

# The 1889 Paris *Exposition*: Mapping the Colonial Mind

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In May 1889, as the first visitors were flooding through the gates of the *Exposition universelle* in Paris, a writer for *Le Figaro* assured his readers:

The Exposition of 1889 therefore brings together the elements of a gigantic encyclopaedia, in which nothing is forgotten: it shows us how, in the year 1889, the human being feeds itself and houses itself. It shows by which scientific procedures we satisfy our needs. It shows everything and it explains everything. Just like the industrialist who does his inventory to the last cent in order to work out his profits and his future revenue, you could say that the whole of humanity has come, in 1889, to do its stocktake in Paris, between the Trocadéro and the Esplanade des Invalides.<sup>1</sup>

‘It shows everything and it explains everything.’ This confident promise by an anonymous journalist is eloquent testimony of the anthropological discourses that were implicit in the very act of putting cultures on display. The cultural historian is tempted to pick up *Le Figaro’s* ‘Blue Guide to the Exposition of 1889,’ some hundred years after its publication, and to stroll, in imagination at least, through the exhibits again, and to reflect upon the discursive strategies by which cultural forms, French and foreign, were put on display to the world.

The journalist’s metaphor of the exposition as a three-dimensional encyclopaedia provides our first approach to the structures of knowledge underlying the display. It evokes, for example, the great prototype, the *Encyclopédie* compiled by the *philosophes* during the Enlightenment. Its 71,000 articles and the explanatory illustrations presumed to record, dissect and explain nearly every imaginable aspect of the natural and human world. The metaphor also evokes Roland Barthes’ excellent dissection of the assumptions behind the encyclopaedists’ project:

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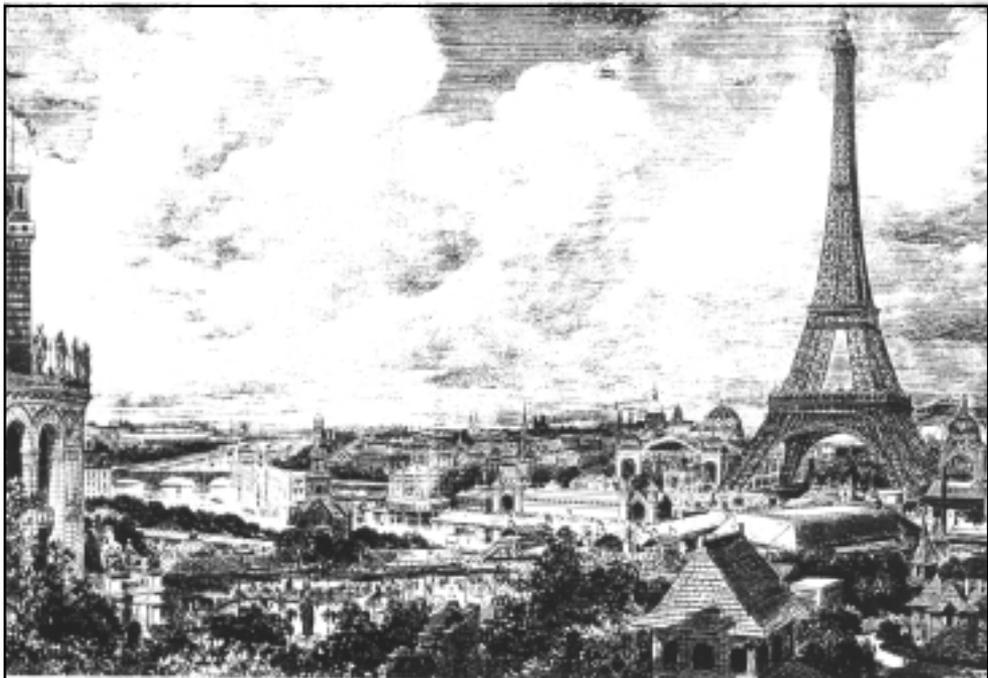
<sup>1</sup> Emile Berr, et al., *Exposition de 1889. Guide bleu du Figaro* (Paris: Le Figaro, 1889) 12. Trans. by the author. ‘L’Exposition de 1889 réunit donc tous les éléments d’une encyclopédie gigantesque, où rien n’a été oublié: elle nous montre comment, à la date de 1889, l’être humain se nourrit, s’habille, se meuble et se pare; par quels procédés scientifiques il travaille à la satisfaction de ses besoins; elle nous montre l’histoire passé et l’état présent des arts qui ornent sa vie, et des sciences destinés à rendre l’homme plus heureux, plus intelligent et meilleur ... Elle montre et elle explique tout. A l’exemple des industriels qui font leur inventaire chaque année afin d’évaluer à un sou près leurs bénéfices d’hier et leurs ressources de demain, on peut dire que l’humanité tout entière est venue, en 1889, faire son inventaire à Paris, entre l’Esplanade des Invalides et le Trocadéro.’

