Nantes History Museum retraces the history of the town and its territory over the last two centuries. When all is said and done, its history would have been very ordinary if Nantes had not distinguished itself, notably in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and at the start of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, by the role it played in the Atlantic slave trade. As the first slave trade port in France, 42\% of the French expeditions left its outer ports and nearly 450 000 men, women and children were sent from Africa towards the French colonies on board its ships.

To write and present the history of Nantes therefore brings up many questions on how to approach such a subject chronologically as well as thematically in a wider historical context. It is a major risk for a town which has to acknowledge the dark side of its history as well as for the visitors’ learning, considering that in France the questions of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery are hardly touched on in school curriculums. The visitors do not have much knowledge in these matters.

While creating the museum lay out, we were faced with many questions. If we wanted to rigorously tackle this part of history in the museum rooms in order to stop all denial and misconceptions, we nevertheless did not want to develop this section in the same scenographic way as the one used throughout the rest of the museum.

Photographs room 13 and visitors in the room

Even though the matter of slave trading is approached over a large part of the visit (fourteen rooms), in one particular room we decided to concentrate on a presentation of a Nantes slave trade campaign. This section, which finally only consists of three rooms, is particularly “strong”. It is the most visited room by the public and is also the most appreciated, especially for its educational contents. 65\% of the visitors say that they have widened their knowledge of the slave trade by the end of their visit and 28\% discovered it thanks to their visit to the museum. The visit is organized to show the different stages of a slave trade campaign: from the port of Nantes where funds were raised to finance the expedition, to the colonies where prisoners, who later became slaves, would end their lives.
This section is presented in a way that breaks with the general lay out of the museum; this room evokes the mid-deck of a slave ship. If human rights are not directly evoked, they are omnipresent in this place where the heavy oppressive atmosphere is created by a very effective museology.

The human rights matter is also here through the original documents showing the step by step organization of the trade and revealing the true reality as it was, the “customary” killings on the African coasts, the piling up of prisoners on board the Nantes ships, as well as the treatment inflicted on the slaves: notably brandings and punishments…

Photograph of the Marie-Séraphique – shackles – whip – anti-riot spikes

The question of the abolition of slavery and of the long fight that preceded its application in France in 1848 is greatly represented throughout the museum. The Nantes people having fought to keep the slave trade after its abolition by the National Convention in 1794 were worried about the economic collapse of the port of Nantes.

Photographs of the readings in the rooms by the “Lune Rousse” or the “quarts d’heure de l’objet” in front of the painting of the ear piercing.

In order to attract the public to this matter, the Atlantic slave trade section holds regular specific events developed and presented by artists, musicians or members of the educational team.

We can see that as a citizens’ museum the History museum is in keeping with a multiple approach; as a history museum it tells us what happened but its mission does not stop there. It also stimulates our memories. Even if its main purpose is not to make us remember, it has become a place for a wider contemplation of the past. Even more so with the 10th May commemorations, an event that commemorates the recognition of the slave trade as a crime against humanity.

It is also a “support” place for the historical speech in the heart of Nantes where a memorial dedicated to the abolitions of slavery will be inaugurated next year along the river Loire on the quays. The connection between history and memory will therefore be “fixed” into the urban landscape, like a link between present and past. This memorial, still under construction, aroused and still arouses many debates amongst the inhabitants. If everyone understands that Nantes must acknowledge its slave trade history, many fear that if a memorial is built, from then on, the city will be stigmatized. The fact that the theme of the memorial project was progressively oriented towards the abolitions, and not the slave trade itself, reduced the causes for concern even if some remain. The memorial inauguration in the summer of 2011 will be without doubt a major event for the town.

13 years will have been necessary for the project to succeed.

Photographs of the memorial
A place where heated debates often take place over these matters, the museum at last has its calm moments when it opens up to writers, historians or thinkers coming from elsewhere where they find an audience.

Photographs of Alain Anselin conference

So in 2009, the Caribbean Alain Anselin, slave trade historian, came to present his recently published work, assisted by the museum, on the resistance to slavery, entitled “Le refus de l’esclavage”, at a time when the subject had never been considered by French university lecturers as important.

In 2010, Nantes invited Yanick Lahens, an Haitian author, to come and meet the public to tackle the question of the still very strong relationship between France and Saint-Domingue, which gained independence through revolution, and to speak of the island’s development from the 19th (nineteenth) century to nowadays.

On all these occasions, the human rights notion is at the heart of the debate. The museum becomes a place of exchanges, meetings and sometimes conflicts. A vibrant place where people cannot stop questioning themselves. Perhaps a new place for rights and liberty…who knows?

In 2008 when a secondary school pupil was asked what he remembered from his visit he wrote: “…it scares me because this means that humanity does not learn by its mistakes; they make the same mistakes again but even worse and I ask myself: who will be the next victim?”