



European national museums: Identity politics, the uses of the past and the European Citizen

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The idea underpinning Eunamus is that narrating and displaying the nation at museums impact the ways in which people understand themselves and connect or disconnect with the nation and its surrounding areas or wider spatial scales. Research conducted within Eunamus starts with the notion that the worlds presented in national museums tie into political claims on citizenship and territories. It is therefore of particular interest to study how museums born out of traditional national scopes handle challenges in times of large-scale migrations, federative tendencies within nation states and the aims of the European Union.

Eunamus research looks at the development of a formative museum infrastructure, explicit narratives in museums and implicit narratives in collections, museum architectures, geographies and virtual communities. It also investigates the hopes and utopias that cultural policy makers have placed on museums and will launch a study on how national museums are viewed from the citizen perspective. Finally, conclusions will be made on the possibilities of museums to contribute to greater social cohesion in Europe. Eunamus runs until 2013. One subproject has started and two more are on their way.

Successful opening and premiere workshop in Stockholm, April 28-30, 2010

In his key note speech, Professor Stefan Berger, the University of Manchester, elaborated on the current situation for national museums:

*Today, national museums are being squeezed between conflicting demands. There is a revival of national narratives and museums are increasingly asked to tell **the** uplifting story of the nation and provide citizens with cultural glue. At the same time, demands are being placed on museums to provide multiple forms of identity for different sections of the citizenry. They are also asked to relate the story of the nation to its neighbours and to wider spatial entities. Finally, museums are under pressure to educate citizens towards tolerance and cosmopolitan values.*

The opening was kindly hosted by Nationalmuseum and the director of the museum's section for Research, Archives and Art Library, Associate professor Karin Sidén, proudly welcomed Eunamus to her institution's lecture hall. Her introduction was followed by a presentation of the layout of the project by its coordinator Peter Aronsson. Project partners then raised a series of important questions that will guide future research within the project:



How is the complex geography of national museums connected to Europe's different state building processes? (Peter Aronsson)

Who are the actors claiming ownership of the past? How can we answer that question by analyzing narratives of acquisition and claims for restitution? (Dominique Poulot)

How are the histories of Europe, its changing boundaries and its shared concepts, reflected in archeological and art historical collections? (Simon Knell)

Have national museums really changed due to the last decades of policy development regarding democratization and multiculturalism?
(Arne Bugge Amundsen)

Do the national museums of today reflect the modern, diverse nations or do they remain irrelevant for large parts of the society? (Alexandra Bounia)

In what way does the fall of communism affect national museums in Central and South Eastern Europe? (Constantin Iordachi)

In his talk, Constantin Iordachi stressed that Eunamus is a truly European wide project. Eunamus not only focuses on Western Europe, but also on Northern Europe, Southern Europe, Central Europe, and Southeast Europe. Concordantly, Estonian partner Kristin Kuutma, hoped that she and her affiliated researchers would not only contribute with a reflective disciplinary history on heritage scholarship, but also bring onboard different experiences than researchers who explore the traditional centre of Europe.

Workshop Mapping and framing institutions 1750-2010

The public opening of Eunamus was followed by an intense two day workshop with contributions from all over Europe. The workshop and its national reports laid out the contours of a museum geography of great complexity with several inbuilt paradoxes.

Even though national museums often claim national uniqueness and splendour, they are a genuinely transnational phenomenon. Most nations in Europe display very similar sets of collections of art, antiquities and archeological items, scientific collectables, armory, coins and ethnographica housed in impressive buildings open to the public. But as pointed out by Ilaria Porciani already in her opening talk: "there seem to be yet another paradox in the very concept of national museums. In many



countries there are a large numbers of museums, with national resonances, distributed all over the country. There is no single national museum, or a collection of big museums, in the capital”.

Fine-tuning of an analytical and functional definition of a national museum to use in the exploration was one of the important achievements of the workshop. Another was to focus less on individual museums and more on explaining the actors behind them and the resulting structure of an evolving institutional frame-work of national museums in each state.

The overview of the history of European national museums will aim to achieve several objectives: what museums and with which agendas have been established, when and by whom? The outset is comparative, looking at differences and similarities between the histories and landscapes of European national museums. With regard to the ways in which national museums connect to state making trajectories, the reports gave some really thought-provoking examples, among them Latvia:

Since the interest in popular antiquities, wonders of nature and artefacts of fine arts gained form as collections available to general public, national museums in the territory of (contemporary) Latvia have undergone several stages of development. To begin with, they represented the interests of the Baltic German upper class; then, being owned by one of the richest municipalities, they became the pride of the Russian empire; in their next stage, they transformed into cultural treasures of the emerging nation-state, and after that followed the period to serve as local archives representing the pre-Soviet past under the conditions of the communist regime. Today, Latvian national museums have acquired their status of national representatives in the contesting arena of independent European countries.

Toms Kencis & Kristin Kuutma

The completed country reports will be further discussed at the conference Comparing National Museums 1750-2010 in Bologna March 30 – April, 2011.

During the fall of 2010, Dominique Poulot at The Department of Art and Archaeology, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, will set up research on museum narratives.

Simon Knell at the School of Museum Studies, Leicester University will choose case studies for research on how Europe distinguishes itself in collections and museum architecture; relationships between the national museums and the broader national territory; and the formation of online nations.

Follow the development of Eunamus at www.eunamus.eu

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