



## National Museums in Belgium

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### Summary

The problematic and laboriously constructed nature of the Belgian nation is, to a large extent, reflected in the structure and distribution of Belgium's federal/national museums. The complexity and contradictory nature of the administrative organisation of the Belgian state led one of its leading contemporary artists to comment that 'maybe the country itself is a work of art' (Fabre, 1998: 403). Its national museums - those which receive direct federal funding - are the result of a series of projects that founded the large cultural institutions of Brussels in the nineteenth century, decreed by the Belgian monarchy that was itself only founded in 1830. Brussels, the largely French speaking capital of the nation situated geographically in the centre of a Flemish speaking region, is since 1830 the seat of a constitutional monarchy and democratically elected parliament that governs over the two very distinct linguistic and cultural areas: the northern Dutch-speaking Flanders and southern French-speaking Wallonia. In his article on 'What, if Anything, Is a Belgian?', Van der Craen writes: 'Belgium has been at the centre of a heated debate since its creation. The relatively young country has had little time to develop any nationalistic feelings in comparison to, for instance, the Netherlands or France' (2002: 32). In constructing a nationalist discourse through the creation of national institutions such as museums, the Belgian monarchy looked very much to the French model for inspiration, and the strong influence of France, both politically and culturally, can be clearly retraced in the history the *Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*. In the parliamentary debates concerning the organization and support of the arts, France appears as the preponderant model (Montens, 2001: 14).

Today, the relative inertia of Belgium's federal institutions is indicative of the problems that the Belgian federal state has been experiencing in the face of rising regionalism and the transfer of the management of cultural affairs to the communities. As has been pointed out by numerous critics, its national museums, the *Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale* and the *Musée royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire militaire* especially, can be characterized by the 'dusty' character of their museography. Of the *Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale* (1910) an American scholar wrote: 'The fundamental message remains the same: when going through the revolving doors of the museum's main entrance, one has the feeling of entering into a liminal space, frozen in time' (Muteba, J., 2003: 61).

Three periods are of capital importance to understand the evolution of Belgium's national museums: the French occupation at the end of the eighteenth century (1793-1815) – although no museums were really established this was a crucial period for the crystallisation of a public consciousness of artistic heritage; the years following Belgian independence in 1830 with the decision of the city of Brussels to sell its collections to the state (1843) and finally the period of the jubilees and the great national, universal and colonial exhibitions (1880-1930). Recent decades have, in stark contrast to what can be observed in other countries (for example Luxembourg), seen no major projects initiated by Belgium's federal cultural authorities, and this despite the fact

the museum as an institution is of growing popular appeal. One may however mention the creation in 2005 of the BELvue Museum that tells the history of Belgium as structured by the reigns of its successive monarchs.

This is not to imply however that there have not been major developments under the control of the government of the different communities – but simply to underline that the dynamics of museum creation have moved away from the central federal powers.

The identification of Belgium's most important national/federal museums poses no problem of definition of any kind – though none of them carry the epithet 'national' but are denominated as royal. There are exactly five major 'royal' museums, all situated in Brussels and all directly funded by the federal government, they form an exemplary group to illustrate the classic national museum typology with a national art museum, an archaeology and history museum, an ethnology/colonial museum, a natural sciences museum and a military museum.

## Summary table, Belgium

Name	Inaugurated	Initiated	Actors	Ownership	Type	Values	Temporal reach	Style Location
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique	1801	1797	Monarchy	Municipal, State (1842). Federal Science Policy Dept. today	Fine Arts	Old Master paintings, all schools. Strong representation of Belgian/Flemish artists.	11 <sup>th</sup> to 19 <sup>th</sup> c.	Classical architecture, Brussels.
Muséum de l'Institut Royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique	1848	1846	Monarchy	State Federal Science Policy Dept. today	Anthropology, Zoology, Ecology, Mineralogy Paleontology	Materials from Belgium but include international specimens.	Geological time to present day.	Brussels.
Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire - Musée du Cinquantenaire	1880 in its current buildings	1835	Monarchy	Princely collection, Federal Science Policy Dept. today	History, Archaeology	Universal collection world history and art. Antiquity, European and non-European decorative arts.	Prehistory to 1000 AD to present day.	Beaux-Arts style classical construction, Brussels.
Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale (formerly known as the <i>Musée du Congo Belge</i> - 1960)	1910	1897	Monarchy	State Federal Science Policy Dept. today	Ethnography	Museum of Belgian Congo after independence 1960 including Africa and Oceania.	17 <sup>th</sup> to 20 <sup>th</sup> c.	Beaux-Arts style classical construction, Tervuren.
Musée royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire militaire	1911	1910		State, Federal department of Defence	National Heritage and Military History	Collection of arms, uniforms, and military equipment.	17 <sup>th</sup> to 20 <sup>th</sup> c.	Beaux-Arts style classical construction, Brussels.
Musée BELvue	2005	1992 (former museum of the Belgian dynasty)	Monarchy	King Baudouin Foundation	National History	History of Belgium 1830, the federal state, reign of King Baudouin.	1830 to 1990.	Place des Palais in Brussels, next to the Royal Palace, Bellevue Hotel.

## **Introduction: A brief history and geography of Belgium's national museums**

The last decade has seen the development of a historiography dedicated to questions of cultural policy and also to the history of artistic institutions such as museums (Kurgan-van Hentenryk, Montens, 2001). Christoph Loir (2004) has studied the origins of Belgian museums and cultural policy in detail. One might observe however that the history of other types of institutions has received far less attention.

As opposed to the other major European museums, such as the Prado or the Louvre, the royal museums of Belgium are not rooted in any major early modern princely collections (Roberts-Jones, 1987: 9) - the collections of curiosities and arms of the dukes of Brabant and later of the archduke of Austria that were displayed in the royal arsenal of the Coudenberg palace (today the location of the Royal palace of Brussels) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries went back to Vienna in the eighteenth century.

