

# MAAOA

Musée d'Arts Africains Océaniens Amérindiens

## [Re]thinking the MAAOA

Reflection Committee

2025 - 2027

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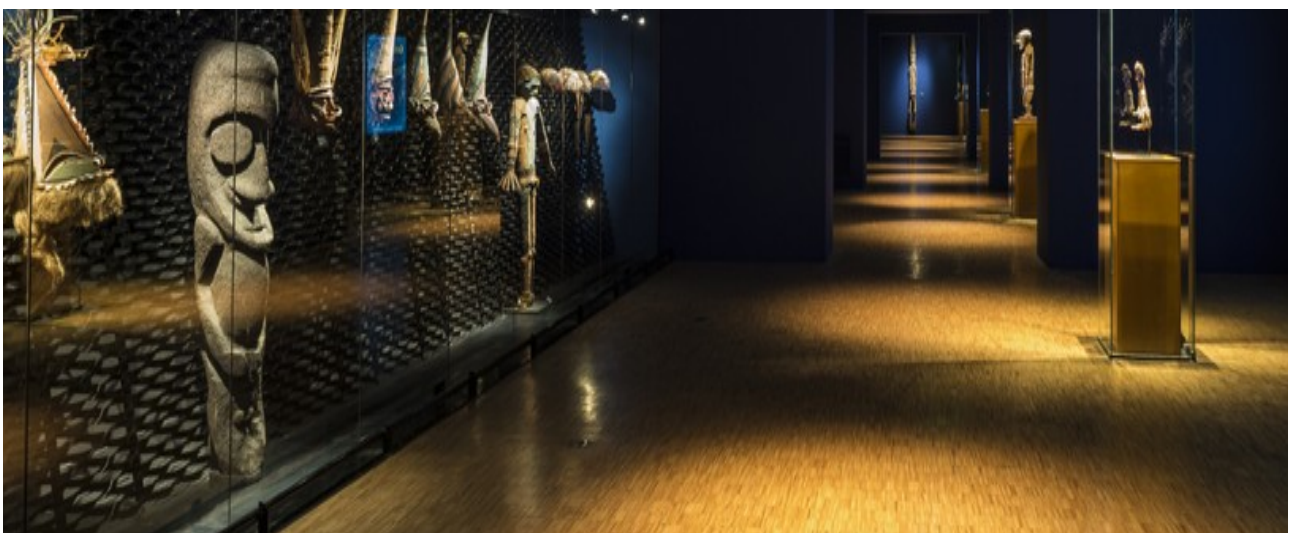


# [Re]thinking the MAAOA Reflection Committee

*A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible, and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally, and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.*

Aligning with the new museum definition adopted in 2022 at the Extraordinary General Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and in light of the new phase of transformation that ethnographic, non-European art, and social history museums have undergone across the world over the past twenty years, Marseille's Museum of African, Oceanian, Native American Arts ([MAAOA](#)) begins a deep reflection on its future.

Thanks to the richness of its collections and scientific work carried out since its foundation in 1989, the approach undertaken by the [MAAOA](#), particularly as a Musée de France, is based on the continuation of its regulatory public service missions (conservation, research, valorization, and transmission) as well as its will to build the foundations of a new relational ethic centered around the role of dialogue and connections at a local, national, and international level.



# THE HERITAGE

When it was founded in 1989, the [MAAOA](#) defined itself as the heir of the successive perspectives of/placed on these subjects-objects. First perceived in the 18th and 19th centuries as objects of curiosity participating in an encyclopedic understanding of the world's cultural diversity in the 18th and 19th centuries, then in the 20th century as subjects of scientific research and as artistic sources of new aesthetic experiments.

Opened to the public in 1992, the permanent exhibitions at the [MAAOA](#) underwent a renovation in 2012 that preserved the main characteristics of the original scenography. The exhibition itinerary revolves around the discovery of three galleries corresponding to [*different*] geographical regions of provenance.



sculptures).

The Mexico room is entirely dedicated to the presentation of Mexican folk art. The *opening* of this room was made possible by the legacy François Reichenbach (1921-1993) left to the City of Marseille in 1994. Only a part of the 3000 objects (masks, wool paintings, trees of life, and sculptures) is presented/in exhibition. In 2016, the Bernard Meusnier collection, including huipil garments and alebrijes (papier-mâché sculptures) enriched the collection on display./In 2016, the collection on display was enriched by the Bernard Meusnier collection, that includes huipil garments and alebrijes (papier-mâché



The Africa room presents a set of about one hundred subjects-objects, mainly masks and statues, of which a large majority are from the Léonce, Pierre, and Michel Guerre donation to the City of Marseille. Since the [MAAOA](#) was founded, the collection has been enriched by the subjects-objects on long-term loan from the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Aix-Marseille Provence (CCIMAMP). These two sets were supplemented by other acquisitions.



