

Home for hopes and Dreaming

Aboriginal art has inspired a new museum in Paris backed by President Jacques Chirac, writes arts editor **Miriam Cosic**

WHEN French architect Jean Nouvel invited Aboriginal artists from Australia to decorate sections of the eagerly awaited Musee du Quai Branly, which opens in Paris next Friday, it was not because he attached particular weight to their ancient cultural traditions.

“To be absolutely sincere,” the museum’s president, Stephane Martin, told *Inquirer* earlier this year, “it was just a question of colour. He wanted colour.”

In Nouvel’s original idea, the work of Aboriginal artists would adorn the ceilings, and he dressed up the drawings in his winning proposal with different styles of painting from this distant land. It was a formula he had used to good effect before: a rather plain facade offset with highly decorated ceilings inside, lit so that they are visible from the street at night.

In the decade since the project was commissioned, the Australian contribution has grown, due largely to negotiations between Nouvel and Australian curators Hetti Perkins and Brenda Croft, who were asked to choose and liaise with the eight artists involved.

“Our first idea was to find artists who were capable of painting the huge quantities of ceiling, we were not interested in their prestige,” Martin says. “The Australian curators insisted, and it was a very ambitious development, that those artists should be big names.”

Last month, in the budget, the federal Government announced it would more than double, to \$820,000, its allocation of funds to the project, which it considers a valuable advertisement for Australia. The MQB is freighted with the aspirations of the Aboriginal art world, too, which sees it as an international embassy for indigenous culture.

The project is also a fulfilment of the aspirations of French President Jacques Chirac, an internationalist who has propelled the endeavour from the beginning. Several post-war presidents have been identified with grand projects that have enhanced France’s reputation as a world cultural capital: Valery Giscard d’Estaing with the redevelopment of the cavernous Quai d’Orsay, which houses 19th-century paintings, including those of the impressionists; Francois Mitterrand with the glass pyramid for the Louvre. Only two projects have been personally initiated by presidents: the Pompidou Centre at Beau-

bourg, which was Georges Pompidou’s idea, and Quai Branly, which was Chirac’s.

Martin says Chirac’s world view is “very different from 99 per cent of French people. When he was young, he was not so interested in Oceania, and he discovered Africa through politics, but he has always been very interested in China and India. And he was always puzzled that we Europeans – and I guess you in Australia, too, for a very long time – have been taught that the history of the world was roughly the history of the Mediterranean Sea, that everything started there and that culture was transmitted from Egypt to Rome, and from Rome to France and England.

“His idea, maybe from the time he was 17 or 18, was that it would be interesting to shift the globe to the other side of the world and to have a look at it from Beijing or Mumbai.”

French journalist Michel Daubert, of *Telerama*, has followed the development of Quai Branly since its conception. He says that although he is opposed to Chirac’s conservative politics, he has no doubt of the sincerity of the domestically embattled President’s international viewpoint.

“He is very open to other cultures,” Daubert says. “In fact, is an Occidentphobe: he is more interested in foreign cultures than in French culture, and his idea with this museum was to open French eyes to his own humanist view of the world.”

MQB has brought together the collections of two existing institutions: the Musee National des Arts de l’Afrique et l’Oceanic (National Museum of African and Oceanic Art) and the Musee de l’Homme (Museum of Mankind). The new museum, which contains 300,000 objects, has a significant collection of historical Australian pieces, including 1423 objects such as weapons, tools, jewellery and funerary poles, and 230 bark paintings from Arnhem Land, many of them collected by French painter Karel Kupka in the 1950s, as well as 40 acrylic paintings MAAO had bought since, some of which will be on permanent display.

Each of the original museums had a different remit: MAAO was run on aesthetic principles and came under the department of culture; and the Musee de l’Homme had an ethnographic and natural history brief and was administered by the department of education and scientific research.

Their integration was contentious. Many in the scientific community considered the blending of the aesthetic and the ethnographic a “marriage against nature”, as *Le Monde*’s correspondent Emmanuel de Roux put it. Ethnographers at the Musee de l’Homme claimed that serious scientific research would be abandoned.

They held meetings and held strikes in protest. Most of them eventually came around

and nine of the original 12 joined the MQB.

