



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



Striking a Balance: How national museums can contribute to a socially cohesive Europe

Policy implications of EUNAMUS, an EU-funded interdisciplinary research project comparing the development of museums in 37 European countries.

Final Policy Brief

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INTRODUCTION

National Museums negotiate complex European identities

European citizens are increasingly transnational. While much focus has been placed on the diversity of populations within individual nations, the individuals within those nations have themselves been undergoing their own quiet revolution. Today's resident of a quiet town in France most likely identifies herself as French—but she may be married to a Tunisian whose mother studied in London. Her brother may work in Warsaw, with his Swiss wife, for a Dutch company. She herself may have spent a year in Italy and have a best friend from Finland, with whom she is planning a holiday trip to Prague.

In such a complex world, the idea of a national historical museum may seem to have lost its legitimacy. However, this has not been the finding of the European Union National Museums project: our research has demonstrated repeatedly that national museums are more vital than ever to people negotiating their way in modern Europe. Personal identity, the sense of one's place in the world, is a combination of individual and collective identifications with a set of values, beliefs, actions, and histories. When EUNAMUS researchers asked visitors where they thought their historical roots lie, the word "roots" seemed to carry more weight than the word "historical"—that is, feeling at home in a space rather than time defined the frame of their answer. As a result, in most cases respondents identified their historical roots with the space (more often the state) that they live in or were born in, or their ancestors were born in. National museum displays of a state's treasured objects and narratives bring the stability necessary to feel "at home", in a Europe where borders have changed over time, while both their implicit connections to what we have called the "language of Europe" and their explicit ability to reformulate narratives allow for the countering perspectives that disrupt a static complacency.

National museums, that is, balance the stability of the old with the disruption of the new, providing a space where, as national citizens, people can experience their own mosaic of old-new identity or, as tourists, can experience commonality with the developing mosaic-identities of other European peoples.

In an era of instability, in which distrust and exclusivist ultranationalism are increasingly common responses to the uncertain times, national museums, therefore, thematize the possibility of expressing regional/local, national and European perspectives, not in competition with each other but as complements. The ongoing, inclusive presentation of shared history and culture in these significant spaces can help all groups—including the young, the underrepresented and socially disadvantaged, as well as those feeling excluded from a changing Europe—to engage creatively in forming the varied but intensely proximal visions of their life together.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

National museums project unity in diversity

National museums vary greatly as they respond to local variations of political context, resources, collection legacies, museum practices and professionals—and this variety is universally desired. It was clear from our case studies that no one associated with museums—professionals, researchers, or visitors—desired homogeneity. At the same time, national museums necessarily shared a number of features. While European countries feature dozens of institutions that operate officially under the title ‘national museum’, many other institutions perform that role without the name.

Thus, EUNAMUS employed an operational definition recognizing that any institution, collection or display can be considered a national museum if it claims, articulates and represents dominant national values, myths and realities. Over the years a number of European nation-states have built up impressive ensembles of national museums. Some of these are specialized institutions that focus on a particular aspect of a nation’s identity or heritage. Common fields of specialization include art, archaeology, socio-political history, ethnology and anthropology, the natural sciences and military history.

These diverse institutions formulate the cultural cohesion that is necessary for a political constitution to remain intact. They are, as we have called it, part of the “cultural constitution” of Europe, providing political constituencies with a more stable counterpart for negotiating conflicting allegiances. As a tangible stabilizing force, national museums are Europe’s “cultural glue.” Speaking the shared language of arts and culture, they strengthen solidarity between communities even when economic or political crises threaten uncertainty. They contribute to the communal attitudes necessary for the Europe 2020 vision of sustainable and inclusive growth to succeed.

