

Reinterpreting Extra-European Collections: The Case of the Musée Des Cordeliers and the Legacy of the Croisière Noire

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Abstract: This article examines the changing status of extra-European objects in French museums, focusing on the processes of collection, patrimonialization, and reinterpretation that shape their contemporary meanings. Drawing on the case study of the Musée des Cordeliers in Saint-Jean-d'Angély, it specifically analyzes the collections resulting from the Croisière Noire expedition (1924–1925), considered as a complex legacy combining scientific, colonial, and cultural dimensions.

Adopting both a historical and critical perspective, the paper traces the shifting perceptions of these objects, from exotic curiosities to ethnographic artifacts and, more recently, to recognized works of art and cultural heritage. It highlights the persistent ambiguities surrounding their exhibition, which oscillates between aesthetic appreciation, colonial memory, and challenges of cultural mediation.

Through an analysis of museographic practices and conservation strategies, the study questions how meaning is currently produced and communicated in museum contexts. It ultimately argues for a critical reassessment of ethnographic collections, aimed at moving beyond inherited ethnocentric frameworks and fostering a more balanced and inclusive intercultural dialogue.

Keywords : Collections, Ethnography, Black Cruise, Exhibition, Cordelier's Museum.

Résumé : Cet article analyse les transformations du statut des objets extra-européens dans les musées français, en mettant en lumière les processus de collecte, de patrimonialisation et de requalification dont ils font l'objet. À partir de l'étude de cas du Musée des Cordeliers de Saint-Jean-d'Angély, il examine plus particulièrement les collections issues de la Croisière noire (1924-1925), en tant qu'héritage à la fois scientifique, colonial et culturel.

L'approche adoptée articule une perspective historique et critique afin de retracer l'évolution du regard porté sur ces objets, depuis leur perception comme curiosités exotiques jusqu'à leur reconnaissance en tant que patrimoines culturels et œuvres d'art. L'article met en évidence les ambiguïtés persistantes dans leur mise en exposition, oscillant entre valorisation esthétique, mémoire coloniale et enjeux de médiation culturelle.

En s'appuyant sur l'analyse des dispositifs muséographiques et des logiques de conservation, cette contribution interroge les formes contemporaines de production du sens dans les musées. Elle plaide pour une relecture critique des collections ethnographiques, susceptible de dépasser les cadres interprétatifs hérités et de favoriser un dialogue interculturel renouvelé.

Mots clés: Collections, Ethnographie, Croisière noire, Exposition, Musée des Cordeliers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Extra-European collections now occupy a central place in contemporary debates on museums, heritage, and cultural representations. Long perceived as mere exotic objects—tokens of distant and often imagined worlds—these artifacts have undergone profound transformations in their status, function, and meaning within European museum institutions. Their trajectory, from cabinets of curiosities to contemporary museums, reflects a complex history shaped by exploration dynamics, colonial frameworks, and the emergence of anthropological sciences.

In France, the formation of extra-European collections dates to the 16th century, within a broader effort to gather, classify, and display objects originating from newly explored territories. Initially regarded as curiosities, these objects contributed to a staged representation of the world intended to satisfy elite curiosity and to support early reflections on cultural diversity. From the 19th century onwards, with the expansion of colonial enterprises and the development of scientific missions, these collections acquired new significance: they became tools for knowledge production and interpretation of so-called “other” societies, while remaining deeply embedded in the power relations that structured interactions between Europe and colonized territories.

Over time, these objects were integrated into various museographic frameworks that played a key role in shaping representations of otherness. Initially approached through evolutionary and classificatory perspectives, they were gradually revalorized for their aesthetic qualities, particularly under the influence of early 20th-

century artistic movements. This shift contributed to a process of decontextualization, whereby objects came to be perceived as universal works of art, sometimes at the expense of their original cultural and social meanings. In this context, ethnographic museums emerge as key sites for observing the evolution of perspectives on extra-European cultures. They function not only as spaces of conservation and display but also as arenas for the production of discourse about the “Other.” However, they are increasingly confronted with critical challenges related to colonial legacies, restitution claims, and the need to rethink their modes of mediation and representation within more inclusive and reflexive frameworks.

