



Address by Jacques CHIRAC, President of the French Republic, at the opening of the Musée du Quai Branly.

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Paris, tuesday, 20 june 2006

Secretary-General of the United Nations, dear Kofi Annan, thank you for travelling to be here with us today and for your willingness to pay tribute to our work on behalf of the United Nations,

Abdou Diouf, Secretary-General of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie,
Prime Ministers,
Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen, Friends,

And, in particular, permit me to salute with joy and respect the presence of Claude LØvi-Strauss. He is unquestionably one of the most distinguished representatives of contemporary human intelligence and contributed a great deal of what proved crucially important to the work that led us, notably, to create this museum. I am particularly happy that the auditorium where we are gathered today is named after him.

It is both an immense joy and thrill for me to be here with you, who have come from all over the world, to open the Quai Branly Museum today. Thank you kindly for accepting my invitation to this opening, which, I think, is an event of great cultural, political and moral significance.

A visit to this new institution dedicated to other cultures will be at once a breathtaking aesthetic experience and a vital lesson in humanity for our times.

As the world's nations mix as never before in history, the need for an original venue was felt, a venue that would do justice to the infinite diversity of cultures and offer a different view of the genius of the peoples and civilisations of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas.

Moved by that sense of respect and acknowledgement, in 1998 I decided to create this museum, in full agreement with the prime minister, Lionel Jospin. France wished to pay a rightful homage to peoples to whom, throughout the ages, history has all too often done violence. Peoples injured and exterminated by the greed and brutality of conquerors. Peoples humiliated and scorned, denied even their own history. Peoples still now often marginalised, weakened, endangered by the inexorable advance of modernity. Peoples who nevertheless want their dignity restored and acknowledged.



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This is in fact the spirit behind the declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples that we are drafting in Geneva, a declaration to which I know the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan, is especially committed, as well as my friend Rigoberta Menchœ Tum who is greatly involved in its drafting. And this is also the spirit, dear Eliane Toledo, in which I hailed the election of your husband as president of Peru, and I ask you to express my cordial friendship to him. This is the reason that inspired me, Paul Okalik, Premier, to travel to Nunavut, with our mutual friend, Jean Chrœtien, in 1999.

Central to our idea is the rejection of ethnocentrism and of the indefensible and unacceptable pretension of the West that it alone bears the destiny of humanity, and the rejection of false evolutionism, which purports that some peoples remain immutably at an earlier stage of human evolution, and that their cultures, termed primitive, only have value as objects of study for anthropologists or, at best, as sources of inspiration for Western artists.

Those are absurd and shocking prejudices, which must be combated. There is no hierarchy of the arts and cultures any more than there is a hierarchy of peoples. First and foremost, the Quai Branly Museum is founded on the belief in the equal dignity of the world's cultures.

I would like to pay homage today to the men and women who inspired the museum, starting with the late Jacques Kerchache, who conceived and was behind the project. With him, in 1992, while in different parts of the globe the quincentenary of the discovery of America was being celebrated, we decided to organise a major exhibition in Paris dedicated to the civilisations of the Greater Antilles, and in particular to the Taïno Indians of the Arawak group, the people who welcomed Christopher Columbus to the shores of the Americas but were subsequently exterminated. It is also to Jacques Kerchache that we owe the admirable rooms of the Pavillon des Sessions at the Louvre.

I also extend my warmest thanks to all the men and women who helped bring the Quai Branly Museum into existence and who surpassed themselves to ensure that everything was complete on time.

Jean Nouvel, Gilles Clœment, and their teams, who have crafted a building of masterful architecture, suffused with respect for the visitor, the environment, the works and the cultures that produced them.

Germain Viatte and the curators, whose superb museography interweaves approaches and dissolves the artificial distinction between art and anthropology, affording visitors the pleasure of discovery and sensitivity and inviting them to open their eyes and broaden their horizons.

Stœphane Martin and his staff, who administer this original institution and will assuredly make it an uncontested centre for education, research and dialogue and a venue for contemporary art, testifying to the vitality of the cultures to which it is dedicated. A vitality reflected in the superb



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Australian Aboriginal ceiling paintings, whose artists I once again commend. I also extend my warmest thanks to the representatives of the Australian government, which showed great dynamism and generosity towards France.

I also express my profound gratitude to all the patrons who have rallied round the project and supported it so generously.

The Quai Branly Museum will, of course, be one of the largest museums dedicated to the arts and civilisations of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas, with a collection of almost 300,000 items, including exceptional works that may be regarded as some of the greatest works of art in the world, such as this totem pole from British Columbia and the superb monumental Djennenke sculpture from the Bandiagara Plateau in Mali.

But it is much more than a museum. By multiplying viewpoints, the venue's ambition is to render the depth and complexity of the arts and civilisations of all those continents. In so doing, it seeks to encourage a different more open and respectful view in the broadest possible audience, by dispelling the mists of ignorance, condescension and arrogance that were so often found in the past and bred mistrust, scorn and rejection.

Far removed from the stereotypes of the savage or primitive, the museum seeks to communicate the eminent value of these different cultures some of which have been lost, many of which are endangered these fragile flowers of difference in the words of Claude L vi-Strauss, which must be protected at all costs.

Because the first peoples possess a wealth of knowledge, culture and history. They are the custodians of ancestral wisdom, of refined imagination, filled with wonderful myths, and of high artistic expression whose masterpieces rival the finest examples of Western art.

By showing that there are other ways of acting and thinking, other connections between beings, other ways of relating to the world, the Quai Branly Museum celebrates the luxuriant, fascinating and magnificent variety of human creativity. It proclaims that no one people, no one nation, no one civilisation represents or sums up human genius. Each culture enriches humanity with its share of beauty and truth, and it is only through their continuously renewed expression that we can perceive the universal that brings us together.

That diversity is a treasure that we must preserve now more than ever. In globalisation, humanity is glimpsing the possibility of unity, that age-old dream of the Utopians, which has become the promise of our destiny. At the same time, however, standardisation is gaining ground, with the worldwide expansion of the law of the market. But who can fail to understand that when globalisation brings uniformisation it can only exacerbate tensions between different identities, at the risk of igniting murderous violence? Who does not feel a new ethical imperative, faced with the confusing questions thrown up by the rapid development of scientific knowledge and our technological



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achievements? As we search falteringly for a development model that would conserve our environment, who does not seek another way of looking at man and nature?

That is also the idea behind this museum. To hold up the infinite diversity of peoples and arts against the bland, looming grip of uniformity. To offer imagination, inspiration and dreaming against the temptation of disenchantment. To show the interactions and collaboration between cultures, also described by Claude LØvi-Strauss, which never cease to intertwine the threads of the human adventure. To promote the importance of breaking down barriers, of openness and mutual understanding against the clash of identities and the mentality of closure and segregation. To gather all people who, throughout the world, strive to promote dialogue between cultures and civilisations.

France has made that ambition its own. France expresses it tirelessly in international forums and takes it to the heart of the world's major debates. France bears it with passion and conviction, because it accords with our calling as a nation that has long prized the universal but that, over the course of a tumultuous history, has learned the value of otherness.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

More than ever, the destiny of the world lies in the capacity of peoples to have an enlightened view of each other and share their differences and cultures, so that, in its infinite diversity, humanity can gather around the values that truly unite it.

May the visitors who pass through the doors of the Quai Branly Museum be filled with emotion and wonderment. May they come to realise that this knowledge is irreplaceable. May they in turn become bearers of the message of peace, tolerance and respect for others.

Thank you.

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