Museums are seeking balance

Professor Stefan Berger told an EUNAMUS audience at its first conference that national museums faced four competing demands: telling the uplifting story of the nation, providing multiple forms of identity, relating the national narrative to outsiders, and inducing citizens towards tolerance and cosmopolitan values. Subsequent

research has demonstrated that museums and those involved in museum policy are trying to balance the pressures of this competition using a combination of five techniques:

Re-formulation

- challenging the aims and scope of their collections and narratives

Re-narration

- using national museums as instruments for a correction of collective memory

Re-mediation

- using new media and new ways of inviting users into existing or new museum institutions

Re-professionalization

- the entry into museum policymaking of new groups who have deeply influenced the museum field both theoretically and practically, including consultants, artists, economists and architects

Re-organization

- the sometimes massive government-initiated organizational changes that have in many cases strengthened political control at the expense of museum professionals

Museums wrestle to balance stability with change

It is clear that visitors to national museums draw reassurance from the constancy and integrity of the objects on display. In some respects the static and unchanging aspects of the museum are as vital to its contribution to social stability as is its willingness to be more inclusive. In difficult times, museums act as repositories of past glories and hold the potential for their re-ignition.

At the same time, museums wrestle with nationalistic master narratives and seek to reformulate them. Over the past two decades, multiculturalism has been a significant motivator for this reformulation. Museums following principles of cultural diversity and inclusion of minority voices seek to turn the national narratives into arenas for intercultural encounters—but this process has been complicated by their own role in upholding the socially stable narrative.

Museums balance national stasis with new mobility

The 5000 visitors surveyed by our teams across Europe overwhelmingly agreed that national museums of all kinds, not just nationalistic ones, are key institutions in representing national values. Reflection on the manner in which national confidence and security controls and constrains national narratives, however, has allowed some museums to renarrate the national values in new ways. Transnational circulation of people and objects across Europe is one way to disrupt the nationalistic master narrative. The simple fact that ease of travel has meant wider audiences viewing what had been

localized displays has led to old paradigms being challenged and new questions raised. EU-sponsored digital collections such as Europeana further allows the remediation of collections to achieve wider access even from home.

EUNAMUS research on narratives in museum spaces has upheld temporary exhibits as places where innovative renegotiations can most readily occur, as these exhibitions can be more dialogic, more contemporary, more inclusive, more interactive, and more embracing of ambiguity. International traveling exhibits add the extra advantage of presenting familiar themes from new and unexpected perspectives.

Finally, the collaborative, reprofessionalizing initiatives—cooperation and travel—between museums, museum professionals, and museum scholars that the EU has sponsored for many years showed benefits time and again in museum professionals' awareness of other paradigms and interest in pursuing transnational initiatives.

Bridge-building narratives are needed to balance authority and plurality

Focused interviews in multiple nations demonstrated repeatedly that minority communities want to be engaged with their nation's museums but often feel excluded by static and exclusive displays. The assumption of many art and history narratives is of an essentially white, Christian, highly educated audience. The necessary, politically contingent histories of national museums can incorporate reconciliation and plurality without sacrificing control of the narrative. Internal reflection on the audience effect of architecture, display, and story will permit greater understanding of the manner in which “necessary” stories are produced.

Examples from other museums are also highly useful as museums seek to reinvigorate the balance between collection and audience. It is here that the EUNAMUS reports, which together comprise the largest collection of theorized analyses of European museums ever compiled, provide researchers and professionals with an invaluable database. Such a broad depiction allows us to see patterns across museums rather than simply individual examples. It is this diversity of similar examples—these patterns—that can allow museums to exercise their creative capacity to develop their own bridge-building histories that best fit their local scene.

Museums can become places where airing conflict is balanced with resolution

As part of the cultural constitution of Europe, national museums can provide an institutionalized arena for negotiating new understandings of the nature of political community. The very manner in which unity and difference, threats and hopes are negotiated prepares the nation for both stability and change. Germany provides an example where national museums have been able to negotiate difficult historical periods with great success. In other countries, museums are often still struggling to come to terms with their own difficult pasts. Our research suggests that the museum response to conflict today can be placed along a continuum, from efforts that add to conflict to efforts that seek to neutralize it to efforts that aim at genuine reconciliation.

