

# Anthropology, Photography, and Painting: Jean Gabus and Hans Erni in Mauritania 1951–1952

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Cet article fait partie d'une série de six articles initialement présentés dans le cadre du panel « *Historicizing Anachronistic Motives* » qui s'est tenu lors de la première conférence internationale des histoires des anthropologies « *Doing Histories, Imagining Futures* » (4-7 décembre 2023, en ligne) co-organisée par le History of Anthropology Network de l'EASA et l'Università di Pisa avec le soutien de Bérose et de dix autres acteurs institutionnels dans le domaine de l'histoire de l'anthropologie. Le panel a été organisé par David Shankland (Royal Anthropological Institute ; University College London, Royaume-Uni), Christine Laurière (CNRS / UMR9022 Héritages, France) et Frederico Delgado Rosa (Universidade Nova de Lisboa, CRIA Centre for Research in Anthropology, Portugal).

In 2024, many historians of the social sciences and humanities are proponents of an inclusive narrative that recognizes the synchronic diversity of scientific practices without ranking them; if an argument at all, mere observation of the sheer variety in most “pre-paradigmatic” disciplines suggests that the disparity of practices, methods, concepts and ideas is more the rule than the exception. A large part of historiography has told another story. Focusing on the figure of the hero or the pioneer, it has, in contradiction of François Simiand’s warning against the “chronological idol” (1903), favoured the study of innovation processes rather than that of practices or institutions. As a consequence, actors, ideas, practices, or methods are placed in a sequence, where some of them are perceived as modern or passé – “intellectual rhizomes grown from trees ‘cut down’ in earlier periods” (Delgado Rosa, Laurière, Shankland 2023).

These problematic narratives constitute a specificity of the historiography of social sciences and humanities, partly because of the role that history plays in their curricula: it is used as a

simplifying tool for introducing students to a complex and messy state of the field. As such, it is written by, and from the perspective of, those who dominate the disciplinary fields today; chronicles of disparity and difference help to reject epistemic opponents through the mobilization of the past. In anthropology as in geography or in sociology, historiography, to misquote Carl v. Clausewitz, is the continuation of scientific controversies with other means (Reubi 2015). Anachronistic motives and hegemonic trends are usually little more than historiographic artefacts.

This is not to say that a relation of domination does not exist. Hegemony is real and so are minor traditions and scholars. But they are not always those that one expects. Following Susan Cannon's tautological definition, minor traditions are populated by those who are unable to understand what is at stake in a discipline and to impose their line of thought (1978: 137–165). Contrary to the hegemonical tradition, they do not possess the structured propensities that may help them to affect and orient the discipline: they are dominated – which is of course a circular mode of thought.

Time helps to understand and perceive hegemony. Scholars of minor traditions are not those who modify or renew the discipline. They may embrace innovations, but only after they have been accepted by others. They do not invent but follow: they are unable (or unwilling) to challenge the state of a discipline. Minor traditions and scholars do not set the agenda. Of course, a possible bias could be pointed to in the constitution of the corpus, as many inventions do not translate into innovations; hence it must also happen that new methods, concepts, research programmes or scientific objects disappear from the agenda before they are taken up. In this case, a counter-narrative to a perceived “backwardness” of minor actors vs pioneering work of “trend-setters” could be the “febrility” and the “conceptual hypertrophy” of dominant actors vs the “normal scientist”: stability is a virtue. Minor traditions should be of interest to historians.

First, minor traditions are certainly useless for grasping short-lived controversies but help understand common practice, stabilized by inertia of institutions and the lengths and slow changes of biography. They may not be innovative but are a majority, as minority is a political concept more than a demographic one. Therefore, it is interesting to know what minor or rather “minored” actors do and who they are: examining these traditions and actors and methods sheds light on what sciences are. Second, as minor traditions appear in opposition to dominant trends described by mainstream historiography, they can be surprising. But the estrangement that one may perceive on discovering their anthropological praxis, individual biographies, and scientific institutions is methodologically and heuristically enriching. When a case study conforms to the general scheme, no one wonders about the validity of methods, tools, or perspectives that were used. However, when it does not fit the general narrative, one has to look for alternative tools, new modes of inquiry, disregarded archives, or help from neighbouring disciplines, and, at least, understand the origins of the differences. Third, I realized in the past 20 years working on anthropology that the differences between minor and major traditions are not as important as they might have

