarity that was often regarded as a tremendous mess precisely because it evinced the complexities of the task of displaying modern France, drawing harshest criticisms at the Musée Permanent): it

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113 Wilder.
115 Wilder quotes Leiris as recalling a brochure announcing the creation of the Institut d’ethnologie in the hope that it would guarantee a smoother and human administration. Michel Leiris, *C’est-à-dire: Entretien avec Sally Pierce and Jean Jamin* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992) 38; qtd in Wilder 224.
included prehistorical exhibits, displays, or documents, that were of interest to physical anthropology; ethnographic facts (dances, religious rituals etc.), and even indigenous arts (most of it on loan from prominent Parisian dealers of art nègre). Further, many of the artifacts displayed were obtained from fieldwork during famous ethnographic missions, thus suggesting the end of “ethnologie en chambre” – which introduced other cultures through data collected by colonial administrators or missionaries, and brutally detached from its context, left to be interpreted by Parisian scientists with an irresistible impulse to classify and to orientalize. Fieldwork, as Mauss insisted,\textsuperscript{116} was the backbone of new ethnology because it was precisely through sustained observational research \textit{in situ} that other cultures could best be understood. More important, the new ethnology tapped precisely into the question the 1931 Exposition posed: how to recontextualize ethnographic artifacts or rituals (or cultures, for that matter) within the space left open by different – if rivaling and contradictory – discourses (evolutionary, differentialist, or primitivist\textsuperscript{117}) once there no longer was a monolithic (colonialist, republican, universalist etc.) message. The same questions were at the heart of France’s attitude toward modernity.

\textsuperscript{116} Mauss himself did not do fieldwork.

\textsuperscript{117} De L’Estoile, “From the Colonial Exhibition to the Museum of Man” 353-4.
**Alternative Modernities**

Following the catastrophe of the Great War, the quest for alternatives to Western civilization permeated the entire cultural space. It was channeled into a passion for primitivism, or *l’art nègre*,\(^\text{118}\) which appeared in literature (Apollinaire, Cendrars, *négritude*), in music (jazz), and in dance (embodied in the figure of Josephine Baker) – in sum, infatuation with all things black/tribal (*négrophilie*). At the Exposition, the possibility of an alternative was unintentionally suggested by the breakdown of the monolithic message (e.g., about France or about the colonies) in favor of various discourses which justify my focus on the internal contradictions of the fair. As I have shown, the meanings disseminated at and by the Exposition (architectural, political, cultural, etc.) were destabilized, and new discursive possibilities emerged in the space that opened up within the inherent contradictions.

The possibility of an alternative to Western modernity was most concretely articulated at the counter-exposition organized by the Surrealist group\(^\text{119}\) – an event at once political, aesthetic, and ethnographic, aiming to challenge the ideologies disseminated at the Colonial Exposition and the fundamental principles of Western civilization. The counter-exposition was mounted in September 1931 and was formally titled *La vérité sur les colonies*.\(^\text{120}\) The idea of the counter-exposition came from Alfred

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\(^{118}\) The best recent scholarship on the tribulations of the term primitivism and on its development from the perspective of art history, cf. William Rubin, *“Primitivism” in the 20th century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 2 vols. (New York: MoMA, 1984). In the Introduction (1-81), he traces the development of the field through a lexicographic and etymologic analysis of the term “primitive art.” In the 1920s and 1930s, *art nègre* began to be used interchangeably with “primitive art,” which in turn was supposed to reflect tribal artifacts, conflating the differences between African, Oceanic, American Indian and Eskimo art, and even some Pre-Columbian art forms, no matter how inconsistent. Rubin also points out that until the early 1920s, primitive art also included Japanese, Egyptian, Persian, Cambodian. Cf. Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Painting* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938).

\(^{119}\) I do not take into consideration the internal divisions and para-surrealist groups in this chapter.
Kurella, a member of the Comintern, who was dismayed to see no response to the Colonial Exposition on behalf of the French communist party (PCF), or any “intelligent” critical reaction, for that matter. Amanda Stansell cites recently discovered historical evidence to account for this lack of reaction: the PCF, afraid from the political repercussions of a potential response, decided instead to establish a separate entity, the *Ligue anti-impérialiste*, that would officially stand behind the response to the Exposition, and to ask the Surrealist group to organize it. By that time, many surrealists were already members of the PCF (although they remained on its margins), seduced by the possibility for a cultural revolution and a true alternative to the decadence of the West in the communist doctrine.

The counter-exposition was set up in Melnikov’s Constructivist Pavilion erected for the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs. The choice of site is not coincidental: the pavilion was the official entry of the Soviet Union for the 1925 event and had, by 1931,

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121 For a study of the behind-the-scenes politics within the Surrealist group, see Lynn E. Palermo, “L’Exposition Anticoloniale: Political or Aesthetic Protest?” *French Cultural Studies*, February 2009, vol. 20, no. 1, 27-46. Morton explains the lack of critical responses to the exposition by the “generous subsidies from the Exposition to the press in return for favorable articles” (97). The few voices of opposition came exclusively from the Left, and appeared in publications such as *Internationale comuniste*, *Pravda*, *Internationale syndicale rouge*, *Bolchévik*, *Orient et les Colonies*, *Communist Review*, and *Correspondence internationale*.

122 The documents in question -- minutes from a meeting -- were recently discovered by Janine Mileaf. Cited in Amanda Stansell, “Surrealist Racial Politics at the Borders of ‘Reason’: Whiteness, Primitivism, Négritude” in Raymond Spiteri, Donald LaCoss, *Surrealism, Politics and Culture* (London: Ashgate, 2003), 111-126. By contrast, an often cited account claiming that the Anti-Imperialist League was not a ‘front organization’ funded by the PCF, is Babette Gross’ political biography of Willi Münzenberg, a member of the Communist Party and of the Anti-Imperialist League *Willi Münzenberg* (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1974) 188-189.

123 For more on the complex relations between the Surrealist movement and the PCF, cf. Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism* (New York: Belknap Press, 1989), esp. “The Aragon Affair”, which was concurrent with the organization of the counter-exposition, and was the cause of tensions within the Surrealist group. The Aragon affair involves Aragon denouncing surrealism in Moscow where he was invited by Elsa Triolet (whose allegiances to the Soviet Union continue to inspire research and generate debates), and then his writing a fervent revolutionary poem, *Front Rouge*, for which he was imprisoned and charged with inciting murder because of the line “Kill the Police!” The Surrealist group rallied in his support until he was freed; Aragon then formally left the Surrealist group and proclaimed his allegiance to the Communist Party.
been moved to the rue Mathurin-Moreau, in the 19th arrondissement (ironically to be demolished later), and served as quarters of the PCF. The pavilion, built in wood but employing very progressive style, reflected both the avant-gardist and revolutionary orientation of the Surrealists, and its erstwhile association with the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. The Surrealists’ admiration of the Soviet Union was given special attention in a part of the exhibit which featured photographic and textual appreciation of the socialist regime, e.g., workers “constructing” socialism in opposition to the unproductive French bourgeoisie; quotations of Marx and Lenin, even, strangely enough – especially from today’s perspective – a map of the Soviet Union, with the motto from Lenin “Talk to Unite,” and photos that “showed the economic and cultural ‘progress’ of the Kurds, Tartars and Bachkirs under Soviet rule.” The ground floor and a room on the second floor contained the ideological part of the counter-exposition, for which Thirion was responsible. It constituted an attack on the very logic of imperialism and colonialism: through statistics, graphics, photographs, and other visual and narrative means the counter-exposition recounted the colonization and exploitation of the colonies. The visual information created a narrative quite different from the one at the Colonial Exposition: the truth underlying the ‘authenticity’ and coexistence promoted at the Exposition was brutal exploitation, robbery of resources that were not French, forced labor, numerous deaths in service of capitalism. Illustrations and photos told the stories of the 1891 Dahomey massacres; of a French army officer standing proudly next to two decapitated heads in Morocco; of massacres of indigenous troops, of torture and bombardments in Morocco, Syria, and Lebanon; of deplorable working conditions for

124 It is ironic that Melnikov, regarded as one of the most original avant-garde architects, would give up his design work rather than adopt the “Stalinist style.”
railroad construction workers, citing the 18,000 who died putting 170km of rails in Equatorial Africa; of machine guns and a portrait of Général Mangin (nicknamed “black crusher” for his notorious cruel treatment of Africans), contrasting the image of the benevolent civilizer, who supposedly allowed the natives to continue cutting sugar cane, sowing rice, transporting coconuts in primitively carved canoes, capturing crocodiles, surrounded by exotic trees and animals, as was suggested by the 250 plus bas-reliefs on the Musée Permanent. As the Surrealists echoed in their manifesto, Ne visitez pas l’Exposition Coloniale, the beautiful pavilions of Greater France – “ce concept-escroquerie” “particulièrement intolérable” – were erected in order to give French people “la conscience de propriétaires qu’il leur faudra pour entendre sans broncher l’écho des fusillades lointaines.” These words also alluded to the slogan hung at the entrance, quoting Lenin: “Imperialism is the last stage of capitalism.” At a time when the colonial debate oscillated between assimilation and association, between exploitation and cooperation, before there was significant and organized anti-colonialist resistance, the Surrealist counter-exposition openly rejected these “options” as false and attacked the very logic of colonialism: “il serait un peu fort que nous distinguions entre la bonne et la mauvaise façon de coloniser”, and demanded the “évacuation immédiate des colonies et la mise en accusation des généraux et fonctionnaires responsables des massacres d’Annam, du Liban, du Maroc et de l’Afrique Centrale.”


127 Tanguy et al., Ne visitez pas l’Exposition coloniale. Similarly, the Surrealists vehemently criticized this “owners’ attitude” in the second manifesto written in response to the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Premier Bilan de l’Exposition Coloniale. The Bilan reported on the fire of the so-called “Holland” pavilion, which contained precious Javanese artefacts, and argued that the fire was not extraordinary but totally symptomatic and congruent with colonialist practices.

The aesthetic and ethnological aspects of the counter-exposition overlapped with the political in the gallery on the second floor.\textsuperscript{129} This main room featured African, Oceanic, Native American tribal art (masks, sculptures etc.) from famous collectors of primitive arts at the time,\textsuperscript{130} juxtaposed to European religious articles labeled \textit{Fétiches européens}.\textsuperscript{131} Polynesian and Asian music was played alongside French popular songs and a rumba.\textsuperscript{132} The labels, as exemplified by the “\textit{Fétiches européens}” category, differed significantly from the accepted classificatory standards seen at the Colonial Exposition, downplaying the ‘documentary’ value of such objects and bringing forward their poetic value. In other words, objects were not regarded by the Surrealists as documents of an evolutionary stage, in contrast to the 19\textsuperscript{th} century anthropological viewpoint; instead, such objects possessed an intrinsic aesthetic value that reflected the collective reality of which they were inspired, echoing the ideological premises of new ethnology. (It is important to remember that many of the Surrealists were passionate amateur ethnologists). Like the 1920s and 1930s ethnologists, the Surrealists questioned the primacy of reason and ‘objectivity,’ the master narratives, the evolutionary, racial and artistic hierarchy maintained by the Western civilization. By juxtaposing Polynesian or Asian music and rumba to French popular songs, the Surrealist counter-exposition insisted on the relativization of aesthetic value, i.e., art is a social construct, as is positing Western civilization as the norm. By placing tribal religious objects next to Catholic iconography, they insisted on the equal value of cult objects, revealing the arbitrariness of

\textsuperscript{129} While Morton cites Aragon for this information (103), Bates claims this very important room was on the main floor, referring to a confidential report (no. 5163) “Note sur l’Exposition Anticoloniale”, dated September 23, 1931, available on microfilm at the Institut Maurice Thorez [bob 69, series 461]. Bate 216. Unfortunately, there are few surviving primary sources on the counter-exposition, and most of the information available is based on reports or private correspondence.

\textsuperscript{130} Such as Charles Ratton, who had also lent articles from his collection to the Exposition Coloniale.

\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Le surréalisme au service de la Révolution} 3-4 (December 1931).

\textsuperscript{132} Morton 103.
the assumed notions of hierarchy. The counter-exposition challenged the very notion of artistic production and aesthetic value. By calling the European religious and art objects “fetishes” – a term imposed by European aesthetic discourse on non-European objects that most likely found their place in the *cabinets de curiosités* in the 19th century, the Surrealist exposition disavowed the West’s authority as the producer of such discourses. Jody Blake has further argued that the political potential of such inversion of the erstwhile power hierarchy lies in valorizing the “artistic integrity of subjugated people,” which is, for the Surrealists, an act of anti-colonial resistance. At the same time, the counter-exposition destabilized the opposition between “civilization” and “primitiveness” – these categories were no longer relevant or non-negotiable. The Surrealists articulated the same message in the manifesto *Ne visitez pas l’Exposition Coloniale*:

Il est donc naturel, prétend-on, […] que des hommes dont les mœurs, ce que nous essayons d’en apprendre à travers des témoignages rarement désintéressés, des hommes qu’il est permis de tenir pour moins pervertis que nous et c’est peu dire, peut-être pour éclairés comme nous ne le sommes plus sur les fins véritables de l’espèce humaine, du savoir, de l’amour et du bonheur humains, que ces hommes dont nous distingue ne serait-ce que notre qualité de Blancs, nous qui disons “hommes de couleurs,” nous hommes sans couleur, aient été tenus, par la seule puissance de la métallurgie européenne, en 1914, de se faire crever la peau pour un très bas monument funéraire collectif - c’était d’ailleurs, si nous ne nous trompons pas, une idée française, cela répondait à un calcul français - voilà qui nous permet d’inaugurer, nous aussi, à notre manière, l’Exposition coloniale et de tenir tous les zélateurs de cette entreprise pour des rapaces.

The construct of civilization and evolutionary hierarchy was falsely based on race as the norm. As Stansell convincingly argues, by opposing “men of color” to “us, men without color,” the Surrealists inverted the accepted idea, and imply that color – and not whiteness – represents the norm. The Surrealists also rejected any suggestion of

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133 Jody Blake, in Stansell 118.  
134 Stansell 119.
European genius as the basis European power: they offered an alternative theory, namely the success of “European metallurgy,” adding a dimension of randomness to the attack on the traditional narrative of progress, and then further denounce it as an inappropriate yardstick, since its logic led to unimaginable death and destruction. Michel Leiris similarly undermines the assumptions of the superiority of Western civilization in his article “Civilisation” in *Documents*:

> Toutes nos habitudes morales et nos usages de politesse, tout ce manteau de couleur fraîche qui voile la crudité de nos instincts dangereux, toutes ces belles formes de cultures dont nous sommes si fiers – car c’est grâce à elles qu’on peut se dire ‘civilisé’ – sont prêtes à s’évanouir au moindre tourbillon, à se briser au moindre choc […], laissant apparaître dans les interstices l’effrayante sauvagerie […].

Civilization then is a fake veneer (“mince couche verdâtre”) of politeness and morality that can easily break and reveal our terrifying savagery. To be sure, Leiris does not express fear of “our savagery,” quite the contrary – he argues for the need to rid ourselves of the restraints of Western civilization, and to “nous rapprocher plus complètement de notre ancestralité sauvage, et n’appréciions plus guère que ce qui, anéantissant d’un seul coup la succession des siècles, nous place, tout à fait nu et dépouillés, devant un monde plus proche et plus neuf.” Breton similarly had advocated in the 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto* for liberation of thought from rational, aesthetic and moral considerations in order to reach deeper “foundations of the real, […] a clearer and at the same time ever more passionate consciousness of the world perceived by the senses.”

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136 Leiris, “Civilisation” 221.
138 André Breton, *What is Surrealism?*, originally delivered as a lecture to a Belgian Surrealist group in 1934, but shortly after published as a pamphlet. This citation is from an English translation from André Breton, *Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Monad/Pathfinder Press, 1978) 115.
It is because objects offer access to this closer and renewed world, as is demonstrated by the counter-exposition, that they are so important for the Surrealists. In *L’amour fou* Breton writes that once Alberto Giacometti overcame an artist’s block when he discovered a mask at a flea market:

The purpose of the mask’s intervention seemed to be to help Giacometti overcome his indecision in this regard. We should note that here the finding of the object strictly serves the same function as that of a dream, in that it frees the individual from paralyzing emotional scruples, comforts him.\(^{139}\)

This story summarizes the different aspects of the Surrealist interest in objects. The inspiration the object conferred was the result of a chance encounter, just like the beauty in “the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table.”\(^{140}\) The found or the discarded object is suddenly transformed into an object with magical qualities, an object of artistic inspiration and beauty. As such, it is not reducible to any single ‘category’ of art because it has managed to transcend all imposed limitations. Tribal objects seemed to the Surrealists to be especially endowed with such quality; they were, as Morton put it, “a window into a prerational mentality that could serve as a counter to the horrifying consequence of reason’s dominance in modern life.”\(^{141}\) Hence, the passion of Surrealists for primitive art, which, by the way, was not limited to African art (seen as too commodified by some) but also included Oceanic, American, Malaysian, Alaskan etc.

The magical quality that objects possessed for the Surrealists was also a theme explored by ethnologists, as Morton reminds us. Lévy-Bruhl’s work represented one such intersection of interest (before he was placed on the do-not-read list). Lévy-Bruhl

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\(^{140}\) Lautrèamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868).

\(^{141}\) Morton 108.
investigated the role of mythology in “primitive mentalities,” and argued that the mythological (imaginary, magical, mythic) realm was just as present as the tactile, knowable reality of everyday experiences, although it defied Western norms of logic or reason. Therefore, in “primitive mentalities,” objects of everyday life are endowed with a magical quality because there is no distinction between the marvelous and the real; in Western civilization, on the contrary, the so-called “real” experiences suppress the mythic dimension.