It all started with an art dealer, Jacques Kerchache, who had a special interest in *l'art primitif*, or *l'art premier* (Kerchache's coinage), as some French now more carefully call it. Described by de Roux as having a ghostly presence, a sulphurous reputation and an implacable eye, and battling cancer, Kerchache published a manifesto signed by 150 prominent intellectuals and artists in left-wing newspaper *Liberation* in 1990, calling for the proper recognition in French institutions of non-Western art. It was not a new idea. It was first elaborated by writer Guillaume Apollinaire in the early 20th century, and his work had informed the establishment of MAAO in the 1960s by culture minister Andre Malraux, who wanted to see so-called primitive art placed on an equal footing with European art.

When Chirac was elected President in 1995, he appointed Philippe Douste-Blazy as minister of culture. Martin had joined the ministry when the socialists were thrown out in 1993. (In the French system, state departments have political staff who work alongside career public servants to implement policies of the government of the day.) Poached by Douste-Blazy to be his chief-of-staff, Martin was with him when he received a phone call from Chirac. The President wanted his culture minister to meet his friend, Kerchache, to discuss the art dealer's idea of getting a permanent display of non-Western art into the Louvre. Knowing that Martin had a longstanding interest in African art, Douste-Blazy sent him to the meeting.

Martin knew that the directors of the Louvre would not be in favour of installing tribal art in their grand institution. "They were extremely irritated," he says. With the President's imprimatur, however, he was able to force through the plan. The idea morphed. "By the beginning of 1996, Kerchache and I agreed that he should work on the Louvre project and that we would also seek either a bigger museum or a complete renewal of the Musee de l'Homme," Martin says.

"His idea was that this sharing of the national collection between a supposedly arty museum in MAAO and a supposedly ethnographic museum in the Musee de l'Homme was ridiculous, that those collections were not very well shown, and we should bring them together in a new environment."

They presented the idea to Chirac at Martin's first meeting with the President in 1996 and he agreed to it. "Oceania reacted well, the Musee de l'Homme extremely badly," Martin recalls. "Of course, we would be breaking up their collection because we were only interested in the ethnographic part of it. Their idea was that a museum should deal with everything, not only ethnography but biology and prehistory, giving a full explanation of the ascent of man from a one-cell fish to [Aboriginal artist] John Mawurndjul."

By early 1997, a draft plan was in place: Kerchache would curate the display in the Louvre, a relatively modest project costing

\$10 million, and tenders would be called for a new building to house the national collection of non-Western art. A site was found on the left bank of the Seine at Quai Branly.

Then, in February, general elections were held. The conservatives were voted out, ushering in an uneasy era of power-sharing between the conservative President and a socialist prime minister. "Jospin was elected, my minister was ousted and I was ousted too," Martin says wryly.

He asked the new minister of culture if he could run the ambitious project. She agreed, but wanted a cheaper alternative of renovating an existing building. Martin opted out and took a job in Monaco. Kerchache continued to work on the Louvre installation but, with Chirac's backing, lobbied hard for the new building. By May 1998, the Jospin government came full circle on the plan and Martin returned to head the MQB.

In 1999, Nouvel won an international competition for the design of the building, against stiff competition which included Renzo Piano, who had designed the Pompidou Centre and was considered the doyen of museum architecture. Chris Johnson, then the NSW government architect, was part of a selection jury drawn from across the world.

Kerchache lived to see Chirac open his elegant installation at the Louvre in April, 2001: according to de Roux, the museum's director, Pierre Rosenberg, couldn't hide his chagrin during the ceremony. Four months later, Kerchache died while on holiday.

The MQB is opening 18 months late: some of the time was lost in the political manoeuvres, some of it when excavation revealed archeological artefacts on the site and some when controversies slowed progress. A serious embarrassment to the French and Nigerian governments erupted, for example, when a British archeologist, attending a UNESCO meeting in Paris in 2000, accused MQB of having bought protected terracotta figures that, he said, had been illegally exported.

The museum, at a cost of \$278 million, has come in 8 per cent over the original estimate, Martin said, "which is not bad. And Chirac managed to exempt us from budget cuts."