appeared at first glance. The reason for this is that the historiography of dominant actors and traditions have encountered massive change. Much more than that of minor scholars, it has been complexified, nuanced, and modified, as they were often very much tainted by Whig and disciplinary narratives. To a certain extent, studying minor traditions helped to reread what had been presented as normal by what appears to be simplifying and hagiographic accounts. Minor traditions are not more contingent but have been examined in context: their historians took into consideration the fact that places, actors, and moments influence the production of knowledge. Looking at minor traditions, which always appear messy and complex, underlined the advantages of using a similar vantage point to study major traditions. As in the case of the history of women in science, the study of minor traditions helped to see and address what had been presented by dominants as “normal”. Working on minor traditions is hence not only about examining little known specificities, but more about shedding light on neutralized practices.

I aim to explore these considerations through the work of Jean Gabus (1908–1992), a Swiss cultural anthropologist whose contribution to his discipline was totally ignored in disciplinary history but might be of interest in understanding general developments of anthropology in the mid-20th century. My case study will be his 1950–1951 field trip to Mauritania, to which he invited the painter Hans Erni (1909–2014) to sketch some “scènes de vie” on the spot: this cooperation blurs the lines of the relation between arts and sciences and the chronology of the variation of objectivity (Daston, Galison 2007).

As a clear signal of minored actors, I will start my case with a short presentation of both protagonists, Jean Gabus as an ethnographer, and Hans Erni as a painter, before narrowing my study on the Mauritania expedition.



Fig. 1

Jean Gabus showing drawings by Hans Erni of African ornaments made during a recent expedition, 18 June 1961

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## Jean Gabus, Ethnographer

Jean Gabus was a Swiss scholar. He received an education in humanities and worked as a journalist/explorer among the Skolt in northern Finland in 1936 (Gabus 1936), and among the

Inuit in Canada around Hudson Bay in 1938–1939. After his Canadian trip that he started as a sensationalist journalist, he decided to use his documentation to write a dissertation under the supervision of Wilhelm Schmidt SVD, who had fled Austria with his Anthropos Institut and settled at the University of Fribourg. He received his PhD in 1942 (Gabus 1944). That same year, he was enrolled by geographer Paul Girardin to take part in a scientific mission, funded by the University of Fribourg Department for Geography, exploring the Niger loop in French Equatorial Africa (Gabus 1945).

In 1945 he was appointed director of the Musée d'ethnographie de Neuchâtel (MEN) and professor for geography and ethnology at the University of Neuchâtel. Once he held these positions, he both organized the renovation of the museum, that was to make him one of the promoters of European museology in Africa and Asia (Knodel & Reubi 2022), and started a broad, extensive research programme in French West and Central Africa: in 1946–1947, the Stinson expedition consisted of an airborne survey of various areas of the Sahara that helped him identify and locate places of interest. The Mauritania expedition in 1950–1951 was one of the fifteen trips that he made to this region before he retired in 1980.



Fig. 2

Jean Gabus, Recording of songs during the Hudson Bay mission, 1939

© MEN

This large research project can be understood in many respects as a surviving practice, a living fossil, of late 19th-century ethnography: Gabus favoured an extensive approach and he examined his objects on a very large geographic scale – roughly speaking the north-east corner of Africa. Moreover, he focused on the study of material culture: he collected literally tons of artefacts, tools, raw materials, or semi-finished objects that he kept in his museum and developed the idea of “artefact as witness” (*l'objet-témoin*) as, in his perspective, material culture would give capital insights into the life of the populations he studied. He also tended to work in a team, as in Marcel Mauss's recommendation (“partir plusieurs ensemble”, Mauss 1947: 17), as a means to be more efficient, that is to be faster, but also to apprehend simultaneously all the aspects of the cultural groups they encountered. Finally, in all his expeditions, Gabus advocated the use of mechanical means of recording. He worked with photography, cinematography, and phonography: on the shores of Hudson Bay, he used three reels of film and recorded sixty-one vinyl plates, covering what he judged to be the main aspects of Inuit musical life. He continued to build up sound and film archives in the

