TOWARDS A NEW UNIVERSALISM
FOR THE 21st CENTURY?

Sandra Beauchard ©

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ABSTRACT (January 2014)

How the Louvre Abu Dhabi project, «first universal museum in an Arab world»*, can be an opportunity to rethink the concept of universalism in the XXI century global word, as well as giving a new perspective to the museography and as allowing a new vision of Art History.

The Louvre Abu Dhabi, «first universal museum in an Arab world»*, which will open its doors in December 2015, is certainly a chance for the United Arab Emirates, which will thus enter the courtyard of the great cultural Nations. A chance for France, with its overall project support mission which will enrich some of its national museums and (re)improve its image as an international reference of cultural expertise. A chance for the Louvre, whose original mission as «universal museum» in 1793 was lost, following political and historical changes.

But beyond diplomatic, economic, tourist or cultural stakes, under the pristine and already iconic dome designed by Jean Nouvel, something more important is being performed.

On both sides – UAE and France – references to cultural dialogue, sharing and mainly, to universalism, are constants. This is somewhat expected as we talk about universal museums, but if the ideals seem common, we should identify what such notions cover for each Nation, considering their own national identity.

On what kind of universalism are we discussing? The one of the great thinkers and scholars of Islam from the 7th to the 15th centuries, that manifested in Baghdad, Cordoba, Damascus, Cairo or Tunis? Or the one of the Enlightenment which wanted to emancipate the people of obscurantism and of the yoke of Churches and States by knowledge. The Enlightenment is also - do not forget - the advent of the dominance of the West in science, philosophy, constructions of intellectual standards and classifications, such as the Art History. Furthermore, the 18th century was the time of the invention of a fantasized East, far from its identity...

The Louvre Abu Dhabi project engages a redefinition of the universal museum, its interaction with a new audience, new museum perspectives... More profoundly, the Louvre Abu Dhabi must allow the emergence of a renewed approach to universalism and Art History, to burst its Western-centric mold, which is no longer appropriate in the global world of the 21st century. In that sense, the Louvre Abu Dhabi, at the crossroads of East and West but also North and South, is a chance for the world. Provided that we consciously face the questions outlined above.

Here, I would like to thank the organisers of this second conference 'Museums in Arabia', in particular Sarina Wakefield & Karen Exell, and their team. My acknowledgment also goes to UCL Qatar, the Qatar National Research Fund and to the magnificent Museum of Islamic Art, which hosted us. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to all the participants I have had the opportunity of listening, whose contributions have been deeply enriching and helped me broaden my horizons.

I have been pursuing my research into the Louvre Abu Dhabi project for several years. It was as a French person, working in the cultural domain, that, at the end of 2006, I was surprised, intrigued and amused by the controversy provoked by the much-talked about Louvre Abu Dhabi. I am not going to return here to the ‘Museums aren’t for sale’ petition initiated by three French eminent art world personalities. However, seeing among the petition signatories personalities for whom I had the utmost respect, and hearing them say such hostile, almost ‘dreamt up’ things, piqued my curiosity. Hence, in 2008, having resumed my Masters degree in Intercultural Management, for my dissertation subject I chose to focus on the Louvre Abu Dhabi, as well as the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi. This work gave rise to many interviews with the projects’ various actors, in France and in the Emirates, as well as regular field surveys.

This paper does not aim to pass judgement on the project, but to open up avenues of thought and to ask questions.

### THE LOUVRE ABU DHABI PROJECT: «A CHANCE»

As pointed out in the abstract for this paper, to my mind, the Louvre Abu Dhabi is ‘a chance’ for everyone, with much deeper implications for each of us than perhaps superficially appears.

### A CHANCE FOR THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

In a region where museums and cultural institutions are mainly devoted to local heritage, archaeology, Islamic arts, and modern or contemporary art, but where few ‘general-interest museums’ exist, it is clear that the Louvre Abu Dhabi, alongside the other cultural projects of Saadiyat Island, will enable the UAE to be on an equal footing with the leading cultural nations.

