

The Role of the Ahmed Zabana National Public Museum in Preserving, Studying, and Exhibiting the Cultural and Civilizational Heritage of Oran City.

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Received: 10/08/2024

Published: 25/04/2025

Abstract:

Oran, a Mediterranean city extending from Mount El-Aswad in the east, the Bay of Oran in the north, Mount Marjago in the west, and the Sebkha in the south, has been inhabited since the dawn of history and has witnessed the succession of various civilizations. Consequently, it has become a pivotal city on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, influencing and being influenced by its surroundings, resulting in a rich cultural heritage, both material and immaterial, that testifies to the civilizations and nations that have passed through the city.

In the 19th century, due to the vast number of archaeological discoveries in Algeria in general and the Oran region in particular, it became imperative to establish a museum to collect and display these material testimonies. The initiative came from the Geography and Archaeology Society of Oran, leading to the establishment of the first nucleus of the museum, which would undergo significant developments at various stages.

The Oran Museum is the only national museum that houses collections across multiple disciplines, including natural history collections, prehistoric collections, ancient artifacts, Islamic art collections, numismatic collections, Maghreb and African ethnography collections, ancient Oran collections, and fine arts collections.

This wealth of museum collections is a testament to the diversity of the city's cultural heritage, necessitating that the museum plays its fundamental roles in preserving, studying, and exhibiting this cultural legacy, while also communicating it to future generations through the latest museum systems and modern technologies.

Keywords: Museum, Museum Collections, Antiquities, Museum Exhibition, Archaeology.

1. Introduction

Oran, a Mediterranean city extending from Mount El-Aswad in the east, the Bay of Oran in the north, Mount Marjago in the west, and the Sebkha in the south, has been inhabited since the dawn of history and has witnessed the succession of various civilizations. Consequently, it has become a pivotal city on the southern shore of the Mediterranean, influencing and being influenced by its surroundings, resulting in a rich cultural heritage, both material and immaterial, that testifies to the civilizations and nations that have passed through the city.

For anyone studying the history of Oran, there is a vast amount of material evidence documenting the stages and eras that have impacted the city. In this study, we will rely on the museum collections exhibited at the Ahmed Zabana National Public Museum to document historical periods, highlighting the richness of the museum in both material and immaterial evidence that reflects each stage. We will demonstrate the significance of this evidence as a primary documentary source that historians and specialists should utilize to revitalize the writing of the city's and the nation's history, adopting a new perspective that relies on scientific and inductive methods of material evidence.

2. Definition of the Museum

A museum is a place where ancient and precious artifacts are gathered for preservation and enjoyment. Museums were known to the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and later civilizations, and were associated with the ruling class and priests, which gave them an aura of sanctity and secrecy. In the Middle Ages, museums gradually began to open to the general public and were assigned educational and cultural roles. In modern times, museums have evolved in their functions and roles, and various types of specialized museums have emerged based on their collections and target audiences.

Linguistically, the term "museum" is defined in the "Al-Ma'jam Al-Wasat" as "a place where artifacts are collected; an artifact is a rare, valuable item whose worth increases with the passage of time." The term refers to the meaning or subject it indicates. The plural of "artifact" (تحفة) is "artifacts" (تحف), and in the same dictionary, a museum is described as "a site for artistic or archaeological artifacts," with the plural being "museums."¹

The International Council of Museums (I.C.O.M.) defined a museum in 2001 as: "A permanent institution, non-profit, serving society and its development, open to the public, which conducts research related to the material evidence of humanity and its

¹ Ali, Ben Hadiya; Belhassen, Belish. *The New Dictionary*, Algeria, National Publishing and Distribution Company, 1979, p. 997.

environment, acquiring, preserving, restoring, and exhibiting it, and making it available for scientific, educational, and recreational purposes.”

A recent update to the museum definition was provided by the International Council of Museums on October 24, 2022, during an extraordinary general assembly held in Prague. It defines a museum as follows:

“A museum is a permanent, non-profit institution at the service of society, dedicated to the research, collection, conservation, interpretation, and exhibition of material and immaterial heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, it encourages diversity and sustainability. Museums operate and communicate ethically and professionally, with the participation of diverse communities. They offer their audiences varied experiences of education, entertainment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.¹”

Museums are permanent institutions that are non-profit and serve society. They specialize in the research, collection, preservation, interpretation, and exhibition of material and immaterial heritage. Museums are open to the public, accessible, and inclusive, promoting cultural diversity and sustainability. They engage with the public while respecting the ethical standards of the museum profession and doing so professionally, involving all components of society. In this way, they provide their audiences with varied experiences for learning, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge exchange.