The secularisation of artworks from the Jesuits and the convents under Habsburg rule did not lead to the creation of any museums (Loir, 2001: 44), however the French invasion greatly hastened the process of secularisation of works of religious art. The French revolutionaries began by confiscating major masterpieces of Flemish painting in 1794; this provoked a growing awareness of the territory's artistic heritage – an exodus that served as a traumatic catalyst for the development of a sense of national heritage. Subsequent campaigns also led to the creation of depots and of municipal collections in Antwerp, Brussels and Gand between 1802 and 1804. The French decree that founded France's major municipal museums also founded the museum of Brussels, which opened its doors to the public in 1803.

Thus, quite paradoxically, the museums of Belgium have been very much influenced by the evolution of France's national museums due to its occupation of Belgian territory during a period when it was developing its own republican museum system. Belgium's first museums in sense developed with, and in reaction to, the occupying force. Although no official 'national' museum could be created during the period of French rule under the Republic or the Empire, many projects were put into place and the core of the collections that were nationalised in the 1830s was established during that period (cf. the *Musée royal des beaux-arts de Belgique*), notably the paintings collection.

In 1835, the new king of Belgium declared the creation of an official royal museum in Brussels that was to be based on the collections that had been brought together in the buildings of the former court and which along with paintings also housed a cabinet of natural history and sciences. The collections of the city of Brussels were officially acquired by the state in 1843 to form what was to become the *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique*, but also the basis for the *Muséum de l'institut royal des sciences naturelles de Belgique* founded in 1846 and the basis of what came to be known later as the *Musées Royaux d'art et d'histoire*. The idea behind the creation of the museum of fine arts especially – indeed the acquisition of the city's collection of paintings was considered to be the most important element of the whole affair - was to create a national institution exclusively dedicated to the productions of the most noteworthy Belgian painters, sculptors and architects. It was hoped that this would fuel a much-needed sense of national pride (Stengers, 2002: 15). This fundamental decision in terms of national cultural policy was accompanied by the organisation of an artistic salon, the creation of a commission for the

preservation of historical monuments and a royal commission for a series of statues representing Belgium's greatest men. The debate that arose at the beginning of the 1840s surrounding the opening of these museums shows the difficulty of creating a national centralized institution in a nation where local powers and sentiment are particularly strong (Kalck, Michèle Van, 2003).

The last decades of the century saw the development of the two major museum poles of the city of Brussels with the *Parc du Cinquantenaire*, created for the 1880 anniversary celebrations of the Belgian nation and the expansion of the *Mont des arts*. The *Cinquantenaire* marked a period of distinct reinforcement of a nationalist discourse. Indeed, the end of the nineteenth century saw the elaboration of a theory of the Belgian 'soul' (Dumont, 2001: 38) in a famous text by Edmond Picard published in 1897 (Gubin, 2002: 121) as the product of two races, the child 'Belgium' was the combined result of the north and south as mother and father. It was hoped that the celebrations for the jubilee would appease the internal conflicts that the country was experiencing at this time; the so-called *guerre scolaire* was indeed dividing the country between clerical and liberal camps. In this context, the celebration of national art was the strongest argument in the discourse of unification that characterized the celebrations (Deneckere, 2005 : 7), a thin veneer that could only barely hide the dividing forces at work within the country (Dumont, 2001: 28).

It was in the buildings constructed for the *Centenaire* that the universal collections of the *Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire* (as opposed to the more clearly national character of the collections of the *Musée des Beaux-arts*) were relocated in 1885. The Universal Exhibition of 1897 also hosted in the park was the original starting point for the *Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale*, which later moved to a building by Charles Girault in *Tervuren* and opened to the public there in 1910. The park also became the home of *Musée royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire militaire* whose origins go back to 1910, the year of the following Universal Exhibition in Brussels, when a young army officer Louis Leconte assembled a collection of 800 objects destined to illustrate Belgium's military history. It may be considered with the *Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale* as a reflection of colonial policy and nationalist sentiment that needs to be considered with particular intention.

As we can see from this short overview, most of the federally funded national Belgian museums are situated in Brussels, home to the monarchy and the parliament. The *Musée royal des Beaux-Arts d'Anvers* (Antwerp) may also be considered as a national (royal) museum. In many ways there was no absolute cultural centralisation in 19th century Belgium: the (national) art salons are organised each year alternatively in Brussels, Gent and Antwerp, the national Art Competition (*Prix de Rome*) was organised in Antwerp, the two national Art Schools (Académies Royales) were in Antwerp and in Brussels.

Recent studies of the history of cultural policy in Belgium underline the fact that state subsidies for the arts were however unequally distributed before the 1970s and there was little sense of proportion in relation to the value of the artworks and the size of the museums. The museums of Gent, Liège or Bruges, although extremely rich, received very little state financing in comparison to Brussels, a fact that was perceived as an injustice by the Flemish members of parliament (Montens, 2001: 16).

This may have influenced the negative perception of a relatively strong concentration of institutions in Brussels which came under criticism from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards and has remained a subject of unresolved tension though it has lessened since the 1970s when in the context of the federal state, the communities were given jurisdiction over cultural

matters, including most museums. In the context of the current federal structure of Belgian government, recent historiography tends to present the development of “national” cultural institutions in Belgium as a failed attempt to create a central national state by establishing most major institutions in the capital.

Of course, Brussels was, and is, a space of conflict in relation to the nation as Van der Craen (2002 : 27) points out. In a city whose role is to reconcile two different linguistic communities, Francophone cultures appears nevertheless as dominant quite simply because of the population figures: only 15 to 20 percent of the city’s population speak Flemish, and only 2.5 percent of Belgium’s Flemish speaking population live in Brussels. This is in stark contrast to the 33 percent of Belgium’s French speaking population that has its residence in the city meaning that the national museums of Belgium are, above all, easily accessible to Belgium’s French speaking community.