It is within this perspective that the present article is situated. It seeks to analyze the processes of patrimonialization and valorization of extra-European collections through a case study: the Musée des Cordeliers in Saint-Jean-d’Angély. This institution is particularly significant due to its extensive holdings derived from the Citroën expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s, especially the Croisière Noire (1924–1925), a landmark event at the intersection of scientific, technological, and colonial dynamics.

The Croisière Noire represents a pivotal moment in the history of exploration, knowledge production, and the formation of ethnographic collections. Organized in a context marked by the consolidation of French colonial power and major technological advancements, the expedition led to the collection of a substantial body of objects, images, and scientific data. Today preserved and exhibited at the Musée des Cordeliers, these materials provide a valuable analytical framework for examining both the logic behind the formation of collections and the contemporary modes of their interpretation and display.

The aim of this article is twofold. First, it seeks to trace the historical evolution of the status of extra-European objects, from their initial collection to their recognition as museum heritage, highlighting the transformations in the ways they have been perceived. Second, it analyzes the exhibition strategies and heritage issues associated with the Croisière Noire collections, in order to understand how these objects are currently mobilized in the construction of museum narratives.

Through this analysis, the article contributes to a broader reflection on the role of ethnographic collections in contemporary museums. In particular, it highlights the tensions between aesthetic valorization, colonial memory, and the recognition of cultural identities that continue to shape these institutions. By questioning inherited interpretative frameworks and current practices, this study calls for a critical reassessment of extra-European collections, one that acknowledges their historical and cultural complexity.

Thus, rather than being static remnants of the past, extra-European objects can be understood as dynamic carriers of meaning, whose interpretations evolve in relation to social, political, and scientific contexts. Their presence in contemporary museums raises fundamental questions about how otherness is represented, how knowledge is transmitted, and how intercultural dialogue can be fostered in an increasingly globalized world.

II. From Exotic Curiosities to Ethnographic Heritage

Extra-European objects have occupied various positions and held different meanings throughout history. Initially perceived as curiosities, they were later considered ethnographic objects, then as part of collections typical of the colonial period, and today increasingly as works of fine art rather than as testimonies of specific cultures. In France, the history of collections originating from different continents, the evolution of their treatment within museums, and the meanings attributed to the display of objects from non-European societies are closely intertwined with both national and global history. Indeed, several major phases can be identified in the history of these collections:

- **First phase:** large-scale collecting from the 17th century to the mid-20th century;
- **Second phase:** a period of concealment, during which objects were stored in reserves, basements, crates, or frozen in display cases (with the exception, in 1949, of the Museum of African and Oceanian Arts), from the mid-20th century to the 1990s;
- **Third phase:** rediscovery and recognition, from the late 20th century to the present day.

Extra-European collections began to take shape in France as early as the 16th century, particularly within private collections and cabinets of curiosities. Nobles and scholars collected “curiosities” driven by a taste for rarity, discovery, and pedagogical ambition. While reflecting elite fascination with rare objects, these cabinets also contributed to early reflections on natural classification systems, encouraged by the exploration of distant lands. They were based on the idea that the world could be reconstructed locally by assembling diverse objects in a single space, conceived as a meeting point between art and science.

The fascination with exoticism led to the development of both private and public collections, forming the basis of the first ethnographic museums. As early as 1470, Charles the Bold ordered a Portuguese trader to acquire “four wooden figures” from Africa, making him one of the earliest known collectors of so-called “African art.” Following Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the Americas in 1493, numerous objects were brought back to Europe, captivating emerging collectors. In August 1520, during the ceremonies for the

coronation of Charles V in Brussels, objects brought from Mexico by Hernán Cortés were displayed, astonishing Albrecht Dürer, who wrote of his admiration for “the subtle ingenuity of forms from other lands.”

In the 17th century, European trading companies operating across Africa, Madagascar, and the Indian Ocean facilitated the collection of such objects. Many nobles, wealthy merchants, and rulers across Europe owned cabinets of curiosities. For instance, in 1612, Marie de Medici maintained a cabinet at the Louvre, now part of the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris. By the mid-century, early museums such as the *Kunstkammer* emerged. The *Kunstkammer* established in 1650 by King Frederick III of Denmark became one of the most significant collections of African objects. Similar collections appeared in Ulm (1659) and Rome, forming the foundation of later ethnographic museums.