The Oceania - Americas room is dedicated to two distinct geographic regions. It *houses* the collection of Henri Gastaut (1915-1995), acquired by the City of Marseille in 1989. This set is composed of 80 human-ancestral remains, mainly skulls from all over the world but mostly/mainly from Oceania and the Americas. This corpus is completed by the subjects-objects on long-term loan from the CCIMAMP, and through purchases, notably the two Vanuatu

collections bought in 1991 and 1992, as well as donations such as the Native American feathers, a gift from/gifted by Marcel Heckenroth (1902-2008).

The MAAOA has never been far from the major issues that drive our contemporary societies.

In 2012, twenty Māori human-ancestral remains from French museums, including a mummified head preserved by the [MAAOA](#), were returned to a New Zealand delegation. The request had raised in France, and around the world, many ethical, philosophical, spiritual, historical, and legal questions opening the opportunity for dialogue/discussion in the areas of museology, science, law, art, and history.

The Māori head preserved by the [MAAOA](#) had never been displayed or reproduced/replicated since the museum's opening, as/since this human-ancestral remain had been kept in the reserves of the institution since 1989, when the Henri Gastaut collection (1915-1995) was acquired. Since 2012, the [MAAOA](#) has chosen to make this absence visible. The museum has therefore chosen to permanently display an empty showcase, with a scientific poster and contextualization text.

Open to the world's heritage, cultural, and artistic diversity, since this restitution, the museum has continued its commitment to the great changes that *constitute* the construction of our common history.

## THE PRESENT

The process that has been initiated is based on the museum's willingness to implement a *reasoned symmetry* of relations with communities, their representatives, or diasporas from which the collections originate, but also on its ability to be transparent, whether it is of a methodological, historical, or cultural nature.

The [MAAOA](#) is committed, like all the museums of Marseille, to question in an open and collective way the history of their collections by consolidating a proactive policy of provenance research, whose results will gradually enrich, amend, and clarify the knowledge related to each subject-object.



# THE FUTURE

The [MAAOA](#) was built around a discourse almost exclusively dedicated to the contemplation and aesthetics of the arts from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

Thanks to the reflection conducted by the Reflection Committee, an exceptional opportunity now offers itself to rethink the polyvocality of narratives and the alternation of voices, to create the conditions/terms for a shared relational ethic, and to redraw/redesign/ **reconstruct**/redefine the **scope**/perimeter/*framework* of a social history museum.

In order to be part of a reasoned reflection, this approach must be pragmatic and not obscure the risks or erase the pitfalls associated with the issues involved in a global approach.

## The *stakes*

- Sociopolitical issues
- Museum issues
- Interpretative issues
- Legal issues
- Heritage issues
- Ethical issues
- Technological issues
- Territorial issues
- Environmental issues

## The risks

- Risk of immobility/downtime
- Risk of dispersion
- Risk of invisibility
- Risk of misunderstanding
- Risk of breakage/rupture
- Risk of delayed timelines
- Risk of loss of objectives

# OBJECTIVES

Already conducted by other institutions in France and abroad, the reflection *that begins* for the [MAAOA](#) goes beyond the framework of a single project to redesign the visit/tour route. With its collections at the heart of this approach, this/the project is guided by the importance of heritage, ethical, social, societal, and environmental issues that *animate* not only the world of museums but also the public, and thus society as a whole.

The objective/goal/aim of the Reflection Committee's work is to ensure that the scientific expectations and scope of the institution's missions are reassessed *in line with*/according to the Museums of Marseille's transversal Scientific, Cultural, Educational, and Social Project (PSCES). It will result in both a methodological framework for implementation and the definition of the main points of the program specifications.

Beyond this primary objective, the work of the Reflection Committee also aims to draw /design/plan an ethical charter that will lay the foundations, intrinsically thought as evolutionary, of the scientific and moral identity of the institution.

Four topics will *frame/lead/guide/steer* this open discussion and guide the work of the committee:

Be(ing) in collections  
Be(ing) in dialogue  
Be(ing) networked  
Be(ing) in resonance

Examining each of these topics will allow to go beyond an exclusively museum-focused/based and historical approach, opening the approach/the process to transversal themes such as absence and emptiness, *terroir* and ecology, circulation and movement, or creation and cooperation. Our exchanges/discussions will also be enriched by the confrontation of/confronting/comparing the project to/with illuminating concepts such as those of mutated objects, post heritage, multiperspectivity, diasporic objects, heritage translocation, and rhizome identity.

The only certainty at this stage is that the [MAAOA](#) will be neither quite the same nor quite *another/different*, but only what WE, museum professionals, visitors, researchers, thinkers, artists, citizens, etc., will make of it.

**Benoît MARTIN**  
Curator - MAAOA



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