

Short guide for visit to the Museum of Immigration

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Practical information

Get your ticket online here, before the day if possible

<https://palaisportedoree.tickeasy.com/en-GB/products>

If you are under 25, it's free. If you are older, it is 12 euros.

If you forget, you can buy a ticket at the museum, but the queue can be half an hour.

If you lose us, the address of the museum is 293 Avenue Daumesnil; the nearest Metro is Porte Dorée.

Meet on Thursday at 10h15 at the main entrance of the conference, 8 Ave de Saint Mandé. I will be wearing my decorative baseball cap.

We will walk to the museum : it is 25 minutes' walk maximum.

On arrival, I will give a very short introduction : then you are free to visit at your own pace (and find your way back to the conference :)) I will be there for any questions.

We are very lucky to have an immigration history museum in Paris. Many European capital cities do not have one. It was opened in 2007, and, as we shall see, they chose a very significant building for the site.

As in all Western countries there is a need for constant work to spread understanding of racism and immigration, and one sometimes gets the impression that French school students learn more about racism in the US than about racism in France: their high school is more likely to be named after Angela Davis or Nelson Mandela than after a Black figure from French history.

The Art Deco palace was built in 1931 for the *Exposition coloniale internationale*, an immense event celebrating what was then called “la plus grande France”—colonial France. The palace was designed to glorify the empire, with elaborate bas-reliefs depicting exotic animals, tropical plants, and idealized scenes of French colonial rule.

In 2007 then, the palace was reborn as the Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration—France’s National Immigration History Museum.

When it first opened, it seemed to take a few years to get its bearing and find a way of presenting the history which was both serious, well explained for a non-academic audience, and included some fun. Through personal stories, historical documents, photographs, films, popular music (oh yes!) and art, it explores how immigrants have shaped French society—economically, culturally, and politically.

You'll learn about the Italian bricklayers of the 1920s, the North African workers who helped rebuild France after World War II, Portuguese nannies, Vietnamese students, and Malian musicians. There is hardship, racism, exclusion—but also community, fightback and more.

The museum receives over a quarter of a million visitors every year, including large numbers of school groups.

About a third of the text in the main exhibition is translated into English. However, there is so much text that this is plenty for a visit of a good length. The history of immigration is told through a series of key dates, each illustrated with documents, posters, objects, videos, interviews, and so on. Below you have a very brief introduction to each key date.

The museum shows, sometimes accidentally, the strengths and the weaknesses of French society's treatment immigrants. There are elements of the history of racism from the antisemitic campaign against Dreyfus in the 19th century, to the rise of the far right National Front in the 1980s continuing until today. While today, islamophobia is at the centre of racism in France, you will find very little about it in this museum. In my opinion, this is because all parts of the political spectrum have frequently been extremely reluctant to campaign against islamophobia , although over the last seven years, this has begun to change.

Before you enter the main building, stop on the steps and turn around: across the road you will see a monument to French colonial hero, Marchand, showing French soldiers working with half naked Senegalese workers.

Little has been done in France to challenge such statues, as has been done in some countries. Indeed in 2020 president Macron vowed "The Republic will take down no statues".

Nevertheless, some change has come. In 2022, a statue was erected in Paris in honour of Solitude, a heroine of the struggle against slavery in Guadeloupe, executed in 1802. And next year a national monument to the victims of slavery is due to be inaugurated not far from the Eiffel Tower at Trocadero. Nearly a quarter of a million names of enslaved people will be engraved on it.

Inside the building: ground floor

As you go into the main building, you will see that the main collection is upstairs. But first you should look at the big room on the ground floor, which is covered with many colonialist frescoes showing France « bringing civilization » to every corner of the globe. French priests ministering to sparsely clothed generic Africans, French doctors and nuns helping generic Asians, etc, the scenes overlooked by Lady Science, Lady Industry, and a few more. 1931 frescoes produced for the Colonial Exhibition: you can read much more about them in English here :

<https://monument.palais-portedoree.fr/en/the-settings/the-palais-s-function-room/ducos-de-la-haille-s-fresco>



Upstairs is the main exhibition, in a dozen rooms based on around a dozen key dates. In fact there are eleven key date rooms, and a popular music room.



1685

1685

- The Royal Edict on the organization of slavery is published, often known as the Black Code (code noir). The slave trade is

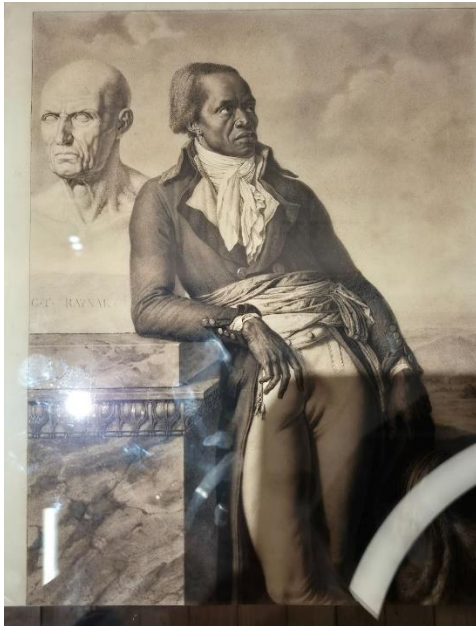
encouraged to staff the sugar plantations. Provision is made for baptizing slaves and rules established concerning flogging and branding.