in presuming to analyse, dissect, categorise and explain, the encyclopaedist assumes a position of power in relation to his or her subject.<sup>2</sup>

### The Exposition as Text

Most of Barthes' comments on the Encyclopaedists could be applied with equal accuracy to their nineteenth-century counterparts who built the expositions. The similarity of conceptualisation and imaging is evident, for example, in any one of the many souvenir panoramas of the *Exposition*, such as the *Panorama of the 1889 Exposition*, published for the customers of the Printemps department store.<sup>3</sup> Typically, it shows the site from an aerial perspective and then, by means of an anthology of individual images aligned along the margin, celebrates the parts that constituted the whole. The image is eloquent of the intellectual structures behind the display: this is a visual translation of the technique of cultural synecdoche, by which representative fragments are chosen to depict a whole culture. Everything could be set out scientifically in categories, very much like the pages of a schoolbook. The architect Jules Garnier, for example, provided a complete taxonomy of the evolution of human housing, by building reconstructions of human habitation over time, a virtual schoolbook in three dimensions.

**Figure 1.** Anonymous. *The Paris Exhibition of 1889. A Panorama.* 1889. Engraving. Published in *The Graphic* (11 May 1889). Collection of Michael Adcock.



<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Plates of the Encyclopædia,' *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (London: Vintage, 1982) 218–35.

<sup>3</sup> *Panorama of the 1889 Exposition*, reproduced in Miriam Levin, *When the Eiffel Tower was New. French Visions of Progress at the Centennial of the Revolution*, exhibition catalogue, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 1989 (South Hadley, Mass.: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 1989) 75, plate 36.

However, Roland Barthes' deconstruction of the assumptions behind the encyclopaedic mentality reminds us that, although we can still pick up the guide book and stroll through the exhibits again, we can no longer do so with the same intellectual certainties of the generation of 1889. First, in the place of certainty we find doubt; in the place of intellectual coherence, we discover contradictions, dissonances and perturbing questions. A surviving photograph, entitled *Strange Encounter*, depicts a relaxed moment in which a French photographer at the *Exposition* paused in his work, at the reconstruction of an African village, to share a cigarette with an African woman who was one of the living exhibits.<sup>4</sup> It is the moment when the formal distance between the western observer and exotic subject breaks down, but it is a rare one. The image was probably a mere curiosity in 1889, but today it is more eloquent than all the official images of the exposition as a whole. It reminds us that it is an extraordinary thing to presume to put another culture on display by means of cultural synecdoche. There is no doubt that the government of the Third Republic intended the exposition to be a meaningful text, and that it wrote certain messages very deliberately into that text for contemporaries to read. Since Foucault, however, we have learnt to read the messages below the messages, and if we wish to we might still use his term and identify them as discourses. In the first part of this paper, I would like to review some of the discursive strategies at work in this complex showcase of cultures.

