

The Attitudes of Some Moroccan Diplomats toward European Museums: from 1786 to 1922⁽¹⁾

Mohamed Jadour (*)

As is well-known, diplomats' records of their journeys to foreign lands provide an invaluable opportunity to identify the mental representations, and the cultural and religious prejudices that structure their discourses. In this respect, a number of studies have dealt with such writings from various perspectives, including the literary, the historical, the social, the anthropological, and the linguistic perspectives. These studies have identified a number of attitudes and assumptions that consistently distinguish between the Self and the Other. In this paper, it is not our intention to give a new reading of such genre of writing, but rather, to consider one specific aspect, which is their authors' attitude toward the Western way of dealing with their cultural heritage. This way consists essentially in preserving the heritage not only for future generations of Europe, but for all mankind, making it the object of scientific research, and attracting local and foreign tourists to raise money for public expenditure. In this paper, we will focus on writings by some Moroccan envoys to France, Italy and England. Thus, what sort of conceptions can we find therein of museums in those countries?

1. Special thanks should go to Ahmad Ech-Charfi, Faculty of Education- Rabat, for translating this article from Arabic.

*. School of Arts and Humanities, Ben M'sik, Casablanca.

First of all, it must be pointed out that, although most of the diplomats expressed reservation or caution from Western culture, their writings communicate implicitly their interest in, and their astonishment at, the great interest that Europeans confer on antiquities and various plant and animal species. Here are some examples.

When Mohammed Ben Othman Al-Meknassi was Ambassador of Sultan Mohammed Ben Abdellah to Italy between 1786 and 1788, he remarked the great interest that Europeans had in monuments, and the techniques they had developed to conserve them. He wrote: "they take great care of their predecessors and the monuments they have left", "and when they notice that some (ancient) building or wall is decaying, they would restore it; and it falls down, they would rebuild it under its old form if possible. All this indicates their deep interest in exhibiting relics of the old monuments."

Another writer is Mohammed Taher Al-Fassi, who was secretary to Abderahman Al-'Aji and Mohammed Al-Shami, heads of a delegation sent by Sultan Mohammed Ben Abderrahman to Queen Victoria in 1860. The journey lasted seventy days during which the secretary kept a record of it. Of the General Exhibition in London, he writes: "In short, it contains innumerable wonders"⁽²⁾ Similar remarks were also made by Idriss Al-Amraoui, the envoy to Napoleon III, during a trip which lasted forty days (between July 17th and August 20th 1860)⁽³⁾. In his journal, he writes that he was struck by the deep interest the French expressed in monuments and their history as well as in the monarchs who had founded them. He writes: "they like to own antiquities, and they boast of those they have acquired."⁽⁴⁾ Concerning the Military Museum, he notes: "this is one of the best places we have visited, and it must have inspired its visitors with many an idea"⁽⁵⁾ In the same vein, Mohammed Al-Sayeh wrote after his visit to the Palais de Versailles in 1922: "they (the French) are very meticulous about the precise dates of historical events, and they tend to praise a lot their monarchs and

2. Mohamed Al-Tahar Al-Fassi, *Rihla Al-Ibriziya Ila Diyari Al-anjaliziya*, print in university Mohammed V, Fès, 1967, p. 30.

3. Ibn Idriss Al-Amraoui, *Tohfah al-Malik Al-Azziz Bi Mamlakati Bariz*, Presented and annotated by Zaki Moubarak, North printing ; Tangier, 1989.

4. Ibn Idriss Al-Amraoui, *Tohfah al-Malik Al-Azziz Bi Mamlakati Bariz* ; p. 66.

5. Ibn Idriss Al-Amraoui, *Tohfah al-Malik Al-Azziz Bi Mamlakati Bariz* ; p. 76.

their dignitaries”⁽⁶⁾. He was also surprised to notice that the French would not leave anything related to their previous monarchs or dignitaries go unpreserved, and this for the sake of future generations⁽⁷⁾.