During the 18th century, Enlightenment thought placed humanity at the center of inquiry and marked the emergence of anthropology. Objects were increasingly collected through exchanges or chance encounters and gained scientific significance. This was the era of major explorations, with figures such as James Cook contributing to ethnographic knowledge and donating collections to institutions like the British Museum. Under Louis XVI, numerous ethnographic objects entered royal collections, notably those gathered by the naturalist Joseph Dombey during his travels in Peru.

The 19th century was characterized by colonial expansion and the so-called civilizing mission of the West, which framed non-European societies as objects of scientific study. Colonial administrators became major suppliers of exotic objects. Concerns over the disappearance of certain populations led scholars to advocate for museums preserving material traces of humanity. Ethnographic collections were incorporated into institutions such as the *Musée de la Marine* in 1828, reflecting a growing pedagogical mission.

By the late 19th century, ethnographic collections in France were dispersed, poorly preserved, and often disconnected from other museum holdings. This situation led to the creation of specialized institutions such as the *Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro* in 1878. Universal exhibitions further popularized ethnographic displays, often staging “indigenous” peoples and cultural artifacts for large audiences, thereby shaping public perceptions of other cultures.

Exotic ethnography became both a cultural trend and a symbolic component of European expansionism. In the early 20th century, avant-garde artists, including those associated with primitivism, cubism, and surrealism, contributed to the growing recognition of extra-European art, particularly African art. These works gradually entered the art market and gained institutional legitimacy.

Despite this recognition, collections were also shaped by speculation, looting, and forgery. Major exhibitions and institutions further contributed to their visibility, culminating in the official recognition of extra-European arts with the opening of the *Pavillon des Sessions* at the Louvre in 2000, where masterpieces from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas are displayed.

III. Current Situation and Heritage Issues

From the 20th century onwards, massive quantities of so-called “exotic” objects were transferred to Europe with the aim of preserving the material traces of peoples perceived as inevitably destined to disappear due to rapid civilizational change. Within the ethnographic museums that housed them, classification systems were largely based on theories of cultural evolution, progressively organizing these material productions according to their geographical origin and presumed function—generally interpreted as either magico-religious (such as statuettes) or strictly utilitarian.

These objects were not originally intended to provide aesthetic pleasure or artistic appreciation, but rather to contribute, through an empirical and functional approach, to an understanding of otherness.

Two main research directions can be identified in this field: on the one hand, the analysis of collections aimed at recontextualizing objects within their original cultural frameworks; and on the other hand, the reconstruction of the history of ethnographic collecting in France, alongside the evolution of European perceptions of extra-European societies, long shaped by ethnocentric biases.

In recent decades, there has been a renewed interest in the valorization of extra-European objects. This trend is reflected in the proliferation of ethnographic museums across Europe, such as the *Musée du Quai Branly* in France, the *Ethnological Museum of Berlin*, and the *Ethnographic Museum of Geneva*. A growing aesthetic appreciation of these “exotic” objects has emerged, raising important questions about representations of the “Other,” cultural identities, and intercultural dialogue—issues that remain central within contemporary European societies.

Over time, the meaning attributed to objects undergoes continuous transformation. The interpretations and perspectives applied to them redefine both their status and significance. It is through our gaze that these objects are detached from their original contexts and incorporated into what André Malraux conceptualized as the “Imaginary Museum” (Malraux, 1947).

IV. The Croisière Noire: A Colonial Expedition Between Exploration and Knowledge Production

The Citroën expeditions across Africa during the 1920s and 1930s must be understood within a dual context. On the one hand, they reflect the renewed importance of the colonial empire following the First World War, as well as the growing interest it generated among a public that had previously shown relative indifference to colonial issues in the late 19th century. The empire began to attract entrepreneurs, businessmen, geographers, ethnologists, and anthropologists alike. On the other hand, these expeditions were made possible by significant technological advances in the French automobile industry, particularly the development of more efficient tracked vehicles capable of navigating diverse terrains.