From the historian's point of view, the function of the exposition as a showcase for industrial Europe, and of its colonial products, was always clear. It took the work of some pioneering cultural historians, however, to alert us to the many *other* layers of meaning below this obvious one. Patricia Mainardi re-examined the expositions held by the Second Empire in 1855 and 1867, and probed more deeply into the political, social and anthropological purposes of these displays.<sup>5</sup> The great pioneer for the study of the *Exposition* of 1889 was Deborah Silverman, to whose groundbreaking essay this paper is profoundly indebted. Her article, 'The 1889 Exhibition: The Crisis of Bourgeois Individualism,' laid bare the many layers of meaning behind this extraordinary temporary city of fabricated buildings.<sup>6</sup>

First, Silverman showed us how to read the ground plan of the exposition, quite literally, as a text. She argued that the very layout of the whole site—shown in countless souvenir panoramas—carried a subliminal message, because it was in fact based upon the familiar plan of the Christian cathedral. By her analysis, the Eiffel Tower provided the spire, while the open space of the Champ de Mars provided the nave, leading directly to the central dome. Beside this open nave, the Palace of Fine Arts and the Palace of the Liberal Arts provided a sort of side aisle. Finally, the Palace of Machines, which transected this axis, provided a sort of transept. The focal point of the whole—where you might expect to find the altar of the church—was the central dome, a place where ritual was concentrated, because the great republican ceremonies were all centred upon this point. These republicans, who believed so strongly in a secular state, had in fact appropriated the very spiritual and emotional structures of the

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<sup>4</sup> Reproduced in Caroline Mathieu, 1889. *La Tour Eiffel et l'Exposition universelle* (Paris: Union of National Museums, 1989) 79.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Mainardi, *Art and Politics of the Second Empire. The Universal Expositions of 1855 and 1867* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Debora Silverman, 'The 1889 Exhibition: The Crisis of Bourgeois Individualism', *Oppositions, a Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture* 8 (Spring 1977): 71–91.

**Figure 2.** Anonymous. *The Paris Exhibition of 1889. The Palace of Industry.* 1889. Engraving. Published in *Le Journal illustré* (17 February 1889). Collection of Michael Adcock.



Christian religion.<sup>7</sup> Surviving photographs reveal the centrality of the statue of the female figure of the Republic, looking more than ever like a surrogate statue of the Virgin Mary. The interior of that central dome also had a religious quality, not in any specific symbolism, but in its use of the new industrial architecture of glass and metal to mimic the airy lightness of the Gothic cathedral. Nor is it too fanciful to suggest that the republic had appropriated some of the rich ceremonial of the church: in the Palace of Industry, President Carnot and the members of his republican government massed for grandiose ceremonies, of which the last and most magnificent was the final distribution of prizes, itself commemorated in Henri Gervex's panoramic oil painting, *Distribution of Prizes at the Palace of Industry*.<sup>8</sup> This work, like so many of its counterparts, belongs to a vast corpus of republican visual propaganda that has been largely forgotten by historians; it is only when one revisits the illustrated catalogues of the annual art exhibitions that one finds compelling evidence of the scale of the republican programme to commemorate its achievements, long after the splendour of transient ceremonies and temporary expositions. Thus the thirty-two million people who came to the *Exposition* in 1889—including unprecedented numbers of peasants and urban workers—approached this site with a subliminal sense of the sacred, like the faithful approaching the altar. But what was it that they had they come to worship?

<sup>7</sup> Silverman, 'The 1889 Exhibition' 71–73.

<sup>8</sup> Henri Gervex, *Distribution of Prizes at the Palace of Industry* reproduced in Gaston Scherer, *The Salon of 1897* (Paris and London: Boussod, Manzi, Joyant, 1897) n.p.

We start to find answers when we return to material that has hitherto been classed as ephemera. The souvenir poster entitled *To the Workers* is addressed not to bourgeois manufacturers, but to the workers of France.<sup>9</sup> Its central theme is Progress, but it is Progress with a specific significance: the image, and the caption below, are urging France's working classes to support a vigorous, prosperous republican democracy, and to join in the progress and prosperity it will bring. In 1889, this political need was acute: the labour movement had not only been drawn to socialist groups on the left, but had that very year been drawn to the puzzling movement of right-wing populism, represented by General Boulanger.<sup>10</sup> When the exposition opened, people were taking bets as to when he would stage a coup and topple the republic.

