



## Cuzals: a visit to the Eco-Museum

by Patrick Wright

(written for the *Guardian*, summer 1992, previously unpublished)

In recent years, the 'Eco-Museum' has become a characteristic feature of the French scene. The prototype may be found in the National Museum of Folk Art and Tradition in Paris, but almost every region now seems to have at least one of these predominantly open air institutions devoted to the exhibition of its traditional ways of life. Some are little better than exhibition stalls for local producers, but there are a host of more ambitious versions, many of them opened in the last decade.

A few weeks ago I came across a fine example near Sauliac-sur-Célé, in the Southwestern Department of the Lot. Leaving the river Célé, the road winds up through a landscape of scrub oak and limestone, to a remote site called Cuzals. There was a small hamlet here at the end of the last century, but it was bought in 1919 by a wealthy industrialist from Lyon, who built himself a forty room neoclassical pile and established a model farm too. This wealthy outsider became mayor of the nearby town, but he had some disputes with the *maquis* during the war, and in 1943 his mansion was burned down.

The ruined and abandoned site was taken over in the early eighties by Quercy Recherche, an association of regional historians, which now runs the Quercy Open Air Museum here with financial assistance from the Ministry of Culture and various regional authorities.

Whatever 'themes' a particular eco-museum may find in the industrial, agricultural or domestic archaeology of its area, it will almost invariably include a programme of 'animations' in which ancient crafts are demonstrated and the past is coaxed into a resemblance of life. Cuzals is no exception, promising its visitors a chance to 'relive the life of an agricultural labourer from the time of the French Revolution to the present day'. The small fields of long-stemmed wheat testify to the live and summer-long demonstration of traditional harvesting techniques. Bread is baked in the ancient way, and brown long-horned cows also perform archaeologically correct manoeuvres. At appointed intervals, a nonchalant and phlegmatic fellow steps out into the sun to drive about on ancient tractors, which he first tinkers into a resemblance of working order.

But Cuzals is not inclined to go too far in this direction. The *animateur* may run to a cheroot and a regional straw hat, but there is no tacky costume drama here, no illusionistic attempt to draw visitors into a faked up past. The guidebook declares that the role of the museum cannot be 'to embalm things for the sake of futile and retrograde delectation'. It declares Cuzals to be against 'petrification and excessive devotion', insisting that 'the thread of time is broken', and that the past should be approached with humour, plenty of critical spirit and a 'soupçon' of irreverence too.

Situated just inside the compound, the first exhibition is a jokey alienation device designed to mock the illusion that museums and archaeologists have direct access to the past. It presents an imaginary excavation of a late twentieth century site dug up by the archaeologists of an interplanetary civilisation in the fifth millenium AD. A battered old Citroen 2CV protrudes from blue sand which is also littered with other exposed objects - a traffic cone, old tin cans, a discarded computer keyboard.

This mess - described as 'one of the seven most prestigious archaeological sites in the solar system' - is submitted to bizarre, offbeam interpretation: traffic signs mistaken for popular art, an exhaust pipe described as a baton of command, a Cocoa Cola can displayed as a box of concentrated nutrients. A book by Bernard-Henri Levy, the *nouveau philosophe* of yesteryear, identified with considerable irony as 'probably a sacred text'.

Throughout Cuzals, the signs and printed explanations combine teacherly observation with subversive little *pensées*, many of which serve to undermine the strategy of the museum. Some take the hard facts of rural life, and turn them lose on the mythologies with which advertisers and rural onlookers have usurped them. Others enjoy the clash of contradictory interpretations - say the different ways in which an ancient water-carrying cart will be seen by an antique dealer, a working farmer and a curator or archaeologist. Others again question the very idea of regional culture.

It all began, say the signs, with the rise of tourism at the beginning of the twentieth century. This created a need to define as much of the world as possible in terms of regional type: every region needed its typical style of house, its typical costume and cuisine. So the region of Quercy got going on confit du canard and cassoulet, little round cheeses called Cabecou, walnuts, and all the other paraphernalia that is available in the discreetly placed shop.

Ironically, the house selected as typical of Quercy was not the most ancient but the most recent, which dated from the mid nineteenth century: a 'belle maison' of course, with a pigeon tower, an externally placed staircase - and

many of the other features that are shown here - dismantled and spread about in a little park of clichés described as an enclosure of regional architecture. It was left to the enthusiasts at Cuzals to reconstruct the prehistoric-looking bunker of true antiquity, in which people and animals lived under a single roughly thatched roof.