The idea that the sacred resides in everyday life was central to Surrealist philosophy, hence, their appreciation of ordinary objects, places, events that reveal in some circumstances their dream-like, imaginary, magical potential. It depends, however, on freeing them, as it were, of their functionality and banality, of going beyond the “paucity” of reality. Leiris writes in his famous essay “The Sacred in Everyday Life”: “What, for me, is the sacred? [emphasis in the original] […] It is a matter of searching through some of the humblest things, taken from everyday life and located outside of what today makes up the officially sacred (religion, fatherland, morals).” He offers as an example of the sacred a tour of his childhood home, where every ordinary object reveals itself as sacred. Similarly, in Paysan de Paris, Aragon is engrossed by the Passages and the parks in the familiar city around him that in turn inspire in him all sorts of philosophical musings and personal reflections. In a sense, it is through objects that reality can be perceived as an aesthetic experience. It is also by revealing the marvelous

143 This is a reference to Breton’s “Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality” (“Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité”). In Breton, *What is Surrealism?*
that what Breton calls “the interior reality” (the subjective, the intuitive, the artistic, the magical) and “the exterior reality” (the physical reality, the logical, the rational) can be experienced as continuous, and as one full experience. That such unification is possible is exemplified by the dream-object. Breton recounts, for instance, how recently, while I was asleep, I came across a rather curious book in an open-air market near St. Malo. The back of the book was formed by a wooden gnome whose white beard, clipped in the Assyrian manner, reached to its feet. The statue was of ordinary thickness, but did not prevent me from turning the pages which were of heavy black cloth. I was anxious to buy it and, upon waking was sorry not to find it near me… I would like to put into circulation certain objects of this kind, which appear eminently problematical and intriguing.

Such dream-objects, Breton suggests, should serve as models for the creation of real objects, regardless of the physical impossibility or their impractical nature (e.g., iron with nails; cup lined with fur). Objects, he writes, should be “no more useful than enjoyable,” they should be “the objectification of the very act of dreaming.” As Bate points out, the surrealist object is different from other objects because it does not participate in the economy of fetishism, rationality, and physicality but also because the object of perception is no different than the real object.

What is, then, the status of the objects in the collection presented at the 1931 Surrealist counter-exposition? Have they transcended the limitations of reason, and practicality to become poetic objects that allow privileged access to reality? In other words, have they become surrealist objects? The counter-exposition, inspired by the ideas of revolution central to Surrealism, had in fact aimed at subverting Western logic on many levels. The decision to display tribal objects was obviously intended to confirm

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146 Breton, What is Surrealism?
147 Breton, What is Surrealism? 26.
“l’existence d’aspirations qui ne pouvaient pas s’exprimer dans notre propre civilisation,” as also theorized by new ethnology. In order to bring forward the magical and artistic quality, these objects had to be discovered as aesthetic objects, not as objects that attract the explorer. As Breton wrote, the explorer’s attitude is inspired by fetishistic desire for exoticism, and Aragon further dismissed it as a “petite nostalgie bourgeoise,” the dream that “l’évasion impossible, chacun songe paisiblement à s’évader. […] Ils se sont rebâti un paradis virtuel, qui niche quelque part en Afrique.”

The aim of the counter-exposition then was to subvert the discourse of the imaginary appropriation of the other; the object could reassert its autonomy as an aesthetic object (as opposed to an exotic object) once the ‘exotic voyage’ ends.

The counter-exposition also raised the question of the collection – how to present objects in a way that will affirm their poetic value. The logic of the Western museum rests on the notion of visual, imaginary and physical appropriation, which “kills” the poetic value of the objects. This is no doubt what Bataille alluded to when he wrote in the entry Musée of the Critical Dictionary: “L’origine du musée moderne serait donc liée au développement de la guillotine.” Further, the Western museum evacuated the poetic value of the object, and made it the prerogative of the public: “les salles et les objets d’art ne sont qu’un contenant dont le contenu est formé par les visiteurs.”

The alienation of

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150 Breton, qtd. in Bate 191.

151 Aragon, in Debaene, n.p.

152 The same theme, Debaene reminds, is shared by ethnology with its emphasis on fieldwork, which is similarly opposed to the idea of voyage. Debaene also sees a contradiction between the idea of suspending the voyage and the practice of defamiliarizing the familiar in order to reveal the marvelous, though they are not necessarily mutually exclusive because they both are the expression of a mindset that rejects fetishism and seeks freedom from the restraints of reason, functionality, practicality etc.

153 Bataille, “Musée” in Documents 5 (1930) 300.
the poetic aspect of the objects is further exacerbated by the principle of organization: the museum establishes a taxonomy of objects, based on a supposedly objective, disinterested point of view. For Breton, this approach is but a “regard glacé,” an attempt to “tout détecter [avec des appareils], sauf précisément ce qui […] importe, soit ce qui détermine la fusion de l’esprit et du coeur […].”154 The ‘objective’ point of view of the museum erases the particularities of the object in favor of a quantifiable and classifiable “indifference.”155 The logic of the museum obliterates the spiritual and poetic nature of the object, and is therefore unacceptable to Surrealist ideology. The only valid guiding principle for a collection instead is personal predilection; hence, the opposition between museum and collection. By extension, as Debaene argues, objects should only be included for their emotive value: “l’essentiel est […] avant tout de respecter le rayonnement [de l’objet] et sa capacité à métamorphoser, en retour, l’esprit.”156

These principles were put into practice in the counter-exposition, as I already discussed, in an attempt to valorize the colonial other and to interrogate fundamental assumptions about art, beauty, reason, hierarchy, etc. The tribal objects served to counter the restraints imposed by Western civilization. The Surrealists’ view of the tribal object as pre-rational or pre-civilized might be read as problematic if it is not understood within a larger context: the Surrealist project seeks a radical revolution, total redefinition and subversion of Western civilization, as evidenced by a 1925 letter written to Paul Claudel: “We fervently hope that wars and colonial insurrections will annihilate this Western

156 Debaene, n.p.
The Surrealists were equally, if not more, interested in the political potential of these practices, notably, the preparation of a revolution, the subverting of Western civilization for its own sake. The anti-colonial reaction expressed at the counter-colonial exposition should be read as a part of a larger cultural revolution that sought to free true spirit from the restraints of imposed by reason and logic.  

**Conclusion**

The 1931 Colonial fair, like all previous expositions, was an attempt on behalf of France to boost its international standing and to present to its citizens the nation’s greatness, symbolically synthesized in the idea of Greater France – a sprawling, wealthy and influential France that united over a hundred million citizens. In contrast to previous colonial displays, the 1931 fair also sought to demonstrate the success of French colonial efforts and the civilizing mission by inviting displays of colonial cultures and subjects simultaneously as smoothly and tastefully integrated in French society, and as retaining their cultural particularities. The new modes of display the fair promised to implement were no doubt meant as a reponse and visual proof of the new French policy toward its colonial subjects – that of association, which reversed centuries-long assimilationist efforts, characterized by institutionalized brutality. Further, new cultural attitudes and scientific approaches, repudiating, for instance, the racial biology that dominated earlier colonial displays, seemingly inspired more tasteful and acceptable images of colonial cultures.

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158 Stansell 118.
Yet, by analyzing closely the images, narratives and contexts of the exposition, I show that beneath the seemingly unproblematic messages, the fair constructed conflicting images of the colonial subjects, othering, instead of integrating, the colonies into an imagined French national space. I argue that this conflict between the officially sanctioned imagery and the ambivalent representations of the fair concealed in fact a growing fear of modernity and anxiety over loss of cultural dominance.
CHAPTER THREE

The Last Universal Exposition and the Future of France: The 1937 Paris Exposition

Encouraged by the overall success of the 1925 Art Deco Exposition and of the 1931 Colonial Exposition, France began to prepare for the next major spectacle with which it sought to dazzle Europe and the rest of the world.¹ Unlike those fairs, which explored a single theme, the next Exposition would be the first attempt in the 20th century to reinvent the spectacular tradition of the 19th century great fairs. When the Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques dans la vie moderne opened on May 25, 1937, about a month later than originally planned, it was trumpeted as “l’exposition la plus grandiose que les génies de la France aient jamais conçue.”² It spread its 300 pavilions, constructed by some 20,000 workers, over 105 hectares, housed 11,000 participants, and went on to welcome over 31 million visitors – as much as the 1931 Colonial Exposition – over 7 months.³ The 1937 fair was also the most expensive universal exposition to date, realized at the cost of billions of francs.⁴ It featured dazzling displays of technological inventions, including fêtes de la lumière, son et lumière, and water spectacles powered by electricity; sound film; a palace of discovery conceived by Jean Perrin, the French scientist who discovered the atom; an ice tower 40 meters tall at the Pavillon du Froid

¹ The history of the planning of this fair is discussed later in this chapter.
³ Brigitte Gudehus-Schroeder and Anne Rasmussen, Les fastes du progrès: Le guide des expositions universelles, 1851-1992 (Paris: Flammarion, 1992) 192-4 and Dupays 7. While the 1937 fair was indeed a major undertaking and the largest fair in the interwar years, it fell short of the record-breaking 1900 Exposition, which welcomed almost twice as many visitors and eight times more exhibitors.
⁴ According to Gudehus-Schroeder, the Exposition received subsidies from the government in the amount of 1.3 billion francs and from the city of Paris in the amount of 351 million francs. While it is generally assumed that the Exposition’s balance sheet was negative (750 million francs), Gudehus-Schroeder cites a financial analysis dated 31 December 1940 that indicates that the Exposition realized net profits of 218 million Francs (193).
that remained frozen through the summer months of the exposition, and many others. The miracles of technology and modern science, as the title indicated, were important themes at the 1937 event. The Exposition also featured the largest number of national pavilions at any exposition – forty-two countries and several territories whose political status was not clear at the time (such as Israel) – confirming the thematic shift in the fairs of the 20th century from advertising commercial products to promoting nation-states. With all the competing national pavilions, it was imperative that France as the host set forth a powerful image of its national consensus and identity.

In many ways, the 1937 fair, like the 1925 Art Deco Fair and the 1931 Colonial Exposition, was seen as an opportunity for France to reclaim its place as a leading political, economic and cultural world power, and to reassert its national unity. It was the third major international fair organized after the Great War, not counting the national colonial exposition of 1922 in Marseille. Because of their more limited scope and themes, however, these earlier expositions are not considered universal in the tradition of the great expositions of the 19th century. The 1937 event attempted to return to precisely that model, promising to offer a synthesis of the progress in the domain of the arts and of technology realized since the war, in other words, an “assessment of the world’s civilization.” Edmond Labbé, the Commissioner General, also spoke of the exposition as an expression of a “contemporary humanism” aimed at the “humankind’s well-being.”

Yet the employed universalist rhetoric gave way to nationalist sentiments. For one, the official title designated the fair as “international,” and not “universal.” The internal organization along national lines implied that the nature of the fairs evolved

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5 Dupays 7.
away from ‘universal’ themes toward reaffirming the primacy of the nation. This shift no doubt reflected the politically unstable interwar context, in which France had to define itself in relation to the rise of new ideologies across Europe, namely fascism and communism. It also expressed the painful recognition in France that these ideologies not only challenged French universalist and republican worldview but were incompatible with French way of life. In other words, the opportunity to provide a synthesis of progress in universal terms was gradually replaced by a competition between nations. Léon Blum, the serving Popular Front Prime Minister at the time of the opening of the fair, expressed hopes that the exposition would make French citizens aware of their “profound unity and strength.” For his part, in an interview with journalist and critic André Warnod, commissioner Labbé contended:

> Je sais bien qu’il s’agit en même temps d’une exposition internationale, et qu’une exposition internationale est une confrontation. Cette confrontation, pourquoi la redouter, comme si nous ne pouvions pas affronter nos concurrents sur certains terrains, comme s’il n’y avait pas encore des champs de bataille économiques où la France sût triompher? En 1937, nous pouvons faire comprendre au pays et montrer aux nations ce qu’est la qualité française. Ne négligeons pas l’occasion qui nous est offerte…

The language of confrontation and international competition replaced the universalist rhetoric, revealing the anxiety and lack of conviction in the applicability of these ideas to the contemporary world. Labbé’s words signaled an important shift in the conceptualization of the fairs: they were shaped increasingly as a tool for the construction of national identity and a platform for affirming national dominance among international competitors. The image of the 1937 fair as ‘a benevolent act’ toward international

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8 Labbé in Warnod iii.
solidarity overtly competed with the image of international confrontation and economic competition.

The 1937 event shed light on the urgency for France to define itself in relation to and to rise above other participating nations, as already made clear by commissioner Labbé’s remarks. The exposition planning took place during an enormously challenging period in the history of France. The trauma of the war was still very much present in national consciousness, as was the bittersweet victory, which was won at a very high cost. As historian Eugen Weber grimly recalls, the destruction and losses were still very much visible some 20 years later:

for fifty-one months […], 1,000 Frenchmen were killed day after day, nearly 1 of every 5 men mobilized, 10.5 percent of the country’s active male population. […] About 1,400,000 French lost their lives; well over 1,000,000 had been gassed, disfigured, mangled, amputated, left permanent invalids. Wheelchairs, crutches, empty sleeves dangling loosely or tucked into pockets became common sights. More than that had suffered some sort of wound: Half of the 6,500,000 who survived the war had sustained injuries. Most visible, 1,100,000, were those who had been evidently diminished and were described as mutilés. 9

The war had grave repercussions in social terms as well. The birthrate dropped significantly largely due to the decline in male population, the mobilization of women in the working force during the war and the ensuing reorganization of gender roles, sowing fears of a demographic catastrophe. 10

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Anxiety in France was further compounded by the severity of the economic crisis. War debts and rising reconstruction costs continued to cause a huge deficit. France had drawn economic prestige from its extensive colonial holdings, exploited mainly for their natural resources and labor, but by 1937, as commissioner Labbé put it, “it is no longer good enough to produce; we must also sell.” The Depression, although late to reach France and initially not as serious there as elsewhere, caused widespread unemployment: official figures estimate the unemployed to have numbered anywhere between 350,000 and 600,000. The government’s inability to deal with the economic crisis in turn resulted in deep social unrest and dissatisfaction (expressed in paralyzing general strikes in 1925-6) as well as governmental instability. Beyond the economic and financial repercussions, the Depression rattled the belief in the capitalist system and market economy.

The economic crisis also had repercussions on the cultural front. France had always prided itself on being a great artistic center and insisted that its national genius


12 Initially, the Depression, which spread rapidly through industrialized countries like the US or the UK following the Wall Street crash in 1929, did not have the same intensity in France: there, 1930 was relatively prosperous (Roger Price, *A Concise History of France*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. 262-269). At the same time, structural problems and the shifting state involvement in managing the national economy prolonged the downturn in the country more than anywhere else. Practically the entire decade was marked by significant decline in industrial production; deflation; collapsing trade, and so on. For a detailed study of the evolving role of the state in the face of the economic challenges of the 1930s, see Richard Kuisel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) ch. 4 “The Thirties: Experiments and Alternatives to Liberal Economics” 93-127. For a comparative perspective of the unfolding of the depression in Europe, see Patricia Clavin, *The Great Depression in Europe, 1929-1939* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000) who argues that the gold standard system in France also had detrimental effect on the recovery.

relied on its unique goût. But, as commissioner Labbé put it, “les arts ne peuvent se
nourrir de l’air et du temps […] : une civilisation où l’art se fane ne vous semble-t-elle pas
une civilisation à l’aurore de la décadence?”14 The economic crisis was seen as directly
related to France’s loss of cultural dominance, and the Exposition’s program was
intended as a measure to aid artistic production and to instill in the general public a sense
of the immense importance of the arts for the nation, as Labbé himself asserted: “il s’agit
de faire comprendre [au public] que pour se dire civilisé […] il faut encore avoir du goût.
Il s’agit de faire savoir au peuple que le beau n’est pas forcément austère, coûteux,
inutile, que l’art n’est pas inévitablement esclave du luxe.”15 The indispensable nature of
artistic production for French identity resonated particularly strongly at a time when
standardization and mass production came to be perceived as detrimental to French
culture, which had long prided itself on the quality of hand-made, artisanal production.
Mass production threatened to erase long-standing traditions and lifestyle, and to usher in
a new era of standardization and homogeneity.

In addition, the international context in the 1930s was becoming increasingly
volatile. France watched quietly as Germany was growing strong16 and as fascism,
limited to Italy in the 1920s, spread throughout Europe and even threatened the French

14 Labbé qtd. in Dupays 9.
16 March 7, 1936 is often considered to be a critical date. On that day, Hitler sent German troops across the
Rhine. This act was very much symbolic in that it expressed Germany’s defiance of the Versailles Treaty,
which explicitly forbade Germany “to place any soldiers or military installations in a broad band of
German territory: all land west of the Rhine, and a strip fifty kilometers (thirty miles) wide along the east
bank of the Rhine.” This provision allowed France to identify any military actions undertaken by Germany
against it as early as possible and to act to defend its sovereignty; it also declared the remilitarization of the
Rhineland “a hostile act.” Following Germany’s actions, France simply filed a complaint with the League
of Nations, for the prospects of mobilization in an election year would have been highly unpopular in
France, and because France lacked international support to act. See Robert Paxton, Europe in the 20th
Republic in February 1934.\textsuperscript{17} The political situation in neighboring Spain, involving fascist general Francisco Franco, had degenerated into a full-scale civil war in 1936. That cause resonated strongly with French intellectuals particularly, and many of them voluntarily joined the battle.\textsuperscript{18} Beyond the serious political implications, the rise of fascist ideology also constituted an attack on French universalist values: as historian James Herbert put it, Nazi Germany was proposing “disturbingly different conceptions of society, race, science and aesthetics and also threatened French notion of a world happily and fully integrated through economic cooperation and aesthetic universality.”\textsuperscript{19}

All of these challenges brought forth the urgency for France to reinvent itself and to rethink what it meant to be French and modern. The exposition served as a platform for synthesis and stock-taking, as Labbé affirmed:

Notre exposition ne portera pas le titre d’Exposition universelle, mais, puisque nous voulons faire d’elle une vaste synthèse, une synthèse aussi complète que possible de toutes les activités caractéristiques de la vie de la France moderne, elle sera en fait une exposition universelle, qui nous permettra de prendre conscience de l’étendue exacte de nos ressources, de recenser nos forces et nos faiblesses.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} Paxton notes that in the 1930s, fascist regimes ruled not only in Italy and Germany but also in Portugal, Austria and, later, Spain, in addition to the establishment of authoritarian – and sympathetic to fascism – regimes in Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia). Cf. Paxton, ch. 12 “The Spread of Fascism” 351-381. For more on fascism in France, see Paxton 373-375, and Stanley Payne, \textit{A History of Fascism, 1914-1945} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), esp. 291ff; and Robert Soucy, “Fascism,” in Lawrence Kritzman, \textit{The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 35-38.