1789

1789 - Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen
(August 26, 1789)

This founding text of the French Revolution proclaims that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights” and establishes the principle of the universality of rights (freedom of opinion, religion, property rights, right to resist oppression). Although a distinction is made between “active” and “passive” citizens (foreigners are excluded from voting), the universal scope of these articles will become the benchmark for future asylum regimes and immigration laws . Don’t miss the 1794 decree abolishing slavery, which followed the 1791 decree declaring that any enslaved person arriving in France was automatically freed. These were heady time. In 1802, Napoleon preparing to become emperor brought back slavery and the final abolition had to wait 46 years till 1848.

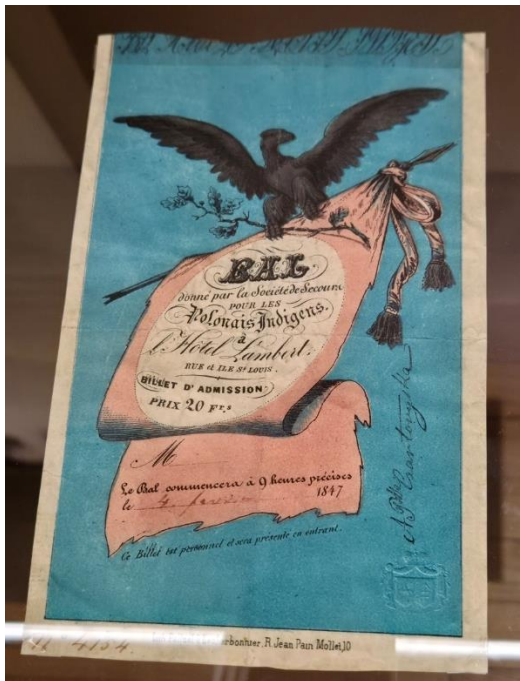


Jean-Baptiste Bellay an elected member of the Convention (parliament) from 1793 to 1799.

1848

the 'Springtime of Nations'.

1848 saw a number of uprisings against the vast empires which controlled Europe in the East. Polish, Italian and German refugees in large numbers came to Paris for safety, fleeing repression. This poster advertises a dance to raise money for destitute Polish refugees.



1889

In 1889, the double jus soli was brought in - this meant you had French nationality if at least one of your parents was born in France. This is still the case today : if you are born in France to foreign parents, you can apply for nationality but it is not automatic.

The drawing below shows Belgian immigrants working in agriculture. Popular anti-Belgian riots broke out to protest at their presence in the country. The assassination of the president of France by an Italian anarchist was used to build up prejudice against Italians.



This section of the museum also shows images and artefacts illustrating the centrality of antisemitism to racism at the time, and recounts the infamous Dreyfus case, of a Jewish man being wrongly accused of spying, a case which tore society and politics apart .

1917

Establishment of the identity card for foreigners living in France.

More and more effort was made by the French state from 1917 to 1930 to encourage foreign migrant workers to come to France to participate in the reconstruction after the Great War.



1931

At the beginning of a decade of extremes and crisis, the French government organizes an enormous Colonial Fair in Paris to celebrate the French Empire, and this is when this palace was built. The fair is huge, with many restaurants, replica temples, craft exhibitions etc. Eight million visitors are counted. The aim is public relations for the empire, and exhibits include “Native villages” where African people and others can be watched going about their “traditional lives”. Other colonial powers each have their own grand

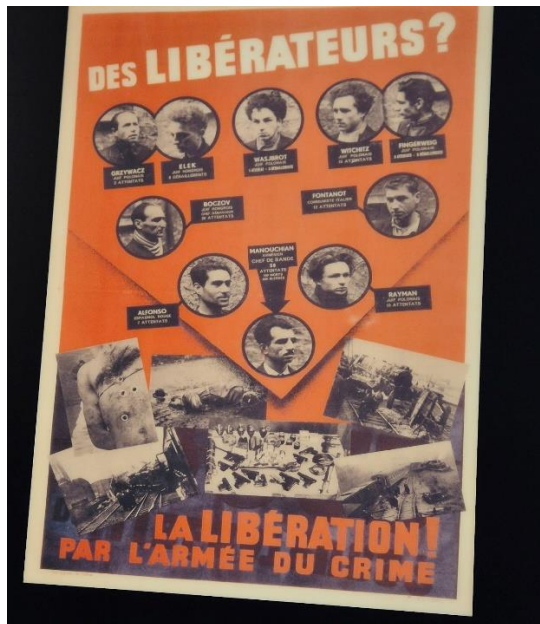
exhibition. Some counter-protests were organized, however, as this poster shows:



1940

The establishment of the Vichy government to collaborate with the Nazis was followed by the horrors of the Holocaust, as Jews, Gays, Communists and Resistance people were rounded up and deported to labour and death

camps. The slowly built up Resistance attracted many immigrants, including the well known group of the Red Poster (so known after the Nazi propaganda poster denouncing them). They were executed by firing squad at Mont Valérien near Paris, where to this day there is an important commemorative monument.



