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The Great War in French Museums 1914-2018

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It was the campaigns of Napoleon that first prompted the emergence across Europe of 'heritage awareness' (Savoy 2003: 146). But, in the case of France itself, the French Revolution had already raised the question of the destruction, seizure and preservation of works of art to an extent previously unknown. A further threshold in the involvement of cultural property in hostilities was crossed when the unprecedented violence of the First World War struck France. The Great War had a number of impacts on the history of cultural heritage on French soil, both in terms of destruction and in the creation of new war collections (Ypersele 2013; Granger 2013; Savoy and Kott 2016). In addition to the cultural property directly impacted by war in regions crossed by the front line, France, like other European countries, saw the creation of new provisions that had the goal of documenting the hostilities and mobilizing civilian support. Still today, the Great War remains strongly anchored in French local and family memories (Offenstadt 2010), and the centenary of the hostilities has once again shown the keen interest of the French in this conflict. This paper aims to examine the ideological and memorial challenges that the Great War has represented, and which it continues to represent, for French museums from the start of the conflict to the commemoration of its centenary in 2014-2018.

The history of museums and artistic heritage during and after the First World War remains, in France, a relatively unexplored field of research. Despite the development of cultural history in the 1980s, the concept of museums and collections as vectors of war culture between 1914 and 1918 did not immediately attract the attention of researchers (Maingon 2016). Finally however, the new perspectives opened up by the concept of *lieux de mémoire* and, more recently, the emergence of the Material Culture Studies and of a history of museums and museography, has encouraged interdisciplinary engagements between historians, art-historians, curators and archaeologists in studying the fate of museums and collections during and after the Great War; whether from a national (Nivet 2013; Bollard-Raineau et al. 2014; Nivet and al. 2017; Tillier 2019), international (Saunders et al. 2009; Kott et al. 2016) or transnational (Meyer et al. 2014) perspective.

In a country like France, where the memory of the First World War is still very strong, the heritage destroyed and created by that conflict has been the object of conflicted memories, which have seen a long evolution from 1914 until the centenary commemorations of 2014-2018. In this paper, I will focus on three key moments in the history of the museumization of the Great War: the origins of the war's artistic heritage and the creation of new collections during the conflict itself; the museography of the Great War in the principal French museums from the second half of the 20th century until today; and finally the significant contribution of French museums to the commemorative period of the centenary years of the Great War.

The museum at war

When considering the cultural heritage of the Great War, it is important to distinguish the fate of cultural property during hostilities – whether it has been the subject of conservation measures or destruction by the enemy – from objects ‘produced and bequeathed by war’ (Capronnier et al. 2014). The inexorable logic of Total War ensured that French cultural heritage, in common with that of other European countries enduring an enemy presence, became a strategic and ideological issue and, as a result, simultaneously a target of destruction and an object of covetousness. Faced with threats of intentional destruction in regions close to the front or damage during the bombing of French cities, public authorities took initiatives to preserve museum collections. In this iconoclastic war, they also set out to organize exhibitions, with the dual intention of denouncing this destruction while patriotically acclaiming French heritage. In parallel with this official management of French works of art, the Great War aroused an unprecedented enthusiasm for war objects. Public and private collections reflected the previously unheard-of level of involvement of the whole of society in this mass war. Even in the immediate vicinity of the frontline, soldiers paid special attention to war objects. As a result, these collections nowadays carry ideological and memorial burdens, since they signify the mobilization or remobilization of French society during the war, as much as they bear witness to attempts to ensure its long term memory.

