

## What Do National Museums DO? Three Papers, One Commentary

Arne Bugge Amundsen  
Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages  
University of Oslo, Norway  
[a.b.amundsen@ikos.uio.no](mailto:a.b.amundsen@ikos.uio.no)

I see my task as a commentator as two-fold. I shall comment upon the three papers presented, and I shall try to draw some lines and connections between them. Let me, then, start with the three papers.

**Barbara Wenk** has presented her analysis of how a group of scholarly educated employees – also called museum professionals - at some science and technology museums in contemporary Europe reflect on the changed roles of this kind of museums. Her main approach has been to interview museum leaders. The fieldwork has consisted of asking them a lot of simple and substantial but not uncontroversial questions about what a science and technology museum should be in today's European society. Taking the analysis of the answers as a point of departure Barbara Wenk reflects further on the answers from the museum leaders, and uses her reflections to ask similar questions to national museums in today's Europe: What should a national museum in today's Europe be? Her specific perspectives are on the scope of museum exhibitions, the transmission of knowledge through or by museums and museum exhibitions, relevant skills and expertise for museum professionals, and museums as public places or interactive arenas in societies that are subject to rapid changes.

I find both her material and her perspectives interesting and intriguing, but perhaps a bit monotonous. Most of her informers seem to be in favour of changes and challenges. This is less surprising than the opposite – that they should consider change as irrelevant. What I would have expected, however, was a presentation of the results of Wenk's *comparative* study, i.e. if there were any significant differences between different European science and technology museums regarding the questions asked. It would also have been interesting to hear more about the chronology: Barbara Wenk suggests – as do her informers – that rapid changes have occurred in the field of science and technology museums during the recent years. But *when* did these changes eventually take place? Are these alleged changes essential and fundamental, or do they more belong to the realm of generation shifts, where one generation of museum professionals wants to establish a proper distance to the former. My impression is – to put it in other words – that the change prophecy might be slightly over-emphasized both by Barbara Wenk and by her informers.

I find this question relevant simply because I also would have expected earlier generations of academically trained employees at science and technology museums to have had quite distinct ideas about the relevance of their exhibitions to educate future generations, to make them interested in the progress and challenges of modern science, or to establish a dialogue with the visitors – simply because they were not keepers of the past, but prophets of the future.

Another question that Barbara Wenk does not raise in her paper, is if not many European science and technology museums at least in earlier periods of European history actually have had status as national museums. And perhaps some of these museums even still function as performances of national progress and development? If this is the case, the relevance of questions like what kind of public institutions these museums are or what kind of public arenas they should develop in the 21st century would be even higher. Do the answers Barbara Wenk received from her contemporary informers imply that these museums try to leave or negate their role as keepers of *national* memories and prophecies within the field of technical and scientific progress, or do the answers indicate that this keeper's role only is being adjusted to new technology?

Barbara Wenk does not answer these questions directly, but her paper is a very relevant step towards investigating these important questions.

When we turn to **Ellen Chapman's** paper we find a seemingly different perspective than Barbara Wenk's. Chapman investigates more directly the basic problem of what makes a museum a national museum. And then she continues by reflecting on the constitutive elements of a national museum. Can e.g. a museum outside the physical borders of a nation be a national museum or at least have functions similar to a national museum?

Her point of departure is the hypothesis that what she calls *community museums* can elaborate ideas of nation and national identity. According to my opinion Chapman is right on a more general level. Within the borders of an established national state not only formally accepted national museums, but also regional and local museums in some way or another might be expected to modulate or to vary – or even dispute – the concept of a national history. But in some way or another these museums also confirm the imagined community of a nation, to put it in the historian Benedict Anderson's words.

Ellen Chapman, however, moves in another direction. In her paper, she focuses on three Welsh-American community museums that in different ways – but at a substantial distance from Europe - express opinions about characteristics of Wales and Welsh people. But if one asks what the three Welsh-American local museums scrutinized by Chapman have in common I am not fully convinced that “national museum” is the best way of labeling the museums studied here or to use the concept of “national museum” as basis for a further investigation of what these museums do.