Music room



Music studio

By the 1930s, France's musical panorama was rich in a wide variety of musical scenes including foreign ones. Over the following decades, musical frontiers became blurred, allowing fruitful artistic encounters. A chronologically themed selection reflecting this history, from the 1930s to the 2000s, offers a chance to immerse oneself in various musical universes, meeting artists whose careers or works evoke the migratory experience. Among them are emblematic figures who have left their mark on entire generations, passing on their passion for music and helping to enrich a shared musical heritage.



Playlist 1 – Durée: 4'43"

Ça « swingue » à Paris

Playlist 2 – 4'58"

L'exil en musique

Playlist 3 – 5'17"

Indépendances et contestations

Playlist 4 – 4'29"

Le son de la révolte

Playlist 5 – 5'00"

Le Grand mix

Playlist 6 – 4'59"

Du Punk à la Zulu Nation

1962

The war for Algerian independence from France, which the Algerians won in 1962 after eight years of war against an infinitely better armed opponent, obviously had a huge effect on North African immigrants in France. Horror stories include that of the massacre of October 1961. The government had imposed a curfew on Algerians only, and a demonstration against this curfew took place. Tens of thousands took part. Several dozen were killed by the police, that night and on subsequent nights. “perhaps between 130 and 150” according to Le Monde.



1973

The arrival of the long economic crisis and the return of mass unemployment was used by racist organizations to build. Small groups of activists bitter about Algeria, fascists and other far right groups formed the National Front around Jean-Marie Le Pen.

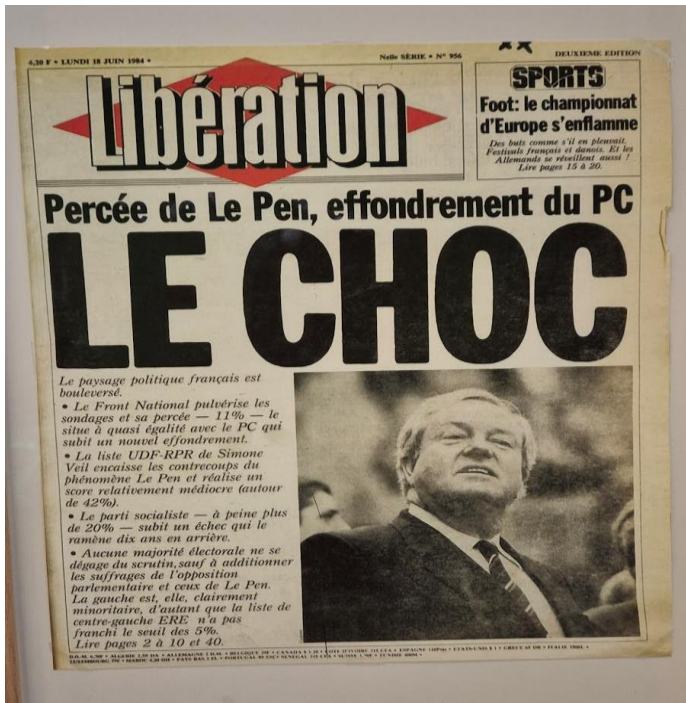


1983

After the victory of the left under François Mitterrand at the presidential elections of 1981, hopes of better times for immigrants were raised. The new government gave papers to 130,000 documented immigrants, improved rights to residence permits, and made some other reforms. The promised right to vote for non-French residents, however, did not materialize.

In 1983 the March for Equality and against racism symbolized the beginning of a new wave of anti-racist movements.

And in 1984, the first major electoral breakthrough of Jean-Marie Le Pen set into motion a slow rise of fascist and other far-right organizations which has continued to this day. In 2002, 2017 and 2022 these forces got through to the second round run-off in the presidential elections.



1995

In 1995 the Schengen agreement came into effect, meaning that citizens from 27 European countries could freely enter France and work if they pleased.

In the following year, 1996, a much publicized attack on a Paris church which undocumented migrants were occupying launched a movement of the undocumented - the “sans-papiers” which has sometimes been able, often with trade union support, to win residency papers for groups of workers in construction or hospitality in particular.

The question of immigration and racism remains absolutely central to French politics today, as can be seen by recent government decisions to ban the wearing, in high schools, of North African tunics – alleged to be symbols of religious affiliation, of local mayors deciding to ban full body swimsuits in their town swimming pools and so on. Meanwhile, sections of the Left put forward the idea of the « creolization » of France as a new ideal to aspire to.

This has been a very short introduction, for people who have not studied French history and politics, so it is obviously very much simplified. All opinions were mine only. I hope it has been useful to you.