The burning and bombing of monuments, the looting of museums and the destruction of libraries and archives were all witnessed as the German Army made its initial advance in the West in 1914. Faced with the shock of going to war, the French authorities were aware of the increased need to preserve and conserve the country’s monumental, artistic and archival heritage. In 1914, however, there was no plan to rescue French museums. It was not until August 1917 that the Service for the Protection and Evacuation of Works of Art and Monuments was created (Désiré 2017: 89). Witnessing the August 1914 advance of German troops through Belgium, the French Administration of Fine Arts could do no more than recommend to the cities of Northeast France that they ensure the protection of their museums. The most worrying case was that of the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille, which housed very rich collections. These were safeguarded in basements or, in the case of the most precious works of art, such as *La Tête de cire*, walled-up. But such precautions proved difficult to take; first due to a lack of human and financial resources in the context of general mobilization, secondly because drastic measures might undermine the morale of the French civilian population (Bollard-Raineau et al. 2014). Some museums were closed and requisitioned for military purposes, the museum of Douai, for example, was transformed into a hospital. The collections of other museums in regions close to the front line are either stored in basements to try to shelter them from bombardment, or evacuated, as at Dunkirk, Boulogne-sur-Mer and Bergues. Other museums were purely and simply destroyed, as at Arras in July 1915 or at Péronne in July 1916. Plundered and entirely destroyed by the Germans, the Alfred-Danicourt museum of Péronne, which housed numismatic and glyptic archaeological collections as well as goldsmithery, was reopened during the interwar period. Part of its collections had been cleverly concealed by the curator during the war; the remainder were reconstituted thanks to war reparations (De Sousa 2014). In the occupied zones of the North and the East of France, museums were placed under the direction of the *Kunstschutz*, the German service for the preservation of artistic heritage. But they did not find themselves protected by this. They became places of deposit for German objets d’art, or were seized or requisitioned in support of the German war effort (Kott 2006).

Impacted by the fighting and coveted by the enemy, French museums took on political and ideological significance during the Great War. The looting of works of art perpetrated in Belgium and France offered the French the opportunity to reactivate the stereotype of the German thief and pillager of museums, previously employed during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. The damaged artistic heritage itself became the object of patriotic exhibitions which sought to denounce German 'barbarism'. In this cultural war, French museums symbolized 'civilization' and the universality allegedly embodied in French culture. As the home to collections tracing the history of humanity, the *Louvre* was used as a veritable political instrument between 1914 and 1918. Art historian Robert de La Sizeranne even pronounced it to be the embodiment of the 'moral force' of France (Maingon 2016: 16). Although it was closed in 1914 for a period of five years and partially emptied of its works, the *Louvre* contributed, thanks to works of art retained in Paris during the war, to the development of several patriotic exhibitions. These included 'War Art', 'Paintings of Glory', and 'Work by soldiers', which were organized by the periodical *Pays de France* and presented at the *Jeu de Paume* in 1915 (Ibid. : 88). On 24 November 1916, the French capital witnessed the opening, by the President of the Republic at the *Petit Palais*, of a 'Museum of German Atrocities', also known as the 'Exhibition of German Vandalism'. This exhibition pursued the triple objective of showing the resistance and heroism of soldiers in their fight to protect French territory, accusing the enemy, and remobilizing public support following the costly victory of the Battle of Verdun. According to Claire Maingon, the 300 or so pieces from the devastated regions exhibited there were literally imbued with the character of 'martyred' works, being presented in a sort of museographic 'cemetery' (Maingon 2014). The remnants of art objects collected from the ten Departments along the front line – hands and heads of statues, ruins, charred saints, silverware distorted by fire, damaged liturgical objects – rubbed shoulders with purely symbolic objects intended to add weight to the indictment against the destructive madness of German troops. These included shrapnel from Verdun or rubble from the fire at the cathedral in Reims, a symbol par excellence of German 'barbarism'. To these categories of objects were added works of art saved by the French authorities; for example intact woodwork from the choir of Verdun cathedral dating from the 18th century. This museum initiative even prompted restorations. One such case is a Rubens painting 'The Adoration of the Magi', which had been damaged in the bombing of the Saint-Gervais-Saint-Prottais cathedral in Soissons. These patriotic exhibitions all lent themselves to affirming the moral and cultural superiority of France over the brutality and the lack of culture of the Germanic peoples.

