

The Robert Baldick Memorial Scholarship 2024/25 Trip Review

In early April 2025, I spent five days in Paris conducting archival research for my dissertation, which traces how the Institut Kurde de Paris (founded 1983) used exhibitions and cultural programming as tools of visibility and diplomacy. My project situates the Institute within the broader landscape of Mitterrand-era cultural and foreign politics, and asks how a newly consolidated Kurdish diaspora navigated and subverted French frameworks (e.g., of multiculturalism) to assert a stateless cultural sovereignty. By focusing on exhibition-making as a political practice, I aim to reframe the Institute not just as a cultural hub, but as an active site of anti-colonial struggle within postcolonial Paris.

Alongside the Institut Kurde, I examine contemporaneous organisations such as the Association de Culture Berbère Paris (Berber Culture Association), exploring how each mobilised visual culture—through exhibitions, publications, and public events—to assert political presence and historical continuity. Rather than positioning these activities as mere cultural output, my research considers how stateless communities leveraged the cultural sphere to challenge their marginalisation and reimagine collective futures.

The bulk of my time was spent at the Archives Nationales, which holds a wealth of governmental correspondence, administrative files, and grant applications relating to both the Kurdish Institute and the Berber Culture Association. Sifting through these files was illuminating. I uncovered internal memoranda between cultural officers, detailed breakdowns of state funding, and letters of intent which reveal how Kurdish and Berber cultural actors framed their work to fit French conceptions of ‘droit à la différence.’ These documents will prove central to my dissertation’s argument regarding the co-production of cultural legitimacy between migrant communities and state institutions.

I also visited the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq’s French Embassy, which generously granted me access to their digitised archive on Kurdish-French diplomatic relations. This archive provided invaluable context for understanding the longue durée of France’s evolving position on the Kurdish question, especially in relation to its foreign policy.

Another key site was the Centre Culturel Algérien Paris (Algerian Cultural Centre), which, while primarily funded by the Algerian state, occupies a unique position within the cultural and political landscape of postcolonial France. I visited to examine early exhibition posters and press cuttings to understand how the Centre presented Algerian culture to a Postcolonial French public in its formative years. The exhibitions offered a complex negotiation of identity, nationhood, and memory—providing a useful point of comparison for understanding how the Kurdish Institute, operating without a nation-state, articulated cultural and political claims within similar institutional and affective spaces.

Naturally, I also spent time at the Institut Kurde de Paris itself. Speaking with staff and exploring their collection gave me insight into the affective and intellectual atmosphere of the Institute today. Despite increasing pressures, the Institute continues to function as a vital space of Kurdish cultural production, memory, and political imagination in diaspora. I also had time to pop into the Institut du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute) to see how the Middle East is represented within a major French institutional context, particularly in relation to questions of heritage, identity, and display.

While the research days were intensive, I made the most of my evenings to explore the city’s cultural life and exhibitions relevant to my work. A major highlight was visiting *Paris Noir* at the Centre Pompidou; a powerful final show before the museum closes for a five-year renovation. The exhibition traced the influence of Black diasporic artists in Paris across the twentieth century, offering a richly intersectional reading of the city’s modernist and colonial histories. It was especially

moving to see the exhibition foreground questions of coloniality, displacement, and cultural resistance—so central to my own research—within an institutional setting.

At the Palais de Tokyo, I saw *La Joie Collective*, an experimental, sprawling exhibition that sought to stage 'joy' as a radical, fugitive emotion under systems of oppression. In many ways, it was the perfect counterpoint to the heavy archival work of the day, and resonated deeply with my research into cultural resistance through affect and form.

I also came across a more intimate exhibition by Kurdish artist Bahar Kocabey, whose work explores the aesthetics of memory and erasure. Her delicate, layered pieces provided a striking visual parallel to the themes I was tracing in the archives—particularly around loss, fragmentation, and the impossibility of a total archive.

My wanderings took me too to Librairie Petite Égypte, a beloved hub of anti-colonial and radical literature, where I browsed texts on decolonial art practices and postcolonial theory in French.

This trip was foundational to the archival spine of my dissertation, but also allowed me to situate my work within a wider sensory, intellectual, and emotional landscape. I return to Oxford with a camera roll full of documents, exhibition leaflets, and notes—but more importantly, a renewed clarity of purpose.