Africa began to capture the attention of André Citroën in the early 1920s. In December 1922, he organized the first expedition, known as the “First Trans-Saharan Crossing by Motor Vehicles,” aimed at establishing a north–south connection between Algeria and West Africa by creating a motor route along existing caravan trails from Touggourt to Timbuktu. Its success led to the more ambitious idea of a full trans-African crossing, linking Colomb-Béchar (southern Morocco) to Tananarive (Madagascar).

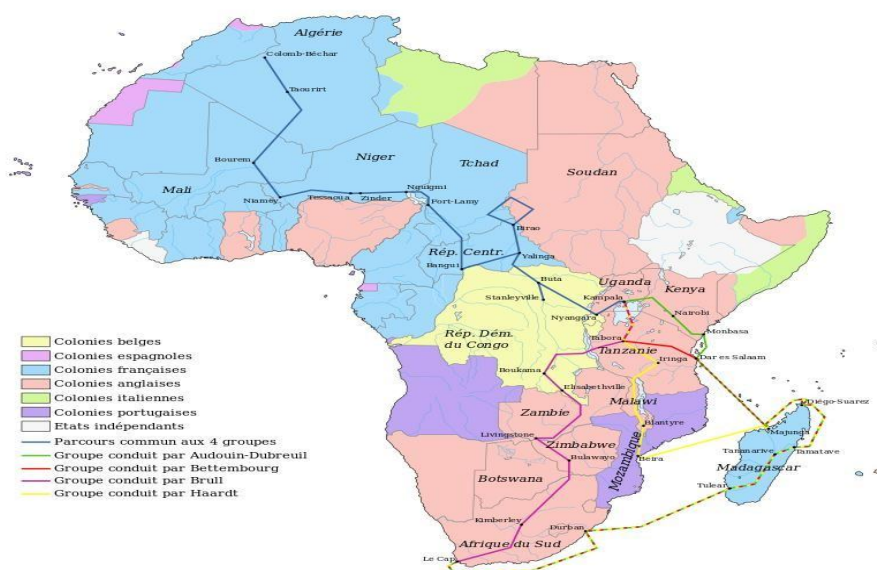
Supported by the French government and military, aware of the strategic and symbolic importance of such an initiative, the “Croisière Noire” expedition was launched from October 28, 1924, to June 26, 1925, with the objective of establishing a regular motorized route across the African continent. Over the course of more than a year, eight Citroën half-track vehicles traveled approximately 28,000 kilometers across Africa—crossing Algeria, Niger, Chad, Ubangi-Shari, the Belgian Congo, and finally reaching Madagascar—generating considerable enthusiasm among the public as well as scientific, artistic, and economic circles.

Upon their return to Paris in autumn 1925, the expedition members were celebrated, and several exhibitions were organized, including displays at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and the Pavillon de Marsan at the Louvre. The expedition produced an impressive body of material: 300 botanical plates, 15 sketchbooks, specimens of over 300 mammals, 800 birds, and 1,500 insects—many previously undocumented—as well as paintings of African landscapes, maps, weapons, musical instruments, textiles, containers, masks, and statuettes. In addition, 6,000 photographs and a 70-minute silent film documenting the expedition were produced, both achieving significant success.

Several studies have addressed this expedition, including early works by Georges-Marie Haardt and Louis Audouin-Dubreuil, as well as more recent publications such as the Aguttes auction catalogue and works by Ariane Audouin-Dubreuil. However, these contributions largely stem from the expedition’s participants, their descendants, or the African art market. Much remains to be explored regarding the artistic, anthropological, and cultural dimensions of the collections produced during the Croisière Noire.

Today, the final stage in the patrimonialization of these collections is reflected in their conservation and exhibition at the Musée des Cordeliers in Saint-Jean-d’Angély, which stands as the only public institution and the primary resource center dedicated to the ethnographic collections of the Citroën expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s.