Beyond these diverse cultural properties, which found their place in patriotic exhibitions, in France as well as other belligerent countries, the Great War generated new conflict-related material culture of its own. This social and anthropological phenomenon goes hand in hand with the need to legitimize the conflict and then, after 1918, to give meaning to the victims and the suffering caused by these four years of war (Saunders 2012). Symbolic appropriations of the war, this type of object appears both behind the frontline and in the rear. The most notable phenomenon is known as 'artisanat des tranchées', 'Schützengraben-Handwerk' or 'trench art'. Through personal initiative, combatants reclaimed the very weapons and projectiles that had been produced to eliminate them, and remade them. The term 'trench art' covers a vast field, which comprises not only objects made by soldiers at the Front, but items created in prison camps and hospitals, or those produced in the rear, for sale to civilians. The field is further enlarged, and indeed confused, by post-war artefacts, produced for sale to collectors or souvenir-hungry battlefield tourists. (Saunders 2003; Tillier 2019: 26-27). During the war itself, however, there was plainly a desire on the part of the combatants, to

recover and conserve and transform these objects, in order to transmit their experience from the front to those around them and to future generations. In fact, the term 'museum' is frequently found used as a metaphor to designate collections of such artefacts in the wartime correspondence of French soldiers (Ibid .: 17).

A different, but related, phenomenon manifested itself on the Home Front. The creation of what are known as 'collections de guerre', testifies to the enthusiasm of civilians and cultural institutions for war memorabilia between 1914 and 1918. Even if this phenomenon did not, in France, reach the pitch that it attained in Germany at the time (see, for example Brandt 2004), it was characterized by a strong dynamic in collecting traces of the war. Printed matter, postcards, posters, photographic material, personal letters, children's books, ration cards; all such objects became worthy of interest to make the experience of war more acceptable, to contribute to the cultural mobilization of French civilians and to bear witness to everyday life during the conflict for generations to come. In France, large collections were formed at the initiative of public institutions, although these remained isolated enterprises (Didier 2008). Among them, we can cite the decisive role played in the collection of printed matter – in accordance with traditional French centralism – by the National Library of France. The Edouard Herriot collection, held by the Lyon Municipal Library, also represents a major public involvement in securing such material, being one of the largest public collections in France, with 20,000 objects and documents. But the most impressive 'collection de guerre' stemmed from the private initiative of an industrialist couple, Louise and Henri Leblanc. From 1914, supported by French parliamentarians and with the help of auxiliaries, they gathered all kinds of documents and objects relating to the conflict, before donating them to the French State in August 1917. Supplemented by official and private donations, this immense collection contains over 100,000 volumes of printed matter, 9,000 archive files, 10,000 maps and aerial photographs and 15,000 posters in many languages. It gave rise, in 1919, to the creation of the *Bibliothèque-Musée de la Guerre*, which in 1987 became the *Musée d'histoire contemporaine / Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine*. In 2018 it was relaunched as *La Contemporaine*. Before the Great War entered national military museums and regional history museums, these war collections represented, along with trench art, the first attempt to preserve the memory of the conflict through its material culture.

War memories at the museum

In victorious countries, both in England and in France, war collections enjoyed lasting success during the interwar period. Memorials, museums, and war collections there embodied 'material representations of memory' (Saunders 2012: 284) of the conflict. In France, the Great War sparked an unprecedented wave of memorialization during the interwar period. For the first time, thanks to a 1913 law on historic monuments, the French authorities endeavored to conserve sites of memory, battlefields, fortifications and French and German shelters. These foundations of war tourism and, above all, the 'collections de guerre' (the latter soon transformed into museums and libraries), retained a strongly nationalist dimension. Their main object was the glorification of the army and the celebration of the heroism of the *Poilus*. Against such a background, relations between French and German museums remain strained and burdened by Germanophobic stereotypes. A tentative cooperation is detectable from 1926, thanks to the mediation of the International Museums Office. This took place in the context of the Locarno Treaties of that year, wherein Germany normalized its

relations with France and other signatories (Kott 2013). During the period 1939-1945, French museum collections were once again threatened by bombing and occupation by German troops. In safekeeping at the Château de Vincennes, near Paris, the collections of the War Museum were damaged by an outbreak of fire in 1944 (Didier 2008). In various museums and archives, significant losses were lamented, the most famous of which remains the fate of the original of the Treaty of Versailles, taken to the Reich Chancellery in June 1940 and probably destroyed at the end of the war.

