

AGRICULTURAL MUSEUMS IN FRANCE

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"Agricultural museums" is a convenient but somewhat misleading label if taken too literally. Hundreds of museums in France have and display objects relevant to agriculture and agricultural life, but only a few have been designed with agriculture proper as the main focus of their collecting, research and exhibitions. "Museums of rural life" or "Local history museums" would be more appropriate terms for all those museums where agriculture is present because, until recent times - the 1960s - ~~agriculture~~<sup>it</sup> happened to be the mainstay of the people. On the other hand, agriculture is also present in some museums that are not intended to be rural life museums. So what this paper deals with is "Agriculture in museums" rather than "Agricultural museums".

Let us begin with some statistics. There is in France a rather sharp distinction between two kinds of museums. The first kind, "musées classés et contrôlés" (classified and controlled), includes all museums which abide by the rules set out for state museums concerning the ownership and preservation of objects, the admittance of the public, etc., and which are accordingly eligible for government subsidies. (ICOM has a similar set of rules according to which museums are eligible for membership or not.) The second kind includes

all the museums that are excluded <sup>from</sup> in the first. The reasons why they are excluded may differ. It may be a lack of means, a lack of knowledge or interest, a reluctance to enter the intricacies of administrative and legal paperwork or a matter of principle. For most museums of the second kind are basically the work of one person who began as a private collector, became addicted to it, and at some point felt a need to display his/her collection and to find new resources in order to be able to do it. Such persons have usually quite strong ideas and even idiosyncrasies, and it is not easy for them to abide by rules which look to them arbitrary or pointless. But like it or not, a very large part of our agricultural heritage is in the hands of such persons. Exact figures are not available, but we can admit the following :

\* about 70 to 80 museums of the first kind, a total obtained by adding up :

- some 30 "écomusées", most of them actually open-air museums (many more museums describe themselves as écomusées, although they are not classés et contrôlés and so cannot be eligible as members of the "Fédération des Ecomusées");
- some 30 indoor ethnological or folk museums of regional importance (meaning that they cover a former province like Normandie, Lorraine or Savoie, or an area of comparable size);
- a little less than 20 natural parks (some national, some regional), which either are in direct association with an écomusée, or otherwise maintain some place which plays more or less the role of a museum;

\* several hundreds (about 300 have been localized, but the actual figure could be up to 600 or even higher, nobody really knows) museums of the second kind.

In order that American readers can make sense with those figures, I must add that France has a little less than 60.000.000 inhabitants living on 212.000 square miles, and that for the purpose of establishing good agricultural statistics, it has

been found necessary to divide the whole country into about 450 "agricultural regions" - the figure conveying a good idea of the diversity of the country. Of course, the several hundred museums of the second kind are everything from big to small and from good to bad. Some, as we have seen, would not even be considered as "museums" at all, according to current rules. But if we insist in drawing the line, I think we are losing a lot. In the field of agricultural machinery, for example, what is owned by first kind museums is but a small fraction of what is owned by private collectors and other museums - 10 % ? 20 % ? nobody knows, but I would not bet on more than 20 %. In other fields, the proportions are less unbalanced, but even then, private collections or nondescript local museums quite often show items or assemblages that are missing in good or ~~real~~<sup>true</sup> museums. Hoes were very important in France, for until the end of the last century, they were the main soil-working tools used in vineyards (due to the disposition of the plants, the use of ploughs was only rarely possible). So French hoes show a bewildering diversity of forms, answering no doubt a similar diversity of functions, of ways to use them, and of ways to make them. To my knowledge, nobody ever tried to understand this diversity, and in the absence of a significant collection at the national level, nobody could have a try. Now there is one such collection, which has been gathered in a few years by a private collector; it includes about 1000 items. No museum, not even the Musée National des Arts et Traditions populaires, has anything like it.

It may well be asked what is the use of a collection of

1000 hoes. In my opinion, the questions ought to be addressed seriously, because it is that of the various ways to arrange objects in museum displays. As anyone, I like what seems to be by far the most favored way, which is to reconstruct whole historic settings from some specific place and time, in which objects will be put where they are thought to belong. Classic examples are a farmstead for agricultural tools and machinery, a workshop with the tools of the trade, a kitchen for cooking utensils and ordinary ware, a drawing-room for upper-class furniture and china, etc. This approach to the problem of arranging objects may be said to be classic, for it has been used in World Exhibitions since at least 1876, and in open-air museums since the 1890s. It has at least two undeniable advantages, which are, 1) to convey to visitors a panoramic image of what the past may have been like, and 2) to force museum people and historians to deal with down-to-earth problems that more intellectually-minded historians are only too prone to ignore.

But the "classic" approach has also some drawbacks, especially when it is too exclusively relied upon to give meaning to objects, which may well be the case today in "true" museums. One such drawback, for example, is that the reconstructed past is imposed rather than proposed to the public. Visitors, especially children, have no real choice. They can only take or leave what is presented to them. They can hardly discuss the details, because they are not given access to the materials and processes of historical research before the research has been completed. They have no chance to ask a real question,

that is, a question to which no one has a ready answer. They are given the meanings of objects, so that they are deprived of the opportunity to look for those meanings themselves. In this respect, the opposite of classic museums are the antique dealer's shops, the dilapidated buildings, the attics and the junkyards which are the hunting grounds of many collectors (and of some museum people as well). Let us not be hypocrites. Those are the places where we really enjoy ourselves. And let us not be so selfish as to deny others the fun we find there.