\textsuperscript{18} Studies on the national makeup of the international brigades show that French volunteers represented by far the largest group of all. According to a conservative estimate by Bradley and Chappell, French and Belgians numbered about 10,000, while the second largest group (Germans and Austrians) were merely half as many (Ken Bradley and Mike Chappell, \textit{International Brigades in Spain 1936-39}, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2004) 7. On the subject of French participation in the brigades, see also Rémi Skoutelsky, \textit{L’Espoir guidait leur pas: les volontaires français dans les brigades internationales, 1936-39} (Paris: Grasset, 1998), who clarifies that the majority of French volunteers were members of the working class. On the direct and indirect involvement of the French Surrealists in the Spanish Civil War, see also Robin Adèle Greely, \textit{Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).


\textsuperscript{20} Labbé qtd. in Warnod ii.
The task of reinventing France through a public spectacle was monumental and complex, and negotiating national and cultural priorities was not easy – a difficulty reflected in the debates surrounding the initial proposals. There were three proposals originally, each of them proposing a different response to the challenges facing France.

The first proposal for the exposition, submitted in 1929 by Julien Durand, a Radical deputy who was also the president of the Trade Commission, proposed an exposition on the “modern decorative and industrial arts,” a sort of a sequel to the 1925 Decorative Arts Exposition. The proposal suggested that the exposition be run by the Ministry of Trade, alluding to the commercial success of the 1925 fair, but by choosing arts as its central theme, it sought to emphasize the importance of French goût and quality and the importance of the arts for the economic stability of the country, echoing Labbé’s position.21

In 1932, Durand’s initial proposal was broadened to include a second proposal by Socialist Paul Tournan for an “exposition internationale de la Civilisation” [sic] focusing on the sciences, humanities, arts and industry “en vue du développement de la coopération intellectuelle”22 and promoting peace between the nations. Labbé supported this program in La Nouvelle Europe:

[…] nous entendons servir la cause de la paix en organisant, au beau lieu d’une époque troublée, une Exposition internationale. Une Exposition internationale doit être le théâtre de concurrence généreuse, de compétitions fécondes; elle doit montrer ce que peut chacune des nations dans telle ou telle branche de l’activité humaine; elle doit mettre en lumière cette collaboration universelle, cette coopération, ces échanges, ces enseignements mutuels qui sont les raisons déterminantes de tous les progrès. […] Les différences mettent des nuances dans le tableau, elles en accentuent l’unité profonde.23

21 Labbé, “L’Exposition internationale de 1937.” For Labbé’s full quote, see 226.
22 Gudehus-Schroeder 192.
23 Labbé in La Nouvelle Europe 920.
Tournan’s proposal hoped to cast France as a peaceful leader in a troubled era. It attempts to show that the French universalist model, far from being obsolete, is more relevant than ever to the challenges of the modern world.

In June 1932, soon after a Leftist coalition government was created following parliamentary elections, socialist Eugène Fiancette submitted a third proposal, which enjoyed tremendous political support (on the left) owing to its focus on workers’ and peasants’ lives. Fiancette justified this idea by arguing that the economic crisis had demonstrated that the problems of work and workers are common to all nations, regions and domains of work and should be addressed in a coherent and organized effort. Further, by associating agricultural workers with industrial workers (who were more organized and better-represented) the project scored political points for the Left, which sought rural support.  

After many revisions and negotiations, the plan for the exposition was finalized. It retained the major themes of all three proposals and was dedicated to les arts et les techniques dans la vie moderne. However, the different nature of the three proposals already suggested that under the surface, the image of France displayed at the Exposition would not be nearly so unproblematic as was advertised. The fair would instead reveal the complex circumstances that destabilized any perceived ideas about Frenchness and France’s abiding anxiety about the future.

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25 For a time, it was uncertain whether the exposition would take place at all. The political and economic situation inside France had deteriorated so much that the first Commissioner General Aimé Berthod (who was also Minister of Commerce) was prompted to announce in 1934, to the dismay of many, that the Exposition was canceled. The severity of the economic crisis made it difficult to justify such a large expenditure; the political climate was characterized by governmental instability and social unrest (fueled, among others, by the Stavisky Affair and the February 6, 1934 riots). The exposition was ultimately reinstated, and Berthod was replaced by Labbé, though he remained an advisor to the planning committee.
A Visit to the Exposition: The Foreign Section

France was not alone in struggling to address the challenges of the rapidly changing world and to define itself in the face of modernity and the new world order(s) proposed at the time by the USSR and fascist Germany. By many accounts, the nations participating at the Exposition failed to present modernity – the major centralizing theme of the Exposition – as a unifying and convincing idea; each nation instead revealed its own ambivalent attitude toward modernity. Some, like the pavilions of Finland and Denmark, embraced the modernist, geometric style while relying on natural materials characteristic of their geography (such as wood and marble from Greenland). Others offered a more traditional vision of their cultures. Bulgaria, for instance, was represented by a house designed and furnished in a traditional manner that supposedly testified to the reputation of Bulgarian builders who created an ethnographic “style which still persists in Bulgaria”26; at the same time, such ‘traditional’ architecture served to conceal the fact that industry in the country scarcely existed at the time, despite national efforts to modernize like the West. Still others can be praised for making a genuine effort to incorporate modernist design with traditional elements, like Japan in its use of bamboo and wood with cinderblocks and metal beams. This effort was contrasted by numerous examples of architectural pastiches. Egypt’s eclectic pavilion, for instance, represented a modernized rendition of a neo-classical building with a Corinthian colonnade. Others still, like the pavilion dedicated to the Baltic states of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, showed no immediate reference to the theme of modern industries and decorative arts and lacked an easily detectable unifying idea, displaying instead Christian religious items, a

small art exhibit and, surprisingly, an equestrian statue of the Latvian president, Karlis Ulmanis.

Most prominent by far were the centrally located and outsized pavilions of the USSR and of the Third Reich (3.1). Their main concern was to assert the inevitability and strength of their competing ideologies, and chose to do so through a neo-classical architectural vocabulary, which allowed them to insist on the modernity of their respective ideologies and to assert their historical legitimacy.

3.1 The View from the observation platform of the Palais de Chaillot. On the left is the pavilion of Nazi Germany, and right of the Eiffel Tower is the pavilion of the USSR.

Few were the daring, truly modernist pavilions at the exposition. The pavilion of Czechoslovakia stood among the most aesthetically innovative and progressive (3.2). Entirely built in steel and glass, the clean, geometric forms of the cube-shaped building also evoked the industrial aesthetic. “C’est une création modèle de l’architecture de
l’avenir,” exclaimed the *Guide Officiel*.\(^ {27}\) It also drew commissioner Labbé’s praise, who similarly admired the use of metal and glass in the Swiss pavilion (3.3), which resembled “une immense vitrine lumineuse et aérée qui tend au double but de permettre une circulation pratique et de mettre en valeur des objets exposés.”\(^ {28}\) In his view, both of these pavilions were successful because they also drew on the tradition of glass-and-metal buildings that defined the expositions in the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century, but managed successfully to stage innovative interpretations of them.

![Image 1](image1.png)

3.2 The Pavilion of Czechoslovakia, built entirely in steel and glass.

![Image 2](image2.png)

3.3 The Swiss Pavilion was praised by Commissioner Labbé.

\(^{27}\) *Guide officiel* 116.  
\(^{28}\) *Guide officiel* 120.
Overall, the foreign section produced fragmentary and disjointed visions of modernity. *Le livre des expositions universelles* offers a peek at contemporary commentaries: “Le plan de composition reste introuvable,” complained Alf Agache, an urbanist; another critic, Maurice Barret, lamented the exposition’s “disorder.”29 And they had a point: the classificatory system for the 1937 fair had been reorganized and expanded several times, adding new “sections” under already existing “groups” and “classes” in order to accommodate hard-to-classify or late-coming participants. The resulting organization, although stemming from the encyclopedic tradition of the 19th century fairs, clearly could no longer maintain – or justify – the authoritarian rigidity of the positivist taxonomy of the 19th century fairs, as if to echo the external reality the Exposition claimed to portray. More importantly, the exposition failed to offer a new, coherent and overarching vision of modernity – even if this is exactly what it had set out to do. The fairs had always been used to unveil new visions of modernity, guided by the belief that “à chaque âge convient un style,” as Labbé claimed in an article in *L’Europe Nouvelle*.30 The 1937 Exposition therefore also needed a new style, as Labbé realized; regrettably, however, the various pavilions offered chaotic and irreconcilable ideas of what it meant to be modern.

With a few small exceptions, the Exposition failed to present radically new and audacious notions of modernity of the sort that the Crystal Palace had offered in 1851.31 They revealed instead its elusive nature and the ambiguous attitudes from the participants of all nations – testimony to the anxiety toward the future.

30 Labbé, in *L’Europe Nouvelle*.
31 For more on the Crystal Palace and its reception in France, see Part One 36-47.
France’s own appearance at the Exposition was no less ambiguous. To begin with, there was no designated pavilion of France that might make a monolithic statement about the nation. France’s image was instead composed of various pavilions in the regional center, in the colonial section, now relegated to the Ile-des-Cygnes, and in a number of thematically organized sections, as if to suggest that Greater France was now dissipated among the myriad of national pavilions. Instead of defining France as both modern and traditional, metropolitan and regional, artistic and technological, imperial and republican, as it first promised, the Exposition offered an image of France as fragmented into disconnected realities, corresponding to the inability to create a coherent narrative of the nation. The conflicting narratives became obvious during the negotiations of the question of how to present France as united and cohesive, in particular in the debate about reconstructing the old Trocadero palace.

**The New Trocadero**

When it was agreed that the 1937 Exposition would be situated on the Champ de Mars, it was also decided that updating the style of the Trocadero Palace, which stood across from the Eiffel Tower, was indispensable for the shaping of France’s image as modern. The Trocadero had always had an important place in the Expositions. It was originally designed as an exposition hall for the 1878 Exposition on a site celebrating France’s 1823 victory over Spain in the battle for the Fort Trocadero, in southwestern Spain (3.4). Since that time, the Palace drew strong criticism for its style that relied heavily on glass and steel arches and strayed from the classical tradition of public buildings: such modern style resulted in an “incorrect profile” that was the “defect in
modern monuments,” wrote one critic in *Revue de France.* It was further vehemently criticized for its uses of ‘exotic’ architectural vernacular. It was compared to a Turkish bath, accused of donning a “fake Lebanese style,” and called a “Moorish abomination.”

The observer from *Revue de France* summed it up: “C’est assyrien, ou mauresque, ou byzantin, mais c’est haut!” The manner of the Trocadero Palace made it unreal, non-French and incomprehensible: “Nos fils doivent apprendre les langues étrangères pour comprendre ce maltais!”

In other words, in the 19th century still, the Trocadero was reflective of French anxiety over hybridity that loomed large in the French imaginary. The Palace purportedly dishonored the purity and character of the French artistic tradition, and this loss was seen as conducive to aesthetic and cultural degeneration. Even at that time, the “Troca” was a 

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34 “Le Palais du Trocadéro.”
35 “Le Palais du Trocadéro.”
battlefield for the debate about what it meant to be French and modern. By the mid-1930s, however, the Trocadero’s ‘modern’ style had become all but obsolete in a context that called for renewal, and the 1937 Exposition provided the occasion for reassessing the Trocadero. It was not only a matter of imprinting a new, 1937 style; it was a question of how to present France to the whole world in an era in which the expositions provided a platform for national propaganda. In turn, its 1937 style lends itself nicely to a study that aims to point out the conflicting notions of national identity in the face of unstoppable modernity.

The initial plan, intended to keep costs under control, opened a competition for camouflaging the Palace for the occasion. The numerous submissions offered diverse responses (3.5). Some, like Jacques Carlu, a prominent architect with solid institutional support from the academic Ecole des Beaux-Arts, proposed to enclose the old structure in a huge shell, allowing the building surface to be used for the exposition displays, and its front façade as an immense screen. Carlu’s proposal also involved lighting in an effort to achieve a cinematographic effect.36 Another submission, by Joseph Marrast, an architect and a collaborator of Albert Laprade, the architect responsible for the Musée des Colonies for the 1931 Colonial Fair, suggested constructing a permanent shell that evoked a Roman Cathedral intended to produce a powerful effect on the spectators. The plan was deemed attractive and promising, because it developed a well-proportioned façade, fine ornaments and strong character consistent with the French aesthetic tradition. Nevertheless, it was rejected because it required demolishing the houses behind the

Palace to replace them with trees, making the design inapplicable to the context. Other proposals drew inspiration from American aesthetic and Art Deco style, and even included an amusement park with roller coasters. Still others proposed keeping parts of the building as recognition of the past, and rebuilding the towers in an updated style, including constructing a large garage as a nod to the automobile, the symbol of the 20th century. There were proposals to suit all tastes, commented *L’architecture aujourd’hui* (3.5). But the many disparate visions also revealed lack of a coherent idea of how best to represent France.

3.5 Proposals to camouflage the Trocadero on the occasion of the 1937 Exposition.

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38 *L’architecture d’aujourd’hui* (January 1935) 42.
In addition, the very idea of camouflaging was met with sharp criticism. Art critic Claude Roger-Marx echoed the public anger: “Voici l’admirable hérésie qu’on projette: camouflage pendant la durée de l’Exposition de 1937, de ce bâtiment d’exposition qu’est le Trocadéro, afin de rendre à cette construction provisoire sa laideur permanente.”39 Others protested that such an illogical project further undermined the confidence of French architects, instead of helping them at this particularly difficult moment.40 The plan was thrown out and it was decided that the Trocadero would not be camouflaged but presented for the occasion. But a few weeks later, a new idea was voted and passed by the Commissariat of the Exposition: to demolish the existing structure and rebuild it anew, under the earlier leadership of Carlu with the collaboration of architects Azéma and Boileau. A new storm of anger ensued: accusations were directed at the Commissariat for inappropriately and arbitrarily appointing Carlu as head of this project, and at Carlu for having plagiarized ideas from other worthy contestants. The benefits of the plan from an urban-planning perspective were called in question, as was the design itself. The very ethics of the project were also attacked:

Où irions-nous, d’ailleurs, si l’on se mettait à démolir les monuments qui, à tort ou à raison ont cessé de plaire. Songez qu’à une époque pas bien lointaine où l’architecture du moyen âge était assez méprisée, il se serait trouvé des architectes pour voir sans déplaisir disparaître Notre-Dame.41

While not liking the old Troca in the first place, Paris was not ready to let go of it, bespeaking the disquiet modernity inspired. This sharply critical response further problematized France’s relationship to its past and its attitude toward modernity. In the

39 Claude Roger-Marx’s words originally appeared in *Le Jour*, and were mentioned again in *L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui* (August 1935) 82.
41 Louvet, *L’architecture* (January 1935) 82.
meantime, demolition of the old palace was already underway before any plan was approved. Finally, a project submitted by Carlu was approved to preserve a part from the old structure but to clad it with marble, and to gut out and renovate the other part. The organizers hailed this partial reconstruction as “judicious”\textsuperscript{42} and as “a rational usage of what can be preserved of the work of the past,” like the Louvre, Versailles and so many other famous monuments [that] are noble examples of the synthesis of contributions of successive generations.”\textsuperscript{43} Yet, the final version retained the sense of France’s ambivalent relationship to its past and its history, and its sense of loss of the present and desire to resist modernity (3.6).

Although Carlu’s project included two very audacious elements, I contend that it was not a gesture of embracing modernity but rather one that shed light on France’s avoidance of modernity, the desire to disguise the past in the present or the present in the past. Carlu’s project for the new Palais de Chaillot cut into the hill itself, and opened up an observation platform that framed the view of the esplanade overlooking the Seine and the Eiffel Tower. The Trocadéro, built a decade before the Eiffel Tower incorporated the natural convex shape of the hill into what was often referred to as its “belly,”\textsuperscript{44} and was intended as a point of visual reference. After the Eiffel Tower was erected for the 1889 Exposition, however, the elevation of the Trocadero hill eclipsed the view over the new monument and the intentional grandiosity of the palace itself suggested a visual competition, which, by the 1930s when the Eiffel Tower had become an extremely

\textsuperscript{42} Guide officiel 29.
\textsuperscript{43} Qtd. in Gournay 96f.
\textsuperscript{44} Bruno Foucart (in Gournay 64-65) reads this as the ultimate gesture to erase the old Trocadero: Carlu “killed the Troca twice over,” one, by exposing its emptiness and, two, by imposing the concave over the convex.
popular attraction, was deemed unwinnable.\textsuperscript{45} This was the main motivation behind Carlu’s proposal to open up the visual space toward the Seine and turn it into an observation deck for “legions of tourists the better to see and photograph this Eiffel Tower whose construction the Académie des Beaux Arts would have liked to prevent,”\textsuperscript{46} thus complementing it rather than competing with it. In fact, many commentators expressed their appreciation for the visual order around which the new palace was constructed. Louis Gillet, a prominent art critic, noted with satisfaction that “there is hardly any site that possesses such a commanding view” and André Dezarrois, also an art critic and the editor of the monthly \textit{Revue de l’art ancien et moderne}, complimented the unclipped view, saying that “c’est de la nouvelle terrasse du palais neuf du Trocadéro que l’oeil prend possession de cette éphémère et babylonienne Cité.”\textsuperscript{47}

3.6 The rebuilt Palais de Chaillot, 1937.

\textsuperscript{45} According to statistics compiled by the Eiffel Tower company, the Paris landmark received about two million visitors when it opened in 1889, about half as many at the 1900 exposition, about 800,000 visitors on the occasion of the 1931 Colonial Exposition, and a little less than 700,000 in 1925. Without the attraction of special events, the Eiffel Tower regularly averaged over half a million people in the 1920s, and about 350,000 visitors in the 1930s. In 1937, it drew over 800,000 people. These figures are from the company’s official website \url{http://www.tour-eiffel.fr/tiffel/fr/documentation/chiffres/page/frequentation.html#}. Retrieved Dec 14, 2010.

\textsuperscript{46} Jeanne Laurent, \textit{Arts et pouvoir en France de 1793 à 1981} (St Etienne, 1983), qtd. in Gournay 63.