The International Council of Museums (I.C.O.M.) is a non-governmental organization focused on the museum world, providing definitions of museum institutions as their objectives evolve and their areas of interest expand in line with scientific and social developments and the new concepts they generate.

This definition states that a museum is an institution established permanently or temporarily for the purposes of preservation, restoration, study, and exhibition through various means, particularly by displaying artistic, historical, scientific, or technological collections to the public to achieve learning and enjoyment. This is done by employing modern methods and technologies to keep pace with the times. Museums are also required to sustain their functions and create sustainable wealth by utilizing the cultural assets in their possession while engaging all components of society without discrimination or exclusion. Herein lies the importance of involving

¹ - International Council of Museums. *Museum Guide: Professional Ethics*. Paris: Publications of the International Council of Museums, 2001, p. 6.

new stakeholders by creating opportunities for entrepreneurship in the cultural field, also known as cultural industries.

Museums are classified according to their scientific specialization as well as the nature of the collections they preserve. In Algeria, they are overseen by the Ministry of Culture or other sectors such as veterans, defense, and traditional industries. There are also private museums, which may belong to institutions or individuals.

3. Types of Museums

Museums can be classified into different types based on several characteristics. Firstly, museums are categorized according to the nature of their collections, the historical and geographical scope they focus on, and the overseeing body, which may be governmental or private. Recently, a new type of museum known as virtual museums has also been added to these classifications.

Museums can be divided into three main types based on their collections:¹

3.1 Art Museums: These museums preserve, acquire, and display artistic collections and all items related to artists. They contribute to the appreciation of human artistic heritage. Examples include the National Museum of Fine Arts in Algiers (M.A.M.A.) and the Museum of Arts in Oran (M.A.M.O.).

3.2 Historical Museums: These museums preserve, acquire, and display artifacts from various historical periods, ranging from prehistory, ancient times, and the Middle Ages to contemporary history. An example is the National Museum of Ancient Antiquities in Algiers.

3.3 Scientific Museums: This type includes museums that specialize in preserving, acquiring, and displaying collections related to natural history, geology, paleontology, and botany, as well as those dedicated to preserving evidence of technological and industrial development. These types of museums have not yet gained widespread recognition in Arab countries.

However, there are also multidisciplinary museums that combine collections related to art, ethnography, and history. An example is the Ahmed Zabana National Public Museum in Oran, Algeria, which serves as a model for multidisciplinary museums, combining artistic, historical, and ethnographic collections along with natural history.

¹ ICOM. Definition of the Museum. Prague, November 24, 2022.

URL: [\[https://icom.museum/fr/ressources/normes-et-lignes-directrices/definition-du-musee/\]](https://icom.museum/fr/ressources/normes-et-lignes-directrices/definition-du-musee/)
(<https://icom.museum/fr/ressources/normes-et-lignes-directrices/definition-du-musee/>)

Museums can be classified into two types based on the space for preserving collections:¹

- **Building Museums:** These are museums where collections are preserved and displayed within a building that meets all necessary conditions and specifications for preservation and exhibition. Notably, museums built specifically for this purpose often feature architectural specifications that allow them to accommodate various museum functions, including exhibition halls, storage, and study and restoration laboratories. In contrast, museums established by converting historical buildings into exhibition spaces often have limited areas, which negatively impacts the preservation conditions of the collections.

- **Open-Air Museums:** These are archaeological sites or historical landmarks where it is impractical to relocate the existing artifacts for various reasons. They are geographically designated and utilized as open-air museums, such as the Tassili National Park in Algeria.

Museums can also be classified according to ownership into two categories:²

- **Public (Government) Museums:** These are managed and funded by the state, allocated budgets for equipment and operations, and are usually under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture or Tourism. They preserve the material evidence of a nation and are the most common type of museum worldwide.

- **Private Museums:** These are owned by individuals or legal entities, where many individuals or institutions establish museums to showcase their history and activities or to display their private art collections, such as the “Yves Saint Laurent” Museum in Oran.

