

Parisian migrations

A report of the Western European Studies Section's Paris conference

by Denis Lacroix

From March 22 to 26, 2004, 120 North American and European academics met in Paris at ACRL's Western European Studies Section (WESS) Second International Conference. Participants spent the week discussing *Migrations in Society, Culture, and the Library* at various locations: la Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF) (François-Mitterrand site), l'Espace Georges Bernanos (near the Opera Garnier and the Galeries Lafayette), and the Salon du livre (Porte de Versailles). The sessions, organized social and cultural events, and personal experiences in the French capital provided both a theoretical exploration and a practical discovery of the issues and realities of the changing world of libraries and publishing.

Speakers and attendees discussed the migrations of literature, book collections, and art in the context of evolving formats and reflected upon the realities of publishing. Jean-Noël Jeanneney, BNF's president, observed that the migration of print to electronic format has re-established the book's original nomadic identity, thereby potentially facilitating unrestrained social proliferation. This uncontrollable migration, according to keynote speaker Jean-Claude Guéron (University of Montreal), has concerned authorities from Gutenberg's time to ours. In working toward the formation of what Guéron

calls new epistemic communities, librarians need to become aware of the effects of textual migration on readers. Roger Chartier, director of the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, concluded the conference by stating that "medium defines or redefines the readership, the meaning, and the status that a work has." Chartier predicted that the future of the electronic migration of texts depends on how well the online medium manages to exceed its present tendency towards fragmentation and discontinuity.

Salon du livre

At the Salon du livre, WESS members benefited not only from the 160,000-square-foot of exhibition floor space occupied by 1,500 publishers, but also from two informative panel sessions hosted by the national publishers union of France. The topic was the present and future of French publishing as seen by a number of publishers and authors. Le Bureau international de l'édition française (BIEF) and les éditions Grasset, du Seuil, Gallimard, Buchet-Chastel, de l'Herne, and la Découverte contributed to the portrayal of the French book world. Buchet-Chastel invited authors Michela Marzano and Ong Thong Hoeung, l'Herne presented Jean-Paul Charnay to the audience, and Le Seuil not only celebrated

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its author and editor Jean-Louis Schlegel, but also its online database of Roland Barthes textual and audio documents.

Olivier Nora, president of les Éditions Grasset, pointed out that French and American publishing resemble each other in the importance of supply and demand in the adult book trade, but differ significantly nonetheless. Speaking from a French perspective, he noted five main points of divergence. First, the fixed book price favors a bottom-up structure and allows a wide range of publishing houses, both big and small, to exist in a symbiotic relationship. Second, in order to prevent unequal competition in the publishing industry, France does not permit book advertisements on television. Third, French writers generally do not hire agents. They simply send their manuscripts directly to publishers. Nora likened French publishers to both hunters and farmers, while stating that their American counterparts are only farmers. This dual approach sustains publishers who take risks on emerging authors in hopes that they may flourish in the future. Fourth, the French book market benefits from an aid structure, which includes aid to bookstores and publishers. Finally, French publishers are a tight-knit community, which Nora describes as endogamous and conniving.

Learning about libraries

WESS conference participants also took part in a tour of BNF and the Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian, which presented the opportunity to learn about French libraries and their rich multicultural heritage. Two groups toured the François-Mitterrand site of the BNF, which opened in 1996, and discovered its Haut-de-Jardin Reference Library and its Rez-de-Jardin Research Library, as well as its extensive closed stacks, whose resources are served to the public through 300 electronic carts traveling on 5 miles of rails. From the depth of its nearly 250 miles of shelving, its 200,000 rare books, and five library sites, BNF has uncovered and is exhibiting until June 20, 2004, 130 exceptional Chinese works dating back to the fifth century A.D. Entitled *Chine, l'Empire du trait*,¹ this exhibit breathes life into BNF's collection of Chinese calligraphic works, paintings, and poetic texts, which are a good example of textual migrations² from

one continent to another. Migration and multiculturalism are also an integral part of the Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian,³ whose library opened in 1965 and provides access to more than 70,000 volumes in every subject area of the humanities relating to Portuguese culture. The encyclopaedic nature of the library attempts to encompass the entire Lusophone world.

Culture and comradery

Receptions at Paris 6th district's City Hall and Altitude 95 in the Eiffel Tower, sponsored by Jean Touzot Librairie Internationale and Aux Amateurs de Livres International respectively, provided conference attendees with a taste of exquisite French culture and nurtured social and professional relations. Jean-Pierre Lecoq, mayor of the 6th district, and Jean-Denis Touzot, president of the Librairie Jean Touzot, warmly welcomed WESS participants to a concert and reception at city hall. French music and literature had a place of honor during this sonorous concert of pieces by Claude Debussy, Hector Berlioz, and Henri Duparc, as well as the vocal arrangements of Théophile Gautier, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Jean Lahor, and Charles Baudelaire's poetry. The celebration of French culture ended with mingling over sushi and wine.

Similarly, Aux Amateurs de Livres treated conference attendees to a champagne aperitif before accompanying them down Avenue de Suffren and up to the Eiffel Tower's first floor restaurant, Altitude 95, in a double-decker elevator.

Inspired by their Parisian experience, WESS members have resolved to continue to create and foster cooperative relations between French and North-American libraries, as well as to plan a third international conference in five to seven years.

Notes

1. Sylvie Lisiecki, *L'art du trait en Chine, Chroniques de la Bibliothèque nationale de France* 25 (January-March 2004): 9-10.

2. The exhibit has also migrated to the digital medium as it is partly viewable through the BNF's virtual exhibit page: expositions.bnf.fr/ (accessed June 15, 2004).

3. See the Centre's homepage for a link to the library's catalog at www.gulbenkian-paris.org/. ■