



European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen

Newsletter #2 OCTOBER 2010

Welcome to the second Newsletter from Eunamus, a three year research project coordinated from Linköping University with seven additional partners from all over Europe. This newsletter is dedicated to the latest news from WP2, "Mapping and Framing Institutions 1750-2010", and the layouts of WP3, "Uses of the Past", and WP4, "The Museology of Europe". It also provides a topical example of Eunamus area of research.

The funding provided by the European Commission gives Eunamus a highly structured outset. The project is divided into WPs, or Work Packages, subsets of the overall project. The WP:s are delegated to the project's different partners for execution. Each partner then assigns research tasks to the other partners, or completes the tasks with their own staff. For example, WP2 is led by the overall project coordinator Peter Aronsson at Linköping University. All partners have engaged researchers to cover the institutional development of national museums in all countries of Europe. Simon Knell at Leicester University, who runs WP4, engages researchers from several partners, and so does Dominique Poulot at Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne who leads WP3.

Comparing National Museums 1750-2010 – conference March 30 – April 1 2011

Each Eunamus partner is responsible for organising conferences where conclusions are discussed and compared. The next Eunamus conference is "Comparing National Museums 1750-2010" and it will take place in Bologna March 30 – April 1 2011. Eunamus' Italian partner, The Department for Historical, Anthropological and Geographical Disciplines, University of Bologna, hosts this conference which will provide the first comprehensive overview of the establishment of institutional frameworks of national museums in Europe.

Confirmed speakers so far are:

Peter Aronsson on Agents, challenges, visions and consequences of national museum making in Europe

Ilaria Porciani on Changing roles of cultural history museums in the making of citizens and community

Confirmed discussants are:

Tony Bennett on Empires to nations: Imperial strategies and performances in changing circumstances

Dominique Poulot on Towards a typology: the changing roles of art museums

Stefan Berger on States into nations and nations into states in the age of nationalism 1750-1914

Peter Apor on Post-imperial nations: new nations, new borders and new unions 1914-2010

A limited numbers of external participants will be admitted to the conference. More information will be posted on the Eunamus website soon, but it is already possible to apply via email to contact@eunamus.eu.



Progress within WP2

The conference “Comparing National Museums 1750-2010” is organised within WP2, the first subproject to start off in Eunamus. Its researchers are now about halfway in their investigations into the histories of Europe’s national museums. The editor of Eunamus newsletter asked some of them what had surprised or astonished them the most so far:

From Malta, Romina Delia reports about national museums built on the wealth of former colonisers’ private collections:



The islands identity is a melting pot of the diverse influences from the many colonisers. Preceding the existence of official national museums in Malta, various individuals are known to have had their own private collections. During the circa 250 year rule of the crusading brotherhood of the Hospitaller Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, especially from the 17th century onwards, it is known that the Knights, the Maltese nobility and the wealthy merchants, who had established themselves on the islands, owned various collections.

If Malta’s museums express national wealth by displaying architectural sites and artistic treasures, national museums in Greece seem to underpin state building processes by telling one master narrative. The main question for Andromache Gazi is therefore:



Why is there so little room for border narratives or other narratives than the story of the nation from prehistory to date? The Greek museum system is characterized by strong state control and the idea of the diachronic continuity of the nation (from Prehistoric to Classical and then, through Byzantium, to modern Greece), which was essential for the construction of the Greek national identity in the 19th cent., remains in use even today. This is reflected in museum exhibitions which, despite recent developments and the growing number of noteworthy exceptions, retain an ethnocentric character.

The way that national museums in Malta connects to the past by means of its invaders’ treasures and Greece supports national continuity through its classical heritage, may be contrasted to the way that museums are rapidly changing in Eastern Europe:

If one considers the current state of national museums in countries of the former Soviet Bloc, perhaps, one of the most astonishing facts is their fairly modest and neutral attitude to refashioning exhibitions. There is a range of newly founded museums in Eastern Europe, particularly the Museum of the Insurrection in Warsaw, the Museum of the History of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius, or the re-founded Romanian Peasant Museum in Bucharest, which attract broad popular interest and frequently considerable amount of public or private funds.



Peter Apor, who is one of the principal researchers in Eunamus, furthermore points to the importance of noting:

that museums of communism are conceived with the declared aim of shaping post-communist national identities and of making strong claims on national histories by visual means. Paradoxically, it seems, in Eastern Europe, the interpretations of the history of communism provide the last chance to articulate national identities in a post-national era.

From Lithuania, Egle Rindzeviciute reports about a somehow different development:

As Lithuania broke away from the Soviet Union in 1990, the existing organisational form of the republic's museums was renamed into national museum and democratised by reforms which abandoned censorship, introduced decentralisation of decision-making and attempted at decentralisation of funding (implemented to only a limited extent).



The most surprising insight so far is that the development of national museums, as both an integrated organisational system and a significant agent in the state cultural policy, is a truly international phenomenon which evolved after World War II.



Photos: Egle Rindzeviciute

On the basis on her investigations, Egle Rindzeviciute suggests that the Lithuanian case testifies to the fact that differences between political regimes (state socialism, capitalism and neoliberal democracy) may not automatically create different models of organising national museums. Whilst there are obvious differences in micro management of contents, macro organisation of museums as an administrative system, which is tied up in state cultural policy, might reveal striking parallels.

Comparisons and conclusions regarding the roles of national museums in state making processes will be further developed at the conference in Bologna. This conference will touch upon the indirect narratives behind national museums and their collections, but narratives and objects will be studied further in two additional work packages.