4. The Role of Museums in Educating Youth

Museums contribute to education and cultural awareness, as well as the preservation of historical and artistic artifacts. They help generations connect their past with their present and shape their future by enriching children’s cognitive and emotional aspects and promoting an understanding of history and culture, which fosters a sense of belonging.

Museums make the learning process more exciting and engaging, serving as a practical application of theoretical study, as observed through school visits to

¹ - Bulletin of the International Council of Museums. News from I.C.O.M. Paris, 1989, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 4-24.

² - Executive Decree No. 277-85. Defining the Model Basic Law for National Museums. Official Gazette of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria

museums. They allow visitors to interact directly with artifacts and exhibits, providing access to cultural resources and knowledge of historical indicators and the characteristics of each era. This interaction highlights the differences in cultural and civilizational components that contribute to intellectual and knowledge exchange among community members¹.

Museums are sources of creativity and innovation, preparing generations and fostering communication between peoples, cultures, and civilizations. They enhance the sense of national identity and contribute to revitalizing intellectual life in communities, defining the dimensions and concepts of “citizenship” among community members and stimulating the socialization process. Today, they have also become generators of sustainable wealth by involving community members as partners through the creation of opportunities for entrepreneurship in the cultural field.

5. Museum Culture

Cultural issues represent one of the fundamental challenges for systems (politically, economically, and socially). Culture enables every citizen to integrate and root themselves in the society to which they belong, serving as a crucial element in a modern society that deepens self-knowledge and awareness of the surrounding environment, thereby fostering a sense of belonging.

The dissemination of culture in all its forms among citizens enhances creativity and innovation, leading to positive impacts on the local economy and creating wealth that improves individuals’ living conditions². Museums are cultural institutions that should receive special attention due to their pioneering roles in valuing the cultural heritage of society in general and reinforcing the identity of emerging generations. This requires strengthening the relationship between museums and society by establishing traditions and finding new methods for museum promotion, which highlights the importance of creating emerging institutions active in this field and investing in cultural industries.

6. The Establishment of the Museum

It is worthwhile to discuss the history of the establishment of the Oran Museum, which began as an idea and was realized through the efforts of a group of local dignitaries and scientific associations during the colonial period. The Oran Museum was

¹- Lucie Daignaut, Bernard Schiele. *Museums and Their Audiences: Knowledge and Issues*. Quebec, Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2014, pp. 128-134.

²- Jean-Michel Tobelem. *The New Age of Museums: Cultural Institutions Facing Management Challenges*. Paris, Armand Colin, 2012, pp. 133-138.

established in 1885 by the Geography and Archaeology Society of Oran, upon the recommendation of its vice president, “Captain Doumait.¹”

Due to the lack of financial and material resources for establishing the museum, the Geography and Archaeology Society sought assistance from the residents of Oran and its surroundings, especially from major European landowners who contributed the necessary funds and donated artifacts in their possession to enrich the museum’s collections. It is important to note that the majority of the European population in Oran consisted of veterans from various countries under French colonial rule from all five continents, which would give the newly formed museum collections a global character. The collected funds allowed for the acquisition of display cases and storage cabinets for the museum’s collections.

The municipality of Oran allocated the old hospital building to house the museum, and the city’s first museum was officially opened on May 5, 1885². Since that date, the Geography and Archaeology Society of Oran has been tasked with managing the museum and developing its collections, aided by numerous discoveries and archaeological excavations in western Algeria and Algeria in general.

It is essential to mention that in the same year, 1885, three (3) mosaic panels discovered at the site of the Roman city “Portus Magnus” in Tiaret, as well as a complete collection of Roman inscriptions and funerary monuments found by chance in various areas of western Algeria, were transferred to the museum.

After organizing and categorizing the collections according to scientific standards, the museum’s exhibits were divided into six (6) branches, which are as follows:

1. Ancient Antiquities Branch
2. Numismatics Branch
3. Prehistoric and Ethnography Branch
4. Algeria Branch
5. Art Branch (sculptures, original paintings, and photographs)
6. Natural History Branch

¹- Benkada, Saddek. The Scientific Society, the Geography and Archaeology Society of Oran: A Model of Scientific Societies Between Past and Present. *Insaniyat*, No. 68, p. 120.