I do not propose to turn museums back into junkyards (a cut in revenues usually does the trick quite well). Classic museums are and will remain necessary in the foreseeable future. I only believe that the classic approach should not be valued to the point of excluding others. A tractor from the 1930s exhibited in a farmyard known to have existed in those years and with the relevant equipment is meaningful. Included in a line of other tractors, it is meaningful too, and perhaps more. A series of 120 tractors placed side by side may be a complete bore for many people, it can also be absolutely fascinating for others. Tractors, especially before the 1960s, show a bewildering diversity. Trying to understand this diversity leads to innumerable questions about inventors, mechanical engineering, firms, markets and marketing strategies, terrains, crops, techniques of cultivation, farms, farmers, etc.

This is the very point I have been trying to make since I first mentioned that collection of 1000 hoes (to which I could add my own small collection of sickles, much to the same effect). Series, as opposed to sets of objects, can be every bit as

meaningful, but their meanings are to be looked for in other directions. This is not only because the serial approach obviously follows another logic than the classic (whole set) approach. It is also, I think, because whereas sets of objects ~~are most~~ <sup>cannot be</sup> meaningful <sup>unless</sup> when they are ~~presented as~~ the result of completed research,<sup>1</sup> series of objects are most interesting when they are presented as materials for future research. To that extent, the serial approach seems to me to require both more humility and more ambition than the classic approach. More humility because it exhibits ignorance as well as knowledge. More ambition because it opens up wider avenues for further research. (Note that humility and ambition are ingredients of naïveté, which may help to explain why collectors nearly always begin with series.)

The serial approach was formerly dominant in museums that are considered nowadays as obsolete, but I believe not for very good reasons. Series of objects can of course be an absolute bore when they are arranged so as to provide evidence for some uninteresting conclusion such as the inevitability of progress. This means only that the philosophy is bad, not the method.

Finally, we have in France a third approach, where the emphasis is put on products and processes. We have olive-oil museums, flax and linen museums, hemp museums, cider museums, beer museums, vine and wine museums (a lot), cheese museums, bees and honey museums, wood and wood-crafts museums, etc. This kind of museums is certainly not peculiar to France. Germany has more and bigger beer museums, Italy has probably

as many wine museums as France, and the most extraordinary flax museum I know is in Kortrijk (Belgium, Flanders). What can perhaps be asserted is that product and process museums are peculiarly at home in France, for very valid reasons rooted in the commercial history of the country. France is comparatively large (by European standards) and diverse, with many areas at a disadvantage in commercial competition for being poor, or landlocked, or both. No area of France was able to compete, in terms of costs and prices, with eastern and northern Europe for grain, with the Netherlands, England and Denmark for butter and cheese, with Portugal and Spain for wines and olive oil, etc. With the growth of international commerce since the middle of the 18th century, many areas of France were placed before a simple alternative : get out of business altogether, or try to beat the competition on other terms than costs and prices. Understandably the second option was preferred wherever possible, that is where there was a chance to develop a product that would be, 1) characteristic of the region, and 2) of a quality (especially taste) that would fetch higher prices than the standard product. It is obvious that a gastronomy was a prerequisite for such a strategy to work, and it is no mere coincidence if French gastronomy was developed in the 19th century, along with many regional products. The example of cheese is particularly clear. De Gaulle is said to have <sup>e</sup>one declared in disgust that you cannot govern a country with 350 different kinds of cheese. But there were probably less than 35 identifiable kinds of cheese in the 18th century. With perhaps a dozen exceptions

that can be traced back to the Middle Ages (and then, we do not really know what they were like), our cheeses are rather recent creations. They are not the expression of some special French-ness. They have simply been the best possible answer to the challenge of a more and more open and competitive economy in conditions that happened to be those of a large part of rural France. The sanction of the law was still later to come. The Appellations d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) were officialized as recently as 1936 for wines only, and they are only now being extended to other products as well. This French model, if I may call it thus, is doing rather fine. I think it has really a future, because it is the only way for a developed agriculture to survive in areas that are not competitive for mass production.

So much for the three main approaches (or traditions) that I feel possible to identify in French agricultural museums. To summarize, they are the following :

(1) The open-air or classic approach - reconstructing whole scenes from past life - which appeared quite late in France in comparison with other countries (in the mid 1970s only), and under the guise of a different name ("écomusées").

(2) The serial approach, which was standard in old-fashioned museums and museums of technology, which is still preferred for the exhibitions of agricultural machinery and by private collectors, but which unfortunately lacks intellectual respectability.

(3) The "regional products" approach, which is also a way to advertise the products that made or make this or that region famous.

Of course, there are a lot of museums, the majority perhaps, where all three approaches are indistinguishably mixed. This may be as well, because the more museums I see, the less I believe in doctrines. What makes a museum interesting is the talent, the energy, the passion, the vision of the person or persons who is or are its authors. (I would support the opinion that there should be a recognized authorship for museums, as for literary works and academic papers.) Ideas are useful insofar as they are good stuff for an author's dreams and projects. They are counter-productive if they must be applied and obeyed as a doctrine. I have seen absolutely superb museums which were also supremely boring, and I could not imagine any other explanation than all the care and skills of the people in charge were directed to the application of rules.

Finally, as an academic historian, I would like to add a last remark. It seems to me that there are presently two basic motivations among people who bother to go to a museum : nostalgia (look ! this is exactly like granny told us it was when she was a little girl), and how-things-work (oh, that is how they get milk from a cow !). Those are quite honest motivations, they are important for children and parents alike, and museums shall have to answer them forever probably. But there is also a broader view of what history is about, which I find strangely absent from most museums, even the best. I cannot enter this kind of discussion now, but I very much believe that this broader view has to be more and more taken into account in museums if we want them to have a future. Which means first, of course, that academic people should get themselves much more involved in museum work than they presently do.