By striving to address local, regional and international publics at the same time, the Abu Dhabi authorities could probably not choose a more powerful symbol than the Louvre Abu Dhabi, with its sublime ‘floating’ dome and the ‘rain of light’ imagined by Jean Nouvel, which have already become iconic. A national fine arts museum in the Emirates, which for at least 30 years will bear the label of one of the world’s greatest museums, is no small feat!

A national museum, a universal vocation. «The first in the Arab world and in the Middle East», it has been written. A multicultural crossroads as a strategic element of regional soft power, the heritage of Sheikh Zayed’s humanist political vision.
A CHANCE FOR FRANCE

The intergovernmental agreement signed in March 2007 between France and the UAE was, of course, a considerable financial godsend for France: about 1 billion euro over thirty years, which would benefit the Musée du Louvre and other French museums.

But the project’s scope and striving for excellence also allowed France to reposition itself on the scene of great international cultural powers, among whom – it must be said - its influence had diminished somewhat in recent years.

In my opinion, in a less visible way, equally important things were happening. In France, profound changes caused an upheaval in society and among the elites. The controversies and fears that shook up the museum – and the political – world at the beginning of the project echoed these changes: the Louvre Abu Dhabi de facto brought a new reading of our institutions and of our museum and cultural policies.

With the hindsight of the past few years and the perspective offered by this quote from British anthropologist Mary Douglas, the project could be seen as a chance for France to make its institutions evolve and put them more in sync with a world in a state of constant and rapid transformation.

Thus, a highly particular legal and social form had to be ‘imagined’ to run the project on the French side: the Agence France-Muséums, created in 2007, is in fact a private company, but with public cultural establishments as shareholders.

A point which for we French is no small matter: with the Masters in Art History and Museum Studies specifically instituted at the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi, the project pulled off the feat of reconciling two major French enemies: the University and the Museum. The partnership established between the Université Paris-Sorbonne and the École du Louvre is unique. This rapprochement has probably been allowed by the act that it is taking place on foreign soil, devoid of our national memory.

― Mary Douglas, in How Institutions Think (1986)
A CHANCE FOR THE LOUVRE

«THE WHOLE WORLD»...
From its opening in August 1793, the Musée Central des Arts de République – the future Musée du Louvre – proclaimed its universal ambition in the pure revolutionary universalist thought resulting from the Enlightenment.

As chance would have it... at the time the Muséum’s collection included 660 works, a number similar to that which the Louvre Abu Dhabi collection should contain when it opens in 2015!

Without tracing the history of the Musée du Louvre here, it was never strictly speaking a universal museum, even though its encyclopaedic vocation, underpinned by a means of demonstrating national power, was never put into question. Likewise for the British Museum opened four decades earlier.

Can a place where half of humanity is denied entrance be called a ‘universal museum’?

We had to wait until the 21st century, in April 2000, for the so-called «Primitive» arts to find a place in the Palais du Louvre, within the context of the planning commission for the Musée du Quai Branly.

At that time, I managed the mission’s multimedia programme and I recall the minor earthquake caused, particularly amongst certain Louvre curators, by the arrival of some 120 masterpieces from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas!

[See below the poster campaign ‘I am at the Louvre’, ‘Together at the Louvre’]

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The exhibition, still in the Pavillon des Sessions, nevertheless remains independent from the Louvre’s collections.

As for the Islamic Arts, they were only gathered together in a single gallery in 2012!

Hubert Robert, Projet d’aménagement de la Grande Galerie du Louvre, 1796 - Musée du Louvre, Paris

April 2000: The Arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas entered the Louvre after more than two centuries of waiting
UNIVERSALISM

‘In many respects, the history of the Louvre is one of continual reinvention […] But the venture is also in profound harmony with the very identity of the Louvre, enabling it to reconsider its universal vocation under new auspices.’
— Henri Loyrette, President-Director, Musée du Louvre (2001-2013), in ‘Preface’, Birth of a Museum (2013), Flammarion

Apart from the reference to the very subject of the Louvre Abu Dhabi project – the creation of the first universal museum in the Arab world – let’s take a look at the end of the article: ‘each Party respecting the cultural values of the other.’