URL: [<https://doi.org/10.4000/insaniyat.8330>] (<https://doi.org/10.4000/insaniyat.8330>)

²- Demaeght. Reasoned Catalogue of Archaeological Objects from the Museum of the City of Oran. Oran, 1932, p. 1.

URL: [Catalogue raisonné des objets archéologiques](Catalogue_raisonné_des_objets_archéologiques_[...]Demaeght_Louis_bpt6k65724700.pdf)

Since the first year of its establishment, the Oran Museum has been distinguished by the richness and diversity of its collections, which later led to its classification as a multidisciplinary museum. It became the only museum to include collections related to natural history, gaining fame among visitors and patrons.

After the Geography and Archaeology Society of Oran successfully realized the dream of establishing a museum for the city, it presented it to the city of Oran, represented by the municipality, on April 8, 1885. The museum was named “Municipal Museum of the City of Oran,” officially recognized by a ministerial decree published in the French official journal on November 9, 1885, and a provincial decree from the Oran administration issued on December 21, 1885. This decree appointed “Captain Doumait¹” as its curator without salary, in recognition of his efforts in establishing the museum.

However, the building housing the museum quickly became inadequate for preserving the archaeological finds intended for study and display, necessitating the search for a larger space. In 1891, the museum was relocated to a building on “Montéblou” Street (currently “Ben Tiba Maki” Street) in the Sidi El-Houari neighborhood. This was an abandoned school consisting of a ground floor and three upper floors, each containing two spacious halls, which provided more space for the museum to develop its collections scientifically².

After the death of Captain Doumait on April 26, 1898, the municipality of Oran decided to name the museum after him in recognition of his contributions to its establishment, organization, and service as its first curator on a voluntary basis. Thus, it became known as the “Doumait Municipal Museum,” a name it retained until independence.

However, during this period, the museum, which had become the largest museum in Algeria in terms of the number of collections and archaeological artifacts, faced numerous challenges, particularly related to the lack of space for the scientific preservation and display of its collections. This led to several relocations of the museum between various buildings in the city, most of which were unsuitable for the museum’s functions. In the absence of a project to build a museum befitting the available collections, this became a difficult phase in the museum’s history, negatively impacting the collections, which were often exposed to natural elements and even theft.

¹- Doumergue, F. History of the Museum of Oran. In Bulletin of the Society of Geography and Archaeology of Oran, 1825, pp. 66-103.

²- Lespes, René. Oran: A Study of Urban Geography and History. Oran, R. ed. Bel Horizon, n.d., p. 202.

We will summarize the key relocations and buildings that housed the museum's collections temporarily until a permanent solution was found. In 1912, following the law that separated church and state, the municipality of Oran was allowed to transfer part of the archaeological and artistic collections to the episcopal palace (now the Conservatory of Music), which was designated for the municipal museum and the municipal library. However, it soon became apparent that the space was insufficient for both institutions, leading to overcrowding and inadequate storage conditions for the collections.

In 1921, the episcopal palace was returned to the church's authority, resulting in the redistribution of the museum collections across several distant buildings in Oran. This led to the museum's closure to the public, scattering the collections and exposing them to loss and damage. In 1925, the archaeological collection was moved to the minaret of the Great Mosque of Muhammad to be preserved there for a period of time¹.

Since 1916, the municipality of Oran proposed a plan to establish a Palace of Arts that would include a museum, a library, and a school of fine arts. A piece of land owned by the municipality was allocated for this project—this land is located in the new Plateau San Germano neighborhood, originally part of the Islamic cemetery of Sidi Bichir, which was seized by colonial authorities and transformed into the Plateau San Germano neighborhood (formerly Sidi Bichir)².

In 1928, in preparation for the centennial celebration of the French occupation of Algeria (1830-1930), the High Council for the Centennial decided to create three new museums in Algeria, with Oran being one of the cities involved, alongside Algiers and Constantine. These three museums were set to open in 1930.

To expedite the creation of these museums, the regional committee for the celebration agreed to accept the Palace of Arts project prepared by the municipality of Oran in 1916, while noting some adjustments to align with the budget allocated for each city. However, it would later become apparent that the museum building was inadequate for the size of the existing collections, necessitating the construction of extensions that did not align with the intended visitor experience—a problem that continues to affect the museum to this day.