### **National museums and cultural policy in Belgium**

The history and geography of Belgium’s national museums on the one hand reflects a centralized system, with a strong concentration of federal institutions in the capital of Brussels. However in parallel to the creation of such state institutions as the *Musée royal des Beaux-arts*, the structure of Belgium’s artistic institutions as a whole and the distribution of cultural heritage has also been strongly influenced by the historically divided character of power in the territory of the Belgian state since the creation of the United Provinces in 1648. Ruled by the Spanish and Habsburg monarchies from afar, the different provinces maintained a high degree of autonomy with individual towns establishing themselves as independent cultural actors and centres. According to Carl Strikwenda (2006, 81) it was ‘only these historic liberties’ which ‘formed a basis of identity among the ‘Belgian’ provinces at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’.

Belgium’s national museums however are the nearly exclusive heritage of the system of support for the arts defined after the independence of the Belgian Kingdom in 1831 under the rule of Leopold I, in a sense a system that has, since the 1970s, appeared as a failure (Dumont, 2001: 26). According to Montens (2001: 10) one cannot identify the expression of a national cultural policy in today’s sense - that is to say a systematic and deliberate plan of cultural action that is cross disciplinary by nature – in Belgium before the end of the Second World War. For Dumont (2001: 26) indeed it can only really be identified from the 1960s onwards, meaning that the elaboration of a cultural policy coincided with the development of the federal state. This rather strong interpretation should however be considered with some care as it does not seem to take into account the very different nature of what one might (perhaps somewhat anachronistically) call cultural policy for the nineteenth century. This modern perspective, such as presented by Dumont, indeed considers the true nature of the Belgian nation to be not central but federal and so tends to describe the policies of the past with a somewhat negative bias.

Indeed, cultural affairs were a strong element of national construction during the first decades after the establishment of the Belgian state. The fine arts in particular were identified as a strong vector for the development of national sentiment and for the consolidation of its still fragile political legitimacy. A notion clearly expressed by the senator, the count Renesse, before the parliament in 1844: ‘Patriotic sentiment is composed of the memory of great men, of the admiration inspired by the great masterpieces of national genius and lastly by the love that one

may have for its institutions, its religion and the glory of the country' (Montens, 2001: 13). It was clearly felt that the role of the arts was to edify the citizen, to teach him of Belgium's rich past and to illustrate that great men had inhabited its territories.

This discourse was developed by the celebrations of the 50<sup>th</sup>, 75<sup>th</sup> and 100<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of Belgian independence in 1880, 1905 and 1930 respectively, as events that sought to overcome the fragmented structure of the nation to establish social cohesion, a process in which a very important role was given to the arts and their promotion (Beyen, 2001: 75). Subsequently this called for important government investments. These events were important moments in the crystallization of projects and indeed in the building of Belgium's museums: most notably Balat's *Palais des Beaux-arts* and the *Parc du cinquantenaire* which houses the *Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire* and the *Musée royal de l'armée à Bruxelles*. Beyen (2001: 78) identifies what he defines as the culture of the nation as the *Gesamtkunstwerk* reflected in the celebrations for the Jubilees (and for the different National and Universal exhibitions); according to him the idea of national genius could unify different strands of political, artistic, industrial, popular, literary and historical thought present in the country. A romantic and essentialist approach to the idea of the nation defined the jubilee and its resulting institutions as contexts for the unification of the most heterogeneous cultural elements.

The beginning of the twentieth century appears as a period of particular importance with a considerable increase in state financing for the arts, which tend to have been privileged over support for literature and the sciences. In 1907, a ministry for the Sciences and the Arts is created for the first time, leading to the creation of an independent direction of the arts, letters and public libraries (Montens, 2001: 10-12). Between 1900 and 1930 the national institutions all experienced a period of growth and important new museums were founded. Despite these efforts and the creation of large national institutions in Brussels, Montens and Dumont (2001) point to the absence of a real cultural policy capable of instilling a feeling of national adhesion/identity. Dumont in particular accuses the absence of a policy for the democratisation of access to culture, although one may add that Belgium does not appear to be any less advanced in this field than most other European countries (2001: 26). He accuses the 'false intuition' that led the state to believe that the cultural identity of Belgium could coincide with what was essentially one common meeting space: Brussels. How would both Flemish and Francophone culture unite in an area where Flemish was spoken by a minority of the population? This situation did indeed lead to a centrifugal movement away from the culture proposed by the monarchy and the government in Brussels (Dumont, 2001: 27).

The regionalist movement underway since the 1960s finds its origins in the historical situation of the Belgian territories before the independence of 1830 and its strength in the weakness of the state's efforts to overcome linguistic and cultural divisions reinforced by economic inequalities. It resulted in a series of reforms that culminated in 1993 with the creation of a tiered system of government.

Since the 1970s, Belgium has progressively evolved towards a federal state made up of territorial regions and linguistic communities. The federal government is based in Brussels, and delegates all local affairs to three language communities (Flemish, French and German), but also to three regions (Flemish, Walloon and Brussels-Capital) each with their own parliament and

government. The communities and regions do not consistently coincide with each other, notably the Brussels-Capital Region is both part of the Flemish and of the French community.

