

## **Museum of Black Civilizations: time is running out**

The Museum of Black Civilizations is above all the expression of a need specific to the precise historical context. Its origin is rooted in the ideological roots of Negritude faced with a devaluation of legacies, technological and cultural histories of black civilizations. At that time, in the face of theoretical constructions that defined soon obsolete racial categories, common transcontinental strategies were taking shape within the major pan-African meetings, including the Pan-African Conference in London (23-25 July 1900), the Pan-African Congress in Manchester (15-21 October 1945) and the Accra Conference (15-22 April 1958). In addition to these politically charged demonstrations against inequality, the two Congresses of Black Writers and Artists (Paris 1956 and Rome 1959) mark the birth of discourses that add a cultural and artistic dimension to these already global dynamics.

### **I. A few points of reference**

The initiator of this museum, the first President of the Republic of Senegal Léopold Sédar Senghor, had a very dynamic vision of culture. For him the project « it was conceived in the spirit of defense, illustration and understanding of the meaning of the values of civilization of the black world and to concretely apply the fundamental option taken by Senegal not to consider "development" as exclusive research increase in income per capita »<sup>1</sup>. With the recent recognition of human development indices, it can be said that he was still right.

After this evaluation, the matter was referred to UNESCO in 1972. With his commitment, decisive actions are taken, in particular :

- a mission by Pedro Ramirez Vasquez, Mexican architect and author of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.
- the involvement of Professors Jean Gabus, Director of the Neuchâtel Museum and Georges Henri Rivière, Director General of ICOM.
- the creation of a commission for the creation of the Museum of Black Civilizations by decree of 25 September 1976.

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<sup>1</sup> Archive of the Léopold Sédar SENGHOR Foundation.

- the appointment of Professor Jean Gabus as Technical Advisor to the Government of Senegal for the Project Museology.
- the presentation of the preliminary draft and model of the Mass Plan to President Senghor on 29 April 1977;
- a first study of the project resulted in an estimate of a total cost of 1,185,000,000,000 F CFA.

At the end of this process, the Rebeuss site had been selected to host a Cultural Forum that would bring together the major cultural facilities to be built over the next ten (10) years, including the museum<sup>2</sup>. Unfortunately, the project was abandoned in the early 1980s with the adjustment policies. It will be resumed in the early 2000s with a search for financing, finally obtained from the People's Republic of China for a total amount of approximately USD 30,000,000 which also covers an esplanade of 10,000 M2.

## **II. Content design**

Designed in the 1970s with the best experts of the time, the initial project could not of course be carried out as it stood. It had to be revisited by integrating the elements of the context. This was the mission of the International Prefiguration Conference. Held in July 2016, this meeting can be considered as the founding moment of the Museum of Black Civilizations in the sense that it will determine its positioning in relation to the typology of existing museums around the world. After more than five days of debate, experts from all over the world finally took strong action to frame the positioning of the Museum of Black Civilizations<sup>3</sup>. We knew what he shouldn't be, which was a big step.

- The MCN will not be an ethnographic museum, because ethnography is the study of the other, an otherness that the black world cannot accept to define itself.
- The MCN will not be an anthropological museum, because it is in its name that the humanity of the black world has been denied.
- The MCN will not be a chromatic museum, because it is not the museum of the black but that of the black civilizations through the history of Toumaï to our days.
- The MCN will not be a subordinate museum, because its vocation is not to copy a model but to embody a vision.

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<sup>2</sup> Archive of the Léopold Sédar SENGHOR Foundation.

<sup>3</sup> REPORT OF THE PRE-CONFIGURATION CONFERENCE OF THE MUSEUM OF BLACK CIVILIZATIONS. Dakar 28-31 July 2016.



*image 1 - The Museum of Black Civilizations*

Based on these considerations, exhibition design workshops were organized in March 2018. Their purpose was to define the content of the inaugural exhibitions<sup>4</sup>. The work carried out by the workshops led to the definition of the orientations that constitute the guiding and programmatic line of all the exhibitions that have been designed around the celebration of the human being. One of the programmatic choices of the workshops was to renounce the so-called permanent exhibitions. It was considered that they would be simplistic because they could in no way reflect the diversity of cultural expressions in the black world. It would also be a major inconvenience to interfere with the dynamic vocation of the museum. Indeed, it is in the constant renewal of its exhibitions that the MCN will truly represent Black civilizations in their diversity and dynamics.