As an alternative I would suggest to focus on two aspects of the material that Ellen Chapman has analyzed. The first aspect is that it probably can be discussed if Wales is a nation in a classical 19<sup>th</sup> century sense of the word. If the Welsh-American population could be regarded as some kind of a diaspora – i.e. a group more or less permanently forced to stay outside their national borders – it might of course have been meaningful to analyze their local museums outside of Wales as institutions articulating a national identity so to say *ad interim* and with close relations to lost or destroyed symbols or institutions. But this is not the case here, as far as I can see. It is obvious that the three museums articulate notions about Welsh identity, but do they utilize ideas about a specific Welsh *nation*?

The other aspect I would like to focus on is that this Welsh-American case seems to be quite similar to other cases in which immigrants develop strategies to remember and preserve the cultural experiences of their origin. These strategies in many cases might be quite ambivalent, since many emigrants felt forced to leave their country and thus were eager to

interact with their new environments. Not until a generation or two later, the question about roots and origins are fully addressed, but then many ties to the nation, country or area that was left have disappeared.

I would have considered Ellen Chapman's suggestion to analyze the three museums as modulations of national museums if they in some way or another had been interacting with museums in Wales, thus contributing on both sides of the Atlantic Sea to uphold and sustain a master narrative about the Welsh Nation. But as far as I can see, this is not the case.

The real interaction between these immigrant groups and e.g. the national narratives of their former country thus can not take place, and the immigrants start to construct their own narratives of identity and origin.

If I am not wrong here, it might be asked if this specific kind of museums are really good examples of museums contributing to "the construction and representation of national identities" – simply because the master narrative is not there. I find it more relevant to study these museums as ethnical or historical manifestations of group identity in communities of immigrants. That probably is what these museums do or perform, and that does not make them less interesting.

In the third paper of this session, **Cecilia Axelsson** presents a very interesting study of one specific exhibition - the exhibition *Afrikafararna* in Kalmar. The theme of this exhibition was Swedish emigration to South Africa. Cecilia Axelsson explicitly addresses the complex question of what museums do – or to be more precise: Of how museums mediate their messages. She rightly states that this mediation process is a very complex one, it is not static, but in continuous development, and it is dependant of personal actors.

Mediation of messages is of course a question of specific acting persons, their motives and aims. And in a modern museum there are many acting persons, many kinds of experts and generalists who stamp the results – be it an exhibition, the production of written material or oral narration facing a living audience.

My evaluation is that Axelsson in her study has many relevant and valuable perspectives worth noticing. I would simply like to add one more element to this complexity of mediation processes in museums, and that is the media themselves, or – to stick to a concept very much in use during this conference – *the genres*. The question of narrative genres in museums is not only a question of different ways of telling stories or performing narratives. It is also a question of which kinds of media that are used for narrating in museums – film, music, interactive presentations, booklets or simple use of living museum guides. These media contribute heavily to the sustainability of the message, they make it more or less trustworthy, more or less like school education or public entertainment, making it different or similar to messages that can be found elsewhere in society and in the personal world of each and every visitor. My suggestion, then, is that if Cecilia Axelsson had brought the question of genres and media into her analysis, she would have deepened her results, but not contested them.

On the contrary, I find her results from the analysis of the Swedish museum exhibition both interesting and convincing, but perhaps even not too surprising. As seen from the perspective of the producers of the exhibition, factors like economy and lack of time were as important for the results as academic or museological convictions or aims. At the same time, there were indications that the exhibition's impact on visiting students was not too overwhelming. To return to the ultimate critical question: Who cares about national museums? In this case one could perhaps even go one step further, and ask: Who cares about museums at all?

Well, obviously people care about museums, but in what way? The question is why, and how – what do museums do to their visitors, and what do museum professionals want to do to these visitors? That – I think - is a common element of the three papers presented in this session of the conference. These contributions have brought us a bit closer to find at least

some answers to this question. None of the museums mentioned here have been national museums in the way that they are entrusted with any official memory of a nation by representatives of any national state authority. The science and technology museums are not of this kind; neither are the three Welsh-American museums nor Kalmar läns museum. Still, it is obvious that they in some way or another articulate concepts of values, artifacts or processes that are relevant to collective memory.

In this way, they might be said to contribute to a master narrative about a community of people, a master narrative including past, present and future. That such master narratives about a community of people exist is a *sine qua non* also for national master narratives, but not necessarily in the way that the national master narratives are the only of its kind.