

What do we see of the past when it is on display?

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In 2010, the "Maison d'Histoire de France" project was the subject of significant controversy. For its defenders this museum was to be a "support for public education", and a "place of memory". For its opponents it promoted a "national narrative for a political objective". In spite of their divergences, the participants of this debate shared the belief that an exhibition of the past should necessarily transmit historical knowledge and shared values. In this, they simply adopted the (sometimes implicit) conclusions of a now abundant literature on "history museums". Exhibiting the tangible traces of the past – images or objects – in specific spaces is considered as one of the vectors for the emergence of the nation-state. Yet these studies almost exclusively deal with the emergence and institutionalisation of these museums. They do not necessarily interrogate the mechanisms through which these displays of the past to museum visitors might have actually spread national sentiment to the wider population.

Since their emergence in the 19th century, history museums have of course broadened their purpose and mission, yet they continue to play a social role. Displays of the past for visitors are now intended to disseminate "shared memory" and encourage "tolerant citizenship". In addition to this progressive diversification of objectives, the material techniques used in exhibiting history have also evolved: the use of multimedia, immersive scenography, or artistic installations for example. These transformations have inspired many research projects. Once again, and in spite of their diversity, this research only marginally deals with what actually happens when the past (or at least the remains of the past) are put on display for visitors. Reciprocally, and in spite of their recent popularity, studies of various publics, and visitors' studies, have not focused much on history museums. When they have done so, they have most often been limited to quantifying the "satisfaction" or the "historic conscience" of visitors. Although the museum puts the past on display, the perspectives and point of view of the visitors – the famous "visitors' gaze" before a history exhibition – have largely yet to be decoded. The MEMU project, *Revisiting History Museums*, is part of this movement to ask the question: what do we see of the past when it is on display?

The collective study documented on this site aims to understand the way in which the proposed images of the past on display is seen by visitors. In other words, those of Jean-Claude Passeron and Emmanuel Pedler in their study of the aesthetic reception of images, it means seeking to understand "the time given to the past".