7. Space Distribution in the New Museum

¹ Doumergue, F. History of the Museum of Oran. In *Bulletin of the Society of Geography and Archaeology of Oran*, 1825, p. 4.

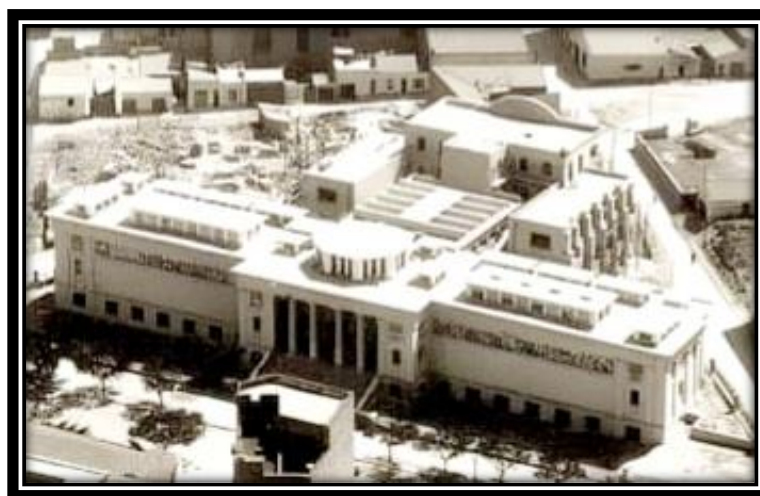
² Benkada, Saddek. *Oran 1732-1912: An Analytical Essay on the Historical Transition of an Algerian City Towards Urban Modernity*. Oran, CRASC, 2019, pp. 157-166.

Visitors enter the museum through elevated stairs from “Elina Street” (currently “Zabana Street”), leading directly to the grand hall on the elevated ground floor. To the left of this hall is the Fine Arts Room, which has been expanded with an annex. In the basement, there is a hall that connects three rooms: the Prehistoric and Comparative Osteology Room, the Natural History and Minerals Room, and the Ancient Artifacts Room, which has access to two courtyards containing ancient and Roman artifacts that could not be accommodated in the Ancient Artifacts Room.

On the upper floor, accessible by two opposing staircases, the right side features the Islamic and Non-Islamic Civilization Room, along with the Old Oran Room. On the left side, there is the Natural History II Room, which houses collections of mollusks and insects, as well as a plant collection room¹.

It is worth noting that the names of the rooms and collections date back to the period of the museum’s establishment and have colonial connotations, especially since the museum was created to serve colonial policies and meet the desires of colonizers and Europeans to showcase their colonies.

The official opening of the “Doumait Municipal Museum” took place on November 11, 1935, delayed from the previously scheduled date. The building housed the municipal museum, the municipal library, and the school of fine arts, remaining under the management of the Oran municipality’s arts department until independence. After independence, the museum retained the name “Doumait Municipal Museum” until 1984, when it was renamed “Zabana Museum,” in honor of the martyr Ahmed Zabana, while remaining under the jurisdiction of the Oran municipality.



¹ - Demaeght. Reasoned Catalogue of Archaeological Objects from the Museum of the City of Oran. Oran, 1932, p. 5.

Oran Palace of Arts - 1932

(Municipal Museum - Municipal Library - School of Fine Arts)

The post-independence period from July 5, 1962, to 1985 saw the museum continue to be managed by the Oran municipality, during which several events negatively impacted the museum's collections. This period was marked by the appointment of several French curators to oversee the museum in the 1960s, according to an education and cultural assistance agreement between independent Algeria and France. These curators engaged in smuggling original art collections from the museum's storage, replacing them with copies, an issue that was only discovered later. Furthermore, all inventory records of the museum were hidden, making it impossible to accurately determine the number of artifacts and items in the collections.

It should also be noted that this period suffered from a lack of qualified personnel to manage museums in general. For example, the Oran Museum was managed by the municipality's arts department, overseen by a curator and a security worker, who lived with their families within the museum.

In 1985, the first basic law for museums in Algeria¹ was issued, categorizing them into two types: national museums and site museums, placing them under the Ministry of Culture. National museums were granted financial and administrative independence, marking a new era for Algerian museums.