If these words clearly indicate a desire for mutual intercultural respect, the agreement then no longer refers to this notion, nor does it define these ‘cultural values’.

Were they obvious to each of the parties from the outset? Or is it rather, as I believe, so difficult to define them? And yet, formulated in this way, with a reference to a ‘dialogue between East and West’, the article leads us to a quasi-culturalist vision of two cultural blocs brought face to face. Certainly, the Louvre Abu Dhabi is a ‘dialogue’, but also the project is a matter of collaborations, interactions between teams, sharing of knowledge and the transmission of expertise. Without claiming to define what each party’s culture would be, we can try to search for what both might intend by this universal notion.

Based on the question of «how to better collaborate together», my approach to the subject is transversal, based on listening to and analysing each person’s discourse, public and private interviews. It is based too on my practical experience of both the geographical and sociological terrain.

While feeling a deep gratitude for the work of thinkers and researchers of last century, who, as it were, knew to formulate different theories, particularly in terms of anthropology and sociology, to then question them in turn, perhaps it is now time to go beyond purely culturalist, relativist and universalist trends.

The sociological approach of Philippe d’Iribarne¹ and his team is hence rather interesting. Culture is thought of as a system of meaning shared by individuals of the same community. By researching national logics and political cultures, as well as a nation’s major fears, the thought reflexes of one another may be brought to light, and these could influence the way in which a project takes shape.

I would also like to mention Nur Yalman, research professor of Social Anthropology and Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, whose inspiring dialogues² with Buddhist Daisaku Ikeda I was currently reading while writing this article, and whose humanist vision warns against any stereotyped conception of the Other.

¹ – D’Iribarne is Managing Director of Gestion et Société (Management and Society), at CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research) in Paris, France and the author of, amongst other works, La Logique de L’Honneur (The Logic of Honour; 189), L’Étrangéité Française (French Strangeness; 2006) and Penser la diversité du monde (Think the Diversity of the World, 2008).
² – A Passage to Peace: Global Solutions from East and West, Daisaku Ikeda & Nur Yalman, B. Tauris (2008)
Here we are... a universal museum inspired by the Enlightenment!

This reference to the Enlightenment on the French side has never diminished since the beginning of the project. We find it in the press, be it specialist or not, but also within the official discourse, as in these examples (below). It is not surprising insofar that the century of the Enlightenment saw the birth of museums, be they «universal» or not, with public collections.

What’s most astonishing is that in almost all the individual interviews with the French work teams, reference was made to the universalism of the Enlightenment: the projects – Sorbonne and Louvre Abu Dhabi alike – either directly inherited the spirit of the Enlightenment or were driven by this spirit. I was struck by this recurrence.

During these interviews, certain people sometimes described the Louvre Abu Dhabi as an incredible ‘laboratory’. It’s amusing if we make an analogy with the 18th century, where the idea of ‘laboratory’ matched that of the ‘cabinet of curiosities’ to engender what would be the central notion of a museum: a reasoned space devoted to the contemplation, reading, analysis and comparison of paintings, where we collect, handle and conserve. Isn’t it this very idea that we find here in the presentation of the Louvre Abu Dhabi’s Scientific and Cultural Project on the website of Agence France-Muséums: ‘In this way, the project will strive to build the Enlightenment’s invitation to look at works with a sensitive and educated eye, with a view to studying them, comparing them and delighting in their invariably singular meaning’?

‘Among the milestones structuring the unique identity of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, we cannot fail to mention, from the outset, the intellectual and cultural history of the Enlightenment, which created the requisite context for the emergence of encyclopedic and universal museums […]’


‘This original project on a global scale, inspired by the Europe of the Enlightenment and whose ambition is to constitute a ‘universal museum’, shelters and brings together masterpieces from all cultures and all periods.’