After the turmoil of the Second World War, representations of the Great War in French museums underwent various changes up to the beginning of the 21st century. Depending on their status and their mission, these museums paid varying levels of attention to historiographical developments. At a time when witnesses and direct actors in the conflict still occupied an important place in French society, museums devoted to the conflict were founded thanks to networks of veterans. Thus, the Verdun Memorial, founded in 1967 on the initiative of the veteran Maurice Genevoix, was intended to commemorate the combat experience of Verdun, mainly from the French point of view. The Memorial continues to this day to depend upon the National Memorial Committee of Verdun (a non-profit association regulated by the French Associations Law of 1901). However the Memorial and its interpretation center were renovated and enlarged between 2013 and 2016. They now present the battle from a Franco-German perspective and have acquired an immersive museography (audiovisual devices; reconstruction of a shell hole). This is something that is rare enough in French museums to be worthy of highlighting. The public is made aware of the Memorial's direct environment since the battlefield can be seen from the museum's terrace¹. Of similar vintage is the *musée de la Caverne du Dragon* on the Chemin des Dames, which opened in 1969, under the aegis of *le Souvenir français*, a commemorative organization founded in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War. This museum was completely refurbished in 1999 thanks to local Government funding (conseil général de l'Aisne) (Hardier 2004).

Other regional museums devoted to the Great War, being more recently conceived, were in a position to take greater account of current trends in historiography from the moment of their creation (Fleury 2014). This was certainly the case with the two main museums specially dedicated to the First World War, the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* in Péronne on the Somme and the *Musée de la Grande Guerre du pays de Meaux* on the Marne. These two institutions have integrated cultural and European dimensions of war into their museography. Both located on the former front line, they were created thanks to the support of local authorities. Unlike national army museums, their collections not only include military equipment, but also many everyday objects. While the collections of the *Historial* were constituted from objects bought on the commercial market (patriotic crockery, toys, postcards, etc.) (Brandt 2004; Fontaine et al. 2008; Wahnich et al. 2001), the museum at Meaux was created from the collection of Jean-Pierre Vernet (uniforms, trench art, artillery pieces, newspapers, etc.) (Le Musée de la Grande Guerre 2012). Inaugurated in 1992, the *Historial*, endowed with an international scientific committee (which included among others Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Jean-Jacques Becker, John Horne, Gerd Krumeich and Jay Winter), is both a museum and an international research center. In a comparative approach, this museum offers visitors a cultural and social history of the Great War through the perspectives of the three combatants on the Somme: Germany, France and Great Britain. From a collection of everyday objects and works of art, the *Historial* highlights the similarities and differences in national perceptions of this 'total war' and expounds people's wartime experiences, both at the Front and in the rear. Without having recourse to the sort of immersive museography popular in Anglophone

museums, the *Historial* places individual experiences of the war front and centre, by opting for a scenography that encourages distancing and comparison. The treatment of the military clothing and equipment illustrates this choice: arranged horizontally on the ground in 'Fosses', the uniforms evoke the inert bodies of combatants from the various belligerent nations. The pre-war period, the origins and the geopolitical and socio-cultural consequences of the First World War are also discussed. The *Historial* was renovated just before the start of the centenary of the Great War, but maintained this unique anthropological and comparative approach. Like many territorial museums, the *Historial* also strives to enhance the battlefields near the museum; the nearby Thiepval Memorial's interpretation centre is directly dependent upon the *Historial*. More aestheticised, the Museum of the Great War in the Pays de Meaux is also firmly embedded in a heritage landscape. Panoramic windows connect the visitor with the exterior topography, over which the First Battle of the Marne unfolded. The inclusion of immersive content within the building is scheduled to be reinforced with exterior elements, including a trench constructed in the museum grounds and battles re-enactments with period uniforms.