Image 1 – Itinerary of the Croisière noire



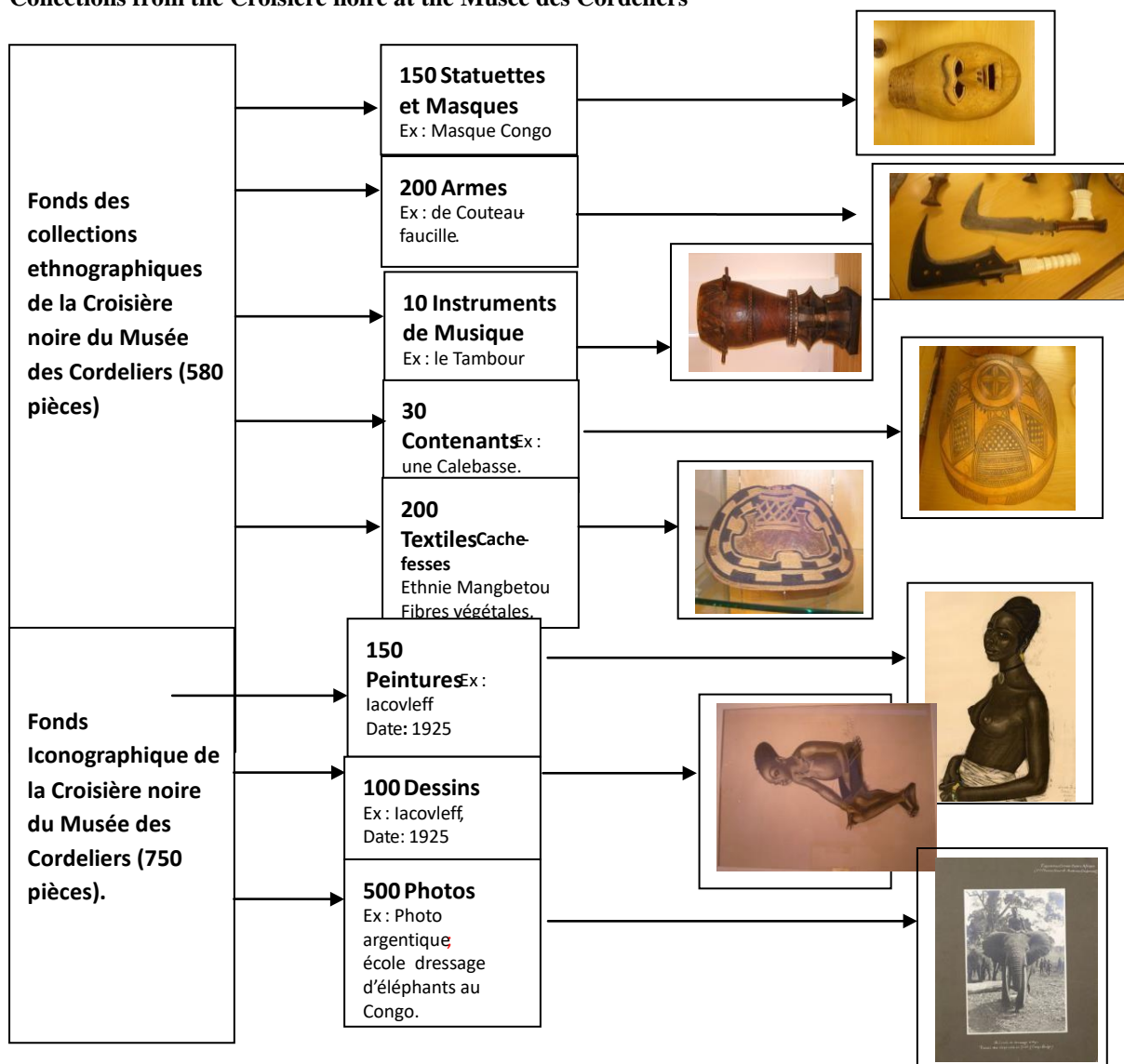
Directed by: Armand Nchare (2025)

a) Formation of the Black Cruise Ethnographic Collection

In 1923, a group of residents of Saint-Jean d'Angély founded the Archaeological Society of Saint-Jean d'Angély and its region. This non-profit association, governed by the 1901 law, aimed to: save, preserve, have classified, and maintain in their original locations all monuments in the region of artistic and historical significance; to jointly study all aspects of the history of Saint-Jean d'Angély and its region; and finally, to establish a museum to house all objects that could not be kept in their original locations.