– Excerpt from the Birth of a Museum Paris exhibition press release, May 2014

The first, and most obvious, perspective of Louvre Abu Dhabi’s universalism stems from the history of museums and particularly that of the Louvre, whose excellence will be conveyed by the future institution. The palace that became the Muséum National in 1793 was a product of the encyclopedic thought of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution.


‘We come with our stock of knowledge, with our heritage and clearly, for us, what is the Louvre? It’s a symbol of beauty and knowledge, broadly speaking... From the moment you talk about knowledge, you’re inevitably speaking about education, hence the opening up of the mind, of the critical gaze, of accepting difference, inevitably all the spirit of the Enlightenment, it’s there.’


‘Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one’s own mind without another’s guidance. Dare to know! Sapere aude. “Have the courage to use your own understanding,” is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.’

– Immanuel Kant, What is Enlightenment? (1784)

Whereas the Louvre of 1793 became the construction of the image of a certain power and of new French national pride, the Man of the Enlightenment was he who freed himself from all yokes, guided by his ‘understanding’, as Immanuel Kant defined it, by this Reason which would go on to forge our European identity.

In English, ‘Enlightenment’ is also called ‘Age of Reason’, if I’m not mistaken.
Maalouf refers to a darker side to the Enlightenment. Without speaking here about the great Napoleonic conquests, when rereading these words (above) by de Volney in *The Ruins*, we can but be concerned by this imperious need to transmit to all peoples the civilising idea of Progress and Reason.

It was the great mission of the Enlightenment. It echoes a certain number of interviews on the French side, where this idealised sense of the ‘mission’ was often evoked. Furthermore, the professors sent from the Sorbonne France to teach at the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi, are called ‘missionary professors’.

It is in an ‘Elsewhere’ – subject of study and curiosity – where Orientalism and the fantasised and nostalgic image of the East flourished – this East which began there exactly where the Europe of the Enlightenment ended.

Today how do we see the Arabian peninsula from France? Has this deep-rooted Orientalism of our thought past? It is worth asking ourselves. I don’t think so.

It may seem trivial, but for me it is rather symbolic: in France, the Louvre Abu Dhabi is often nicknamed the ‘Louvre of the Sands’. Today, although the expression has lost the negative and pejorative connotation it had when first used in 2007, it nevertheless seems to me to belong to a pure Orientalist iconography. Everyone likes to use it, even the president of the French Republic during his inaugural speech for the *Birth of a Museum* exhibition, in Paris, in April 2014.

‘And when nations, free and enlightened, shall become like great individuals, the whole species will have the same facilities as particular portions now have; the communication of knowledge will extend from one to another, and thus reach the whole. By the law of imitation, the example of one people will be followed by others, who will adopt its spirit and its laws. Even despots, perceiving that they can no longer maintain their authority without justice and beneficence, will soften their sway from necessity, from rivalship; and civilization will become universal.’

— Constantin François de Volney, in *The Ruins, Or Meditation On The Revolutions Of Empires*, 1791

Pierre Tardieu, illustration for *The Ruins, Or Meditation On The Revolutions Of Empires*, 1791 (BNF)

Joseph Prillibot Girault de Prangey, *Aycucha Whole Figure*, Cairo, Egypt, 1843, Daguerreotype (quarter plate) © Louvre Abu Dhabi, Agence photo F
The Enlightenment was not part of the Emirates’ history. Just as the Nahda, which took shape in a part of the Arab world at the end of the 18th century with Bonaparte’s Egyptian Campaign, and which is often seen as an Arabian transposition of Enlightenment ideals, remained remote, unless I am mistaken, from this part of the Arabian peninsula.

The UAE are a young nation anchored in very ancient traditions. The universal has not taken on the ‘ism’ and is not established as an ideology.

Emirati discourse concerning the Louvre Abu Dhabi, be it public or official texts, or private interviews, in fact refers back to another world of meaning.

‘This universal approach is not about homogenous expressions, but rather about the heterogeneous and diverse expressions that were transported, adopted and integrated from East to West, West to East, South to North, and North to South. These manifestations of beauty and belief convey human values that join us all together.’