Sahara: during the Stinson expedition, he shot a film on Tuareg dances, and recorded eight reels during the 1948–1949 expedition, as well as the songs of the best-known griots of the Mauritanian Trarza and the main instruments of the Moors. He also regularly used photography, bringing back several thousand snapshots: “Photographs”, he wrote to his correspondent Haroun ould Cheikh Sidya, “cannot betray”. [1]

This use of mechanical recording techniques in the field went hand in hand with the creation, as soon as he was appointed head of the MEN, of various departments at the museum, which demonstrated his interest in this type of document. He set up a photo library in 1945, followed by a film and a sound library the next year. In his own words, it was a way of rationalizing knowledge and ensuring its dissemination (1958: 13). But it was also a way of excluding the scholar and his subjectivity from scientific work, which was based on a similar rationale to the establishment of collections of objects, specific to museum activity. Indeed, in the first third of the twentieth century, many ethnographers linked objects and mechanical recording methods such as photography. For Eugène Pittard, director of the Musée Ethnographique de Genève (1901-1951),

there are too many elements of subjectivity in [ethnographic] descriptions [...]. What is needed about the material life of a people is not just a description of the instrument used, the adornment worn, the deformation or mutilation in use, the physical type of the population. It is the instrument, the ornament, the representation by the object itself or by the photograph of the deformation or mutilation, etc. (Pittard 1901: 4).

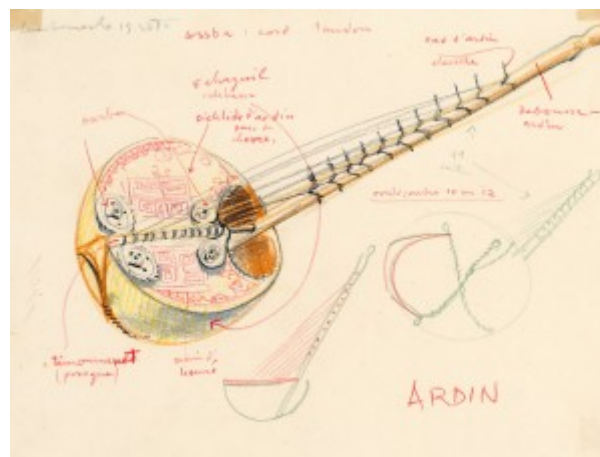


Fig. 3

Study of an ardin harp, 1951. Coloured pencil drawing on paper

© Hans Erni, MEN

For Gabus and many of his colleagues, the object, or the mechanical recording of an ethnographic reality, had very important virtues: they were freed from the scholar’s gaze and could be used independently of the person who had created them (Gabus 1958: 13). His interest in material culture, mechanical recordings, and collective work, which he saw as a tool to multiply the perspectives and erase subjectivity, fitted perfectly into the “mechanical objectivity” coined by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2007).



Fig. 4

Ardin harp player, 1951

© Jean Gabus, MEN

It is well known that, since its invention in the mid-nineteenth century, photography had been conceived by some scientists as a means of mechanically and objectively recording reality. William Henry Fox Talbot, who described photography as the 'pencil of nature' (1844–1846), is a perfect illustration of this belief in the possibility of an unmediated recording of the world, independent of the photographer. Indeed, very early on, commentaries on photography presented it as an objective medium, and philosophers never ceased to question the realistic or conventional nature of the photographic medium (Molderings & Wedekind 2009).



Fig. 5

A group of musicians, 1951

© Jean Gabus, MEN

In the vast literature on this medium and its scientific uses, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's work on the relationships between images, objectivity and the scholarly ethos marked a breakthrough (2007). According to them, it is not so much images in general or

photography in particular that are at stake, but rather conceptions of objectivity and the legitimate investment of the researcher's subjectivity in his or her work and they developed a chronology of epistemic virtues that constitute complex relationships between images, scholarly ethos and scientific practices. In their (contested) [2] narrative, the birth of photography played an important role in the transition from the first to the second of these virtues: from an experienced individual producing images that are syntheses of the reality that his experience and talent may have constituted, the legitimate scientist became, in the mid-nineteenth century, a neutral agent who no longer interfered in the constitution of knowledge reduced to the description of particulars. This second epistemic virtue relegated the quest for 'essence', based on talent and experience, to an outdated version of science: scientific work now demanded transparency on the part of the scientist and a mechanical recording of phenomena. Gabus' objectivist perspective was probably a means to demonstrate the seriousness of his work in the 1930s, when he was a mere journalist. It was a sort of hyper-correction of what he believed to be scientific protocol. To the reader of hagiographical historiography, it may appear partly dated in the context of the second half of the 20th century, even if this perspective is indeed quite common among the mass of anthropologists.