The history of cultural policies since the 1970s must therefore be considered by looking at the combined activities of the three independent linguistic communities and those of the Federal state. Belgian cultural policy is structured by two underlying principles since the 1970s: firstly the autonomy of the communities in terms of their elaboration of a cultural policy and secondly by the ideological and philosophical pluralism that is supposed to guide their cultural activities. For Dumont, the first of these principles is the result of the failure of the Belgium state to unite its citizens through the recognition of a common cultural heritage that is readily accessible to all. The second principle of pluralism as defined in the federal constitution is a specific product of Belgian cultural policy (although one may compare it to the case of Switzerland), it is designed to ensure that the first principle of autonomy does not lead to the further isolation of the different communities in relation to each other (Dumont, 2001: 26). Each of the communities has indeed established their own independent institutions, traditions and structures of political influences (Janssens, 2010). Dumont (2001: 35) retraces the slow genesis of the ideological and philological pluralism back to 1919 and the nomination of the Walloon socialist, an ardent advocate of artistic eclecticism, Jules Destrée to the position of Minister for the sciences and the arts. Destrée had famously written to King Léopold II in 1912: 'Let me tell you the truth, the grand and horrifying truth ... there are no Belgians.... No, Majesty, there is not such a thing as a Belgian soul' (quoted by Van der Craen, 2002: 25).

One of the first and most important reforms (1980) made to allow for a new reattribution of power to the newly defined authorities was related to cultural affairs (including museums, libraries and archives). Since 1980 these sectors are handled separately by a specific Ministry created in each of the communities: French Community: Unit Patrimony and Visual Arts of the Directorate General Culture; Flemish Community: Unit Visual Arts and Museums of the Administration of Culture; German-speaking Community: Department of Cultural Affairs (Van Dinter, 2008). We might add that whilst the communities thus became responsible for cultural affairs, notably museums, the regions were given responsibility over historical monuments and the conservation of archaeological sites.

This division of control has meant that the different communities work separately without consulting each other or following any kind of plan of cooperation. The most notable absence is that of an official body or agency to coordinate their efforts, this of course also implies the absence of any form of consensus or clear expression of national cultural policy that would integrate the federal museums into a larger perspective – or seek to give them greater territorial coverage by creating antennae institutions, as is the case in Switzerland.

This is all the more remarkable as we can find many efforts of coordination at other levels. The Brussels Museum Council for example, or *Conseil bruxellois des Musées* is a non-profit association established in 1995 as a result of the initiative of about 15 curators whose main aim was to find an efficient way of promoting tourism in Brussels. It regroups 80 museums and is particularly sensitive to making sure that all of its activities and events are equally available to both Francophone and Flemish speakers.

Another clear indication of the fragmented system of administration is the absence of a website regrouping along the same lines of criteria all the institutions officially recognised as



museums in Belgium (as may be found again in other countries). Instead, associations and councils representing the different communities provided this information separately (Van Dinter, 2008).

Major Federal museums can be found on the website of the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office and on that of the Brussels Museum Council ('Brusselse Museumraad/Conseil Bruxellois des Musées' - BMR- CBM). The museums of the French Community however can be found on the official portal for museums in Wallonia, <http://www.lesmuseesenwallonie.be> and the association 'Musées et Société en Wallonie' (MSW) (Museums and Society in Wallonia). The Flemish Community has a website of about 300 museums in Flanders and in Brussels. A separate list of the museums officially recognized by the Flemish Community is provided on their website (ca. 50 museums).

Beyond this, the museums of the different communities are classified according to different categories. The French community applies the following categories: art; sacred art; archaeology; regional; ethnography; technology; history; science; literature; special collections. The Flemish have established five categories: cultural-historical museums; modern art museums; ancient art museums; museums for applied arts and technology museum, whilst the German-speaking community does not divide museums into categories related to the type of collections (Van Dinter, 2008 : 25).

An obvious result of this process of regionalisation is to have quite neatly stopped most national projects, and we find no new national museums in Belgium funded by the federal government (there is a marked difference here to the surrounding countries that have all seen the creation of new national museums in the last thirty years, be it France, Germany, the Netherlands or Switzerland).

In this context, an interesting case is the *musée BELvue* established in 2005, to mark the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Belgian nation. It is not run by the federal government but is managed and financed by the King Baudouin Foundation (an independent public benefit foundation, created by 1976, when Baudouin I (1930-1993) celebrated his 25th anniversary as King of Belgium) and as part of this foundation it has a particular status of public museum. The *musée BELvue* is the only museum of Belgian national history: it presents a chronological narrative of the history of the Belgian nation from the perspective of its monarchy. Bellvue, is of course a reference to the name of the former hotel in which it is housed – however, with the adopted typography 'BELvue', it seeks to underline the notion of Bel, for Belgium and vue – as in an all-over view of Belgian history. Interestingly, the museum has maintained quite a low profile and no critical studies or analysis of its creation have been published to this day.

The transfer of cultural affairs to the governments of the communities explains the absence of involvement from the federal government in museum building. This observation is all the more significant if we consider that in the regions of Wallonia and Brussels, 50% of all the museums that can be accounted for today have been created since 1977 (Mairesse, 2004: 158). A good example of the impact of this regionalism on museum geography is the case of the open-air museums of country architecture. In other countries such as Switzerland (museum of Ballenberg) or the Netherlands (The Dutch Open Air museum of Arnhem) we find national institutions that are representative of rural architecture from all over the country. However, although the Flemish philologist, Henri Longeman had called for a Belgian open air museum in 1909, no national

institution was ever founded (Jong and Skougaard, 1992: 155): the open air museum of Bokrijk, was opened in 1953, it is dedicated to rural architecture and daily life for the Flemish region. Its counterpart, the museum of rural life in the Walloon region was founded in 1971 and opened in 1981 – no serious attempt appears to have been made to found a nationally representative institution (even if it is to underline national diversity, as it is the case in Switzerland).

Meanwhile federal authorities have maintained the administration and continued to financially support certain scientific establishments, including a handful of large museums situated in the capital: *Musées royaux des beaux-arts de Belgique*; *Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale*; *Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire - Musée du Cinquantenaire*; *Muséum de l'Institut Royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique*. To this group we must add a handful of other museums, financed by the federal Ministry for Finance or Defense, such as the Museum of the Royal Mint, in Brussels, the *Musée royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire militaire* and the National Maritime Museum of Antwerp.