If the key word of the exposition was Progress, the key signifier was power. The republicans of 1889 intended, quite literally, to dazzle the visitors with a display of power, using new lighting technology to translate electricity into illumination of the sort nobody had seen before. Paris became known as 'the city of light,' and the exposition as 'the fairyland city.' Numerous souvenir images commemorated this, the most startling visual experience of the exposition: George Garen's *The Eiffel Tower Illuminated*, for example, captures the awesome power of light,<sup>11</sup> and countless other images described the illumination of the dome and, most spectacular of all, the so-called illuminated fountains, where coloured light was projected onto the water from within the fountain.

If the *Exposition* was a form of cultural synecdoche, how were foreign cultural forms, including music, represented in its displays? And what of the viewers who came to witness this spectacle? The exposition turned visitors into voyeurs, an irony captured by another photographer, who snapped a poignant image, entitled *The Street of Cairo*, of a lone visitor peeking through a hole in a wall at some display within.<sup>12</sup> Our *Figaro* guides had assured us that the *Exposition* was one enormous 'lesson based on things,' that is, a chance to learn about French and foreign cultures by examining their products.<sup>13</sup> These included a number of cultures that were seen as being 'exotic'. First, the *Exposition* presumed to re-create a continuous piece of reality, such as the precinct devoted to Algeria and Tunisia, complete with its own bazaar. Secondly, it presumed to offer a facsimile of human society and labour: contemporary photographs depict artisans practising and demonstrating their crafts in precincts such as the Moroccan section. Thus far, the didactic purpose of the *Exposition* does not necessarily seem altogether inappropriate. We experience more marked unease, however, when we contemplate images of the reconstruction of the Senegalese village. The presence of Europeans at the railing on the left creates the uncomfortable impression of a human zoo, although we also know that for some of these African subjects the impression was actually mutual. One of the most remarked exotic displays was the Egyptian section, which was created by a group of eighty private entrepreneurs from Cairo. The centrepiece of the exhibition was the so-called Street of Cairo, a reconstruction of a whole street of Old Cairo created with original architectural

<sup>9</sup> *To the Workers*, listed, but not reproduced, in the exhibition catalogue, *Paris in the Late 19th Century* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 1996) 188.

<sup>10</sup> See William Irvine, *The Boulanger Affair Reconsidered. Royalism, Boulangism, and the Origins of the Radical Right in France* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Georges Garen, *Lighting of the Eiffel Tower for the Exposition Universelle of 1889*, reproduced in *Paris in the Late 19th Century* 61.

<sup>12</sup> Reproduced in Mathieu, 1889. *La Tour Eiffel et l'Exposition universelle* 84.

<sup>13</sup> Berr, et al., *Exposition de 1889* 5.

fragments imported for the occasion. It was, the *Figaro* guides said, a 'marvel'. The most popular feature was a café complete with Arabic music and the sinuous dancing of one Almesh Aiousché.<sup>14</sup> 'In the depths of the café,' the guides wrote, 'guzlas, tambourines and tarbuks sounded.'<sup>15</sup> Music was not the only pleasure: the guides noted the authenticity of having practising artisans and real Egyptian donkeys and their drivers. The height of this cultural synecdoche was perhaps accidental: visitors marvelled that there were even real Egyptian mosquitoes, which had apparently been carried in the wood of the exhibits and had hatched out in France.

In the case of the Cairo street, the musical element, like the architectural, was evidently intended primarily to create a sense of local culture. Some of these musical components provided aesthetic revelations for French artists of the sort that the organisers of the exposition may not have intended. It is true that the exposition publicity frequently suggested that artists of various types could come here to study and to learn from excellent examples of their art, but I think that the underlying assumption would have been that French artists would have studied examples of *western* art. Instead, a number of prominent creative artists experienced profound discoveries from contact with eastern art forms. One of the most significant was Debussy's discovery of gamelan music in the Pavilion of Java, a revelation which made him feel that western percussion was relatively primitive by comparison. Years later, he would write with equal enthusiasm to his companion of the moment, 'But my dear old chap! Remember that Javanese music which contained all the nuances, even those that we cannot name, and in which the tonic and the dominant were nothing more than vain illusions to be used by silly children.'<sup>16</sup> The resonances of this experience are to be heard in *La Rêverie* of 1890, and in some pieces in *Pour le Piano*. Debussy was not alone. Two concerts of Russian music held in June 1889, and directed by Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazounov, were also to prove revelatory for both Debussy and Ravel. For Eric Satie, by contrast, it was the direct contact with Hungarian music and gypsy musicians that provided the aesthetic stimulus for some of his *Gnossiennes*, which he began composing in July 1889.<sup>17</sup>