Most of the envoys seem to agree about the importance of museums and their scientific and historical values. They noted down what they had seen in various wings and departments, in detail at times and in brief at others. But they also questioned, either explicitly or implicitly, the goals behind building museums and spending so much on their preservation. In what follows, each on the above examples will be considered in some detail.

Mohammed Ben Othman Al-Meknassi and the Museum of Napoli, Italy

Al-Meknassi witnessed the excavation at Pompei to the north-west of Napoli and reports that “I noticed a large number of workers digging at the site, and when I inquired about them, I was told by the curator that these were wage-earners, and that all the antiquities they would dig out, such as pottery, jewelry or coins, would be sent to the tyrant [perhaps intending the monarch], who keeps them in a special place.” By the ‘special place’, he must have meant the National Museum of Archeology⁽⁸⁾.

In one of the chapters in his book, he stops at the aforementioned museum with amazement and admiration. He describes its huge building, the shelves inside on which items were put, and especially the revolving ones used for the exhibition of antiquities. In this respect, he reports that: “they put up shelves on the four walls [of the hall], from the bottom up to the ceiling, on which are put antiquities”⁽⁹⁾ He also mentions samples of the exhibited items, such as mummified whales and elephants⁽¹⁰⁾.

6. Mohammed Al-Sayeh ; *Osbou'on fi Bariz*, manuscript in Hassaniya library, Rabt, n° 161, quote from Abdelmajid Kaddouri, *sofarao magyaribaton fi Europa (1610-1922) fi al- wa'yi bi attafawoti*, p. 143

7. Susan Gilson Miller, *sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa*, Press of School of Arts and Humanities Rabat, Najah Al-Jadida, Casablanca, 1995, p. 194.

8. Mohammed Ben Othman Al-Meknassi, *Al-Badro as-safer li hidayati al-Mossafir ila fikaki al-assara min yadi al-'adawi al-kafir*, Malika El-Zahida, Press of School of Arts and Humanities Mohammadia, 2005, p.p. 92-197.

9. Mohammed Ben Othman Al-Meknassi, *Al-Badro as-safer li hidayati al-Mossafir ila fikaki al-assara min yadi al-'adawi al-kafir*, p. 92.

10. Mohammed Ben Othman Al-Meknassi, *Al-Badro as-safer li hidayati al-Mossafir ila fikaki al-assara min yadi al-'adawi al-kafir*, p. 214.

Mohammed As-Saffar in Paris

As-Saffar was secretary of Abdelkader Ash'ash, Sultan Moulay Abderrahman's envoy to Paris in 1845. When As-Saffar visited the Royal Library in Paris, he was strongly impressed by the cleanness of the premises, and the extreme order with which books were distributed over the visitors. He also noted down that some of the galleries were reserved to the exhibition of antiquities such as seal-rings that ancient monarchs used to sign their letters with, the iron shields that used to be worn in times of war, different types of shields "and swords, iron maces, and axes" with which they used to fight⁽¹¹⁾. He also cited as examples the many coins exhibited in the library, some of which were made of stone, others of iron, and others still bore the names of kings and princes who ruled over the Andalus and Morocco⁽¹²⁾. His attention was also caught by the way these were exhibited. In this connection, he reports that "each coin is put on a piece on which is written the name of the monarch whose name it bears as well as its origin. The pieces are arranged in a tabular way, and each piece is covered with a box of glass to protect the coin." He continued his description of the exhibits by citing different types of old keys and furniture, relics of ancient Greece, and golden necklaces that used to be buried with the dead in ancient times⁽¹³⁾.

As-Saffar was also impressed by the botanical gardens which had been set up in 1626, and especially by the manner in which were exhibited the various animal species. He says in this connection: "they use techniques to make dead animals look as if they were alive in such a way that, if you looked at a fish, you wouldn't have the slightest doubt that it has just been caught. Certainly, they skin it very carefully, and fill the skin with straw or some similar matter so that it looks like a fresh one. They also add to it some chemicals that stop decomposition for a long time"⁽¹⁴⁾ He pursues by citing different fishes, big and small ones, crocodiles, turtles, etc. that were caught in the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the Nile Rive, or other places. He also describes the

11. Susan Gilson Miller, *sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa* ; p.p.191-192-193.

12. Susan Gilson Miller, *sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa*, p.p.193-194.

13. Susan Gilson Miller, *sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa*, p.194.

14. Susan Gilson Miller, *sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa*, p.149.

various species of birds brought from different parts of the world and exhibited in separate rooms, big snakes and other mummified animals that live in America or India, of which he ignored the names. Other mummified animals he cited include the elephant, the hippopotamus, the antelope, the white and the brown bears, the tiger, the lion, the hyena, the wildcat, the fox, the gazelle and the deer⁽¹⁵⁾.