We have already established that the administration of culture and heritage is fragmented and somewhat haphazardly distributed. Indeed in the case of the French community, the competence for heritage is shared between the Regions (Wallonia and Brussels-Capital) and the community. The French Community's heritage policy is thus mainly focused on museums, the most important of which being the *Royal Mariemont* of the French Community.

In our table of Belgian national museums, we have listed some other museums titled as 'royal' or 'national' that are today funded and administered by one of the three communities, such the *Musée royal de Mariemont* (cf. table) initially a state run institution it is now under the administration/ownership of the French community. It includes a magnificent park and a collection of Greco-Roman antiquities as well as an important collection of regional antiquities assembled by Raoul Waroqué in the nineteenth century. One might also consider the case of the *Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts d'Antwerp* founded in 1810, which is the most important museum run by the Flemish community; it housed the collection of one of the five academies that were directly financed by the Belgian state in the 1830s for the development of their museums (Loir, 2004: 9). It has come to house some of the greatest masterpieces of old Flemish masters. It also continually collected works by contemporary Belgian and foreign artists and today it has the largest collections of paintings by James Ensor in the world.

According to Mairesse (2004: 153) who studied the 405 museums of the regions of Brussels and Wallonia, the larger federal or municipal museums are hardly representative of this group taken as a whole in the subjects that they handle. Indeed what transpires as the great importance, even predominance of the Fine arts, disappears when we stop focusing on those large museums. He has shown that, whilst the major institutions occupy several clearly marked out territories, the other museums constitute a nebula of themes that is difficult to define and classify.

In this complex political context and in view of the fact that it seems difficult to envisage the creation of any new national museums in Belgium today, we might also ask ourselves whether certain museums, though perhaps not administered by federal government, may be considered to be of specific national resonance (cf. table below). This may be of interest to help gain a deeper understanding of specific aspects of national identity as, for example, projected through the life of specific historical figures related to the fine arts. The museum house of Rubens in Antwerp or James Ensor in Ostend are both related to the importance of a figure of great national artistic genius. Rubens as a Belgian artist became of particular importance after 1830; indeed one of the

first exhibitions organized by the *Musée des beaux-arts de Belgique* was a retrospective of Rubens' paintings (1840).

We have also included in our list the *Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée* which is an associative museum founded by a group of professionals of cartoon drawing (both Francophone and Flemish speakers as underlined on the website) who together decided to promote a popular art form considered to be a national export. It is quite an exceptional institution as it is nearly entirely self-financing. Inaugurated by the king and queen of Belgium in 1989, it is housed in Brussels in a 1906 *art nouveau* building by Victor Horta (former Waucquez shops) and has become one of Brussels' most successful museums, welcoming 200 000 visitors per year.

On the other hand, we might also observe that certain of the museums financed by community or federal governments and carrying 'national' in their title (and there are not many) are not necessarily of any particular importance (National Museum of Linen, National Museum of the Playing Card).

## Case studies in chronological order

### Musées royaux des beaux-arts de Belgique

The *Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts* are considered to be the most popular and most visited of museum complexes in Belgium: at the heart of the capital, it is under this denomination that we find united, the so called *Mont des arts*: the *Musée d'Art ancien*, the *Musée d'Art moderne* and the *Musée Magritte*. It also managed the *Musée Meunier* and the *Musée Wiertz*. They depend on the Royal Museum of Fine Arts (as the Musée Magritte), which is at the Mont des Arts. In celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the *Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique* produced an important history of the institution allowing for a detailed account of its history (Van Kalck, 2003).

We can observe the importance of national art in the construction of Belgian identity by reading Deneckere's introduction to the history of Belgium during the *Belle Époque*. On the first page we find a quote from a speech given by the senator Henri't Kint de Roodenbeke at one of the many ceremonies organized to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Belgium independence, in this case the inauguration ceremony on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, 1880 of the first Palace/Museum especially built for the fine arts, designed by king Leopold II's architect Alphonse Balat, the new *Palais des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels. She claimed on this occasion that 'Art in Belgium has its roots in the customs, in the taste and in the character of the nation itself' (Deneckere, 2005 : 7).

Though officially founded thanks to the decree of Napoleon's French Minister for the Interior, Chaptal, in 1801, the idea and the desire to found a museum in the city of Brussels may be dated back to the last decade of the eighteenth century. In the decree that named most of France's important burgeoning municipal museums, Brussels is designated as one of the four most important cities to receive depots from the Louvre (out of a chosen fifteen cities altogether). This is relatively ironic, as the initiative to create a museum for the city had been provoked by the confiscations of the French revolutionary armies from 1793 onwards. At this time, Charles-Antoine de Santander (1752-1813), the librarian of the central school of the Dyle, a man fascinated by the arts and the sciences and an avid bibliophile, had the idea of establishing a picture gallery with paintings that the French representatives had deemed of insufficient importance to be sent to Paris. The paintings, the former property of the suppressed convents

and abbeys, of aristocrats who had fled the country and of the seats of corporations, were stockpiled in depots (as was also the case in France). The idea was developed by the director of the Academy of Painting and Sculpture, Bosschaert, who resorted to the same arguments propounded in the pamphlets that supported the opening of the Louvre in 1793 to create a museum as a centre for the education and betterment of young artists (Roberts-Jones, 1987:13). The museum, founded in Brussels in 1803 on the basis of the Chaptal decree, was significantly expanded thanks to the restitution of a large number of revolutionary confiscations in 1815. The museum was situated in the Royal palace during the Dutch regime that succeeded French rule.