### Republicanism and Patriotism

In choosing the title 'Mapping the Colonial Mind,' I was very much aware that this paper could equally well have been called 'Mapping the Republican Mind.' When we study the *Exposition* of 1889, we have constantly to remember that it was the *second* exposition held during the Third Republic. The first, held in 1878, had been something of a disappointment, and it had been interpreted as a sign that the republic itself was not in a good state. The *Exposition* of 1889 was therefore planned to be an exhibition to end all exhibitions. It was to prove to the world that, two decades after the humiliating defeat at the hands of the Prussians and the unavowed shame of a murderous civil war, France had healed its wounds and was strong again. In addition, since 1878, the true republicans had come to power, and between 1880 and 1889 had elaborated a confident, constructive vision of what a truly republican nation

<sup>14</sup> *Dancer and Musicians at the Egyptian Café, in 'the Street of Cairo'*, reproduced in Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985) 140.

<sup>15</sup> Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque* 182.

<sup>16</sup> Pascal Ory, 1889. *La Mémoire des siècles. L'Expo universelle* (Paris: Editions complexe, 1989) 105–6.

<sup>17</sup> Ory, 1889. *La Mémoire des siècles* 103.

might be. A reading of the *Exposition universelle* allows us to explore how the exhibition might have used the display of culture, including music, to assert some republican themes specific to the early years of the Third Republic.

While the colonial discourse is probably the one that stands out most to modern viewers, it was by no means the only discursive use of music. To an enlightened, reform-minded republican in 1889, the pedagogical use of music was of equal, or perhaps greater, importance. When the makers of the exhibition conceived of the nine fundamental categories of objects to be displayed,<sup>18</sup> they thought of the second group as belonging to education and teaching. Of that group's eleven sub-categories, one was entirely devoted to musical instruments. To the modern viewer, this would seem so natural that it is obvious, but in 1889 the teaching of music had itself assumed a massive new importance in the republicans' programme to create a whole new generation of truly republican citizens. Since the advent of a truly republican regime in 1879–80 (the so-called Republic of the Republicans), a quiet revolution had been under way under the aegis of Jules Ferry, to create a national system of primary education that would be free, compulsory, secular and, inevitably, republican. The leaders of the Third Republic had learned the bitter lessons that had previously undone the First Republic and the Second Republic: one cannot establish a republican form of government unless you have a population imbued with the values of republicanism itself.<sup>19</sup>

The republicans also understood that it was not sufficient simply to create the new schoolrooms and a new pedagogy: it was crucial to present their reforms in a pictorial form that would both explain and glamorise the new style of education. To do this, they adapted an existing cultural form, the Salon painting, to produce large, realistic yet sentimentalised images of the republic's new classrooms. They created a team of painters who were willing to devote their careers to a sort of 'schoolroom realism.' Jean Geoffroy's monumental painting, *The Classroom*, was executed in 1889, and proudly exhibited at the *Exposition* of 1889 to show the world the new type of school the republicans had created across France. In fact, school reform had proceeded fitfully throughout the nineteenth century, but between 1880 and 1889 the republicans, guided by Jules Ferry, undertook to consolidate all existing efforts and to create a uniform system of primary school education that would be universal, secular and free. The result was a new classroom environment, dutifully recorded here by Geoffroy, and a new pedagogy, which anticipated many of the fundamentals of modern teaching. These children were taught, for example, to proceed by empiricism, to learn 'lessons from things,' a republican belief which found a parallel in the idea that the *Exposition* of 1889 was 'a lesson from things for big people.'<sup>20</sup> All subjects were deliberately used to propagate patriotic messages. Albert Bettanier's schoolroom painting, *The black stain* depicts a Geography lesson, where the schoolteacher uses the pretext of teaching the provinces of France to talk about the 'black stain' on the nation's honour, meaning the two provinces of Alsace and Lorraine which France had lost to Prussia in 1871.