As-Saffar's report also includes a description of the department of geology. This included various types of precious stones and metals such as stones of gold, silver, copper, iron and lead, and emeralds, diamonds and huge fossils. He concedes that they were too numerous to be counted or known by name, "although each type has its name and its classification written on it"⁽¹⁶⁾. He mentions also the different types of marble, both colored and colorless, and the fossils it contained of extinct animal species and humans, which reflect the geological and the climatic changes the planet had known. But As-Saffar couldn't believe those ideas no matter how hard the French interpreter tried to explain to him, probably because of his religious background. He uses expressions such as "they claim that [the fossils'] origin goes back to the Deluge".

After that, he moved to plants. In this respect, he mentions the different species of wheat whose ears were exhibited in bottles of glass⁽¹⁷⁾. He noticed that each plant had a thin stick at the head of which there was a card bearing the name of the plant, its origin and its characteristics. As to exotic plants, they were grown in greenhouses with doors, and watered with warm water, depending on each plant and whether it was of a desert or an equatorial origin, such as the palm tree, the banana tree, coffee, tea, and the pineapple⁽¹⁸⁾.

As-Saffar realizes that the purpose behind the exhibition of animals and metals was to promulgate knowledge of them through direct observation of their forms, and a close study of their species and their characteristics⁽¹⁹⁾.

15. Susan Gilson Miller, *sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa*, p.150.

16. Susan Gilson Miller, *sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa*, p.152.

17. Susan Gilson Miller, *sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa*, p.153.

18. Susan Gilson Miller, *sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa*, p.153-154.

19. Susan Gilson Miller, *sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa*, p.154.

When he visited the Royal Palace, As-Saffar was amazed by the furniture that belonged to previous monarchs, and the great effort invested in its preservation, and the preservation of the paintings that depict the palace in different historical periods. As-Saffar was also impressed by the Louvre and its paintings, statues, the writings and inscriptions that testify to the history of the Greeks, the Romans, and other civilizations. His attention was also drawn by the mummies brought from Egypt, which were exhibited in boxes, either lying or standing⁽²⁰⁾. The museum also contained pictures of sea ports with their architecture, in addition to different types of real vessels such as the warships... frigates, trains, supplies, masts, ropes and chains. Another wing was devoted to traditional weapons such as bows, shields, spears, and big and small cannons. As-Saffar was also very impressed by the architecture and the ornamentation of the Louvre, but he expressed his displeasure of the large number of images and paintings which hung on its walls, and which, because of his religious education, he thought "were blemishes on its beauty"⁽²¹⁾.

Mohammed Al-Taher Al-Fassi in London

He witnessed a mobile 'science fair' which was, according to him, a huge village whose walls were made of crystal. It contained wonders from Pharaonic Egypt, and mummified animals such as the elephant, the lion, the tiger, the giraffe, etc. and marble statues and mummified human bodies. But in his opinion, the tickets to go to this fair were very expensive⁽²²⁾.

He was also impressed by what he saw at the Weaponry Museum, particularly by the knights which who completely clad with armor to the extent that only the hooves of their horses could be seen, and by the traditional weapons. His attention was also directed to the great number of people who supervised the museum, their clean clothes, and their insistence on order ⁽²³⁾.