‘In this time and place, here in this particular desert landscape with its precious resources, Abu Dhabi’s leaders are creating the beginning of something, a platform upon which the future minds of the city can grow. In such a context, we ask ourselves: How can one not be universal today?’

– Rita Aoun-Abdo, Executive-Director, Culture Sector ADTCA, ‘Belonging to a Moment, Belonging to a Place’, in Louvre Abu Dhabi – Birth of a Museum catalogue (2013)

Time and space are always related. In a sense, we could say that geography is never far away from history and that the notion of the universal is woven like a cartography of time. Perhaps that will be one of the keys of the future museography of the Louvre Abu Dhabi. To be seen.
The notion of a ‘platform’ and more specifically a ‘network of knowledge’ was also evoked many times in private interviews with key persons involved in the project.

How can we not think of 8th and 9th century Baghdad and of the great Abbasid Caliphs Harun Al-Rachid and his son Al Ma‘Mûn, with its House of Wisdom and its University, which was a forerunner to the Sorbonne, or the learned and effervescent Cordova (Qurtubah) of Al Hakan and its university, the most famous in 10th century Europe?

There again the universal was linked to this idea of diversity, the diversity of knowledge, religious as well, and of its actors. On this subject, let us note that, as Laurence des Cars, the former director of Agence France Muséums, has pointed out several times, the Emirati participants immediately made it clear to the French team that they wanted the main religions to rub shoulders in the collection of the future Louvre Abu Dhabi museum.

As a counterpoint to these considerations, I would like to mention the universal museum project that was underway in Dubai in 2008, but which ultimately came to nothing. This ‘Universal Museums’ with an ‘s’ was a cooperative effort between the fledging Dubai Culture Authority and a consortium of three German museums in Berlin, Dresden and Munich. Without dwelling on the subject, it is interesting to see that on the Emirati side, we again find similar references, whereas the Germans also referred to the Enlightenment, while nevertheless taking a different approach than that of the French.

Lastly, I wondered about the Arabic translation of ‘Universal Museum’: ‘المتحف العالمي’

Here again the relation between the universal – referring to the world – and knowledge is amazing if we refer to the common root between universal and clever, the scholar, ‘العالم’.

We can say that the choice of this painting by Osman Hamdi Bey was logically expected for the Emirati advertising campaign of the exhibition ‘Birth of a Museum’, originally shown in Abu Dhabi in 2013, one year before the Parisian exhibition.

If this ‘Young Emir Studying’ became the iconic emblem of the Louvre Abu Dhabi project, we must not forget that its author, from the Ottoman elite and who studied in France, married also in his painting the codes of Orientalism and advocated the «modernity» of Occident as a model.
‘One of the greatest threats to human dignity and freedom worldwide must surely be the reductive identity that governments and media everywhere seek to pin on diverse and complicated cultures and societies. To borrow from the late cultural historian Edward Said, what we need is a community of humanist interpretation into one another’s cultures, that enables us to avoid sound-bite answers and to insist on the complexity of the underlying questions. World museums of this kind offer us a chance to forge the arguments that can hope to deflect the simplifying brutalities of politics all round the world. [...] Where else other than in these museums can the world see so clearly that it is one?’

– Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, 2004, *The Universal Museum, a Special Case?*, in ICOM NEWS.

and by what was done with the ‘Gallery of Time’ at the Louvre-Lens.

It seems primordial to me that the project must in itself be an opportunity to reconsider the history of art and the teaching of the history of art overall, which remains trapped in a very Western-centric vision, where a large part of the world is neglected, if we consider that almost no major artist from the South or the East is to be found in the so-called ‘modern’ period.

I thus regretted that the *Birth of a Museum* exhibition, currently presented at the Musée du Louvre (May-July 2014), presents no artist from the Arab world in the section devoted to 20th century. It could have been a powerful statement, especially for the French public. It is amusing to see that, as far as I am aware, the few reviews of the exhibition that have appeared in French don’t raise this point.