Due to these guidelines, the title chosen for the inaugural exhibitions can be declined as follows: "African civilization: the continuous creation of humanity" and it is in this general sense that the content of the inaugural exhibitions must be understood.

Africa is the cradle of humanity<sup>5</sup>, it is well known and no one ever thinks of challenging it again. To arrive at this evidence, it took decades of effort by scientists from Africa and

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<sup>4</sup> Report of the workshops for the design of exhibition content. Dakar, March 2018.

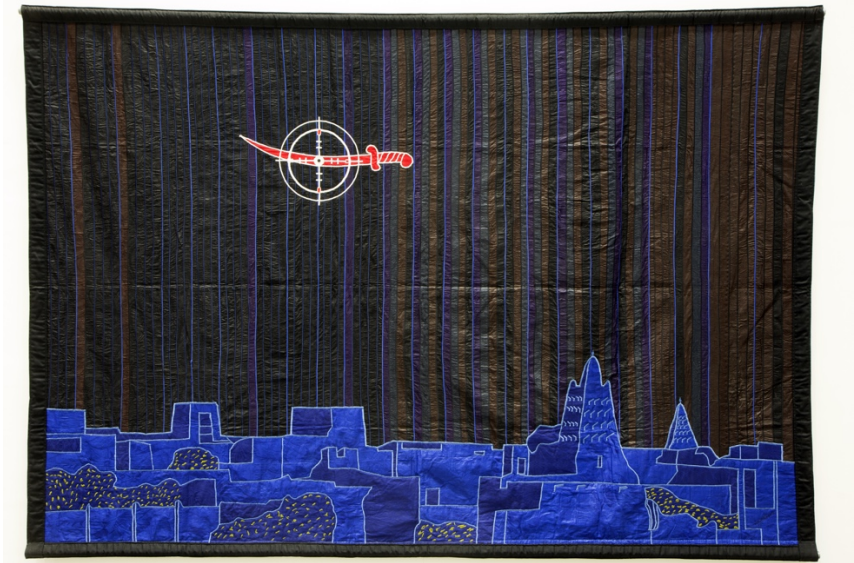
<sup>5</sup> George ABUNGU, AFRICA: CRADLE OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION, In, AFRICAN CIVILIZATIONS: Continuous Creation of Humanity, Catalog of the inaugural exhibition of the Museum of Black Civilizations. Dakar, pp. 45-66. In edition.

elsewhere to exhume the lunar landscape of the Ritf valley and the depths of the Chadian desert the fossilized remains of our distant ancestors. "Toumai" and "Lucy", because it is about them, are recognized as the precursors of the human race.



*image 2 - view of the exhibition Africa, cradle of humanity*

They are witnesses to the inexorable march of the human race towards more humanity, more technicality and above all more ambition. The trajectory of humankind is a string of ever-increasing challenges, but always met. Summarizing this exceptional state of mind, President Senghor will say in his opening speech at the VI Pan-African Congress held in Dakar in 1967 that "Homo sapiens dominates his entire environment with his freedom".



*image 3 - No to sharia law in Timbuktu*

Africa's many contributions to heritage, some of which are still much discussed, are recalled and the arguments in their favour clearly explained. This corpus, which is not based on any ideological bias, is a simple duty of truth. For the inauguration, it was decided to focus on the iron and steel industry<sup>6</sup>, whose invention has taken humanity a giant step forward.

Africa has not only been the cradle of humanity. It was also a space of invention and creativity<sup>7</sup> where the man, from his exceptional observation abilities, was able to understand his environment and invent, on a daily basis, the instruments essential to his development.

Whether it is the domestication of plants, animals, fire control or the invention of iron and steel, Africa has, like other continents, but sometimes well before them, enabled humanity to take giant steps forward.

The great diversity of African civilizations and the expressions that accompany them could not all be mentioned in the inaugural exhibition, which is not intended to do so. The newest aspect of this sequence will undoubtedly be Egypt, an African civilization, but also black for a very long time.