Uses of the Past (WP3)

WP3, on the uses of the past, draws together researchers from all partners in Eunamus to survey what types of narratives museums produce. Researchers in this work package, lead by Dominique Poulot, are scrutinising guides, museum catalogues and journals to look into how national museums represent narratives on past wars and conflicts. They will particularly consider how narratives connect political arguments with artifacts and look into those who functions as “authors” in museum spaces. There is furthermore an ambition to map European conflicts over heritage and study the reception of key narratives, and civic rituals of remembrance within museums.

The Museology of Europe (WP4)

Similarities between Europe’s national museums are the starting point for WP4, The Museology of Europe. Those who travel extensively and visit a lot of history and art museums have probably noticed that there are some architectural features, such as columns, rotundas and tiles, which will occur again and again as well as ways of exhibiting artifacts and paintings that are recurrent. Beside the fact that each European nation seems to have their very own set of iconic objects as well as local surrealists and impressionists, collections and displays seems to be organised by widely shared typologies and taxonomies.

WP4 opens with a survey of the architectural form and material content of national museums in European capitals, in search of an implicit language of materialities and things that connect Europe by the way of its museums.



Simon Knell, leader of WP4

In addition to looking into the common features of the big national institutions, with ambitions to distill and homogenize nations, WP4 will gather researchers to investigate the wealth of historical and ethnographical collections in England, Sweden, Norway and Italy. These four countries represent different ways of assembling the nation through the use of provincial museums distributed all over the nation. In Sweden, Eunamus looks into SAMDOK, a network that connects one major national museum with a range of provincial museums. The Leicester team studies musealisations produced in the wake of social history and industrial archeology in England. The Norwegian study focuses on regional museums. In Italy, researchers look into some additional aspects of regionalisation. The questions to be explored here concern how museums, regions and tourism relate to Italy’s wealth of romantic and affective heritage. Finally, The Museology of Europe looks into emerging online museums and how they recode the very ideas about historical museums, historical objects and nations. Six case studies, performed by researchers in Leicester and the University of the Aegean, investigate online transnational communities built around historical imaginaries or transnational groups who seek coherence in online worlds. Other cases are formed around ways of engaging with contested physical sites online, or around websites that collect and document national pasts or pursue nationalistic agendas by the use of symbolism, imaginary or material culture.

As a whole, WP4 will investigate, define and extend established ideas about how museums work to establish shared sensibilities in different spatial scales.



The Cyrus Cylinder, British Museum and foreign affairs

One topical example of Eunamus' area of research would be the way in which the Cyrus Cylinder is politically charged. A few weeks ago, the BBC reported that the British Museum had agreed to lend the Cyrus Cylinder to the National Museum of Iran for a temporary exhibition. Although, or perhaps because, this precious artifact expresses universal or globalised views of human rights it has been drawn into a dispute with political and religious undertones. The British Museum has had the cylinder in its possession since it was found in Iraq in 1879. It documents the conquest of Babylon by the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE and the museum interprets its inscription as a sign of "of tolerance and respect for different peoples and different faiths".



Stockphoto

Reflecting the institution's encyclopedic ambition and international role, the British Museum states, on its webpage, that the Cyrus Cylinder is part of the world's cultural heritage and that the museum's policy is to lend its collections as widely as possible. But earlier on, BBC has reported that voices within Iran suggest that the British Museum has delayed the loan because of the precarious political situation in Iran and the frayed diplomatic situations between the two countries. The British Museum, on the other hand, explains the delay with reference to research and states that their final decision to lend the object will make "a small but timely contribution towards the creation of better relations between the West and Iran".

As suggested in the outline of WP3, "The uses of the past", the way the British Museum frames the Cyrus Cylinder as a significant object for all mankind is telling about the museum's aim to express a universalist approach. Its final decision to lend it to Iran reflects its ambitions to play a part not only in the history of civilisations, but also in the contemporary diplomatic relations between nations.

Sources:

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New book:

National Museums: New Studies from Around the World

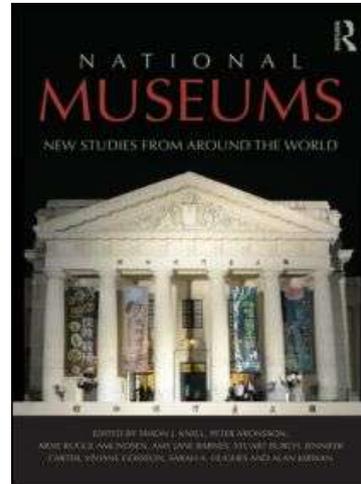
Edited by Simon Knell, Peter Aronsson, Arne Amundsen

Routledge

Paperback

Available from Nov 2010

National Museums is the first book to explore the national museum as a cultural institution in a range of contrasting national contexts. Composed of new studies of countries that rarely make a showing in the English-language studies of museums, this book reveals how these national museums have been used to create a sense of national self, place the nation in the arts, deal with the consequences of political change, remake difficult pasts, and confront those issues of nationalism, ethnicity and multiculturalism which have come to the fore in national politics in recent decades.



The book combines research from both leading and new researchers in the fields of history, museum studies, cultural studies, sociology, history of art, media studies, science and technology studies, and anthropology. It is an interrogation of the origins, purpose, organisation, politics, narratives and philosophies of national museums.

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Project information:

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Coordinator: Professor Peter Aronsson

Coordinating organisation: Linköping University, SE

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Research area: SSH-2009-5.2.2. Interrelation between collective representations and uses of history and cultural evolution in an enlarged Europe

Contract Type: Small or medium-scale focused research project

Partners: University of Leicester (UK), University of the Aegean (GR), Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne (FR), University of Bologna (IT), University of Oslo (NO), University of Tartu (EE), Central European University (HU)

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