<p>ADDING TO CONFLICT</p>	<p>Museums that represent to mobilize present current hostilities from a partisan perspective, making museums partners in political conflict and increasing tensions as well as damaging professional credibility</p>
<p>NEUTRALIZING CONFLICT</p>	<p>Museums that naturalise the status quo ignore/obscure contentious issues. This is a dominant mode for national museums seeking to be nonpartisan, but only works within a strong national consensus--diverse audiences can question its deflections.</p>
	<p>Museums that orchestrate diversity acknowledge difference but domesticate it into "united in diversity". This approach is commonly used by exhibitions on national popular culture to represent regional and class differences and, today, new immigrant groups.</p>
<p>PROMOTING RECONCILIATION</p>	<p>Museums that frame community consensus appeal to values of democracy and human rights as universal goals actively promoted in the democratic world. Within a certain culture this is more or less regarded as impossible to deny, and is the approach used in promotions of a "modern" European identity.</p>
	<p>Museums that distance for a new future attempt to put the past behind in order to encompass a future free from it. However, too rapidly creating history as distance silences needed voices and can make the past return in destructive modes.</p>
	<p>Museums that promote working through past atrocities openly address conflict with the goal of understanding historical trajectories, acknowledging questions of guilt, and accepting repercussions for the present to move into the future.</p>

The balance between national and regional/local museums promotes layered citizenship

National museums provide the stability of master narratives, but regional, local, and ethnic museums can disrupt overly nationalist narratives with alternative histories. While individual local museums cannot provide the necessary plurality, taken together, these sub-national museums form a mosaic of identities that remind people they are citizens at many levels—and these multiple avenues of belonging may allow for the easier inclusion of European citizenship among the mosaic.

National and local/regional museums working together in consortia such as Sweden’s former Samdok (now the Network for Contemporary Collection) or ICOM’s International Committee for Collecting (COMCOL) can reflectively re-organize the national history to best balance plurality and authority and provide people with the multi-layered cultural glue necessary for Europe’s transnational citizens.

Museums operate best when balancing autonomy with governmental policy

Direct political interference in the operation of museums, whether in Paris or Berlin or Eastern Europe, causes the national museum to lose the trust of its audience. National and transnational narratives coexist uneasily in national museums due in large part to the varying utopian ideologies articulated by Europe’s various policymakers. While it is tempting to see museums as instruments for social vision,

throughout European history such a close identification of museum display and governmental policy has been associated with totalitarianism, as was evidenced in the Nazi Heimat museums and later in Soviet interventions in Eastern Europe.

Nevertheless, national museums are at their most effective when working in harmony with the government agenda, and politicians should expect national museums to plan an active role in future society.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

1. National museums should above all strive for the ever-shifting balance between stability and change.

For museum professionals and their collections, this would first mean a re-examination of all aspects of the national collection, considering how to reformulate conflict-promoting partisan displays. It means re-narrating histories to begin to address openly the absence of unresolved painful episodes or unassimilated peoples, as well as the complications left out of stories of “good vs. evil” or “victim vs. perpetrator.” It means thinking seriously about the national identity created by the history depicted.

It also necessarily means collaboration across divisions with those who are the “Others” in a national story, as debating together how to stage conflicts, acknowledging that stories are unresolved, and discussing openly the history of excluded voices all model the attitudes necessary for the effective change.

For officials of the European Union, this means supporting museums to do something they are better able to achieve than almost any other entity in Europe today, to provide safe spaces for difficult discussions. It means funding attitudes, not infrastructure, including efforts to reformulate overly nationalistic, one-sided, or exclusionary collections. It means supporting innovative experiments in the audience development necessary to engage citizens in attitudinal shifts.

It also means collaborating with museum professionals in the formulation of policy rather than dictating desired policies, recognizing that it is the museum staff who have the best sense of local contingencies in the balance to maintain the necessary authority to allow change to occur.