The court was an important arena for the promotion of intellectual life in Brussels and already housed several cultural institutions such as a library, a scientific cabinet of natural history, forming the basis for the future *Mont des arts* (Roberts-Jones, 1987:20). With the creation of the Belgian State in 1830, the provisional government named a new director for the museum but its administration and property remained that of the city of Brussels. After the enthronisation of Léopold I in 1831, the Ministry for the Interior transferred all of the contemporary works that it owned and that it had bought at recent exhibitions to the municipal gallery.

It was the royal decree of the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 1835 that founded the modern national institution for what was to be a 'national museum, exclusively dedicated to Belgium's most remarkable painters sculptors, engravers and architects' and by 1845 a special section of the museum was dedicated to living artists (Roberts-Jones, 1987:26). The difficult financial situation of the city of Brussels encouraged the sale of its collections to the state in 1843 after long negotiations whose main object had been the paintings collections. The deal, however, also made the state the legal owner of the former royal palace and its chapel and a series of other buildings such as the *Porte de Hal*, one of the towers of the former city walls, the town library and the other scientific collections that had already been regrouped at the royal court (Loir, 2001: 43). The *Musée royal* declared its status officially on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1846. This fundamental decision in terms of national cultural policy was accompanied by the organisation of an artistic salon, the creation of a commission for the preservation of historical monuments and a royal commission for a series of statues representing Belgium's greatest men. The debate that arose at the beginning of the 1840s during the negotiations for the sale of the collection shows the difficulty of creating a national centralized institution in a nation where local powers and sentiment are particularly strong (Kalck, Michèle Van, 2003, 121). It is interesting to follow the evolution of the notion of a Belgian school of painting in the midst of this debate. Loir writes that, in the arguments of the *bourgmestre* of Brussels in 1840, one could read the beginning of a national appropriation of the Flemish school of painting. The old Flemish school and the so-called Belgian school were to become one and the same thing. Van Eyck, Rubens and all the other great masters were naturalized as Belgians (Loir, 2001: 49). The problem of the exodus of Flemish paintings is brought up again and again as the most stirring of heritage issues that the country faced.

Once the collections of the town of Brussels had been acquired by the state, the question of their localisation remained to be answered and the decision was rapidly made to maintain their place in Brussels. Loir underlines that, here for the first time, a collection was to be considered and was to represent Belgian national culture (Loir, 2001, 55). The collection of contemporary art remained beside that of the old masters until 1887 when the Palais Balat that had been built for the 1880 centenary was used to house the Museum for Ancient Art. Between 1850 and 1907 a

series of the paintings was isolated as having principally historic value and forming a so-called historical gallery that was to be reintegrated into the rest of the collections again in 1907 (Van Kalck, 2000:194).

As already stated, the museum's policy was, from the beginning, to collect only national art and its directors today, to a certain extent, regret the absence of many French or Dutch artists that could easily have been bought such as Monet, Renoir, Gauguin, Cézanne, Van Gogh and others who had all exhibited paintings in Brussels around 1900 at the time of the XX and the *Libre Esthétique* (Van Kalck, 2003: 16). For Van Kalck, the museum's principle was based on the universal value of art as a celebration of the state and its power, but it was also a collection founded in the context of romantic national particularisms – a perspective that forges its policy to this day.

### **Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire**

The initiative for the creation of this museum of universal ambition and scope (art and archaeology of antiquity: Egypt, Near and Middle East, Iran, Greece, Rome and Etruscan, Byzantine; European decorative arts, Belgian national archaeology) also goes back to a royal decree established on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 1835, just a few months after the decree that founded the principle of a museum for the fine arts. It was decided that a museum of ancient arms, armours, art objects and coins should be founded in the 'interest of the historical studies and of the arts' (*Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire. Antiquité*, 1988: 7). It was installed in the ground floor of the *Palais de l'Industrie* beneath the also newly founded *Bibliothèque royale*. With the rapid expansion of the collections, these were transferred to the *Porte de Hal* in 1847 where they became known as the *Musée royal d'Antiquités et d'Armures*. However, with the construction of the buildings on the *Parc du Centenaire* for the national celebrations of 1880, the antiquities found a new home in 1889, in the wing that would later become the *Musée royal de l'armée* whilst the arms remained in the *Porte de Hal*. The collections had expanded greatly to include many other fields and, inspired by the model of the South Kensington museum in London, it became the *Musées royaux des Arts décoratifs et industriels*.

It was organized according to different techniques but also chronologically to show the evolution of form and style. However, this denomination did not do justice to the wide historical scope of the collections which were finally renamed *Musées Royaux du Cinquantenaire* in 1912. Indeed, the collections cover the art and history of the world from prehistoric times to the present day (with the exception of painting in terms of media) and Africa in terms of geography (represented in the *Musée Royal de l'Afrique centrale*). Antiquity, European decorative arts and non-European civilisations are represented but there is also an important section dedicated to national Gallo-Roman archaeology. Today it also includes a museum of musical instruments. The *Porte des Hals* is today a site for a museum of the history of Brussels and for exhibitions dedicated to folk culture and life.

### **Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale (1910)**

The Royal Museum of Central Africa was created as a 'display case of colonial action' (Cornelis, 2000: 71). Its collection goes back to the creation of a colony that was ruled directly by Leopold II as his personal kingdom between 1885 and 1908. From 1882, a series of initiatives brought together objects – so called curiosities and fetishes - in a small natural history museum