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<sup>18</sup> These were, in order, Works of Art, Education and Teaching, Furniture and Accessories, Fabrics, Clothing and Accessories, Primary Industries, Raw Materials and Worked Materials, Tools and Procedures of Mechanical Industries, Food, Agriculture and Horticulture. Berr et al, *Exposition de 1889* 8–12.

<sup>19</sup> See Philippe Nord, *The Republican Moment. Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Berr, et al., *Exposition de 1889* 8.

While Geography taught students the negative features that had caused France's humiliating defeat, Music, including singing, was to be used remedially to cure the same faults. Auguste Truphème's painting, *A Singing Lesson in a Public School in Paris* (1884) provides a pictorial record of the sort of spirited, and no doubt patriotic, singing that took place in these classes (See Fig. 3). Here, the students gather around the piano while a teacher conducts with great brio; the song they are singing would almost certainly have come from Paul Deroulède's *Songs of a Soldier*,<sup>21</sup> a collection of bellicose songs that were compulsorily used in these new schools. Indeed, the discursive use of music and song had been the subject of a deliberate and purposeful study by a republican Commission on the Teaching of Song, which had begun with a report from Saint-Saëns in 1880, and concluded with the publication of a collection of reports in 1884.<sup>22</sup> One member of this committee, Albert Dupaigne, reminded his readers that this was a moment in the nation's destiny when all people of good will were considering how to use education to achieve the moral regeneration of France, especially of the working classes. He implored the nation's poets to think of writing patriotic songs suitable for use in the classroom.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 3.** Auguste Truphème. *A Singing Lesson in a Public School in Paris*. 1884. Oil on Canvas. Present whereabouts unknown. Salon photograph in the collection of Michael Adcock.



<sup>21</sup> Paul Deroulède, *Chants du Soldat* (Paris: Calmann Levy, 1888).

<sup>22</sup> Ministère de l'Instruction publique et des Beaux-Arts, *Enseignement du chant. Travaux de la Commission. Rapports et programmes* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1884).

<sup>23</sup> Albert Dupaigne, 'Rapport de M. Albert Dupaigne', in Ministère de l'Instruction publique et des Beaux-Arts, *Enseignement du chant* 104.

The republican music educators concluded that France had been defeated by Prussia because French society had become soft and decadent, and lacking in martial spirit. They accordingly looked to military parade music to instill more virile qualities, especially in young men. Another large Salon painting, J. Brunet's *Look at Them Going By!* translates the new republican spirit into a visually compelling image: when soldiers are marching past the school, the teacher does not seek to hold his students' attention in the classroom, but actually takes them out to see the parade. Our guides to the *Exposition* of 1889 are also careful to signal to us that there is an intense programme of military music: there was a recital by four military bands each day on the Champ de Mars, and on Sunday there was also regimental music on the Esplanade des Invalides.<sup>24</sup> In addition, there was one enormous festival of military music, held in July in the imposing surroundings of the massive Palace of Industry.<sup>25</sup> Of course, military music had been a staple of popular festivity since time immemorial, hence was not the invention of the Third Republic; by 1889, however, it had assumed new signification in the light of the nation's obsession with its physical degeneration.

### The Nation's Cultural Production at the Trocadéro

Finally, the *Exposition* of 1889 served as the site for two parallel retrospective exhibitions of France's national culture: one hundred years of visual art, and one hundred years of music. The Trocadéro had been built for the previous exposition of 1878, and had been retained for use in 1889 (see Fig. 4). If the *Exposition* was to be a statement about the state of France in 1889, it was also to be a statement about France in the broader perspective of the nation's contribution to important forms of European culture, notably painting and music. The first of these was a great retrospective exhibition of the masterpieces of French art from 1789 to the present. The second element was a similar retrospective of the great works of French composers. The centre of this palace was occupied by a grandiose concert hall, seating some six thousand but, from all accounts, with dreadful acoustics. Our *Figaro* guides took great care to alert us to this magnificent display of concert music by French composers, contemporary and past. They listed five main concerts, presented respectively by the Concerts Lamoureux, the Association artistique, the Société des Concerts, the Opéra comique and the Opéra.<sup>26</sup> There was also a pair of choral competitions held at the Trocadéro in June.<sup>27</sup> These were to be attended from choral societies all over France. Finally, and very significantly, there was a massive recital of choral groups from the Seine Department, representing choral students from all the republic's new schools in the City of Paris and the adjoining areas of Sceaux and Saint-Denis.<sup>28</sup>