The centenary at the museum

More than a hundred years after its outbreak, exhibitions devoted to the First World War still embody important memory issues in France. The intensive commemorative period of 2014-2018, which, in the context of museums, might be considered to have commenced as early as 2012, imparted significant impetus to the activities of French Great War museums. To anticipate public demand and implement the centennial commemorative programme, a public interest group, the *Mission du centenaire*, was created in 2012 by the French government². Throughout the commemorative period, and until mid-2019, it fulfilled three main functions: coordinating French public and private initiatives that contributed to the centenary, organizing an official commemorative program and furnishing the general public with information about these events and about the First World War in general. Directed by Joseph Zimet, the Centenary Mission was supported by an international and multidisciplinary scientific council which brought together historians representing various historiographical trends, as well as Great War specialists from other disciplines. Among them, we can mention Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker, Laurence Campa, Rémy Cazals, Robert Frank, John Horne, Gerd Krumeich, André Loez, Nicolas Offenstadt, Antoine Prost, Hew Strachan, Laurent Veyssi re and Jay Winter.

French museums were heavily involved in this commemorative season. For the period from 2013 to 2018, no less than 1,474 exhibitions devoted to the Great War were certified and/or subsidized by the *Mission du centenaire*³. These exhibitions presented major variations in size, budget and attendance; and they did not all benefit from the same level of historical support. Some were organized by large national institutions, others by more modest establishments. Some were mounted in Paris, others in the regions. (Zunino, forthcoming). Their distribution throughout France confirms that the memory of the First World War is still strong in France today. Although Paris and its region, the Ile-de-France, hosted 15% of the exhibitions, museum activity between 2012 and 2018 was characterized by a strong national dynamic. This extended beyond the obvious presumption that interest would be concentrated in regions that had been directly affected by the hostilities. Thus, Departments which had been in direct contact with the front, which had been in the 'Zone of the Armies', or had been under German occupation, actually hosted just 30% of the total number of

exhibitions. The centenary years of the beginning and end of the conflict turned out to be the most prolific with, respectively, 35% of the exhibitions organized in 2014 and 31% in 2018. During the years 2015-2017, museum activity on French territory was characterized by a more strongly regional dynamic, in accordance with a commemorative schedule drawn up by the Centennial Mission. At the Chemin des Dames for example, where the so-called Nivelles offensive (Second Battle of the Aisne) took place from April 16, 1917, the centenary year of 2017 actually became the chief commemorative season of the centenary. Among the many initiatives, the *Chemin des Dames 1917-2017* cultural project, presented at the *Caverne du Dragon* from April 16 to September 30, 2017, represents the cornerstone. It threw a spotlight on the failure of the French offensive and highlighted the traces of the fighting on the landscape that are still visible today⁴.

Thus, throughout the centenary quinquennium, France witnessed the birth of a large number of exhibitions, right across the country, marked by a local memory of the war. But there was noticeable variation in how thoroughly these exhibitions disseminated the fruits of recent research on the Great War. From the beginning of the centenary a strong interest in cultural and social history was notable, with emphasis on the experience of combatants and civilians (essentially French ones) through stories of personal trajectories, the links between the front and the rear and the cultural manifestations of wartime. As the commemorative years progressed however, there was an increase in the number of exhibitions, often endowed with a large budget and an international scientific committee, which tried to make the general public aware of the global history of the war, the other European fighting fronts, the non-European fronts, and its impact on the colonial empires. In fact, there is a striking contrast between the 'Franco-French' character of many local initiatives and the efforts at internationalization made, especially from 2017, by large public museums.