20. Susan Gilson Miller, sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa, p.200.

21. Susan Gilson Miller, sodtato aliqaa ma'a al-Jadid, rihlat Mohammed As-Saffar Ila Faransa, p.199.

22. Mohamed Al-Tahar Al-Fassi, Rihla Al-Ibriziya Ila Diyari Al-anjaliziya, p.p. 29,30.

23. Mohamed Al-Tahar Al-Fassi, Rihla Al-Ibriziya Ila Diyari Al-anjaliziya, p. 32.

Ben Idriss Al-Amraoui in Paris

At the Weaponry Museum, he saw different types of weapons, both traditional and modern, which were exhibited on walls in an orderly way, in his view, in order for the visitors to have easy access to them. The weapons were kept clean and refined to look new, and some of them were put in boxes of glass to protect them from dirt or dust. Among these were stone knives, shields, swords, spears, arches, arrows, muskets, fuse, trigger, cannons, wheels and other weapons. Each of these weapons had a card indicating its name, its history, the people who had used it, and the king who brought it to the museum ⁽²⁴⁾.

At the mint, he visited the museum of money, which contained coins from all parts of the world. Each coin was put in a hole on the surface of a piece of wood and covered with glass, and a card indicated the date and the place of its mintage. Some of these coins were minted by the Almoravids or the Almohads or the Saadiens⁽²⁵⁾.

Mohammed Ben Abdesslam Al-Sayeh in Paris

He starts his report by pointing out the magnificence of the Louvre, stating the date of its foundation and the diversity of its exhibits. He states: "it is the greatest museum in Paris. It looks like a large and magnificent new castle. It is constituted of several floors and departments. It contains many paintings, statues, beautiful inscriptions, small artifacts, expensive jewelry, etc. I used to walk fast, eager to visit as many departments and floors as I can"⁽²⁶⁾ After that, he starts describing the different wings of the museum. Thus, he stops at the department of Egyptian antiquities, which he sets apart from the Assyrian department. He also visited the botanical garden, which contained 3,600 species of animals and skeletons of humans and large animals. In the last floor, there were 179,000 pieces of bones, skeletons and pictures of pre-historic animals. But the best of all were the mummies⁽²⁷⁾.

24. Ibn Idriss Al-Amraoui, *Tohfah al-Malik Al-Azziz Bi Mamlakati Bariz*, p.73-74.

25. Ibn Idriss Al-Amraoui, *Tohfah al-Malik Al-Azziz Bi Mamlakati Bariz*, p.p. 72-73.

26. Mohammed Al-Sayeh ; *Osbou'on fi Bariz*, p. 136.

27. Mohammed Al-Sayeh ; *Osbou'on fi Bariz*, p.p. 141-143.

Conclusion

From this brief presentation of diplomats' journals, it is clear that their authors admit the superiority of the Other; the Christian, and his ability to organize and bring things to order, and to value highly not only the European cultural heritage, but also the heritage of other civilizations. All these authors mention the large sums of money spent on museums to search or purchase artifacts and rare antiquities, and exotic animals and plants for exhibition, to raise funds for archeological excavation, and to pay for the restoration of artifacts and for the maintenance of the premises. But although Ben Idriss Al-Amraoui was aware of this situation and of this 'bitter' fact, he continued to cling to the religious canon according to which "life is the paradise unbeliever's." This is obvious from the following quotation from his journal: "A man of reason would be surprised to know how much money they spend uselessly on looking for animals and plants, and looking after them, and on the maintenance of the places where they are put, especially when he realizes how miserly and thrifty they are. They wouldn't spend any money if they were not sure they would make some profit or contribute to the magnificence and power of their nation. But what use or magnificence is there in collecting dogs, pigs, monkeys, wolves and insects! And why preserve a stinky cadaver that has no use!"

These authors did not want to recognize explicitly the pedagogical goals of museums and their role in disseminating knowledge, mainly because of their religious background and their traditional culture based on the belief that Muslims are superior to unbelievers. Consequently, it never occurred to them that similar institutions could be beneficial for their people, a fact which indicates clearly that Morocco at that time was very backward as far as this aspect of culture is concerned. Compared with the writings of this period, those of the first years of the 20th century were relatively more daring, though not enough to adopt the goals and values which museums serve, and to adapt them to the context of their society.