What might we conclude about the exposition of 1889? What conclusions did these visitors take away with them after an exhausting day visiting the site? Certainly, many French citizens evidently received the intended message about the health of the republic, because in the subsequent elections the republic recovered its electoral base, and the threat from the conservative right evaporated. Apart from the short-term political effect, the longer cultural and anthropological understandings created richly deserve further study, both in this and

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<sup>24</sup> Berr, et al., *Exposition de 1889* 41.

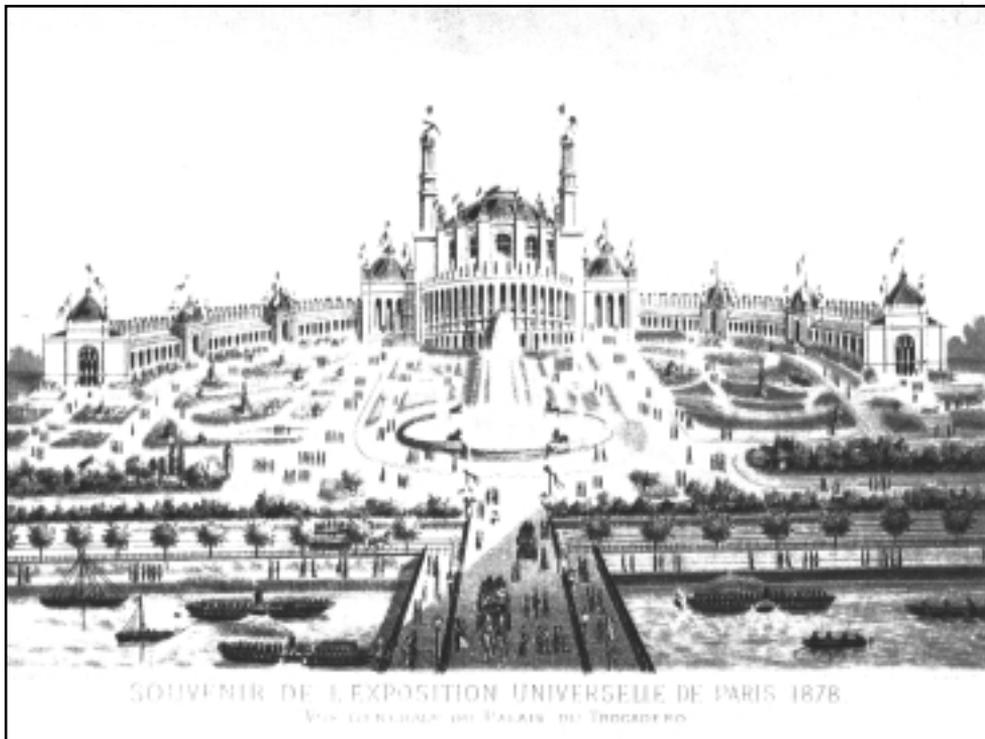
<sup>25</sup> Berr, et al., *Exposition de 1889* 46.

<sup>26</sup> Berr, et al., *Exposition de 1889* 45–46.

<sup>27</sup> Berr, et al., *Exposition de 1889* 46.

<sup>28</sup> Berr, et al., *Exposition de 1889* 47.

**Figure 4.** L. Mertens. *General View of the Trocadero Palace*. 1878. Colour lithograph. Collection of Michael Adcock.



subsequent expositions. Finally, the exposition proved to be a potent didactic instrument in the forging of a republican nation. It brought together messages about France's rapid colonial expansion during the early Third Republic, its continuing contribution to western European culture in the visual arts and in music, and its creation of a new citizenry in Jules Ferry's system of primary schools. Given that the Third Republic did survive its initial transitory existence to become one of the longest regimes in recent French history—it lasted from 1870 until 1940—we must accredit at least some of its early success to its skilful adaptation of the existing tradition of the international exposition.