Jean-Hubert Martin, who brought non-Western contemporary art to the Parisian scene for the first time in 1989 with the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition¹ (*Magicians of the Earth*), and who was moreover in charge of the Louvre Abu Dhabi project before the creation of Agence France-Museums, says: ‘Look at art and all the history of art from a contemporary and uninhibited point of view.’ Here’s an opportunity!

Encouraging things are happening in France with regards to this situation, like the recent *Modernités Plurielles – 1905-1970*² at the Centre Pompidou, a new arrangement of the museum’s permanent collection, where works by artists from 48 countries were presented so as to ‘propose an enlarged geography of art’ and a (re)highlighting of aesthetic trends, and works by artists from the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Latin America, in particular, which until then had often been neglected and left in the storerooms!

¹ – This exhibition was displayed in France from May, 18 to August, 14 1989 at the Centre Pompidou and the Parc de La Villette, with artworks by artists from the five continents. This was a major event which is still considered as the turning point for a new and globalized vision of contemporary art. In 2014, the Centre Pompidou organized a series of events to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the *Magiciens de la Terre*.

To return to MacGregor’s quotation, the second notable point is of course the reference to Edward Said. It is in this spirit that I’ve attempted to show the different worlds of meaning, for the project’s two actors, to which the ‘universal’ notion could refer.

No, the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ does not exist. It is purely a product for the tabloid press, simplistic and dangerous. Differences do not mean oppositions, but instead signify that a solid basis to dialogue is possible, on the condition that differences are identified!

To illustrate this, I would like to finish with a little anecdote. An Emirati friend, enamoured of French history, particularly the 18th century and the French Revolution, one day said that, by hanging period engravings in his home, he would gather together, in the main Majlis, historical figures as diverse and opposed as Danton, Robespierre, Marat, Charlotte Corday, Marie-Antoinette.

Amused, I said to him: ‘Aren’t you afraid to put all these enemies together in the same room?’

He thought about it, then declared: ‘You know, they each have their own particular qualities!’

Thank you very much for listening.

“... But we are not doomed to make history repeat itself; it is open to us, through our own efforts, to give history, in our own case, some new and unprecedented turn.”

– Arnold J. Toynbee, in Civilization on Trial, 1948
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

French national, Sandra Beauchard first has a degree in Art History and Art Market. She has been working more than twenty years in the museum, audiovisual and new technologies sectors. As curator, editor & producer, she has gained expertise in transmitting knowledge and a variety of cultures towards diverse audiences.

In 2009, she graduated with a Master in Intercultural Management at the University Paris-Dauphine. She was valedictorian for her dissertation «French-Emirati cooperations in the sectors of Culture, Education and Environment». One of the main objects of this study was the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a subject for which she produced many interviews and began traveling regularly in the region. She currently builds or help to build projects in cross-cultural partnerships between France and Gulf Countries in cultural, educational and artistic fields (contemporary art, cinema, photography...).

Independent researcher, she still collaborates with institutions such as IISMM/EHESS (Institut d’études de l’Islam et des sociétés du monde musulman/Ecole des Hautes Etudes Sociales), with which she initiated and animated in 2012 a round table «The East and Its Travelers: from French writers of the 19th century to today’s artists Gulf.» This event was a dialogue between Guy Barthélemy, French scholar of Orientalism in literature and painting (member of the Centre for Social History of Mediterranean Islam) and Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, a pioneer and major Emirati artist from Khor Fakkan, UAE. They interacted freely to question the concept of the “Journey to the Orient” with an intersectional approach of the Orientalist art of the 19th century and contemporary art production of eminent artists from the Gulf, who are now active players, not merely window stereotypes in a fantasized Orient.

In 2013, she began a lecture series in prison, proposed by IISMM, on topics such as the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Sorbonne Abu Dhabi and cultural relations between France and the Gulf Countries. In 2014, other lectures on Gulf Countries cinema are planned. She is also currently preparing a monograph on Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim, Land Art and visual Emirati artist, while continuing to develop her own photographic work and research on the region.