In the many local and regional commemorative initiatives, the Great War was mainly presented from a French perspective. Organized in collaboration with municipal or Departmental archives, numerous local initiatives, in municipalities right across the country, favoured an approach based on local or regional history. These exhibitions were devoted to the daily lives of civilians (including women and children) and combatants from the city or region in which the exhibitions were mounted; often to commemorate the start of the war. For example, the Departmental Archives of Morbihan organized an exhibition on 'The Morbihannais in the 14-18 War'. Also in Brittany, the Nantes History Museum, in partnership with the local municipal archives, focused its exhibition on the cultural mobilization and the Great War experiences of Nantes children⁵. This drew upon wartime Nantes public school activity reports, children's homework and drawings, photographs, posters, postcards and other products of war culture. In addition, numerous small exhibitions organized in 2018 by municipalities throughout France revealed that the *Poilu* is still a figure that the French identify with to this day. The titles of these cultural events speak for themselves: *En mémoire des poilus de 14-18* (Biarritz, Pyrénées-Atlantiques), *A nos Poilus!* (Ecomuseum of the Pays de la Cerise in Fougerolles, Haute-Saône), *A nos poilus, morts pour la France* (Cahuzac-sur-Vère town hall, Tarn). This uninhibited celebration of the sacrifices of the combatants of the Great War, which would be unthinkable in other Continental European countries - especially in Germany, because of the subsequent exploitation of the figure of the *Frontkämpfer* by the Nazis - clearly shows the significance of the memory of the First World War in France and its strong local roots.

By contrast, large-scale exhibitions organized by public institutions, which led the way in delivering the centenary dynamic at a national level, broadened their approaches to a European, even global, perspective of war. The attempt to build, little by little, a European memory of the conflict was in fact one of the stated objectives of the Centenary Mission from its inception⁶. From 2012 to 2018, these exhibitions highlighted the Europeanization and progressive internationalization of the conflict – an emphasis not generally found in the majority of cultural events organized during the centenary. Mainly mounted in the French capital, they are also characterized by a strong interdisciplinary ethos, in which the history of art and visual studies in general occupied an important place. Such is the case of the large exhibition which inaugurated the cycle of cultural events of the centenary. *1917*, which opened in 2012 at the *Centre Pompidou-Metz*, was organized in partnership with *La Contemporaine*, ECPAD and the *Musée de l'Armée*. Its scientific council brought together art historians (Philippe Dagen and Jean-Jacques Lebel), film historians (Laurent Véray) and literature specialists (Laurence Campa, Edouard Graham). Mounted in one of the regions most affected by the battles of the Great War, it focused on the year of the conflict which represented a pivotal point, both for the evolution of the war and for the emergence, from Western Europe to Russia, of the artistic avant-garde. Likewise, *Vu du front. Représenter la Grande Guerre (La Contemporaine / Musée de l'Armée, Paris, 2014)* contributed to a better understanding of the processes of image production and of the international circulation of images during the First World War. Renouncing a strictly French and Eurocentric point of view, it focused on the producers and distributors of images from different fronts (land, air, sea) from a tri-national perspective (Germany, France, Great Britain) and looked at the circulation and dissemination of these images in the rest of the world, primarily in the United States. The fact that it placed these cultural productions in the context of pre-1914 history (the Boer Wars, the Russo-Japanese War, the Balkan Wars) reinforced its innovative character (Romanovski 2014). Focusing on the last days of peace in the summer of 1914 and on the outbreak of the conflict, the *Été 14. Les derniers jours de l'ancien monde (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, 2014)* was also characterized by a perspective at once European, international and global (Manfrin et al. 2014).

The Franco-German dimension of the conflict was particularly to the forefront in French responses to its centenary. This provided a foundation for intense international scientific cooperation at the museum level. The centenary saw the creation of the *Historial franco-allemand de la Grande Guerre*, at Hartmannswillerkopf, a spur of the Vosges Mountains in Alsace that was bitterly contested in 1915. Inaugurated on 3 August 2017, it was the first bilateral institution devoted to the Great War with a joint Franco-German scientific council, co-chaired by Nicolas Offenstadt from France and Gerd Krumeich from Germany. The latter historian, also a member of the Scientific Council of the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* in Péronne, was closely associated with the design of several other French exhibitions with a Franco-German dimension, including *Jours de guerre et de paix. Regard franco-allemand sur l'art de 1910 à 1930 (Reims, 2014)* and *Été 1914 : Nancy et la Lorraine dans la guerre (Nancy, 2014)*.