established in Brussels. The director of the museum called for the creation of a specific museum dedicated to the Congo as early as 1894. In 1896, the first director of the future museum of the Congo, Théodore Masui expressed his concern for the changes that European influence was causing on the traditional arts, underlining the need for a specifically dedicated museum. But it was the direct initiative and desire of Leopold II that led to the presentation of the collections in the 'Palais des Colonies' after the vast colonial exhibition organized at Tervuren in 1897. This evolved into a monumental project for a permanent museum that Leopold II hoped would be a forum for 'colonial education', to incite initiatives and vocations related to the colonies. In 1908, after much contestation concerning the administration of Leopold's private colony, with a population terrorised by the iron force of the militia, the Belgium government annexed the colony, and the Independent state of Congo became the Belgian Congo. It was under this title that the museum finally opened in 1910 - the *Musée du Congo Belge* was placed in a sumptuous *Beaux-arts* style palace designed by the French architect Charles Girault who had built the Petit-Palais in Paris for the 1900 Universal Exhibition. Under the direct administration of the Ministry of the Colonies, it was divided into five sections: political economics, moral and political sciences, natural sciences, ethnography and photography and vulgarisation. A large part of the exhibition space was thus dedicated to products such as rubber and ivory imported from the colony. The moral and physical progress of the indigenous populations was presented, notably the elimination of practices such as cannibalism – this section was later to become the historical department of the museum – telling the story of the colonialization – including commemorative plaques for those Belgians who died in the Congo. The ethnography department presented its objects also in the perspective that sought to show the impact of European rational thought on African culture. A small section was even dedicated to the use of African materials such as ivory by Belgian artists. (Cornelis, 2000: 74). The museum's project/mission, as defined by Leopold II's initiative, remained practically unchanged up until the Second World War. (Cornelis, 2000: 72). However, the museum did develop its scientific orientation to include the study of geology, mineralogy, zoology, entomology and botany as well as in the human sciences with a prehistory and anthropology section.

In 1960, with the independence of the Belgian Congo, the museum was renamed to become the *Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale* and, at this point also, its mission and organisation were largely reformed – yet its museology remained largely unchanged (Roger, 2008: 85). However, in terms of themes and subject matter, the economic perspective that had held such a preponderant place in the first decades of the museum's existence all but disappeared and the human sciences section was purged of a great deal of its propagandist discourse.

In order to renew its image from being an out-dated and politically tendentious institution, the museum has developed a strong programme of temporary exhibits, entering a strong period of reflexivity concerning its own history from about 2000 onwards (Roger, 2008: 85) with the temporary exhibition *ExitMuseumCongo* that questioned the museographical usage of the ethnographic objects in the museum. The museum came under increasing violent attacks where 'its Dusty Colonialist Exhibition' was qualified as the 'Ghost of Leopold II' (Muteba, 2003). Roger lists several factors that might contribute to explaining how actors from outside of the museum promoted this reflexive turn. For her, it is in large part the identity crisis of the Belgian state that has encouraged this questioning as it has been accompanied by a re-evaluation of the

classical ideological elements of Belgian national unity, such as the national undertaking of colonialism. Indeed Leopold II's initiatives in the Congo did not at first meet with real enthusiasm and the museum's purpose was also to show the 'Belgian public who they really were in contradistinction to the uncivilized Congolese 'tribes' (Muteba, J., 2003). However, rather than a rigorous post-colonial critique, the social aim appears to be not so much to open painful subjects of the past but rather to attain a more peaceful and harmonious relation to present-day Congo and to harmonize Belgium's own past – an ideological reversal of the national museum's policy that is not politically neutral either (Roger, 2008, 89).

The museum is still awaiting a more general overhaul of its permanent display. A project for its complete renovation appears to be in preparation. However, in absence of a full renovation today, the museum recognizes and describes the maintenance of certain elements of the colonial message in such spaces as the memorial room, where it underlines for the visitor that here the history of the Congo is still presented from a uniquely Belgian point of view. The visitor is made aware of how colonial propaganda has shaped the museum's museography (Roger, 2008, 89).

### **Musée Royal de l'Armée et d'histoire militaire, Brussels (1911)**

Unfortunately the history of this very interesting museum is extremely badly documented, but we have pieced together some essential facts. The idea for a military museum in Belgium developed during the Universal Exhibition of 1910, for which a young officer, Louis Leconte organized the presentation of a collection of around 900 objects that was supposed to illustrate Belgium's military past. The young officer may have felt that his country should, no less than any other, develop such an institution. A military museum already existed in France for example. In the context of growing nationalist tensions, the exhibit was indeed a great success and it was decided to maintain it as a permanent exhibit by installing it in the former military buildings in the Abbey of Cambre. Leconte was able to considerably expand the collections after the First World War that inspired many donations and certainly drew a lot of attention to the museum. It was soon obvious that they would need to be housed elsewhere and in a more prominent position. It was thus decided in 1923 to establish the collections in the north wing of the *Palais du Cinquantenaire* that had been finally completed for the exhibition of 1910 and whose park quite fittingly had formerly been a vast ground for the manoeuvres of the national guard. Leconte, who had fought during the war, asked to be disengaged from the army in 1919 to be named permanent curator of the museum. Leconte conceived of the museum as an arena for display but also as a place for historical research, developing an important library and one of the most important collections of military iconography in Europe (Lorette, 1965 : 486). As an historian himself, Leconte published widely on the history of the Brabant Revolution, the Revolution of 1830, and on the history of arms and Belgian uniforms he was careful to establish a well-documented collection. Although the focal point of the collection was mainly objects related to the history of the Belgian military, an effort was also made in documenting not only a broader European but also colonial context. The collection is perhaps most universal in terms of military uniforms and either due to the presence of the costumes themselves or thanks to iconographic material nearly all the countries in the world are documented (Lorette, 1965 : 499).

In the 1960s, one began questioning what the mission of such museums, created in the very specific context of turn of the century nationalism and defined to glorify a militaristic society

might be in the future (Lorette, 1965: 483), and it became very clear that radical changes would be required. For Lorette, the difficulty for these institutions is to overcome their initial ideology and to allow the past to help them understand the future in light of better analyses of international affairs and history that excludes the prejudices and chauvinism predominant in the older displays. In the case of the *Musée Royal de l'Armée* in Brussels this was achieved by organizing more temporary exhibits allowing for a more in-depth explanation of crucial topics and thus developing a more clearly pedagogic mission.