The attraction of the new site of visuality could be explained, according to James Herbert, with its function as a site of construction of subjectivity. It is by standing there, gazing at the panoramic view over the Champs de Mars and the Eiffel Tower, that the spectator “regarded itself as the subject of that object.” In other words, the esplanade afforded spectators visual command over the object on view, and the visuality of the site actually helped mold the spectators into French citizens, because they could identify with the subject’s domineering gaze, the better to conceive of themselves as citizens. Further, the visual regime proposed by the esplanade of the Palais de Chaillot embodied a particular French worldview that served to obfuscate France’s loss of dominance by visually reestablishing hegemony; in other words, not only was French hegemony not at an end, but it was plainly on view at the exposition. This view fostered an image of France as stable, coherent, technologically progressive, happy and free of conflict, inclusive of its provinces and colonies under the banner of the peaceful republic.

The visual certainty of the view of the esplanade, however, was dislocated by the lack of a corresponding reality, as Herbert argues, undermining in this way the notions of Frenchness and France’s imagined place in the world proposed at the Exposition. The Troca, intended as a symbol of French values and their durability in the interwar period, ironically became the site where these very intents were contested. Visually, the

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48 Herbert 27.
49 Herbert 26-28. Herbert’s analysis of the visual representations of the Exposition also makes it evident that the omniscience of the subject, an idea grounded for Herbert in the visuality of the site (i.e., the position of being “the seeing unseen of the nation” or being outside of the Exposition’s representations) is in fact compromised since there was no place that both afforded a full view or visual ownership of the Exposition’s representations, and precluded the possibility of being seen. See also Ihor Junyk, “The Face of the Nation: State Fetishism and Métissage at the Exposition Internationale, Paris 1937” in Grey Room 23 (Spring 2006) 111.
50 Herbert analyzes the image on the Official Catalogue to support this reading. The cover featured a stylized globe intended to symbolize the global effort and ideals the Exposition embodied. Yet, he points out, France is curiously missing from the globe, completely excised from this representation. The freely floating tricolor ribbon in vain attempts to evoke the host nation (19). The spectacle seems to conceal the lack of support for the myth of France the exposition tried to create.
emptiness of the esplanade drew the visual attention and guided the gaze away from the renovated Palais de Chaillot and the values it was intended to reflect. As historian Bruno Foucart put it, “the great paradox of Chaillot is that this palace, so securely enclosed in the hillside, is the palace of empty space” because it was actually downplayed in the monumental hierarchy, especially in relation to the Eiffel Tower. Further, the Palais de Chaillot never represented France at the 1937 Exposition because its contents – the *Musée d'Ethnographie et de la Marine* and the *Musée des Monuments Français* – were technically excluded from the Exposition.

The reactions to the new Palais de Chaillot challenged even further the idealized image of France at the exposition. While Carlu’s design was conceived as a sort of synthesis between the old and the new, between tradition and modernity in line with the official architectural program of the exposition (“harmony of the most revolutionary modernism with the most profound respect for the formidable patrimony of traditions”), the approval it received was derived mainly from its assertion of French architectural traditions. The art critics and cultural observers praised the reestablished purity of the classical monumental tradition of French architecture. *Le Figaro*, which ran a very successful campaign in favor of the plan, also announced its approval of the neo-Roman

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51 Foucart 62.

52 The Official Guide explains that the Museums were not a part of the exposition, although they were physically located on exposition grounds. In fact, the Museums were not completed in time for the exposition: the *Musée d'Ethnographie* did not open until the following year, and only one section of the *Musée des Monuments Français* opened to the Exposition’s visitors.

The museums further complicate the debate about France’s identity started by the project to renovate the Trocadéro because they also helped construct different and idealized narratives of France: the *Musée d'Ethnographie* offered a spatial alternative, and the *Musée des Monuments Français* a temporal one. Both of them evoked idealized spaces untouched by civilization and modernity, and their appeal relied on the unproblematic narratives of French identity they proposed. Together, they spoke volumes about France’s insecurity and its nostalgia for different – if idealized – places and times. For more on the museums, cf. Herbert, esp. 41, and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), esp. Ch. 4 “On Ethnographic Surrealism.”

53 Lange 15.
style adopted by Carlu’s vision, adding that the Trocadéro “sera un monument de style classique, capable de vieillir sans se démoder,” and not “ultramoderne.”54 Art and literary critic Louis Gillet, who published a series of essays on the 1937 Exposition, commented with satisfaction: “Toutes les médiocrités, les petites misères ornementales, ont été résorbées, effacées, remplacées par un grand accord légèrement théâtral, offrant un mélange complexe d’urbanité et de noblesse, de courtoisie et d’austérité.”55 Elements that drew particular praise included the pilasters which evoked a classical colonnade, indispensable in the architectural tradition of public buildings; the extended horizontal lines of the wings and the central structure which were said to draw inspiration from French tradition “characterised by the predominance of the horizontal”56; and its correct proportions and clean lines which brought it the elegance that was missing in the old Trocadéro. The Guide Officiel also referred with pride to the purity of its lines, its harmony, and rational order, with regard to both its exterior and interior.57 The new Chaillot Palace was then deemed acceptable not because it embraced a modernist aesthetic but because the new structure reaffirmed what was considered truly French – well-proportioned architecture, an established ornamental tradition, the supposed purity of French (and not exoticist) style, and a location with particular importance for French history. The modernism of the building’s lines was praised only insofar as it fit within the French monumental tradition:

L’ancien Trocadéro dont la silhouette exotique hispano-mauresque ne parvint jamais à s’incorporer au paysage parisien, fera place à un monument dont les

54 “Le nouveau Trocadéro sera un palais de style Romain” in Le Figaro (January 4, 1936) 1.
56 Qtd. in Gournay 97.
57 Guide Officiel 29, 34-5.
lignes, malgré leur modernisme, seront bien dans la tradition monumentale des Mansart, Gabriel, Ledoux, Percier, Fontaine etc. (emphasis added).  

In turn, criticisms were hastily dismissed: “Only a faulty knowledge of the past, or prejudice, can authorise the condemnation of a monumental conception which was used in Roman times, as well as in the most brilliant periods of French Renaissance architecture and that of the XVIIIth century.” In other words, the best defense for the new Chaillot was the claim that it represented a return to classicism, which was linked to a particular notion of Frenchness.

*Neo-Classicism in Defense of Frenchness*

The use of classicism to construct an image of France as coherent, humanist, and Republican further complicated the debate on national identity at the exposition, particularly because this style was also associated with the pavilions of the authoritarian regimes at the Exposition, the USSR and the Third Reich, and because of history of xenophobia in France.

The pavilions of the USSR and Nazi Germany, which dominated the view framed by the new Palais de Chaillot, were both designed in a geometric and plain neo-classical style, and emanated a sense of grandiosity and colossality (3.7 and 3.8). Both

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58 Qtd. in *Le Livre des expositions* 146.
59 In Gournay 98.
60 The pledge on the part of the host nation to partially fund the construction of foreign pavilions stirred controversy in the case of the pavilion of Nazi Germany, when France offered to Germany funds larger than those it offered other participants, including ones from France (such as the Regional participants). In the political context, this decision fit within the broader goal of cultural *rapprochement* of the two nations, underpinned with France’s belief that cultural exchange would preclude military confrontation, despite evidence to the contrary. At the same time, such an action however unjustified in reality fit smoothly within the utopian space of the fair in which the possibility of celebrating universal peace existed seemingly with no contradictions with the growing military threat. At the exposition, France could celebrate peace as it mobilized.
61 André Dezarrard in his extensive review of the Exposition, in *La revue de l’art* (September 1937) 127-130.
evoked a somber and serious feeling, further accentuated by the rigidity of the vertical lines. Dezarois commented that such serious architecture no doubt revealed the political messages of the pavilions, and invoked the competing new world orders. Many observers, however, regarded the ideologies embodied in the neo-classical architecture of these pavilions as “cut from the same cloth.” For example, Albert Laprade, the architect responsible for designing the Musée permanent des colonies for the 1931 exposition, noted that the two pavilions betrayed the same nationalist pride and appreciation of the colossal that evoked the aspiration toward the über-mensch. The use of revived classicism by Nazi architect Albert Speer in the imperial, fortress-like monument was deemed appropriate because it evoked the strength, unity and immutability of the German spirit. (In order to emphasize the same qualities of the German spirit, the interior displays also focused on traditional art, rejecting modernist paintings and sculptures as degenerate.)

\[62\] Dezarois 128-129.

\[63\] While this was partially true, particularly in their use of classicism, Dawn Ades has pointed to aesthetic differences in the representations of the body – the “coerced body” – in the two monuments: while the German readied for war, she argued, the Soviet readied for labor. Cf. Dawn Ades, “Paris 1937: Art and Power of Nations” in Dawn Ades et al., eds., Art and Power: Europe under the Dictators, 1930-1945 (Thames: Hayward Galleries, 1995).

The USSR also chose neo-classical style for its pavilion, turning away from the modernism propounded by the pavilion designed by constructivist Konstantin Melnikov for the previous exposition in 1925. The very different political situation in the 1930s dictated the aesthetic shift. In 1925, the USSR still celebrated the revolution with enthusiasm, and the modernism embraced by Melnikov’s pavilion emphasized the relationship between avant-garde and revolution. In 1937, however, Stalin’s USSR, troubled by the rise of Nazism, now hoped to establish an alliance with France and Great Britain; for that reason, it needed to downplay its revolutionary image and thus rejected modernism as inappropriate for constructing the image of the USSR as a trustworthy ally.
in the international community.\footnote{Photo of Melnikov’s pavilion for the 1925 fair can be seen on 99 of this dissertation. For more on the USSR presence at the expositions, see Anthony Swift, “The Soviet World of Tomorrow at the New York World’s Fair, 1939” in \textit{The Russian Review} 57 (July 1998) 364-379. Cf. also William C. Miller, “Soviet Architecture 1917-1987” \textit{Journal of Architectural Education} 43:3 (Spring 1990) 56-57. For a detailed description of the pavilion, cf. Jean-Louis Cohen, \textit{Paris 1937: Cinquantenaire de l’Exposition internationale des arts et des techniques dans la vie moderne}, exposition catalogue (Paris: Institut Français d’Architecture, 1987).} The 1937 pavilion instead flaunted a somber and monumental façade, which, according to Dezarrois, “n’a rien de russe ni d’original.”\footnote{Dezarrois 130.} The façade emphasized verticality, guiding the eye toward the now well-known statue by Vera Mukhina, \textit{L’ouvrier et la Kolhozienne} [The Worker and the Collective Farm Worker], that topped it.\footnote{The statue was popularized as the logo for the USSR film-production company MosFilm, as a symbol of the Communist order and of victory over fascism. Because the visual attention was dominated by the statue, some scholars have argued that the pavilion itself was constructed to function as an extended pedestal. Cf. for example, Ades 60-61.} The statue displays a young and strong worker, hammer in his raised hand, meeting the hand of the \textit{Kolhozienne} who carries a sickle; from their unity emerges the emblem of Communist Revolution. The two figures, incarnating the proletariat and the peasantry united, stand with a determination and exude forward movement toward a brighter future, or, alternatively, staunch opposition to Nazi Germany. In fact, Albert Speer, the architect of the Nazi pavilion, recounted in his 1969 memoir that his design was a direct response to that of the USSR pavilion:

\begin{quote}
Le hasard voulut qu’au cours d’une de mes visites à Paris, je m’égare dans une salle où se trouvait la maquette secrète du pavillon soviétique. Sur un socle très élevé, une sculpture d’une dizaine de mètres de hauteur s’avançait triomphalement vers le pavillon allemand. Voyant cela, je conçus un cube massif, rythmé par de lourds pilastres, paraissant arrêter cet assaut, tandis que, du haut de la corniche de ma tour, un aigle, la croix gammée dans ses serres, toisait du regard le couple soviétique. J’obtins la médaille d’or, mon collègue aussi.\footnote{Albert Speer’s \textit{Au coeur du IIIe Reich} (Paris: Fayard, 1971) was written during his 20 years in prison after he was convicted at the Nuremberg Trials. The book was first published in 1969. Qtd. in \textit{Livre des expositions} 147.}
\end{quote}
In this context, France’s choice of neo-classicism for the newly built Palais de Chaillot (as well as for the nearby Palais de Tokio – which, ironically, was intended to house a Museum of Modern Art\textsuperscript{69}) compromised further the image of France as Republican, humanist, universalist, and again revealed its conflicting attitude toward modernity. In fact, even Albert Speer commented with surprise:

\begin{quote}
Au cours de ces quelques jours passés à Paris, j’allai voir le palais de Chaillot et le palais des Musées d’Art moderne ainsi que le musée des Travaux publics conçu par le célèbre architecte d’avant-garde Auguste Perret et encore en construction. Je fus stupéfait de voir que la France aussi, pour ses édifices d’apparat, tendait au néo-classicisme. On a plus tard souvent affirmé que le style était la marque de l’architecture d’État des régimes totalitaires. Cela est totalement inexacte.\textsuperscript{70}
\end{quote}

The use of classicism at the exposition was further compromised by its racist and authoritarian history in France and its links to extreme right movements. Art historian Kenneth Silver traces the revival of classicism in the afterwar years to the trauma of the war, when classicism was evoked as the distinction between the Latin (Christian) civilization, on the one hand, to which France saw itself as heir, and barbarism, on the other hand, as embodied by the German enemy.\textsuperscript{71} A return to classicism, in other words, meant a return to some imagined and essentialist notion of Frenchness, which was opposed (and allegedly superior) to the German culture. By the 1930s, however, as many scholars have pointed out,\textsuperscript{72} the call for return to classicism acquired connotations of

\textsuperscript{69} The competition for the Palais de Tokio awarded the project to Dondel and Aubert’s project, foregoing modernist proposals by architects such as Le Corbusier and Mallet-Stevens. For more on the Palais de Tokio, see Philippe Rivoirand, “Les Palais de la République,” in Myriam Bacha, ed., Les Expositions universelles à Paris de 1855 à 1937 (Paris: Action artistique, 2005) 183-190.

\textsuperscript{70} Speer qtd. in Livre des expositions 146.


resistance to any influences seen as conducive to the ‘decadence’ of French culture, such as hybridity, racial and cultural intermixing, Americanization, avant-gardism or modernism. Classicism in this way was used as a defense of longstanding French cultural and artistic heritage.

During the interwar period – one of rapid and fundamental transformations and instability – calls to defend Frenchness intensified in response to the growing sense of anxiety over France’s perceived decadence. The aftermath of the war stirred up anxieties over a demographic crisis that had preoccupied France since the beginning of the century. The significant loss of life affecting the male population, and the ensuing social adjustments, such as women joining the labor force to compensate for the lack of male workers, and perhaps above all the influx of foreign laborers and immigrants, gave rise to fears of emasculation and degeneration. The backlash was directed at racially different minorities as much as at Eastern European immigrants and even the non-immigrant Jewish population in France, for they were perceived as a threat to the purity of French race and culture, and to the integrity of the nation. The growing effects of the economic depression amplified xenophobia and cultural chauvinism, and immigrants and those branded as ‘foreign’ became scapegoats for the purported degeneration of French society and culture.


Weber lists the myriad of contradictory accusations against ‘foreigners,’ whose actions purportedly threatened the Republic: “Some refused to assimilate, kept themselves to themselves, intermarried, jabbed incomprehensible gibberish, held fast to their religion, their rabbis, their priests, and their clannish ways, draining the country of its substance and yet demanding assistance when unemployed. Others assimilated too readily, ruined French artisans by their competition, undersold small shopkeepers, developed intellectual pretensions, wormed their way into all the liberal professions, married local girls and spread their physical and moral blemishes throughout the land, overran hospitals, clinics, lunatic asylums, prisons, making for the national decadence and decay” (90).
These sentiments resonated very strongly in the art world where the debate about Frenchness vs. foreignness was similarly fueled by the arrival of immigrant, specifically Jewish, artists in Paris. Their settling in Montparnasse, loosely forming what is referred to as the School of Paris (Ecole de Paris), was overwhelmingly described in terms of an ‘invasion’ and an attack on French tradition (as embodied by the Ecole Française), and as the culmination of the degeneracy of modern art that allegedly began with impressionism. An oft-quoted passage by art critic Louis Vauxcelles (who praised the use of classicism in the Trocadero) expressed the sentiments of xenophobia and anxiety, as well as the desire to defend French art:

A barbarian horde has rushed like a plague […] upon Montparnasse, descending from the cafés of the fourteenth arrondissement onto [the art galleries of] Rue de la Boétie, uttering raucous Germano-Slavic screams of war…. Their culture is so recent! Are they from our village? No. When they speak about Poussin, do they know the master? Have they ever really looked at a Corot? […] These are people from ‘somewhere else’ who know nothing of and, in the bottom of their hearts, look down on, what Renoir has called the graciousness of the French, that is, the virtue of tact, the nuanced quality of our race….75

Vauxcelles sets up the opposition between French artistic tradition on the one hand – in this context formulated in terms of classicism – and foreign aesthetics on the other in terms of racial and cultural purity. He indicates that the French tradition is that of the classicism of Poussin and Corot, and is the only legitimate aesthetic paradigm. By contrast, the excesses of modernism reflected the uprootedness of these immigrant, barbarian artists, and were antithetical to the ‘graciousness’ and restraint of the French national génie. Thus, classicism evoked racial purity, rationality and humanism as key values of Frenchness. Like Vauxcelles, famous art critic Waldemar George maintained

this opposition, asserting the continuity of French art with classical Antiquity, which he viewed as compromised by the growing enthusiasm for disorder, fluidity, anti-rationalism and ugliness. George went even further to assert that “the ideology [of the Ecole de Paris] is oriented against that of the French school,” and called for a defense of French art, i.e., for a return to classicism. Classicism evoked racial purity, rationality, humanism as key values of Frenchness.

These debates and the accompanying cultural anxiety spilled over onto the exposition, since the latter by nature called up debates about national identity, racial and cultural purity, and the relationship between traditions and modernity. Thus, at the exposition, Waldemar George, who worked as an inspector overseeing the production of decorative murals at selected pavilions (including the Trocadero), criticized some sculptors for undermining the aesthetic unity and stylistic coherence of the exterior decoration expected from classicism: “Themes, positioning, personal stamp, all differentiates them. Too many sculptors voluntarily forget Greece and think of Assyria.” He further argued that these new artistic tendencies, embraced by the School of Paris, were ideologically oriented against the French tradition of Ecole de France, and called for a defense of French art.