## Hans Erni, Painter

For all that, Jean Gabus did not adopt mechanical objectivity without reservations. Despite his conviction that access to knowledge was facilitated by the disappearance of the scholar, in 1950 he developed a project in which he teamed up with one of the most important Swiss painters of the second half of the 20th century, Hans Erni. It was proposed that he accompany Gabus in Mauritania, where he was expected to sketch scenes of the everyday life of the local populations. Gabus believed that this kind of visual production would have a value beyond that of photographs and films. 'As usual, we took along recording, filming and photographic equipment [...]. But we have long wanted to supplement this too dry documentation with the artistic contribution of a talented painter' (1950: 63). This would be Erni.

Moreover, this use of non-mechanical images was nothing new for Gabus: he himself made extensive use of drawings and encouraged his collaborators to do the same (Gabus 1950: 62). Even in the context of the 1950–1951 Mauritanian expedition, he collaborated with other draughtsmen and painters, such as André Chautems and Aymé Montandon, who made drawings of tools and jewellery brought back from the Sahara. But they did not enjoy the same status as Erni: he was the only artist, whose work Gabus expected to renew ethnographic knowledge. What was new for Gabus [3] in 1950 was not the use of non-mechanical images, but of the ability to see: the "meticulous" drawings of Chautems and Montandon only constituted a "complete and valid documentation for all specialists in civilisations": [4] they did not produce any new type of knowledge. Conversely, as he wrote in the second volume of his trilogy *Au Sahara*, "photographs have a documentary value [but] can be much more and better than that if the photographer has talent" (1958:13). It was not only

the medium that was at stake, but the qualities and the talent of the painter or photographer. [5] This was the case with Erni, whom Gabus judged to be very talented and with whom he shared humanist ideals.

For Gabus, Erni's talent stemmed in part from his training: after completing an apprenticeship as a draughtsman and architect, he enrolled at the Lucerne School of Arts and Crafts in 1927. He then studied at the Académie Julian in Paris and continued his artistic training with Heinrich Wölfflin in Berlin. After returning to Paris, he joined the Abstraction-Création group, frequenting and exhibiting with Constantin Brancusi, Vassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, before joining the Allianz group in 1937. He soon developed a synthesis between abstract language and figurative representation, as evidenced by the murals he presented for the 1939 Swiss National Exhibition, which earned him his reputation. His talent, which made him the "equal of Picasso or Dalí" in the eyes of Gabus (1983: 26), promoted him to the rank of "authentic" artist, capable of producing images that transcended the aridity of photographic objectivity.

In Gabus's view, Erni also shared with him the same perspective on humanity (Gabus 1954b: 10): both were "in search of the old human ground", as Gabus put it (1954a: 11), and sought to share it with a broad public, Gabus through a popular museum, Erni through the choice of monumental formats or widely distributed media (banknotes, stamps, etc.). But above all, "colours and forms [were], for Erni, the vehicles of a prospective art that transmits human messages in space and time" (Gabus 1983: 26): colours and forms were in fact neither the sole expression of the painter, nor the reality itself, but derived from things behind perceivable reality that could explain it and that only some artists can see. Thus, Gabus concludes in a sort of structuralist vein, "art meets science" (Gabus 1954a: 36).

## The Painter's Part

Against the 'dry' documentation mentioned above, Gabus asserted his desire to solicit the 'receptivity of the artist'.

What [Erni] would understand, what he would produce, would be as interesting – in a very different field – as the information requested from the sociologist, the anthropologist, the musicologist. By questioning the world of Art, made up of sensitivities, emotions, intuitions – sometimes brilliant! – we were running a few risks. Our scrupulous objectivity might be compromised! These are the risks of research, and if they earn us a little of the emotion that radiates from every living being, we are only getting closer to the truth (Gabus 1950: 63).