The Quercy Open Air Museum may not handle them with undue reverence, but it is not one of those museums that has gone to war against the objects in its collection, or sought to suppress their notoriously unreliable claim to speak for themselves with the help of a muzzle made of drab prose. Indeed, its relics are piled high in dense and only partly labelled profusion. Why settle for one old tin hip bath when fifteen slightly different ones are available?

Cuzals is like a semi-organised junk yard deposited on a barely tamed hillside, its clobber divided into a series of more or less differentiated heaps, each one housed in a selected outbuilding or a makeshift shelter of scaffolding and plastic sheeting. There are exhibitions concerned with such things as bee-keeping, Fire and Water, but the museum's heart is to be found up a rickety ladder in a cluttered 'attic' full of 'horological curiosities', where both time and the attempt to explain it have long since come undone.

Cuzals certainly has its pieties - about education, research and the importance of conserving the evidences of disappeared civilisation - but it is wary of the idea of restoration, and apparently not too troubled by knowing that 'the thread of time is broken'.

Other museums may polish and paint, or draft in a hundred willing amateurs to do it for them, but Cuzals is devoted to the idea and, indeed, to the close observation of rust. Having pulled a selection of abandoned old vans and cars out of the hedges of Quercy, it exhibits them in all their battered dereliction, insisting that the aim of this purposeful negligence is to conserve the traces of use that reveal the life of these objects, and which would be 'irremediably wiped out by all restoration'.

Eco-history lies not in the perfect appearance of things that have been rescued from time, but in the dents, cracks and tears that mark the ever-widening distance between past and present. The eco-museum may pay its respects to the heroic efforts made by the old rural folk to stem decay by mending, repairing, patching things, but in the end it bows to the law of 'universal entropic decomposition'.

This great accumulation of objects would certainly strike many of our museum designers as ramshackle and chaotic. But Cuzals justifies its untidy abundance on the grounds that the rural way of life was too layered and complex to be fully grasped in a single glance. Once you get the idea, this can be interesting enough.

What, you may wonder, is that carousel doing near the cafe area? The programme explains that it is certainly not here as 'an attraction' of the kind that might be found in a leisure park. Instead, it serves to mark the sense of festivity that was so fundamental to the old rural civilization: adults may no longer be able to sense the magic of the summer solstice, but children at least are still susceptible to occasional enchantment.

Similarly, there is a corner full of kitsch garden gnomes, plaster ravens and stools shaped like mushrooms, which offers its own elusive testimony to the banality that was always a feature of that irretrievably lost world.

The emergence of such eco-museums since the sixties has prompted considerable discussion. For some they are part of a healthy resurgence of regional culture, and healthily democratic in their commitment to the culture of ordinary men and women. Others, however, have associated them less with benign decentralisation than with a retreat from the more ambitious cultural and political projects of 1968. According to this line of argument, the eco-museum is where the historians of a generation that once shook the gaullist state have gone to trade their youthful belief in the emancipatory potential of the proletariat for a funky antiquarianism of 'roots', goats' milk cheese, and any old iron.

The visitors, meanwhile, seem content to wander about, some of them pushing their picnics on old wooden wheel barrows provided free of charge at the entrance. They visit the various displays, examining bits of machinery and remarking with amused horror, as they file through the various domestic interiors, on the faithfully reconstructed straw beds of history. They photograph the animations, buy the immensely solid-looking loaves of freshly baked bread and, like tourists everywhere, take moving pictures of motionless things.

Perhaps some of those who sit at brightly coloured tables under the shady trees to drink beer or the dry Rosé wine of the region also engage in rather more philosophical speculation. They may meditate on the issues identified by George Henri Rivière, an influential advocate of eco-museums, who worked to promote their development from his position at the National



Museum of Folk Art and Tradition in Paris: on the nature of time and space, for example, or on the relationship between man and nature.

A few renegades might stray beyond this list of approved topics to broach further questions. Is history is really as broken and defunct as the old time-keeping devices piled up in the museum's rickety attic? And now that a new right wing government is busy tightening up on France's immigration laws, does the rise of the eco-museum, with its emphasis on 'roots' and folk culture, actually turn out to have been a roundabout way of reclaiming ethnicity for the natives? Somewhere in the fertile, more or less organised confusion of Cuzals, there is probably a sign commenting on that too.



## [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported](#)

You are free:

- Ⓒ to Share - to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:

- Ⓘ Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
- Ⓓ Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- Ⓔ No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.
- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to this web page.
- Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.
- Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the author's moral rights.