However the collections had grown more quickly than the museum's capacity to catalogue them and organize them accordingly: it became legendary for its plethoric displays (Lierneux, 1994: 43) that today still give the museum a very distinctive appearance in terms of its permanent presentation. It is one of the largest military museums and 'it is doubtful if there is a more concentrated display of military objects elsewhere in Europe' (Westrate, 1961: 62). It was only in 1989 that a project for a new system of classification and cataloguing began to establish a more coherent organization and typology of objects. Larger and more spacious reserves were organized, allowing the museum to finally really appreciate the variety and richness of the collection (Lierneux, 1994: 43). This has not, however, really led the museum to change its permanent exhibit which today appears as an authentic display, illustrated by the description given by Westrate: 'Cases line the walls, filled with objects. Artillery pieces and large guns are placed between the cases. A number of halls have flags jutting out from the walls close to the ceiling. Other halls have airplanes suspended from the ceiling, and there is hardly a bit of wall space that is not covered by either a portrait, a picture of a battle scene, or a bust of some Belgian military hero. Some of the busts and pictures are completely surrounded by swords or guns which jut out from behind and give the appearance of an extra frame. This provides an attractive rosette type design but is hardly conducive to a thorough examination of the pieces' (1961:62). It remains true today, what is more troublesome still is that it is not properly explained so that the visitor might appreciate the specificity of the historical character of this display.

## Notes

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Vlaamse Museumvereniging (VMV) in Flanders  
<http://www.museumvereniging.be>

## Annex table, Belgium

Name	Inaugurated	Initiated	Actors	Ownership	Type	Values
<i>Royal museums under the direct administration of the federal state</i>						
Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique	1801	1797		First municipal, then state (bought in 1842 from town).is one of the four Belgian museums under the authority of Federal Science Policy Dept today.	Fine Arts	Old Master paintings, all schools. Strong representation of Belgian artists/Flemish artists.
Muséum de l'Institut Royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique	1848	1846		State: is one of the four Belgian museums under the authority of Federal Science Policy Dept today.	Anthropology, Zoology, Ecology, Mineralogy and Paleontology	Research is mainly based on materials from Belgium but spécimens from other parts of the world also have their place.
Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire - Musée du Cinquantenaire	1880 (dans le palais du cinq.)	1835		Princely coll, then state, is one of the four Belgian museums under the authority of Federal Science Policy Dept today.	History, Archaeology	Universal collection that covers the art and history of world from prehistoric times to the present day (with the exception of painting). Antiquity, European decorative arts and non-European civilisations. There is a section dedicated to national gallo-roman archaeology.

Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale (formerly known as the <i>Musée du Congo Belge</i> - 1960)	1910	1897		State: is one of the four Belgian museums under the authority of Federal Science Policy Dept today.	Ethnography	Started as the the museum of the Congo, but with the independance in 1960 it enlarged its horizons to all of Africa and Oceania.
Musée royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire militaire	1910	1910		State, federal departement of defense.	National Heritage and Military History	Collection of arms, uniforms, and military equipment.
National Maritime Museum	1927	1925		Municipal and then state.		
Musée de la monnaie royale de Belgique	1969 (?)			Ministry of finance, state.	Numismatic, Technical	Chronological presentation of the coins struck by the Belgian king since 1830.
<i>Museums titled as 'royal' but administered by one the communities</i>						
Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts d'Anvers	1802-1804	1773		First municipal, then state in 1927, and in 1992 it became an institution of the Flemish Community.	Fine Arts	Most represented: Old masters paintings of the North. But also French, Italian and German schools.
Musée royal de Mariemont	1960 (in today's building)	1917	Donation of the private collector Raoul Warocqué to the state.	State owned by since 1991, scientific establishment administered by the French Community.	Art, Archaeology, History	Ancient European and Asian arts, regional archaeological collections, history of the domain of Mariemont, porcelains of Tournai.

<i>Museums titled as 'national'</i>						
National Museum of the Playing Card	1969	1969			Material Culture	Collection of playing cards printed in Turnhout and a collection of printing presses and tools.
National Museum of the Resistance	1972		Initiated by a group of former resitants and political prisoners.		History	History of the Resistance, concentration camps.
National Museum of Linen	1982	1963		Private initiative supported by the municipality.	Social and Economic History	Exhibits including mannequins illustrate all the stages of the production process.
<i>Museums with collections of specific national resonance</i>						
House of Rubens	1946	1931			Art, Furniture, Living Culture	Houses a very varied collection organised in museum style and period rooms.
House of James Ensor		1960			Art, History	The artists atelier and reproductions of his work.

Bastogne Historical Center	1976	1950	Financial support from the ministry for tourism.	Private initiative, municipal since 2000.	Military History	A collection (mostly donated by private collectors) of material related to life on the battle field, two reconstitutions of the the battle situation on the American and German side.
Musée juif de Belgique		1984		Association: Pro Museo Judaïco.	Art, History	Objects representing Jewish culture as a whole but also life for Jews in Belgian, the Shoah, collection of contemporary art by Jewish artists.
Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée	1989			Non-profit organisation, financed by museum entries (10% state financing).	Cultural History	History of comic strip drawing and printing.
Musée BELvue, formerly Musée de la Dynastie, Museum of the Belgian dynasty	2005	1992	Monarchy	King Baudouin Foundation.	National History	History of Belgium from 1830 to development of the federal state. Bellevue Hotel, Place des Palais in Brussels, next to the Royal Palace.
Musée Juif de la Déportation et de la Résistance	1995	Circa. 1985	Consistoire central Israélite de Belgique, with the Province of Anvers and the town of Malines.	Municipal, regional.	History	Situated in the town of Malines, in the province of Anvers in a former military barracks turned into a deportation center by the SS in 1942. It was then again a 'Centre de formation en Administration de la Défense' state owned before becoming a museum of the deportation and memorial site.