Addressed during 2015-2016, on the occasion of its centenary, the genocide of the Armenians represented another museum theme that enabled the opening-up of the centenary to a European and global history of the Great War. Once again the French capital was to play the decisive part in addressing new historiographical trends and presenting them to the general public through exhibitions. For example, *Le génocide des Arméniens de l'Empire ottoman. Stigmatiser, Détruire, Exclure*, mounted by the Shoah Memorial (Paris, 2015) was a landmark exhibition, which pursued

the objective of familiarizing the French public with this tragic episode. Finally, by way of closing the cycle of centennial exhibitions, *A l'Est, la guerre sans fin 1918-1923* represented an effort towards the chronological and geographic decompartmentalization of the Great War, focusing, as it did, on the new conflicts, spawned by upheaval of 1914-1918, endured by the peoples of central and eastern Europe and the Levant from 1918 to 1923 (Lagrange et al. 2018).

These multiple cultural initiatives show the importance of the centenary of the First World War in France. The year 2014 saw a significant increase in the number of museum visitors: for that year alone, the *Historial de la Grande Guerre* recorded 113,659 admissions while the museum at Meaux welcomed 133,000 visitors, an increase of 40% compared to 2013⁷. The 1917 exhibition in Metz received with 219,071 in 2012⁸; *Vu du front* 38,977 in 2014⁹ and *A l'Est, la guerre sans fin 1918-1923* 56,079 in 2018¹⁰. Beyond these bare figures, it is not easy to assess the reception of these exhibitions by the public, inasmuch as they are largely influenced by other frameworks of perception than historiographical issues. The multiple types of appropriation and interpretation vary according to the personal backgrounds and expectations of visitors and to their prior knowledge of the Great War (Antichan et al. 2016). In the case of the *Vu du front* exhibition, for example, some visitors thought they detected a patriotic message in the way that elements of the national heritage were displayed, while others saw it as a pacifist and Europeanist message (Ibid. : 34) .

Conclusion

For France and the French, it is clear that the Great War initiated a vast and enduring process of patrimonialization, in the course of which its material culture became part of France's national cultural heritage. The impressive extent of – and enthusiastic public reaction to – the response of French museums to the centenary show that the war and its material culture retain an important place in local and national memories, even after the passage of 100 years. For long the vectors of nationalism and Germanophobic stereotypes, museums and exhibitions devoted to the First World War are today increasingly engaging with current research trends and historiography. They are thus able to make an important contribution to efforts to build a memory of the Great War that is not just French, but also European.

¹ <https://memorial-verdun.fr/museecollections>

² See the official *Mission du centenaire* site: <https://www.centenaire.org/fr>; also its objectives and timetable, as delivered to the President of the Republic by Joseph Zimet in September 2011: http://centenaire.org/sites/default/files/references-files/rapport_jz.pdf

³ Estimates made on the basis of files listing exhibitions registered with Centennial Mission and data available on its site which lists and maps the exhibitions by year in the Centennial agenda: <http://centenaire.org/fr/agenda>

⁴ <https://www.chemindesdames.fr/fr/le-musee/expositions-et-actualites/chemin-des-dames-1917-2017>

⁵ <http://www.chateaunantes.fr/fr/evenement/lecole-de-la-guerre-1914-1918>

⁶ See the September 2011 report of Joseph Zimet to the President of the Republic: http://centenaire.org/sites/default/files/references-files/rapport_jz.pdf

⁷ <https://www.courrier-picard.fr/art/10329/article/2017-02-11/lhistorial-de-peronne-est-il-trop-elitiste>
https://www.museedelagrandedeurope.eu/uploads/docs/RAPPORT_DACTIVITE_2014.pdf

⁸ https://www.centrepompidou-metz.fr/sites/default/files/issuu/rapport_dactivite_2012.pdf

⁹ https://musee-armee.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/Documents/Rapports-Activites/MA_Rapport-Activite-2014.pdf

¹⁰ https://musee-armee.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/Documents/Rapports-Activites/MA_Rapport-Activite-2018.pdf