George’s comments reflect the general fear of decline of Western civilization and a sense of loss of identity. These sculptors frustrated the

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traditional expectations of classicism, thus destabilizing ideas about national unity, French identity, purity, harmony and rationality central to French artistic tradition. But George’s comments also reflect the rampant xenophobia and racism, for these sculptors rearticulated Frenchness as fluid, heterogeneous, hybrid.\textsuperscript{80}

Other right-wing observers similarly felt that the image of France at the exposition was corrupted – sentiments that grew more intense with the rise to power of the Popular Front, a leftist coalition led by Léon Blum, France’s first Socialist minister of Jewish origins.\textsuperscript{81} In addition to the ideological differences between the Popular Front and the Right, the notion that Blum, whose Jewish origins were seen as an attack on the country’s Gallo-Roman heritage, was in charge of presenting France to the world proved very unsettling to right-wing observers. They swiftly denounced the Exposition as a “Popular Front expo,” even though the planning had, for the most part, been completed under previous cabinets, and launched a vicious campaign against Blum. Guy Richard, a Right-wing writer, accused Blum of undermining national unity by turning the Expo into a partisan project.\textsuperscript{82} Louis-Ferdinand Céline openly denounced the exposition as a Jewish conspiracy intended to subvert the republic.\textsuperscript{83} Thierry Maulnier, another influential right-wing journalist and founder of the journal \textit{Combat}, openly expressed his hopes that Blum

\textsuperscript{80} These attitudes became explosive at the Exposition in response to a statue of Prometheus created by modernist sculptor Joseph Lipchitz, an immigrant of Jewish descent from Ukraine. Junyk has argued convincingly that the violent reaction against this sculpture, which ultimately forced its removal, was provoked by the idea of French identity it embodied as fluid, racially and ethnically diverse, and modernist, an identity that challenged the national image reflected in the classicism of the Trocadero.

\textsuperscript{81} Blum’s coalition was catapulted to power as a result of the February 6, 1934 anti-parliamentary riots that grew violent and caused the resignation of Edouard Daladier’s government. The Left mobilized to respond to what was perceived as a fascist threat to the French republic, forming the Popular Front.


would fail, declaring that all the delays in completing the fairgrounds, despite the unprecedented concessions made to striking workers and unions in the Matignon accords, “disfigured” Paris, and pointed to the country’s decline under Blum’s leadership.\footnote{\textit{Combat} published an article accompanied by a series of photographs of the unfinished grounds under the title \textit{Paris défiguré}. Cited in Antliff, “Classical Violence” 51.} Maulnier and his collaborator Jean Loisy similarly denounced the aesthetic program of the Popular Front as driven by political goals, as artistically mediocre, as promoting chaos instead of style and as portraying France in disunity and decline. The degeneracy of Popular Front aesthetics, which for Maulnier and Loisy meant anything from avant-garde to academism, became, according to Maulnier, all too obvious at the expo when comparing the French pavilions to the neo-classical ones of Italy (3.9), Germany, or the USSR. Instead, in defense of French art and Frenchness, Maulnier embraced the classical aesthetics of Aristide Maillol and Charles Despiau, and the revolutionary spirit of Auguste Perret which he claimed embodied the continuity and permanence of French traditions, the unity of the nation and its racial purity.
Thus, Maulnier advised visitors to avoid the Exposition and to look for France elsewhere, for instance, in the Parisian churches, in the Louvre, or at the retrospective of French masterpieces, organized at the last moment to coincide with the exposition (though officially not as a part of it). The exhibit, at the Musée d’art moderne at the new Palais de Tokio, like Paris’ gothic churches or the Louvre’s collections, appealed to right-wing commentators because it presented a conflict-free narrative of the French nation through some 1300 works dating from the Middle Ages to the 19th century. The exhibit presented only “masterpieces” whose artistic value was no longer vehemently contested (except, perhaps, a small number of impressionist works by Cézanne, Toulouse-Lautrec and Monet; another exhibit, “des maîtres indépendants,” picked up the problematic narrative of the late 19th and 20th centuries). These masterpieces, on loan from institutions and private collections from abroad and from other French cities,85 transcended the limited and supposedly partisan scope of the exposition, and embodied the constancy and the racial, cultural and aesthetic unity of the nation. This idealized world seemed untouched by the excesses and instabilities that rattled the contemporary world. Therefore, the narrative of this exhibit, hardly concerned with representing the past truthfully, acutely captured the cultural anxiety. As Herbert puts it aptly, the exhibition expressed a deep sense of loss.86 The exhibit inspired fascist writer Lucien Rebatet to comment:

85 It was deemed necessary to make the collections of all Parisian museums accessible and intact for the visitors to Paris.
86 Herbert’s analysis here deserves more attention. Through an analysis of Marx’s idea of surplus, Herbert argues that cultural attitudes in the 1930s regarded modern bourgeois society as based on the idea of surplus – an unjust and detrimental idea in itself because of the immense imbalances it produced. This explains the desire to return to an idealized notion of the nation as grounded in the land, in organic and hermetic communities, untouched by capitalism and modernity, however idealized they may be. But Herbert also points to a major contradiction within this very representation at the exhibition at the Palais de Chaillot, itself both within and without the limits of the exposition: the idealized images of France as
French art enjoys the privilege of a continuity that none of its neighbors possesses, that derives essentially from the resilience, from the vigorous capacity to react, of the race ... There is no art, in comparison to that of France, for which tradition is more natural, that is more a matter of instinct, of blood. That is the essential secret of its admirable perpetuity.  

In other words, Rebatet links French artistic tradition with racial purity, whereby the latter guarantees the permanence of the former. Art evoked an immutable notion of Frenchness that reflected the coherence of the French over time. Thus, the use of classicism at the Trocadero supposedly promoted an image of a France whose national and cultural identity was not contested but rather timeless and continuous; at the same time, it revealed an anxiety over the prospect of losing the quintessence of Frenchness.

**Modernity and Nostalgia**

I have shown the ways in which the reaction around the newly reconstructed Palais de Chaillot contradicted the officially sanctioned image of France as simultaneously modern and traditional, as well as humanist, universalist, and republican. Its architecture, seen by the organizers as a privileged tool for constructing this image, and the debates around it in fact sent instead contradictory messages that reflected France’s conflated and historically compromised identity. The return to classicism which won praises for the new Trocadero brought to light a desire to defend some essentialized notion of French cultural heritage from degenerate influences, a desire reflected as well in the contents of the new museums it housed (the *Musée d’Ethnographie et de la Marine*, regional, manual and balanced uncontested by the cultural and social changes at the exposition were inconsistent with the overall commercial goal of the exposition, directed at producing surplus value for *la firme France* (45-6).

87 Qtd. in Herbert 90.
and the Musée des Monuments Français). These museums constructed an idealized imaginary space untouched by modernity, where people lived free of angst, and a conflict-free narrative of France’s past.\(^{88}\)

Indeed, nostalgic visions of the past proliferated in many domains in the interwar period, drawing inspiration specifically from representations of the land and the regions. In the domain of visual arts, the avant-garde style that proliferated before the war was rejected in the 1920s and 1930s in favor of a retour à l’ordre: for instance, Futurism’s cult of machine aesthetics was completely discredited after the war had revealed the catastrophic and dehumanizing consequences of modern technology\(^{89}\); Fauvists like André Derain and Maurice de Vlaminck embraced a naturalist/realist mode of painting, focusing on traditional landscape, and taming down their once vibrant palettes; even Picasso and Braque, the foremost figures of Cubism, turned their back on fragmentary, multiperspectival representations of reality, and entered their so-called ‘neo-classical’ phase. In architecture and design, prominent experimentators like Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) and Amédée Ozenfant began to favor organic forms and themes.\(^{90}\) In literature, too, the use of pastoral images became more commonplace: works by Jean Giono (e.g., Colline, 1929) that posited the return to nature and to simple peasant life as the only morally right choice met with incredible success; Marcel Pagnol’s plays and novels (e.g., the Fanny Trilogy) painted a romanticized version of l’esprit

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\(^{88}\) A description of the museums can be seen on 241n52.
\(^{89}\) Robert Hughes explains that the war metaphorically realized the Frankensteinian myth of humankind’s creations turning against humanity and ultimately destroying it, a sentiment that was echoed in post-war reaction against modern technology. See The Shock of the New, 2\(^{nd}\) ed. (New York: Knopf, 1991) 42-55. On the reception of Futurism in France and on the influence of French art and literary traditions on Futurism, specifically on Marinetti, see Shirley Vinall, “Marinetti, Soffici, and French Literature,” in Günter Berghaus, International Futurism in Arts and Literature (Berlin/New York: DeGruyter, 2000) 17-38.
\(^{90}\) Golan, Modernity and Nostalgia 61.
méridional, with its mores, daily life and local language.\textsuperscript{91} Similarly, a growing interest was registered in studying the rural or agrarian history of France: Gaston Roupnel’s 1932 \textit{Histoire de la campagne française} and Marc Bloch’s \textit{Les caractères originaux de l’histoire française rurale} became immensely popular readings.\textsuperscript{92}

Scholars such as Shanny Peer have argued that this ‘return to the land’ accompanied by a return to man in art as a part of a larger cultural rhetoric urging the restoration of a broken link with nature, was neither artistically reactionary nor politically unprogressive. Rather, it partook of a larger discourse on regionalism that is articulated in a very specific way in the genealogy of French nationalism linking France’s cultural, economic and political strength to rootedness in the soil. I contend, however, that at the 1937 Exposition the regionalist discourse appeared as a response to rapid social, economic, cultural and political transformations, as well as a nostalgic desire to return to an idealized past that itself was challenged by a totally different reality. In other words, regionalist and rural discourse at the exposition was informed by a desire to recreate and impose an imaginary and idealized notion of Frenchness that no longer had a stable referent in reality. In this sense, regionalism at the exposition challenged to a significant degree the official image sanctioned by the organizers.

\textsuperscript{91} Cf. Lynn Higgins, “Pagnol and the Paradoxes of Frenchness,” in Steven Ungar and Tom Conley, eds., \textit{Identity Papers}. Higgins writes that Pagnol’s “idiom is considered (somewhat paradoxically) to be ‘truly French’ because regional, indigenous” (93).

\textsuperscript{92} The tendency to “rusticize the modern,” to use Golan’s formulation, was equally popular on all ends of the political spectrum. Roupnel and Bloch are a case in point: the former was possibly a sympathizer of \textit{Action Française} and the latter a socialist. They also looked at the question of the countryside from different perspectives: Roupnel with a kind of a nostalgia for the extremely parcelized land distribution under the \textit{ancien régime}, and with fear of industrial modernity; Bloch strove to understand France’s attachment to its agrarian history by examining things like old maps, land distribution and so on. Cf. Golan 66-67.
Regionalism and Modern France

Regionalism in France has a long and complicated history. After the Revolution, regions and provinces came to be regarded as remnants of the feudal system and the ancien régime, therefore, as undesirable for the new Republic. They were dismantled and soon replaced, for administrative purposes, with départements of similar size and population, whose geographical and cultural boundaries were more or less arbitrary. A number of initiatives were put in place to stamp out local dialects in favor of a single national language, informed by the desire to shape and solidify a national identity. The view that regional particularities hindered the fostering of national unity was notoriously formulated by Abbé Grégoire, a Catholic priest and revolutionary leader who advocated as early as the late 18th century the “annihilation of the patois” in order to “universalize the use of French language,” as “important to the expansion of enlightenment, the purified knowledge of religion, the easy executions of laws, national happiness, and political tranquility.” His work linked language with cultural practices, establishing that attachment to local, deeply-rooted linguistic practices was consistent with backward views on morality, religion, and nationhood. Further, for Grégoire such attachment was a direct threat to national cohesiveness and unity. While some scholars have shown Grégoire’s prejudices and fears toward local dialects to be exaggerated, in his detailed

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96 The dialects which Grégoire considered to be a major hindrance to national unity were often times only slightly different from the standard dialect of Île-de-France, and produced no Babel-like disunity (Sepinwall 97). David Bell has shown that the cultural and linguistic particularities in 18th century Alsace – a region often targeted by ‘gallicization’ efforts, motivated by the perception that the region’s linguistic adherence to German undermined its loyalty to France – in fact did not promote cultural hostility. See
research on the making of modern France, Weber produces figures that suggest that in mid-1860s, over a fifth of the French population did not speak French.\textsuperscript{97} In response, the goal of expanding the knowledge and use of French as the official language to replace local dialects became a key element in the establishment of the national education system, which had been implementing various centralization efforts since the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century, though these efforts were stepped up only in the 1870s. Specific measures intended to erase local linguistic particularities included prohibition of the use of local dialects in schools, followed by public punishment for offenders; French instruction for local teachers whose command of the language was often inadequate; broadening French instruction for women who in turn could instill the French language into their children, literally making it their mother’s tongue.\textsuperscript{98} Schools became institutions of acculturation as new norms were communicated there, including attitudes toward the nation and toward provinces, fashions, traditions and rituals, and so on, that ultimately helped erase local particularities. By the 1880s, these measures began to yield results, and as Weber writes, “France ceased to be a kingdom and became a fatherland.”\textsuperscript{99}

The establishment of public education in the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century took centralization a step further.\textsuperscript{100} Paris became the administrative, political and cultural center, broadening the divide between the capital and the provinces. Perception of the latter in

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{98} Weber 313ff.
\textsuperscript{99} Weber 334.
\textsuperscript{100} Public education was formally established for boys with the 1833 Guizot Laws but it remained largely under Church control until the 1880s when the Jules Ferry laws were passed. These laws mandated obligatory free and secular public education. For an excellent examination of the gender implications of French national education, see Rebecca Rogers, From the Salon to the Schoolroom: Educating Bourgeois Girls in Nineteenth-Century France (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2005), esp. 83-90.
\end{flushright}
turn changed: citizens of the provinces came to be regarded as uncivilized and backward in their worldviews and lifestyle, still stuck in ‘traditional’ occupations (e.g. agriculture or trades) that had failed to incorporate modern advances. Further, because throughout the 19th century the peasant population in France remained significantly larger than in other industrializing European countries, it contributed to the image of the Republic as less modern and more attached to pre-Revolutionary structures. This is one of the main reasons why peasantry and the provinces rarely featured prominently in universal expositions at the time.

The second half of the 19th century, however, saw a resurgence of regionalism. Political and military turmoil (e.g., the memories of the defeat in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 and the Commune that followed) and the wave of nationalism it propelled, but also the economic difficulties and social changes brought about by rapid industrialization and urbanization forced an examination of French identity. Growing administrative and political centralization, which had been instrumentalized by post-Revolutionary regimes in France as a means to maintain power, increasingly drew criticism. Regionalism was articulated as a critique of the Jacobin centralization and standardization that suppressed and destroyed regional cultural particularities.

Regionalism attracted adherents from all reaches of the political spectrum, including republicans, socialists, conservatives, Catholics, and monarchists. Yet, in the Belle Époque regionalism became enduringly associated with the ultra-conservative Right, led by such polarizing figures as Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès, who called for political decentralization while promoting a strong nationalist agenda based on

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101 Weber’s account of the transformation of France from a rural and regional place into a nation, Peasants into Frenchmen includes a fascinating chapter that discusses superstitions and religious beliefs that were intentionally expurgated from the consciousness of the modern nation. Cf. “Mad Beliefs” ch. 2.
rootedness. The main premise of such a conservative interpretation of regionalism was articulated most famously by Maurras, who posited the existence of a pays réel, rooted in the soil and in the glorified figure of the peasant, which was being threatened by the pays légal, or the legal institution of the state established after the Revolution. The pays légal, which was for him centralized, metropolitan, abstract, liberal, non-religious, parliamentary, and run by “republican politicians, lawyers, businessmen, stock speculators, and Jews”102 did not correspond to the pays réel, to France’s true identity, which was local, regional, rural, Catholic and military. It was a matter of reclaiming the ‘essentialist’ France from the “France that erred,” as Lebovics puts it.103 This ultra-conservative interpretation of regionalism gained prominence and left a long-lasting stamp on regionalism, although it represented a marginal position.104 Only recently have scholars begun to reexamine this belief. Whalen challenges it by examining the construction of regional identity in Burgundy at the respective pavilion at the 1937 exposition in congruence with national identity.105 Deyon assesses the Radicals’ response to decentralization in the context of the principle of the indivisibility of the Republic.106 Moentmann107 revisits the role of Jean Charles-Brun and his Fédération régionaliste française, or FRF, in articulating regionalism in cultural terms in an effort to distinguish

102 Qtd. in Herman Lebovics, True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) 143.
103 Lebovics 143-144.
107 Moentmann 309-311.
his ‘modern’ regionalism from the Maurrassian type, while Wright\footnote{Julian Wright, \textit{The Regionalist Movement in France, 1890-1914: Jean Charles-Brun and French Political Thought} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).} examines the political implications of the regionalist movement up to the Great War.

In the interwar period, regionalism once again gained prominence as a meaningful response to a fast-changing world, to the perceived threat of Fordist and Taylorist mode of production, to France’s weakened glory, to the wounds from the war\footnote{In a very insightful reading, Golan discusses the symbolic value of identifying French landscape with the imagery of the body, whereby the land ravaged by the war is identified with the scarred body of the French nation. See Golan 17-21.} and the loosening grip of its empire. Regionalism, as an expression of the relationship of French citizens to their local cultural traditions, was also regarded as critical of the foundations of the Republic and the unity of the nation. It was this foundational image of France that the exposition intended to project to the world, but these efforts were invariably undermined by the various regional and rural images constructed at the Expo.

\textit{Regionalism at the Exposition: The Regional Center}

It was imperative for France to affirm its national strength and unity, and even more so to demonstrate it at the Exposition, where the Eiffel Tower – all 300 meters of it – stood symbolically threatened by the rivaling pavilions of the USSR and Nazi Germany and their respective ideologies. The menace was certainly felt beyond the exposition, as evidenced by a large print title warning that “Tout ce que nous aimons va mourir,” above a photograph of the German pavilion, decorated with the Nazi flag.\footnote{\textit{Livre des Exposition} 156.}

In response to this concern, France decided to include in the exposition an entire section dedicated to the idea of France as a unified and indivisible nation founded on the strong connection to its diverse and authentic provinces. The Regional Center (3.10) was
to be situated alongside the Seine, close to the foreign section, and it stood in for an extended version of a national pavilion like the ones erected nearby. Commissioner Labbé described it as a “microcosm” of the twenty-seven regions it included which constituted “la vraie France.”