For European citizens, this means allowing museums to tell more ambiguous, open-ended, multivocal histories. It means interacting with and contributing to those stories, speaking up to preserve the national heritage while recognizing that new perspectives may entail sometimes difficult shifts in understanding and identity.

2. National museums should balance the opportunities of new media with ongoing care of collections

For museum professionals and their collections, this means

participation in professional digitizing projects such as Europeana, balancing their professional expertise to present accurate, fair, nuanced interpretations of cultural artifacts with their digital visitors' expectations of new media democracy that allows a polyphony of online commentary.

It also means continuing to care for their material collections, as these are the ongoing foundation of museums' authority in the world.

For officials of the European Union, this means that the funding of digital collections, while important for opening up cultural heritage to presentation, discussion, and debate (particularly by audiences historically alienated from museum spaces), cannot come at the expense of the management of material collections.

For European citizens, this means multiple entry points into collections across Europe.

3. National museums should work more closely together, foregoing past competition.

For museum professionals and their collections, this means participating actively and often in exchanges and transnational dialogues. It means sharing museological expertise and innovative practices. It means listening with an open mind when colleagues explain the local contingencies that make for wide variations between museums, but also being willing to challenge unexamined assumptions.

It also means an ever-greater emphasis on the circulation of objects, via traveling exhibits and carefully curated new media sites, to promote an "open access" to the combined cultural heritage of Europe. It means re-examining and perhaps re-narrating overly localized or outdated displays with an eye toward the interwoven histories of other European communities.

For officials of the European Union, this means a renewed emphasis on funding what we might call the "intangible heritage" of museums themselves—the people and their innovative ideas that promote professional exchanges, collaborations, and increased access.

For European citizens, this means greater engagement with the heritage of all of Europe, and a willingness to hear one's own history from a variety of perspectives.

4. National museums should partner with regional and local museums to promote the mosaic of identities within each nation.

For museum professionals and their collections, this means the development of local-regional-national networks to promote the rational engagement of professionals and communities. An ongoing, theme-based organizational model such as that of the former Samdok ensures a healthy balance between regional difference and thematic commonality of interests.

For officials of the European Union, this means rethinking the potentially divisive policy of funding regions over and above

national entities. Instead, a funding focus on regional-national collaboratives would promote unification of the mosaic of identity which makes up European citizens without undermining the stability provided by current nation-states.

For European citizens, this means the potential for greater community input into cultural heritage collections, as well as engagement around cross-cutting themes of interest.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives

Eunamus (European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen) is concerned with understanding how the national museum can best aid European cohesion and confront the social issues which test European stability and unity.

The project's overarching objectives are to:

1. Map the development of national museums in Europe in relation to the overall cultural evolution of Europe.
2. Distinguish the active and intentional history making that takes place in national museums.
3. Make visible the material culture which itself unites and defines European sensibilities and values.
4. Interrogate the policy-making and policy implementation actions of national museums. Policy is capable of mobilising the national museum, but how does it do so, and what role do museums have in its formulation?
5. Understand museum audiences' experiences and identities.
6. Create reflexive tools and knowledge for policy makers, museum professionals and the public in order to facilitate the operation of museums as arenas for dialogue between European citizens about what it means to belong to the nation and to Europe.

Methodologies

Eunamus combines a range of methodologies for its case studies. A comparative analytical aspect is important to the project throughout.

These are the main methods used:

1. Analytical comparative history on the development of national museums in 37 countries.
2. Analysis of great historical narratives in museum spaces and studies of the ways in which national museums deal with conflicts and transnational heritage.
3. Extensive fieldwork including an analysis of buildings and exhibitions in twelve capital cities. Analysis of online museums and studies of the interplay between national and regional museums.
4. Analysis of policy documents in a selection of national contexts.
5. Audience studies by quantitative and qualitative survey methods in nine national museums.
6. Compilations, contextualisations and cross-analysis of case – studies.

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EUNAMUS PUBLICATIONS

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