In 1986, the ownership of the Oran Museum was transferred from the municipality of Oran to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism under Executive Decree No. 135/86 dated November 12, 1986, which transformed the Oran Museum from a municipal museum to a national museum, renaming it "Ahmed Zabana National Museum" and placing it under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

By ministerial joint decree, the administration of the Ahmed Zabana National Museum is organized as follows:

The internal organization of the Ahmed Zabana National Museum, under the authority of the director, includes:²

Department of Research and Conservation of Artifacts:

¹- Official Gazette of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria. No. 47. Executive Decree No. 279/85, related to the Model Basic Law for National Museums, dated 23 Safar 1406 AH corresponding to November 12, 1985, pp. 1726-1728.

²- Official Gazette of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria. No. 22, Joint Ministerial Decision dated 29 Dhul-Qi'dah 1407 AH corresponding to July 25, 1987.

This department consists of the following sections:

- Section for Research and Conservation of Ancient, Islamic, and Roman Artifacts, and Prehistoric Artifacts.
- Section for Research and Conservation of Fine Arts, Ethnographic History, and Numismatics.
- Restoration Laboratory Section.

Department of Activity and Documentation:

This department is composed of the following sections:

- Library and Archives Section.
- Activity and Publishing Section.
- Photography Laboratory Section.

Administration Section:

This section includes the following branches:

- Human Resources and Social Affairs Branch.
- General Resources and Security Branch.

Scientific Organization of Collections:

Scientifically, the museum has restructured its collections as follows:

- Fine Arts Branch
- Islamic Art Branch
- Mujahid Branch
- Numismatics Branch
 - Ancient Coins
 - Islamic Coins
 - European and World Coins
- Prehistoric Branch
 - Ancient Prehistory
 - Medieval Prehistory

- Modern Prehistory
- Archaeology Branch
 - Pre-Roman Period
 - Roman Period
- Ancient Oran Branch
 - Spanish Period
 - Ottoman Period
 - French Period
- Ethnography Branch
 - Maghreb Ethnography
 - African and Oceanian Ethnography
- Natural History Branch
 - Collection of Taxidermied Animals
 - Birds
 - Reptiles
 - Insects
 - Mollusks
 - Fish
 - Minerals
 - Plants
- Library and Archives Section
- Photography Section
- Maintenance and Restoration Laboratory

It can be observed that the museum has maintained its multidisciplinary character, remaining the only museum at the national level that combines artistic, archaeological, and natural history collections. It is also the largest museum in terms of the number of preserved items, exceeding 100,000 cataloged items, and it is considered the most visited museum, largely due to the diversity of its collections and its central location in

the city. However, it can be criticized for retaining a colonial character in its museographic scenography.

In 2011, Algerian museums witnessed the issuance of a new model basic law for museums¹, published in the official journal under number 355/11. This law defines the types and functions of museums in Algeria and, for the first time, allowed for the establishment of private museums. Under this decree, the museum's name changed to "Ahmed Zabana National Public Museum."

With the arrival of the new millennium, Algeria saw the establishment of a significant number of specialized national museums, bringing the total number of national public museums to twenty-two (22), in addition to equivalent city and site museums. Special attention was given to training specialized human resources, particularly in areas related to the periods of museum collections, as well as in conservation and maintenance fields, involving Algerian universities in this effort. It is hoped that the entrepreneurial project that the Algerian university aims to establish will resonate in the field of museology and cultural industries, ultimately serving Algeria's cultural heritage and contributing to sustainable wealth for future generations.

8. Conclusion:

The Ahmed Zabana National Public Museum in Oran stands as a testament to over a century of collection, preservation, and exhibition of museum collections formed under very specific circumstances. These efforts have always been linked to the city's inhabitants—Oran—who responded to the call of the Geography and Archaeology Society, gathering the initial nucleus of collections and donating funds to establish the city's first museum. This museum has witnessed all the scientific, political, and cultural events that the city has experienced from 1889 to the present day (2024). From an idea initiated by the Geography and Archaeology Society of Oran to the Ahmed Zabana National Public Museum, it has become the largest multidisciplinary museum in the country, with the highest number of preserved and exhibited collections nationally. It is also recognized as the most visited museum in Algeria, surpassing half a million visitors annually in 2023.

¹- Official Gazette of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria. No. 56, Executive Decree No. 355/11 dated 7 Dhul-Qi'dah 1432 AH corresponding to October 5, 2011, defining the Model Law for Museums and Interpretive Centers of a Museum Nature.

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