The French President has maintained an active interest, though he hasn't interfered in the detail, Martin says. He also helped expedite negotiations with the Australian Government. When the Aboriginal component of MQB was pursued, Chirac wrote to Australian Prime Minister John Howard asking for his assistance. It was the time of the Iraq war: Australia had committed troops to the coalition of the willing and France was

vociferous in its opposition to the military expedition. "Relations with Australia were not so good," Martin remarks. "But your Prime Minister, in a very gentlemanly way, answered that he would not only help but he would also give a government grant and do his best for it to be realised."

The federal Government allocated \$380,000 from its arts, indigenous affairs and foreign affairs budgets towards the total cost of the Australian element. French companies and private donors were encouraged to support the Australian contribution, lured by generous French tax concessions.

The Australia Council, which has been managing the project, nominated Perkins, curator of indigenous art at the Art Gallery of NSW, and Croft, curator of indigenous art at the National Gallery of Australia, to oversee the choice of artists. Between them they came up with the list: Mawurndjul, Gulumbu Yunipingu, Paddy Bedford, Lena Nyadbi, Tommy Watson, Ningura Napurrula, Judy Watson and Michael Riley, who died in 2004 – a high-profile group of Arnhem Land, Western Desert, Kimberley and urban artists.

Kuninjku painter Mawurndjul is the only artist who has worked in person on the project; the others have worked closely with artisans who transferred their designs on to the external facade and the internal ceilings and walls, expedited by the involvement of an Australian architect, Peter Lonergan.

There has been considerable interest in Australian art in the French press recently, intensifying as the museum's opening looms. Mawurndjul's arrival to work on MQB and to attend the opening of his retrospective in Basel was widely reported, and the recent exhibition of Torres Strait artist Dennis Nona's work at the Australian embassy attracted interest. The embassy is showing the dazzling personal collection of Gabrielle Pizzi, the Melbourne art dealer who died in 2004, to coincide with the MQB's opening.

Australian responses to the project have been ambivalent. Although most have been uncritically admiring, others have criticised the use of Aboriginal artists' work as glorified interior design and pounced on French attitudes and locutions, seen as outdated, even racist, ethnographic descriptions of what is a vivid contemporary art movement. While this is certainly still true of sections of the French art world, it doesn't exactly describe the interest of the cognoscenti.

"In France, ethnography is concerned, above all, with vanished cultures, and Aboriginal people are still very much alive," Daubert explains. "They are part of the image of contemporary Australia we have in Europe, and their painting has been an aesthetic, not an ethnographic, revelation to us."

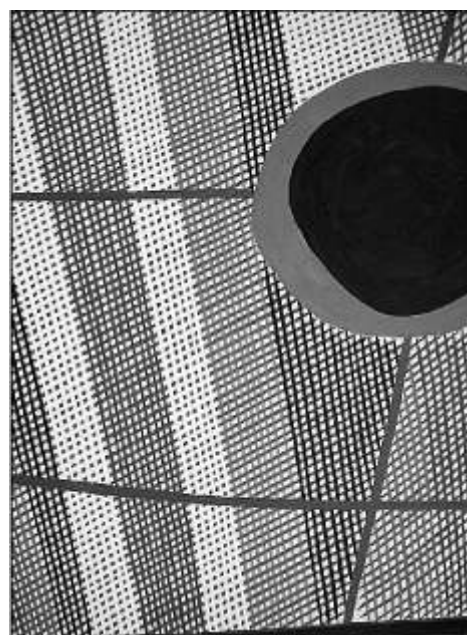
Stephane Jacob, a Parisian art dealer who has done much during the past decade to switch French collectors' view of Aboriginal art from an exotic curiosity to an exciting development in contemporary art – a scout for the art form, Daubert calls him – says the Australian artists' highly visible decorative contribution to the building will provide a powerful pointer to the link between the past and the present. Jacob warns, however, that the Australian Government should view the Quai Branly project not as a culmination but as a beginning.

"The Australia Council's involvement has been fantastic," he says.

"Now I hope they will continue their support by sponsoring major touring exhibitions, for example, to keep Aboriginal art in the public eye."

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Interest: Detail from Mawurndjul's Quai Branly work, *Mardayin at Milmilngkan*



Big name: Kuninjku painter John Mawurndjul is the only Australian artist to work in person on the Musee du Quai Branly project