But Africa has not only created, it has also received and received a lot. The result has been the development of true civilizations of the encounter that, in many ways, are confusing in their singularities. Whether it is languages, architecture or religions, African appropriations are striking by their originality. We have chosen to deal here with "African appropriations of Abrahamic religions". Islam in its Sufi, resistant or even brotherly forms, is not mimicry but an affirmation of a singularity in the shared faith<sup>8</sup>. The same is true of Christianity, from Lalibela in Ethiopia to Keur Moussa in Senegal, and many other churches.

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<sup>6</sup> Hamady BOCOUM (Director of Publication), *The Origins of iron metallurgy in Africa: new light on its antiquity; West and Central Africa*. Paris Unesco, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Augustin F.-C. HOLL, *THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN AFRICA, IN, AFRICAN CIVILIZATIONS: Continuous Creation of Humanity*, Catalog of the inaugural exhibition of the Museum of Black Civilizations. Dakar, pp. 67-73. In edition.

<sup>8</sup> Mamaram SECK, *THE SOUFIES CONFERIES IN AFRICA THE EXAMPLE OF SENEGAL, IN, AFRICAN CIVILIZATIONS: Continuous Creation of Humanity*, Catalog of the inaugural exhibition of the Museum of Black Civilizations. Dakar, pp. 121-132. In edition.





*image 4 – Appropriations of the Abrahamic religions*

In the register of encounters, some were particularly violent. This was the case with the slave trade and colonization. The Trans-Saharan and Atlantic treaties left deep traces and had a considerable impact on the evolution of the continent.

If Africa has missed a significant turning point, which will weigh heavily on the course of its history, it is the steel revolution of the late 13th and early 14th centuries that allowed Europe to access massive iron and steel production thanks to the invention of indirect reduction, already known in China a few centuries earlier. Previously, Africa had a technical level equivalent to that of Europe with the practice of direct solid phase reduction. The iron bar, one of the products of the indirect reduction, will be the reference currency for transatlantic trade.

Submerged by the colossal offer of conquering Europe, which has just discovered the Americas with a phenomenal demand for manpower that had ended by annihilating the Indians, Africa will be the miraculous solution for the new masters of the world. Taking the consequences of indirect steelmaking, Europe will literally flood the continent and impose the iron bar and products derived from the European technical complex in all areas of crafts. Against these products, the slave powers will embark men, women and children who will fill the holds of slave ships. This bloodletting, unprecedented, added to the trans-Saharan trade, will empty Africa of his most able arms and his most ingenious minds.

Weakened by the loan of four centuries of trade, although valiant, African military resistance to the colonial conquest was to be defeated one after the other.

This was the beginning of another cycle of painful deprivation, slavery in the home, following the abolition of slavery by the major European powers.

like a reed, the continent had folded but not broken, the resistance had never stopped. They will be diverse, varied and armed, because pacification, so much desired, will never be complete. These resistances were also cultural because Africans never gave up their plural and religious identities with great messianic figures who embodied both armed and spiritual resistance.

It has also resulted in a diaspora with exceptional capacities for resistance and resilience. The globalization of negritude is therefore a groundswell that, across the oceans, has created a community identity that, more than resistance, is an essential actor in redefining the paradigms of the globalized world. Encounters too, but in a completely different register, that of the dialogue of masks where the plurality of postures can hide an unsuspected proximity in the messages conveyed. Here, masks from all continents will wander, in unison, to celebrate otherwise improbable encounters, in line with the vision of a museum that is widely open to modernity and pays particular attention to contemporary production.

Now Africa, which is another theme addressed by the inaugural exhibition, is an intellectual, artistic and political commitment to give meaning to the Time of Africa, which is also the time of the future of our humanity. Contemporary artists from Africa and the diaspora have made significant contributions to this section.

The section devoted to the Dialogue of Masks from Africa, Oceania, Europe, China and Indonesia was an exceptional moment of encounter that validated the first choice not to create a chromatic institution. Finally, it is worth noting the effort made to promote the great figures of Africa and the diaspora, with particular emphasis on "Women and knowledge production".



*image 5 - Black women and knowledge production*