Although this perspective might appear either outdated or too modern in 1950, it is actually an idea that one would encounter: philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1955: 30) or historian Henri-Irénée Marrou (1954: 51–61) are good examples, but ethnologist Odette du Puigauveau and painter Manon Senones' work in the same geographic area (Vérité 1992: 135) attest that Gabus was not alone in his approach of combining science and subjectivity.





Fig. 6

Ardin harp player, 1951, Coloured pencil drawing on paper

© Hans Erni, MEN

More precisely, the aim was to combine science and a controlled form of subjectivity: in Mauritania, Erni's subjectivity was channelled and directed by Gabus, who showed him what was important and supplemented the painter's views with his own, scientific, observations. Thus, at the beginning of December 1950, he went to the blacksmith Ahmed Salou to observe the techniques "without running the risk of breaking the real rhythm of the work and of no longer being in the right" (Gabus 1954a: 112). He could then inform Erni of the process, its important moments, and he was expected to draw. On a different occasion, Gabus asked him to sketch the tea ceremony and specified "not to forget the austerity of the old mother watching over her daughter [...], nor those insolent chickens and fat pigeons wandering among the tools" (Gabus 1958: 15). The artist's subjectivity was also marked out by the collections and photographs, as exemplified by the multimedia representation of the ardin harps that appear in the collection of the museum as an artefact, as a photograph, and as numerous drawings, in books, articles and even murals: it is important to have them all because 'the drawings complete the objects', wrote Gabus (1955: 37), and helps one to understand them.

Gabus' aim in producing and using these images was to provide easier access to the "real thing". In the second volume of his trilogy *Au Sahara*, he wrote that "all these documents possess a grandeur, a life, a wonderfully elegant precision that none of our technical means – photography, film and recording – could have provided" (Gabus 1958: 15). More specifically, he noted "in comparison with the material from [his] previous missions: films, photographs of similar scenes, how much more real and authentic the sketches and temperas are than the 'documents'. The grace and emotion of an attitude remain, and are transmitted by this kind of miracle of art" (Gabus 1958, 15). Linking aesthetics and epistemology, he elaborated on this phenomenon: "When Erni paints a slave, this captive has never been so beautiful, and yet she has never been so nothing but herself" (Gabus 1958, 15).

In Gabus' mind, art in general, and painting in particular, trumps photography by

permitting

ethnographic enquiry to free itself from the excesses of method and reason [...] to abandon itself to the exquisite prodigality of questions, to the spontaneity created by uncertainty, by 'I know nothing'. All the doors seemed to open for us, thanks to Erni's presence and to the appeal we made to art to isolate and highlight so many problems that had eluded us until then, to relay everything that cannot be photographed or recorded [...], in other words what is essential: life (Gabus 1955: 33).



Fig. 7  
7. Ardin harp  
© MEN

As proof of this, for Gabus, Erni's work could be realized without the help of an interpreter, as if it was expressed in an international language: the cultures encountered, although different, appeared similar, sharing "universal values" with the European (Gabus 1955: 33). Somewhat, without expressing it explicitly, Gabus adopted the Aristotelian distinction between poetry and history: art reached the truth more than science because it could address generalities, i.e. things that happen because of plausibility or necessity (Aristotle 1980: 25–26). Art thus had a special access to human laws: it shed light on science through "this capacity to isolate the essential, to retain it without its parasitic environment" (Gabus 1983, 26): this is the case of talented painting.

Photography, on the other hand, showed what has been, "*ça-a-été*" (Barthes 1981). More precisely, it showed everything that has been, without distinction. As a result, it was no longer capable of making things visible, because it could neither discern nor distinguish. As the scholar's singularity was his ability to identify and isolate what counts, relying on drawings and subjectivity turned out to be, for Gabus, a more scientific approach to his object.