Indeed, between 1947 and 1957, the personal collections of Louis Audouin-Dubreuil, a native of the town, and Maurice Penaud, originally from Deux-Sèvres, respectively second-in-command and chief mechanic of the Citroën expeditions in Africa and Asia during the 1920s and 1930s, were donated to the town, which thus became the owner of a unique and remarkable collection of archives, ethnographic objects, paintings and drawings by the Russian painter Alexandre Iacovleff, and one of the last two half-track vehicles still in existence: the Silver Crescent which conquered the Sahara Desert in 1922. This exceptional collection linked to the epics of the Citroën expeditions during the first half of the 20th century constitutes the unique feature of the Musée des Cordeliers in Saint-Jean-d'Angély.

Collections from the Croisière noire at the Musée des Cordeliers



Design and production: Armand Kpoumie Nchare (2025).

b) The Museology of the Black Cruise: Between Education and Memory

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Four main themes were chosen to present a portion of the collections in the museum's permanent exhibition galleries, arranged in clear and logical sequences around exceptional objects and representative series across a total area of 1,300 m².

Among these themes, the fourth section, dedicated to the Black Cruise and located on the ground floor, emphasizes observation and information through an interpretive approach to museology.

This section addresses the museum's industrial, automotive, ethnographic, and iconographic heritage, presented thematically and documentary-style, thus constituting its focus. The tour through the museum spaces concludes with the discovery of the centerpiece: the half-track vehicle "Silver Crescent," listed as a Historical Monument in 1984. The other collections, stored in reserve, are rotated among the permanent displays or presented in temporary exhibitions.

Permanent display of the Black Cruise collections at the Cordeliers Museum



Photo : Armand Kpoumie Nchare (2025).

The recreation of an African hut, displaying Alexandre Iacovleff's magnificent drawings, and the multimedia kiosks playfully and engagingly extend and deepen the understanding of the exhibited objects.

Display of Alexandre Iacovleff's drawings



Photo : Armand Kpoumie Nchare (2025).

The museum has also dedicated storage area no. 1 (covering 43.06 m²) to ethnographic works and objects related to Citroën's missions in Africa, including the Black Cruise.

Ethnographic Objects Storage Area of the Cordeliers Museum



Photo: Armand Kpoumie Nchare (2025).

These cultural assets, forming the collections of a museum designated as a “Musée de France,” are considered national treasures and, as such, benefit from strict protection measures. The inventory methodology applied to all of the museum's collections is the same one used for the collection from the Black Cruise.

V. Conclusion: Towards a Critical Reassessment of Extra-European Collections

The exhibition of the ethnographic collections from the *Croisière Noire* at the Musée des Cordeliers in Saint-Jean-d'Angély reflects, beyond the institutional requirements assigned to museums labeled “Musée de France,” a genuine political commitment to heritage-making at the local level. The museum actively contributes to the digital inventory of regional collections within the Council of Museums of Poitou-Charentes and collaborates in various dissemination initiatives. Its involvement in co-produced virtual and traveling exhibitions, cultural events, and publications—both regionally and nationally—demonstrates a clear intention to engage in broader scientific and territorial networks.

Extra-European art collections constitute valuable testimonies of the social systems and modes of thought of societies across the world. However, they are still too often approached primarily through an aesthetic or exotic lens, rather than being fully recognized for their anthropological and cultural significance. This discrepancy highlights the persistence of inherited interpretative frameworks shaped by ethnocentric perspectives.

As a result, extra-European objects are now invested with new cultural, memorial, and political meanings for which they were not originally intended. They have become key sites for reflecting on colonial legacies, cultural circulations, and the power relations that shaped their collection and museum display. In this context, a critical reassessment of these collections is essential. Such an approach requires reexamining the conditions of their acquisition, the practices of their conservation, and the narratives constructed around their exhibition. It also calls for greater inclusion of the perspectives and voices of source communities, in order to move beyond one-sided interpretations and foster a more inclusive and dialogical framework. Ultimately, museums today represent key spaces for rethinking cultural relationships and promoting meaningful intercultural dialogue. The valorization of extra-European collections should therefore extend beyond aesthetic appreciation and embrace a critical, ethical, and scholarly approach capable of renewing our understanding of heritage and otherness in a globalized world.

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