Its organization was in line with the regionalist discourse of the 1930s. French provinces are indissociably connected to one another, to their local cultural traditions, histories and land, and collectively form a unified and indivisible France. As Jules Mihura put it, “Chacune se particularise et toutes s’absorbent dans l’indivisible nation. Pas une n’est la nation à l’exclusion des autres, mais la nation est à la fois en toutes et en chacune.”

In articulating the relation between the regions and the nation, Mihura evoked a familial metaphor: like family members, French regions are closely related and solidaire, united by an “essential link,” “de même que chaque famille a son nom et ses traditions, son patrimoine et, pour ainsi parler, ses allures, chaque province a sa personnalité, ses [illegible], ses ressources, ses hérédités.”

The diversity in this collective image is more powerful than any single expression of national identity, and richer than one totalizing and uniform image: “[...] de ce que nous formons un peuple intégral, nourris du même idéal, abrités sous le même drapeau, s’ensuit-il que, pareils de cœur, nous devions de province à province nous réduire à l’uniformité? Certes, non. Nous avons le droit et le devoir d’être nous-mêmes.” Mihura echoed the theme, fundamental to regionalism, that uniformity was not a requisite for national unity, and was even inconsistent with the way France defined itself.

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111 Labbé in Jules Mihura, “Ce que sera à l’Exposition le Centre régional?” Le Petit Parisien (February 14, 1937) 4.
112 Mihura 4.
113 Mihura 4.
114 Mihura 4.
To that end, the Regional Center was to showcase the twenty-seven French regions, with their characteristic architecture, arts, crafts, traditional trades, gastronomy, etc. Because of the growing recognition of the role regionalism played in defining France’s character and because of the anti-centralizing sentiments at the time, the organizers of the Exposition delegated the organization of the Regional Center to a special commission, created to act in support of regional interests. The establishment of the Regional commission represented a shift from the usual centralized planning; for that reason even the Guide Officiel boasted the fact that “le Commissariat Général a tenu à laisser à chacune des provinces toute son initiative afin que ressortent davantage leur caractère générique, leurs manifestations extérieures d’activité, le pittoresque de leur vie propre.”115 In other words, the Regional Commission would provide a broad ideological and organizational framework, and identify the goals of the Regional Center, leaving it up to the local committees to manage their individual projects.

115 Guide officiel 104.
The Regional Commission consisted of members from various backgrounds (arts, architecture, politics, administration), brought together by their support for regionalism. The most prominent regionalist on the Commission may well have been Jean-Charles Brun, the founder of the Fédération régionaliste française (FRF). Charles-Brun, who had been involved with regionalism through the Félibrige movement and who was deeply connected to the conservative and Catholic communities, founded the FRF in 1900 in an attempt to dissociate regionalism from the increasingly nationalist and anti-Semitic version favored by Barrès and Maurras. The FRF was also an attempt to broaden the regionalist discourse and to reformulate it as a defense of all regional traditions (unlike the Félibrige, which focused specifically on Occitan language and literature) and without undermining the cohesiveness of the nation (in contrast to Maurrasian regionalism).

What also made the FRF different from the existing regionalist movements was the insistence that cultural renaissance of the provinces be accompanied by economic revival of the regions, articulated mainly around the need to stop the exodus from rural areas and to spread technical modernization. The FRF’s goals also included administrative reorganization of the provinces and decentralization, and educational initiatives (e.g.,

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116 The Félibrige movement was founded in 1854 by Frédéric Mistral and six other local poets with the purpose of awakening Occitan language and literature. While the concern with local language and literature was of paramount importance to the movement (one of whose earliest work were Occitan orthographic rules), the Félibrige also advocated reinvention of local consciousness through renewed interest and knowledge of local history, traditions, religious customs and cultural practices. For more, see Anne-Marie Thièse, *Ecrire la France* (Paris: PUF, 1991) esp. 23ff; Thiébaut Flory, *Le mouvement régionaliste français* (Paris: PUF, 1966); and Julian Wright, *The Regionalist Movement in France: Jean Charles-Brun and French Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. “Charles-Brun and the Félibrige” 43-75.

117 A recent study by Julian Wright based on Charles-Brun’s personal correspondence and archives concludes that the specific incident that led to the split of Charles-Brun from his Félibrige colleagues was a speech he gave in French at a regionalist event. After the speech, Charles-Brun was vehemently attacked for choosing French instead of the Occitan dialect (cf. Wright 64-65). This incident sheds light on Charles-Brun’s unwillingness to privilege one dialect over the others, and explains FRF’s defense of all regional cultures. It also shows his respect toward the national language and national cohesiveness.
teaching of regional history and geography in schools; use of local dialects in addition to French in primary schools).

These principles of regionalism influenced the Regional Commission as it discussed and determined the goals of the Regional Center. Aesthetically, it should aim to demonstrate the vibrant artistic life in the provinces, thus breaking Paris’ hegemony over the arts and presenting regional arts as more meaningful than the recently popular abstract style that was held responsible for the loss of regional character.\footnote{Jacques Gréber, “Introduction” in \textit{L’Architecture}, a photo album of the 1937 Exposition, compiled by Jean Favier (Paris: Editions Art et Architecture, 1937) n.p.} To that end, the aesthetic goal of the regional pavilions was to showcase the provinces in an original way without destroying the harmony indispensable for a long-lasting aesthetic.\footnote{Gréber n.p.}

The immediate economic goal of the Regional Center focused on attracting tourism as a way of spurring regional economic growth. It also intended to encourage interest in (and consumption of) local goods that organizers considered as defining France. Specifically, these products were regional and hand-made by artisans, in contrast to industrialized, machine production that lacked character, distinction and beauty. However, the opposition did not amount to local versus national production: conflating them was a crucial moment in defining the image of France at the Regional Center. As Commissioner Labbé put it, the Regional Center should defend “the position that centuries of work allowed us to occupy among the great economic powers on the planet.”\footnote{Labbé, \textit{Rapport Général}, vol. viii, p xvi.}

This view was echoed in the words of a committee member from Languedoc-Méditerranée, who lamented that “beauty almost died with the great technological skills of the engineers. The overly skilled means of expression, an overly easy repetition,
necessary for the infinite multiplication in space and time, vulgarized expression
itself.”  

Human, quality production could usefully distinguish France from the rest of
the world’s producers, and it followed that in order for France to regain its competitive
edge and to come out of the economic crisis, it should return to artisanal production.

As is always the case with the expositions, the plans were more noble and
idealized than the execution. In the implementation of the 1937 organizers’ ideals, many
problems arose, stemming to a large extent from the conflict between the vision of the
Commission and its centralized supervision, on the one hand, and the prerogatives of the
regions themselves on the other. For instance, the Regional Commission grouped the
regions in pairs or threes, for management purposes, but these groupings were more or
less arbitrary and were established without consulting the participants. The Commission
also implemented a set of strict rules that aimed to regulate every aspect of the
preparation, undermining the autonomy it claimed to give to individual provinces in a
true regionalist spirit. One such rule required that regions present their pavilions as a
synthesis of traditional and modern elements, indicating a conceptual shift in the way
provinces were usually displayed, as ‘authentic’ and frozen in time.  

A member of the
regional committee for Poitou put it this way:

The 1937 Exposition is not intended as an immense museum, filled with dead
things, but should instead provide a point of departure toward new kinds of
action, toward progress…. Of course, we love the past…. But the past is not
everything. Man should not live in the past, but should have his eyes turned
toward the future.

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121 Qtd. in Moentmann 319.
122 This requirement was in accord with the central organization of the Exposition. Cf. Jacques Gréber,
chief architect of the Exposition, l’Architecture n.p. and Labbé’s description of the central ideas of the
Exposition in La Nouvelle Europe (15 Sept 1934) esp 919-920.
123 Cited in Labbé, Rapport Général vol. viii, 83. Translation from Peer 69.
Indeed, this kind of updated regional style is visible in the architectural face of some of the regional pavilions. Yet, the image of synthesis between tradition and progress was not nearly so unequivocal because the image of the provinces was in a way imposed by the centralized Regional Commission, and did not necessarily reflect the way the regions saw themselves. The conflict was further exacerbated when the Regional Commission forced the provinces to raise funds themselves to implement the Commission’s vision. Raising funds locally turned out to be an impossible task because regional industrialists and artisans showed no enthusiasm for sponsoring an exposition that openly dismissed them as a threat to French national heritage. The financial burden on the provinces, which had long believed, with reason, that the expositions in Paris were organized at their expense, was too big and threatened the realization of the project. For this reason, the regions were forced to ask the central exposition commission to construct the exteriors of their pavilions out of national funds, so that the limited local resources might be concentrated on interior displays. This, of course, gave the Regional Commission even more power to demand that a particular image be constructed, regardless of whether it reflected the reality of life in the regions and whether this image corresponded to the way the particular regions saw themselves.

In fact, while the official exposition agenda intended to showcase the provinces as a synthesis between traditions and progress, the representation that was ultimately created undermined in many ways the narrative of France as simultaneously traditional and

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124 The regional committees’ outrage was fueled even more by the pledge of the central organizing committee to sponsor the construction of some foreign pavilions, including that of Nazi Germany. For more on the German pavilion and the political implications for the exposition, see Karen Fiss, “In Hitler’s Salon: The German Pavilion at the 1937 Paris Exposition Internationale” in Richard Etlin, *Art, Culture, and Media under the Third Reich* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 316-342. For a detailed study of the aesthetic of the pavilion, see Fiss, “The German Pavilion” 108-110.
authentic on the one hand, and modern and progressive, on the other. Since the Regional Commission, which regulated the content of the displays, sought to portray the French as makers of quality artisanal goods, it banned any industries and industrial products from being displayed. But the problems that appeared in implementing this goal were startling and betrayed the power of this mythology of the French national character. According to Moentmann, several regions reported to the Regional Commission that they could not find any artisans to display their goods at the Exposition. For instance, a regional leader from Rousillon explained that “there is no longer any artisanat, in the true sense of the word…”125 A member of the Champagne-Marne regional committee reported the same, as did the Lyonnais committee. Such declarations dealt a blow to the idea of the French small-scale factories and artisanal and manual production as the only possible option for French workers after the Great Depression, and in so doing undermined the entire project of the Regional Center. Particularly painful and ironic was the solution offered by the Marne leader: he could provide, if the Commission accepted, a weaver using an electric motor.

The response of the Regional Committee exposes the difficulty of identity construction in the interwar period. The Committee refused to believe that there were no artisans left in these regions. Moentmann cites one member as arguing that “[artisans] remain in every corner of France, and you can, you must make them known to your regional committee and to the central commission in Paris.”126 The conviction this commission member expresses sheds even more light on the importance of this myth of French identity: being an artisan is not a profession but a vocation, an expression of a

125 Qtd. in Moentmann 307.
126 Qtd. in Moentmann 307.
strong and natural connection to France, conceived as a pays réel, to French character and the land. There is an urgency in finding these artisans, almost as if to suggest that the consequences might be dire if one did not. But the declaration by this Regional Commission member also revealed the anxiety over losing a part of Frenchness, and contradicted the officially-sanctioned image of France by promoting instead an essentialist idea of France as immutable, rejecting outright the possibility that it might not longer reflect reality. Further, despite the commitment to cast French regions as well-adjusted to modernity, the Regional Commission only held onto a nostalgic vision of them, as a repository for some essentialist, ‘true’ France, and managed to impose this image at the Exposition. Even some contemporary observers noted that the Regional Center was “truer than reality,” when citing a local newspaper’s description of the Alsacian village:

[le visiteur] entrera dans le village alsacien, situé à sa droite, par une Tour de rempart du même genre que celle de Thann. / En premier plan il verra le Moulin, dont la roue sera actionnée par un petit ruisseau comme on en voit à Scherwiller et à Kaysersberg. / Un ‘relais’ mènera du moulin à l’habitation bourgeoise. Au centre de la cour fleurie, un vieux puits; au fond, le portique de bois à galerie basse où l’on suspend le maïs et le tabac.

The observer commented sarcastically: “Et tout cela, n’est-ce pas, pour une exposition dite des ‘Arts et des Techniques dans la Vie Moderne.’ Curieuse époque!”

Further problems that also undermined the Regional Center project concerned the general apathy from local industries. They withheld their support – financial and otherwise – understandably so, given that the Regional Commission had not invited them to participate in the Exposition because they did not fit within the image of the regions the Exposition was promoting. The economic agenda was geared toward spurring

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127 Livre des Expositions 151.
economic activity for small businesses and artisans; large industries would receive no subsidies from the Exposition. Local industries initially refused to support even the initiatives to encourage tourism in the regions because their factories were vilified for tarnishing the pristine landscape. Later, however, local commissions negotiated the inclusion of a limited number of industrial or tourist displays, but drew criticism for shifting the character of the Regional Center from an aesthetic and authentic tribute to the regions to commercial event. All the same, the Parisian Regional Commission constantly demanded that local committees seek funding from these larger regional economic players by appealing to their patriotism.

What such episodes reveal is how differently the Commission, no doubt influenced by the regionalist movement and the FRF, imagined the provinces from the way the regions conceived of themselves. The inconsistence of business priorities simply epitomized this conflict. Artisanal, manual and human France was a myth to which the Regional Commission held steadfastly, despite numerous reports claiming the contrary. Pierre Camo, the representative from Roussillon, wrote to the Commission:

For the ordinary needs of life, the public finds it more convenient, and perhaps more advantageous, to look in the grands magasins for furniture and utensils. The public seems to prefer these products of mass production, which are without character… This is the consequence of … the indisputable uniformity of life and the character of the nation.128

Mass production and mass consumption were a fact of life, and more importantly, French people were satisfied with mass-produced products, judging by their desire to buy them. Yet again, the Regional Commission brushed aside such comments because they were inconsistent with the vision of French identity it wished to defend. In line with the

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128 Qtd. in Moentmann 320.
economic goals determined for the regions, the Regional Commission encouraged artisans at the Exposition to produce objects from their daily life, insisting on the idea that the regions were ‘organic communities’ – not unlike the colonies represented at the 1931 exposition – where people lived self-sufficient, communal lives, drawing on the riches of the earth and crafting manually everyday objects and products. Unwittingly, such a plan also continued to maintain a distance between the provinces and Paris, which still remained the capital of luxury. It challenged the notion of a France balanced between tradition and modernity.\footnote{Interestingly, certain provinces were also the subject of another exposition display – the Parc d’attractions, situated on the Esplanade des Invalides (3.11). There the regions were grouped in a display devoted to Notre Vieille France, which reconstructed traditional houses and manors in a supposedly authentic architectural style and interior design. Alsace, which celebrated the 20th anniversary of the return of its territories to France, was represented by an entire neighborhood with commercial and residential streets. A varied program of traditional music, dances and performances was offered in the evenings. This display, although designed for entertainment, in fact complemented the Regional Center as it too presented costumes, folklore, and architecture and design, unrestricted by the requirement that regions be shown as modern. Ideologically, it reminded that modern France is inextricably informed by the Old France. But it also revealed the challenges of producing a coherent narrative of French identity.}
The debate around how to present France at the Exposition as diverse and unified, as regional and rural and modern at the same time, reveals its anxiety about what it meant to be French in the 1930s. The power of the myth of French identity as consistent with the regionalist discourse could not be shaken despite the conflicts and obvious inconsistencies, although the unintended meanings produced in the space of the exposition challenged such totalizing and essentializing notions.
France’s anxiety about losing its identity was also reflected in another important pavilion at the Exposition, against which France sought to define itself: the American pavilion. The Regional Center was located immediately next to the end of a small section of international pavilions (including those of Czechoslovakia, Great Britain, and Sweden) extending westward and ending with the USA pavilion. This proximity of the Regional Center to the USA pavilion (3.12) created an interesting interplay that shed light on France’s identity debate.

3.12 The USA pavilion, 1937.
The USA pavilion was erected over a railroad, and featured a tower forty meters tall, constructed in steel and designed in the style of the staple of American architecture at the time – the skyscraper. Because of time and budget limitations, and the particularity of the site, the erection of a real skyscraper was deemed impossible, but Paul Lester Wiener, the chief architect, insisted that the pavilion symbolized “the soaring, aspiring spirit of America.” It evoked the vertical lines characteristic of the American skyscraper, further elongated visually by a long, uninterrupted curtain from inside. The visual effect was amplified by the use of light beams that reached heights of 200 meters, projecting in the sky the stars of the American flag. The US pavilion expressed American fascination with technology, science and efficiency, as did the planning itself. For the first time in history, the architectural drawings of the proposed pavilion were transmitted as radio facsimile (already in use for sending photographs from war-torn Spain), which, *The New York Times* reported, took “less than an hour,” compared to more than a week, at best, “even by the fastest liner.” To add even more to the scientific and technological aura of the US, after having been received by the radio circuit in London, the plans were flown “by fast airplane to Paris so that work on the building’s foundation might begin before the annual overflow of the River Seine, on the banks of which the

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130 The particularity of the construction site is not mentioned in the French guide and other publications, but it is reported on the US plans and in the *New York Times.*
133 The *New York Times*, Dec 31, 1936. The New York Times also provides a detailed account of the technological aspect of the transmission: “… the sending equipment, comprising a slowly revolving drum, on which the 8-by-10 inch drawing was wrapped. As the drum revolved a small lamp scanned the surface, creating electrical impulses corresponding to the lines and figures of the drawing indicating the location of piles and walls of the building. Wires conveyed the electrical impulses to a powerful transoceanic transmitter on Long Island. Near London, a receiver […] attuned to the American wave, and a facsimile reading machine, reversed the New York process and reproduced the plan on film, which was then developed, printed, and sent to Paris.”
pavilion is to stay."\textsuperscript{134} Despite this expedited delivery, the pavilion was constructed with a huge delay and opened incomplete.