## Conclusion

Gabus and Erni's collaboration in Mauritania is a good case study for thinking about time, chronologies and living fossils in the sciences. First, if the inclusion of subjectivity may seem surprising at first sight, it actually works as a revealer of rather common practices in the history of anthropology and more generally in the history of social science and humanities. Subjectivity may fit quite well within the frame of the anthropologist's "second book" that Vincent Debaene identified (2010) or with the already mentioned similar and contemporary thoughts on subjectivity among historians (H.-I. Marrou) or philosophers (P. Ricoeur). It reminds us of the more general presence of artistic production and the values of subjectivity in research. But it could also be read in the perspective of an alter-narrative: what if we lived in a world where Gabus was consider a pioneer or a trendsetter in the history of anthropology? Would we believe that he was the inventor of a tradition that could be traced through to the present day and would underline the importance of the artists' gaze, as was shown recently in the 'Somewhere in Between' exhibition at the London's Wellcome Collection in 2018? This might help us think about trendsetters and anachronistic scholars differently.



Fig. 8

Mauritania room of the Musée d'Ethnographie in Geneva, display case and fresco by H. Erni, date unknown

© MEN

Second, more importantly, Gabus and Erni's collaboration illustrates that one can both believe in the abilities of the "sage" and the "synthesis" and be a strong believer in the "objectivity" of the materiality and mechanical images, and the value of "particulars". On the one hand, Gabus was committed to mechanical objectivity; at the same time, he believed in the value of selection based on individual talent to identify the essence of things and was faithful to nature. His practice therefore straddled two epistemic virtues: human knowledge can identify a particular truth, as Chautems did or Gabus' own mastery of photography, and a general truth that captures essences, as Erni did. This happens without the one erasing the other, because the particular knowledge focused on the Tuareg, while what Erni's universal

knowledge could capture was human. Different tools grasp different entities and are not simply following each other chronologically. Moreover, unlike Daston and Galison, his conception of talent is innate rather than acquired or the product of experience. It is specific to a certain individual. To be faithful to nature required abandoning one's self and one's certainties in order to see what is true: it is not the synthesis of one's knowledge. Finally, he distinguished the effect of individual talent from the effect of the medium: at the same moment, different persona can hence coexist.

From this perspective, the case helps us to rethink the place of another type of minored scholars: it is not only in the history of anthropology that we encounter scholars and actors that seem not to fit a general narrative. It is also the case of the social scientists in the history of science and knowledge. Just as a Swiss anthropologist may seem irrelevant for the history of anthropology, social anthropology may seem of no interest to discuss larger questions in the history of science. Here to the contrary, it helps to distinguish the role of the media from the importance of the actor. It also shows that a chrono-typology that was proposed for the (natural) sciences does not work well for the social sciences and humanities and calls for Daston and Galison's hypothesis to be re-examined. It finally shows that one can wish to produce general truths and describe particular elements at the same moment in time and that these are not necessarily separate epistemic virtues: this is the most important element, as it can work as a "mise en abyme": a new method, a new perspective, a new instrument, or new actors do not necessarily imply that the ancient ones disappear. They are not incommensurable as Kuhn wrote: they add up, they blend, and they complexify our reading. Innovations are not systematically successful at the cost of the previous ones. For methods and instruments, as for traditions, diversity is much more likely than some evolutionary conception of science has led us to believe.

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[1] Musée d’ethnographie de Neuchâtel (MEN) Archives Gabus, Letter of Jean Gabus to Harounould Cheikh Sidya, 28th December 1954.

[2] Among other problems, Daston and Galison only examine the sciences, and the process they describe does not take the same forms in the social sciences and humanities. The complex relationships between photography and various disciplines such as art history (Griener 2009), ethnography (Harries 2000) or geography (Mendibil 2008) have already been explored, and the use of non-mechanical images seems more enduring than in the sciences. For a general perspective, see Reubi (2023).

[3] For Gabus, but not more broadly: see the case that might have inspired Gabus of Odette du Puigauveau and Marion Sénones’s second trip to Mauritania in 1936–1938, Vérité 1992.

[4] MEN Archives Gabus, Letter from Jean Gabus to Harounould Cheikh Sidya, 28th December 1954.

[5] Or the cinematographer: Gabus many own experiments were never able to produce anything more than “sharp and clear documents, but taken quickly, without skill” (1958:13), whereas a real filmmaker like Henry Brandt, who was also invited on Gabus field trip, was capable of better meeting the objectives: “demanding sincerity, impeccable quality of the image, aesthetic value of the documentary” (Gabus 1958: 14).