The pavilion played directly into the image of America popular in France at the time, as much as it played into France’s identity debate in the interwar period. In the eyes of the French, America had been a source of envy and fascination. In the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, French (liberal) intellectuals, such as Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Destutt de Tracy, admired the ways in which this newly-created republic transplanted and implemented ideals such as freedom, equality, Republicanism, and Enlightenment ideas as its foundations.\textsuperscript{135} America was fashioned as a rupture, in a positive sense — a rupture from feudalism, from the monarchy, from the bonds of history, allowing it to progress and prosper. In this sense, America was constructed as “a laboratory for social and economic experimentation”\textsuperscript{136} – an entirely new society, moved forward by the principles of equality, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness. French liberals and republicans openly showed their enthusiasm for the American Revolution and the new republic and projected their own ideals on it. They imagined an “idealized land of happiness, an agrarian paradise where good savages, altruistic Quakers, modern-day Catos and Cincinnatis, and freedom-loving farmers shared the stoic virtues of the ancient world and the tolerant, Enlightened regionalism of Thomas Jefferson.”\textsuperscript{137} (In the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, only a minority in France, consisting of royalists and conservatives,

\textsuperscript{134} The New York Times, Dec 31, 1936.
\textsuperscript{135} See Jean-Philippe Mathy, Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America (Chicago: Chucago University Press, 1993), esp. ch. 1 “The Contest of America.” However, admiration for the new Republic was at best short lived, and Philippe Roger has identified anti-American attitudes among Enlightened, liberal circles which included Voltaire or Buffon to the early years of the Republic (The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) “Introduction” and “The Age of Contempt”). These were no doubt early indications of the contentious and complex relationship between the two countries.
\textsuperscript{137} Mathy 26.
understandably feared the implications of the American Revolution, and saw America in
a negative light and as a threat to France and Europe.)

In the second half of the 19th century, the perception that America’s political and
economic success was realized at the expense of cultural progress became increasingly
commonplace. Experiences of travelers and emigrants to the new world, who saw
America’s wilderness and mores as very rough, and studies in a variety of fields, such as
natural sciences, political sciences, and economics, that questioned America’s image as
paradise\textsuperscript{138} led to the conclusion that America, admirable as it was in theory, was
fundamentally incompatible with French ways. America was no longer just an ‘other’; it
stood for an ideology that threatened fundamental French beliefs. It is then not surprising
that the word \textit{américaniser} was first introduced in the French language by Charles
Baudelaire, in relationship to the first universal exposition in Paris in 1855. Baudelaire
wrote:

Demandez à tout bon Français qui lit tous les jours son journal dans son
estaminet, ce qu’il entend par progrès, il répondra que c’est la vapeur, l’électricité
et l’éclairage au gaz, miracles inconnus aux Romains, et que ces découvertes
témoignent pleinement de notre supériorité sur les anciens; tant il s’est fait de
ténèbres dans le malheureux cerveau et tant les choses de l’ordre matériel et de
l’ordre spirituel s’y sont bizarrement confondues! Le pauvre homme est tellement
américanisé par ses philosophes zoocrates et industriels, qu’il a perdu la notion
des différences qui caractérisent les phénomènes du monde physique et du monde
moral, du naturel et du surnaturel\textsuperscript{139} [emphasis added].

\textsuperscript{138} The Dutch naturalist and expert on the Americas Cornelius De Pauw insisted, based on empirical
evidence, that the natural conditions there, unlike those in Europe, were conducive to the degeneration of
the species. French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc Buffon also espoused this idea. See Roger,

\textsuperscript{139} In the political and economic realms, it became increasingly difficult for French intellectuals to
reconcile ideas of equality with the American drive for material acquisitions and economic growth; desire
for progress with religious devotion; and the principle of freedom with slavery. For instance, Beaumont,
Tocqueville’s traveling companion and co-researcher of the prison system, wrote a two-volume book
\textit{(Marie, ou l’esclavage aux Etats-Unis)}, a critique of the segregation of the races and the incompatibility of
this practice with fundamental republican and enlightenment principles.

\textsuperscript{139} Charles Baudelaire, “Méthode de critique. De l’idée moderne du progrès appliquée aux beaux-arts.
Déplacement de la vitalité,” originally published in \textit{Le Pays} (May 26, 1855); reprinted in Baudelaire, \textit{Ecrits sur l’art}
“Américanisé” here is used to critique modern man’s unwavering and blind belief in technological modernity as a measure of progress. “Américanisé” is the “malheureux cerveau” that fails to realize the incompatibility of materialist and technological modernity with moral and aesthetic progress. America was no longer the promised land of freedom and abundance, but a symbol of the decay of values, made obvious by the universal exposition, which extolled Saint-Simonianism and industrial progress, and which symbolized for Baudelaire the movement toward a world without spirituality or true art, leading, ultimately to the animalization of man.¹⁴⁰ Twelve years later, on the occasion of the 1867 universal exposition, Baudelaire’s critique was echoed by the Goncourt Brothers: “L’Exposition Universelle, le dernier coup à ce qui est l’américanisation de la France, l’industrie primant l’art, la batteuse à vapeur rognant la place du tableau, les pots de chambre à couvert et les statues à l’air – en un mot, la Fédération de la Matière.”¹⁴¹ America came to embody modernity taken to an extreme, organized around machinism, materialism, and consumerism. At the same time, pessimism and alarm that morality and French values were at stake underpinned the reaction against America and “américanisation.”

In this sense, the menacing image of America was tied to the sentiment of national decline in France and reflected France’s own conflicted attitude toward modernity. There was a general agreement in the interwar period that France was in the midst of a crisis – a spiritual crisis, one of consciousness and of identity. The fear that its decline or even demise was imminent invited a national soul-searching, the negotiations

and contradictions of which already played out at the 1931 exposition and which were central at the 1937 exposition: what did it mean to be French and modern? In this context, consensus emerged that America and the modernity it embodied was the worst case scenario for the future of France. Georges Duhamel’s bestselling *Scènes de la vie future* captured very well France’s fear of the future incarnated in the image of America, when he warned that “[l’]Amérique représente donc, pour nous, l’Avenir.”

What, specifically, was so threatening about America? For Duhamel, as for many others, the disdain for America was predicated on the presumed radical incompatibility of the two civilizations (to the extent that it was acknowledged that America could be considered a “civilization”) and their respective value systems: the Baconian nature of America, characterized by excessive confidence in business and technology often at the expense of the individual, threatened the “moral” or “absolute” civilization exemplified by France, whose purpose was to “make people more human.”

Echoing Baudelaire and the Goncourt Brothers, Duhamel saw American values as being completely at odds with the ‘moral’ civilization and the universalist, humanist tradition that was France’s quintessence. Lucien Romier, a historian and prominent conservative, Catholic journalist, described America as a civilization shaped by a “practical kind of vigor,”

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142 Duhamel 13.
143 The 1920s and 1930s saw the publication of many critiques of America. A few notable examples are: Jean-Richard Bloch’s *Le Destin du siècle* (1931); Robert Aron and Arnaud Dandieu’s *Le Cancer Américain* (1931); André Démaison’s *Terre d’Amérique* (1939); François Drujon’s *L’Amérique et l’avenir* (1938); Jean Canu’s *Villes et paysages d’Amérique* (1937); André’s Siegfried’s *Les Etats Unis d’aujourd’hui* (1927) [translated as *America Comes of Age* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1927)]; and Paul Morand’s *New York* (1929).
not by reasoning and self-reflection. In other words, America was built in a way that scarcely resembled European civilization, despite the claim to common heritage. André Siegfried, a prominent writer whose 1927 study Les États-Unis d’aujourd’hui [America Comes of Age] drew critical attention, further radicalized this difference when he proposed a new narrative of America’s origin: “[t]he old European civilization did not really cross the Atlantic, for the American reawakening is not, as is generally supposed, simply a matter of degrees and dimensions; it is the creation of new conceptions.”

Essentializing the differences between the French and the American civilization and renouncing the idea of a shared cultural heritage was not only a way of reinforcing the sense of ideological conflict but also a way of “othering” America: it was an outside threat that challenged France. At the same time, this maneuver helped reinforce a certain essential notion of Frenchness.

So radical was the incompatibility between France and America that coexistence seemed impossible: the rise of one necessarily meant the fall of the other. That is why the conflict between Europe and the US is often articulated in terms of conquest or attack and defense. Thus, Duhamel used these same terms as he warned sternly: “On n’en peut plus douter, cette civilisation est pourtant en mesure et en train de conquérir le vieux monde.” Similarly, Siegfried underscored this opposition in a chapter entitled “European vs. American Civilization”: “To America,” Siegfried wrote, “the advent of the

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146 Lucien Romier, Qui sera le maître: Europe ou l’Amérique? (Paris: Hachette, 1928) 139-140.
147 André Siegfried, America Comes of Age (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927) 347.
148 Philippe Roger, commenting on Henri de Beaumont’s 1888 article “De l’avenir des Etats-Unis et de leur lutte future avec l’Europe,” explains that the sense was that “Europe and North America were linked by a mechanism of weights and counterweights: if one declined, it would be a purely mechanical effect of the other’s rise.” Philippe Roger, The American Enemy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 279.
149 The English translation of the title, America the Menace, loses somewhat the sense of inevitability, and underscores the possibility of defense more than Duhamel’s original title. The French edition is Scènes de la vie future (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2003) 13.
new order is a cause for pride, but to Europe it brings heart-burnings and regrets for a state of society that is doomed to disappear.” The fear of the spread of American ideology – or of American cancer, as Dandieu and Aron called it – meant the demise of everything France stood for. Hence, it became imperative for France to resist it. Of course, France was also reacting to America’s swiftly increasing political and financial influence that was inextricably tied to its own sense of loss of influence – political, economic and cultural. As Roger puts it:

What was left to defend in France? Frenchness. Not the territory, but the *terroir*; not France’s power, but its wisdom; not its vanishing currency, but its consistently high values; not its damaged vitality, but its unparalleled joie de vivre; not the motherland, as in 1792, but its coveted heirlooms, its dismantled cloisters and exported castles. This was a revolution for anti-Americanism: its cultural revolution. France had moved onto the defensive and was defending a quintessentialized idea of itself.

Hence, the critique of America was articulated precisely in terms of defending a certain notion of Frenchness, however invented, against a modernity that was deemed destructive. That is why the critique of America was articulated in terms of a clash of civilizations or defense of French and European cultural heritage, and as a plea, indeed an imperative to resist.

The specific perceived threat came in the form of rationalization of production, the result of America’s supposed obsession with mechanization and technological and scientific efficiency. This view of America dates back to Baudelaire’s definition of *américanisation*, where technology was identified as a threat to the order of morality and

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150 Siegfried 347.
152 Roger 340.
beauty. In the 1920s and 1930s it was epitomized by the pervasive image of the assembly line. The idea of organizing labor and production with scientific rigor was first developed in the 1880s by American engineer Frederick Taylor, who sought to maximize production efficiency, to minimize the margin of error by reducing intervention from workers, and to standardize products. It also promised speedier and easier production, lower production costs and a more precise method of compensating workers (by units produced). Although Taylorist production was implemented in certain areas of French industry (e.g., manufacture of military materiel, machine elements) as early as the end of the 19th century, the French remained ambivalent toward this new mode of production, even as – or perhaps because – mass production proved all too useful in meeting the demands of war production. In the interwar period, the state pledged its support for scientific principles of management in response to increasing production demands, loss of labor force in the war and introduction of less skilled workers, trumpeting Taylorism as a definitive break from the pre-war world. Nevertheless, in France Taylorism generated discussion principally because of its social, political and cultural implications (all of which Taylor had predicted). The promises of Taylorism were declared to be “philanthropic fallacieuse” and were blamed not only for disrupting French economy but also for vandalizing French life style. The ascendancy of assembly line mass production meant the demise of France’s attachment to the soil and its crafts and small-businesses. France prided itself on its manual, high-quality production that expressed the

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153 Baudelaire’s full quote appears on 277.
156 Aron and Dandieu 47.
local génie of its highly-skilled artisans, who drew inspiration from their relations to the soil. This is precisely the image France championed at the Regional Center at the Exposition. Mass production, by contrast, threatened to destroy the craftsman, because it removed the human element from the creative process of production, and reduced everything to ‘inhuman’ and ‘abstract’ numbers and operations. By jeopardizing the craftsman, the assembly line by extension jeopardized Frenchness. This is why it was imperative for the local committee to find an artisan – a weaver with a motor was not acceptable, as it challenged France’s notion of itself. The anxiety that Frenchness was at stake was so widespread that even Lucien Romier, who in the 1920s had been a vocal supporter of modernization in France, now deplored the Taylorist model of production as detrimental to both the workers, whose bodies “atrophied” from the fragmented and repetitive nature of their ‘rationalized’ tasks, and the final product – the standardized, machine-produced product – which lacked in uniqueness and artistic value.  

Many shared the fear that mass production would usher in an era of uniformity and standardization that would extend onto social relations and culture – after all, uniform productions best suited uniform people. America seemed to offer evidence that machinism, materialism and consumerism did indeed promote a horrifying homogeneity. After all, as Romier noted, uniformity was the “ruling qualit[y] which strike[s] the eye of the newcomer in the United States.”

European travelers can observe this at first glance when they set foot in an American metropolis – with its rectilinear streets, identical apartments, stuffed in buildings and skyscrapers that

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157 Romier 239
159 Romier 141.
resembled “packing boxes” and a dehumanized, soulless crowd – a collective it.\footnote{Luc Durtain, \textit{Quarantième Etage} (Paris: Gallimard, 1927).} Even food was standardized, as François Drujon observed: “la nourriture qu’on prend dans [un restaurant] est exactement la même que la nourriture qu’on prend dans n’importe quel autre. C’est une nourriture de conserve, une nourriture standardisée, livrée à la consommation américaine.”\footnote{François Drujon, \textit{L’Amérique et l’Avenir} (Paris: Editions Correa, 1938) 36.} (France, by contrast, produced at this time well over one hundred types of cheese and a great variety of plums, as Duhamel famously boasted, all of which reflected specific cultural traditions and skills.) France prided itself on diversity: it is this diversity of people, regions, languages and traditions that constituted Frenchness. The American model of modernization threatened to eradicate this diversity and cultural particularity: after all, it successfully eradicated all remains of “the harmonious and diversified civilization which Europe had planted upon the American continent.”\footnote{Romier 140-142.}

Many already saw signs of destruction of French culture in the emergence of mass culture. Duhamel decried the way popular entertainment “assassinated” the grand masters of literature and music:

\begin{quote}
Et nul ne crie à l’assassin! Car, ici, on assassine les grands hommes. Toutes ces oeuvres que nous avons, dès l’adolescence, balbutiées avec notre Coeur plus encore qu’avec nos lèvres, tous ces chants sublimes qui furent, à l’âge des grandes amours, notre pain, notre étude et notre gloire, toutes ces pensées qui représentaient la chair et le sang de nos maîtres, on les a dépecées, hachées, mutilées. Elles passent, maintenant, comme de honteuses épaves, sur ce flot de saindoux tiède. Et il n’y a personne pour crier au meurtre.
\end{quote}

\footnote{Duhamel 36-37.}
Mass culture, lacking in authenticity (“ce n’est pas un art, ce n’est pas l’art,” Duhamel exclaims\textsuperscript{165}, not only vulgarized but mutilated art. In the process, it transformed the collective into a mass of uprooted consumers because mass culture was transmitted directly, through images or technology – “without demanding any effort, without expecting a thought process, without raising any question, without tackling any problem, without lighting passion, without waking any light deep in the heart, without exciting hope, except the ridiculous hope of becoming one day a ‘star’ in Los Angeles”\textsuperscript{166} – rather than negotiated through interactions. Mass culture, following mass production, created a mass of consumers (of culture as of goods) “hébétés par des plaisirs fugitifs, épidermiques, obtenus sans le moindre effort intellectuel [qui] se trouvera, quelque jour, incapable de mener à bien une œuvre de longue haleine et de s’élever, si peu que ce soit, par l’énergie de la pensée.”\textsuperscript{167} Thus, mass culture and mass production jeopardized not only spiritual values but the autonomy of the individual and threatened to uproot the individuals from their traditions, “melting” them into a mass. As Duhamel wrote:

Ils venaient, le plus souvent, ces immigrants, d’un pays naïf où le fils pouvait, sa vie durant, porter le manteau de son père. L’Amérique leur a donné la chemise qui ne supporte pas deux cylindrages, la chaussette que l’on jette au premier trou, parce qu’elle ne vaut pas une reprise – que d’ailleurs on ne saurait plus faire –, le pardessus de confection qui dure tout juste un hiver et demande un remplaçant. Ils venaient, ces pauvres gens, d’un pays où les arbres des vergers portent toutes sortes de fruits, variés à l’infini, riches de saveurs innombrables. L’Amérique leur a fait comprendre qu’il était bien préférable, pour obtenir un bon rendement de ne cultiver que deux variétés de pommes et qu’une seule “variété” de poire, si le mot de variété souffre un tel contresens.\textsuperscript{168}

\textsuperscript{165} Duhamel 42.
\textsuperscript{166} Duhamel 40.
\textsuperscript{167} Duhamel 40.
\textsuperscript{168} Duhamel 168.
Mass production proved destructive to the individual, family and culture as a whole. The only solution was for France and Europe to return to their tried and true traditions. Thus, Duhamel urged a return to man and French traditions: “Qu’à cet instant du débat, chacun de nous, Occidentaux, dénonce avec loyauté ce qu’il découvre d’américain dans sa maison, dans son vêtement, dans son âme.”\textsuperscript{169} Duhamel’s concrete recommendations for saving Frenchness include

\begin{quote}
faire repriser ses chaussettes, refuser l’ascenseur et demander l’escalier, se priver de cinéma, ne pas acheter d’automobile à crédit, refuser une marque de savon dont le propriétaire avoue faire, chaque année, pour deux millions de réclame, se promener familièrement avec un nègre de ses amis, ne pas prononcer le mot standard, offrir sa place dans le \textit{subway} à une vieille dame, sourire, chanter, se promener sans but, etc., etc.\textsuperscript{170}
\end{quote}

Duhamel’s critique of America as a threat of Frenchness was representative of the ways in which European intellectuals approached it. Yet, this anxiety fostered a prejudiced view of Frenchness that refused to accept social and cultural transformations: after all, those things denounced as American, such as jazz, cinema, advertising, radio, skyscrapers, etc. were not only already introduced in France but also favorably accepted by the public.\textsuperscript{171} Rather, the contempt and anxiety arising from the view of America as a mass society reveal nostalgia, a yearning to return to some sort of a pre-war state before France’s decline, before there was any need to defend Frenchness. The apocalyptic predictions were uttered in a sincere attempt to sway France in the right direction – away from this kind of destructive modernity and back to its roots. This is definitely the image France wanted to construct of itself at the Exposition – a strong, humanist, universalist

\textsuperscript{169} Duhamel 13. \\
\textsuperscript{170} Duhamel 168. \\
France, an artistic France, a modern France but also a rural and regional France. Yet, the organizers had yet to reconcile this image with the image of the France of the official guide or of the world beyond the confines of the fair – the France of modern enterprises advertised in the guides and the France that seemingly feared everything it advertised.

**Conclusion**

The 1937 exposition was the first serious attempt in the 20th century to revive the tradition of the great expositions. No doubt the cultural and political context of the interwar years – the domestic political instabilities, the rise of Fascism and Communism, the economic crisis, along with destabilizing societal and cultural shifts – invited a reassessment of what it meant to be French, and the exposition, like all previous expositions, could serve as a tool for reclaiming France’s glory. Yet, at the 1937 exposition France struggled to create a cogent narrative of the nation as loyal to both its history and its future – a duality visible at all fairs. Despite the attempts to demonstrate its eagerness for the new post-war era, the image of France at the fair was fragmented, and the exposition was laden with anxiety over the perceived threat of modernity to the very essence of Frenchness. The architectural ambivalence of the New Trocadero Palace and the idealized representations of a bucolic, regional and peaceful France, combined with the disquieting attitude toward America, a symbol of a modernity gone wrong, channeled in fact the abiding anxiety over a loss of cultural particularity that reached its peak at the 1937 fair.
CONCLUSION

Spectacles of Anxiety

This study has examined critically the three major international fairs held in Paris in the interwar years: the 1925 Art Deco Exposition, the 1931 Colonial Fair, and the 1937 International Exposition. Technically, these fairs were dissimilar in subject matter, scope and designation – a distinction which may account for the lack of previous studies that consider them together. Additionally, thematic fairs, such as the one dedicated to 20th century French decorative arts and the one dedicated to the French colonies, are often overlooked, as scholarly attention is mostly focused on the lavish and expansive world’s fairs. Such a focus might explain the virtual lack of interpretative studies of the 1925 fair, a fair dedicated no less to a subject itself considered superficial and unworthy. Finally, these fairs took place in an era marked by a dwindling interest in such spectacles of modernity, in part due to the twenty-five year gap forced by historical circumstances since the last exposition had been held in 1900. By the 1920s, the fairs had receded in collective imagination. The dark post-war financial realities could hardly justify extravagant expenses for unnecessary if entertaining spectacles when the country lay in ruins; hence, the general preference to curtail ambitious projects like the ones organized in the 19th century and the implication that the relevance of these fairs was diminishing.

The result is that the interwar fairs, among which only the 1937 fair was designated a world’s fair, have received less critical attention than their 19th century counterparts, the spectacular Great Exhibitions that extolled modernity at regular intervals since the mid-19th century. My dissertation has attempted to fill this gap. I have shown that the three interwar fairs, even if not technically world’s fairs, continued to
explore the themes set forth by the 19th century expositions – modernity and nationhood being the ones around which my analysis is organized. Like the 19th century fairs, the interwar expositions unabashedly proclaimed their commitment to modernity and concerned themselves with imagining modern France. Yet, negotiating what it meant for the nation to be modern proved challenging in the wake of the Great War. The erstwhile association of modernity with rationalism and techno-scientific progress had been destabilized, and France’s unadulterated faith in progress and modernity completely rattled; the Saint-Simonian optimism that agitated the 19th century universal expositions had been gradually replaced by a sense of fragility with respect to the future; the universal consensus based on humanist and democratic values earlier fairs had promised stood in sharp contradiction to the post-war political context. Modernity was no longer inevitably associated with universal progress and international consensus based on democratic and liberal values; the benefits of science and industry no longer sufficed to unite the nations; now modernity increasingly appeared destructive and menacing, and stood at odds with French humanism, history and cultural heritage.

This shift in French attitude toward modernity posed a conceptual challenge for the expositions: how could the fairs simultaneously celebrate this modernity and reject it anxiously? How could they reconcile the 19th century spectacles of modernity with the general interwar suspicion toward it? How could they propose to refashion France into a modern nation and yet remain grounded in France’s past and traditions? These instabilities and internal conflicts played out at the three international fairs I analyze, which map France’s shifting relationship to modernity in the early 20th century. These expositions also shed light on the evolution and ultimate disintegration of the French
exposition model itself: in the space of these contradictions, the fairs in fact allowed the creation of alternative narratives of modernity once the monolithic vision of modernity, expressed in the universalizing efforts of classifying humanity’s activities in a strict taxonomy, collapsed.

All three fairs examined here maintained nonetheless their commitment to modernity in their respective fields. The 1925 expo promised to modernize the decorative arts and to embrace a new, forward-looking and modern(ist) aesthetic, as well as to place emphasis on the new socio-economic realities – a sign of modernism. The 1931 Colonial Fair, officially acknowledging the centrality of the colonial project to French formulations of modernity, saw itself as a symbol of the shifting metropolitan attitudes toward French colonies and their peoples, promoting solidarity and fraternity between them, and pretending to acknowledge the validity of non-Western cultures, while drawing legitimacy from new scientific discourse. The 1937 fair, designated a universal exposition like the ones in the 19th century, directly proclaimed its commitment to promoting modernity and to illustrating all aspects of modern life.

Yet, despite France’s formal commitment to modernity at the fairs, the latter constructed multiple and sometimes competing or even contradictory narratives that obscured a nostalgia and fear of decline of the French nation and culture. The resulting ideological and representational incoherence testified to the challenges of conceptualizing and embracing modernity in an era increasingly uncomfortable with it. For instance, the 1925 decorative arts fair seriously questioned and opposed the urban, industrial and technological values central to 19th century fairs’ articulation of modernity. This attitude

1 Colonial displays lasted until the 1940s, even though by that time the colonies had become less profitable and more politically unstable, suggesting that colonies were an integral part of French conception as a modern nation.
was powerfully exemplified in the place attributed at the fair to the Eiffel Tower – a monument symbolizing industrial modernity, which I argue was now kept at bay, overshadowed by the deliberate ambiance of luxury and consumption the fair displayed as values central to modern France. The 1925 fair then redefined French modernity in terms of luxury, consumption and art, a formulation consistent with Frenchness as unique, artistic and artisanal. In the process, the 1925 fair reversed the formulations of both Frenchness and modernity the 19th century fairs had championed. Of course, this definition of modernity also left unaddressed a number of new social and political conditions French decorative arts supposedly sought to address (in order to revitalize the field and make it relevant again). The Exposition was most vehemently criticized for its failure to address the needs of the working class, whose growing presence appeared central to early 20th century concepts of modernity. Instead, the Art Deco fair focused decisively on aristocratic and bourgeois needs and views, as evident from my analysis of Ruhlmann’s Hôtel d’un riche collectionneur or the Rue des boutiques, in an era where elites should have ceded prominence to enlightened masses. This shift in focus suggests a fear, confirmed by contemporary commentators’ reactions, that the concept of ‘modern’ as a transitory style increasingly contradicted supposedly ever-lasting French traditions.

Incidentally, the most controversial pavilion that attempted to address the post-war problems with a new aesthetic and a refashioning of space, architecture, urbanism and interior design – Le Corbusier’s radical Esprit Nouveau pavilion – met staunch resistance on the part of organizers precisely because, I argue, it did not fit within the general view of modern France the 1925 exposition sought to disseminate. What was particularly disquieting about Le Corbusier’s pavilion and Plan Voisin was that its
authoritarian and monolithic vision of modernity threatened to literally raze Paris – an epitome of centuries-long architectural and design traditions that were pivotal in formulating the image of modern France at the 1925 fair – in favor of a purely mass-produced and standardized modernity that was radically incompatible with France’s self-understanding. Similar opposition, if not so acute, met other decisively modernist artists at the Exposition, without whom the event’s modern program would have been inchoate, but whose work challenged the official narrative. The contradictory attitude on the part of officials toward such modernism was notoriously exemplified in the so-called Delaunay-Léger affair, when works by these two prominent artists were removed (temporarily) for fear they did not fit within French artistic traditions and were offensive. Clearly, the kind of modernity proposed by the avant-garde had no place in this exposition which insisted on linking modernity with luxury, handcrafts and uniqueness. What these competing visions achieved was to destabilize the notions of modernity and of Frenchness the fair insisted on establishing, and to open up discursive space for multiple definitions of modernity.

The 1931 Colonial Exposition similarly became a battleground where different concepts of modernity clashed. I demonstrated that the 1931 fair recast the colonial project as an integral element of French modernity, specifically framing modern France through the image of Greater France – a figure of political desire that imagined a symbiotic existence of the Metropole and the colonies based on association and integration. Greater France purportedly sought to unify conceptually the overseas territories and the Metropole through a shared commitment to civilization, progress, and humanism, underscoring both the colonizer’s solidarity with the colonized subjects, and
the latter’s willingness to accept the colonizer’s benevolence. The stated ideological message relied on redefining the idea of both Frenchness and colonial subjects and non-Western cultures. To this end, new rules were put in place at the exposition demanding that the colonial subjects be presented with respect and authenticity – a requisite for cultural association – and not in the conventional orientalist manner.

My analysis of the representations at the exposition, however, revealed inherent resistance to the idea of Greater France, even as the nation acknowledged openly in a major public spectacle that the colonial project was central to modern France. Veiled under pretenses of solidarity, brotherhood and peaceful coexistence were conventional images of colonies and colonial cultures as primitive, static, and radically different, and therefore unintegratable. The multiple visual and architectural representations of the 1931 Exposition reinforced what previous colonial displays had successfully communicated to the French public: namely, that France’s cultural purported superiority, resulting from its supposedly advanced civilization, was unattainable for the ‘indigènes’ – not even if exported by force – thus justifying an open-ended colonial project, inextricably linked to national economic and political interests that were highlighted more than ever at a time of economic downturn and post-war reconstruction efforts. The representations of a solidary if heterogeneous empire, as portrayed through the image of Greater France, were in fact inconsistent with French political and economic interests, since the success of colonialism and the civilizing mission would effectively cease to provide legitimacy to French exploitation. On an ideological level, the realization of Greater France meant the admission that France’s cultural superiority and world leadership would cease to be unique and could be acquired, undermining the myth of France’s exceptionalism – an
idea deeply engrained in national self-understanding. Therefore, I claim that the 1931 exposition inadvertently recycled notions of colonial subjects as radical others, and resisted resolutely ideas of hybridity, inevitable in a heterogeneous nation, in order to buttress its own standing and national confidence, at the same time hinting at the deep cultural anxiety over loss of such exceptionalism.

Incidentally, in the space of these contradictions appeared alternative narratives of modernity and national identity that challenged the official messages promoted at the Exposition. I examined the way the emergent discipline of ethnology, which was slowly displacing physical anthropology’s ultimately racist belief in the relationship between biological (measurable) difference and culture – began to valorize colonial cultures and traditions, even as its program overlapped with colonial policy. Yet, I argued that the emergence of ethnographic discourse succeeded in refashioning somewhat the colonial fair as an ethnographic event where the conventional approach of decontextualization and subsequent recontextualization of colonial artifacts, rituals and people by the colonizer was opposed to the valorization of these same items as metonyms for cultures conceived as wholes. This new approach ushered by ethnology subverted the idea of an unchanging relationship between colonizer and colonized or of Frenchness and modernity, and allowed for multiple interpretations.

Alternative concepts of Frenchness and modernity were similarly proposed by the Surrealist counter-exposition whose program went further than simply opposing the narrative of the official colonial fair. Even though the Surrealist response to the Colonial Fair was unauthorized and not associated with the official fair, it needed to be examined in conjunction with the Colonial fair precisely because it questioned the officially-
sanctioned narratives of modernity and Frenchness, and renegotiated these concepts. The counter-exposition sought to usher in a paradigm shift in the way modernity, civilization or nationhood was conceptualized, radically rethinking the French exposition model and its ideology in the process – precisely what the official fair resisted doing. Thus, the counter-exposition rejected capitalist exploitation, questioned France’s ethnocentric understanding of the world and attacked the premise of the superiority of French civilization central both at the colonial fair and in French understanding of modernity by pointing to the positively ‘uncivilized’ and barbarian actions both in the colonies and more recently on the European continent, left, as a result, in ruins. The counter-exposition questioned the primary values of reason, scientific objectivity, and Western sense of superiority fundamental to the expositions because they had served to and continued to legitimize brutal colonial rule. Instead, the counter-exposition was an aesthetic event as much as it was political, and as such it sought to revalorize objects not for their purported documentary value (e.g., evidence for colonies’ backwardness) but for their poetic value. This effort was visible throughout the counter-exposition which adopted different display and selection methods intended to undermine the general principles of the official fair. My reading of the counter-exposition in juxtaposition to the official fair suggests that, even though the event was attended by no more a few thousand visitors, it was of great importance as it problematized the concepts of modernity and national identity the official fairs advertised and as it proposed alternatives to both.

The 1937 exposition captured the cultural anxiety at its height since the socio-political, economic, cultural and aesthetic context destabilized long-held ideas about modernity or Frenchness. In addition to the severe economic crisis that shook the world
and France’s faith in the capitalist system – a central premise at all fairs – the rise of fascism and the inevitable threat of Nazi Germany called for France to organize an exhibition to reaffirm French values as they had been expressed at earlier fairs: a balanced society, peace and harmony, aesthetic unity, shared international goals through art, historical continuity and rootedness, universalist values, technology and science in service of humanity, and so on. In the space of the exposition different and contradictory visions of what modern France should look like contested one another.

I argue that guiding in defining modern France at the fair was deep anxiety over loss of relevance of French values, symbolically expressed in one of the initial proposals, which suggested the exposition be one on “Civilization” – a characteristically French idea, in the hopes it can reassert the relevant of French civilization and values. Thus, I argue that in a nostalgic gesture the exposition, consciously or not, produced and disseminated highly idealized images of a France unperturbed by modernity. The semantics of the Trocadero rebuilding project shed light on the ideological debates around the question of how to present France to the world at the fair. This question had a central place at the fair both literally (given the site’s location) and figuratively (since there was no designated or more prominent pavilion of France) and was inextricably related to national identity, which I show was both entangled in loyalty to history and traditions, and motivated by a desire to steer the country an idealized future. This time, the conception of modernity as style was undermined by a proposal to camouflage the 1878 palace, denounced as ugly because of its supposedly arrogant foreign features. I examined the competing commissions for the redesign of the Palace and the subsequent reactions to the final plan by architect Carlu in order to demonstrate that the site and the
architecture of the new palace proposed a specific notion of Frenchness as heir to classical humanism, rejecting modernity as threatening to French culture and history. It is for that reason that the extreme right was quick to relate the new palace to the supposed ‘true’ essence of France, arguing the new Trocadero embodied cultural superiority, purity, and civilization. By studying the Trocadero rebuilding in detail, I aimed to bring forward France’s avoidance of modernity and its resistance to new challenging notions of Frenchness.

France’s enduring anxiety toward modernity was most obviously articulated in the reception of the American pavilion at the fair, which I read as representative of anti-American discourse at the time. In analyzing the images of America in collective imagination and in studying notorious anti-American literary works, such as Duhamel’s *Scènes de la vie future*, my goal was to reveal the perception of the new world as embodying the destructive powers of modernity, even though this specific interpretation focused narrowly on mechanization, standardization, scientific progress and technological efficiency accomplished at the expense of artistic, spiritual and moral growth. This extreme modernity purportedly resulted in uncontrollable and irreversible dehumanization (often described through images of humanoid machines, ants, and masses of humans, agitated by materialist wants, satisfied at the price of loss of freedom). My analysis of the image of America in the context of the 1937 exposition established that this unquestionably exaggerated image of America in fact reflected France’s own fear of modernity. After all, if America offered a sneak peek of the future, as Duhamel suggested, then France ought to reassess its goals, for this kind of modernity was inconsistent and incompatible with French national identity. Incidentally, many of the
features of American modernity that anti-American discourse reviled – the assembly line, mass media, chain stores such as Monoprix, popular culture – were a reality in France, and were slowly transforming French culture and lifestyle, raising the question whether the latter could survive the ‘modern’ era. (Interestingly, though, anti-American discourse acknowledged this vision of modernity as a specifically Western and destructive mode, it resisted acknowledging the validity of non-Western cultures and aesthetic norms.) Therefore, I contend that the 1937 exposition attempted to revise Western concept of progress by espousing ultimately nostalgic and even conservative representations in order to shield erstwhile ideas of Frenchness from the profound transformations that seemed unavoidable. For instance, the return to classicism in the redesign of the Trocadero was lauded precisely because it cast aside the fear-inducing modernity and embraced in its place an architectural style that fit within French aesthetic tradition. Similarly, the extensive representation of French provinces for the first time in a world’s fair implied a collective desire to return to a simple, humanist and unproblematic state of existence, now under attack by a destructive and dehumanizing modernity.

The gesture of looking backward (e.g., return to classicism, return to man, return to the land) in the 1920s and 1930s occurred across the political spectrum and artistic scene, inspiring both conservative and avant-garde artists, as an exhibition currently on view at the Guggenheim Museum in New York insists. Nevertheless, I contend that at the exposition, the reaction was decisively nostalgic and idealized. Thus, the implications of positioning the Regional Center next to the American pavilion were unmistakable: the modernity proposed by the American pavilion was incompatible with French values and traditions. French modernity would be regional, underscoring the nation’s important
relationship to its land, nature and history, and would be marked by universal harmony, expressed in 1937 in the peaceful cooperation between the Republic and its enemies. I show that the fair’s focus on rural and regional imagery aimed to obscure France’s anxiety to modernity by offering instead a utopian version of the nation’s past, present and future.

The interwar fairs I study remain extremely important for their role in not only reflecting but also shaping the concept of modernity in the collective imagination. Even though the increasing suspicion toward modernity undermined the overall persuasiveness of the fairs, the fairs merit attention for the alternative narratives of modernity and Frenchness they produced.
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