



## **Eunamus panel for ESSHC Glasgow 11-14 April 2012**

European National museums negotiating truth, identity and conflicts 1760-2010

Museums are institutions used to represent the world in a public and institutionalized space. With the Enlightenment and the Napoleonic wars incitement spread over the world to format these as a balance between material evidence of the typical and the unique, the universal and the national, handling difference and values to the benefit for both stability and evolution. National museums have evolved as a privileged space for these negotiations performed in natural science, art and history. The division of labour between these is in a complex relation to nation and state making preceding, framing or promoting their enhancement and function.

In the project *European National Museums: Identity politics, the uses of the past and the European citizen* (EuNaMus) running 2010-2013 funded by the EC. National museums are defined and explored as processes of institutionalized negotiations where material collections and displays make claims and are recognized as articulating and representing national values and realities. Questions asked in the project are why, by whom, when, with what material, with what result and future possibilities are this museums shaped. The inquiry range from institutional, material, narrative, utopian perspectives to the experiences of audiences in order to assess the complexity of the possible impact of national museum on the histories of Europe.

The panel will present and discuss results from four of the projects, adding relevant research on museums in cultural diplomacy, while at the same time provide material for discussing the possibility and restrains for large scale comparative analyses of complex historical processes and cultural institutions.



**Moderator: Peter Aronsson**

**Discussant: Chris Lorenz**

**Gabriella Elgenius: Mapping and framing institutions 1750-2010: national museums interacting with nation-making**

This paper will explore the comparative components with reference to national museums, nation- and statemaking in Europe, reflecting on the dynamic interaction between culture, politics and knowledge. National museums are here explored as part of national processes of institutionalized negotiations in which collections and displays make claims to represent national values and realities. Many of these negotiations and conflicts behind the scenes have long standing trajectories; they are not arbitrarily chosen, on the contrary they are part of the significant value production in the last two and a half centuries. We argue that national representation as articulated by national museums constitute powerful cultural forces with a decisive power to shape political communities. Such representations are understood as knowledge based, and hence also as legitimate and factual, presenting the role and character of the nation in a world of other nations. The ambitions and functions of the museums thus vary according to the character of the state making process. Thus, the making of national museums will look different in former empires, in nations without interrupted sovereignty, and in nations in the midst of devolution.

**Felicity Bodenstein: Uses of the Past – Narrating the Nation and Negotiating Conflicts**

This paper explores the idea of national art related to its geography, its ownership and the promotion of citizenship in some European national museums. Since the origins of museums, the question of an organisation according to national schools was an important incitation to compare talents, styles and sources of inspiration. From the revolutionary Louvre onwards, there was the idea of dividing the national collections into two parts, one part reserved for the



national school, the other for foreign schools. This idea of division into two institutions is recurrent in the history of European museums and it has created a kind of scheme of « ourselves and the others » that is largely dominant up until some of the thematic rearrangements that have been undertaken in recent years. The legitimacy of a so-called national art resided on the long endurance and past of a sovereign, a community, a people attested through certain archaeological traces for example. Such a national conception of art - for example in the context of a desired renaissance of an art considered insignificant or relatively unimportant - helped to nourish the aspiration of comparing the artistic productions of other nations - in a competitive perspective. Nationalist constructions are based on categorisations, identifications and the adoption of values that constitute the specificity of national art, held as the expression of a community and a necessary accompaniment of a political project. The art museum plays an important, even an essential role in the type of project that founds the particular characteristics of a geographically defined art.

**Sheila Watson: Uses of the past – museums negotiating origins of nations in the twenty first century**

This paper explores the ways in which National Museums in Europe narrate national origins. It examines how nations often re-invent themselves over time and how these multiple foundational moments tell us as much about the needs of the present as the events of the past. The idea of ancestrally related people appears periodically, in spite of some nations' attempts to present a post-modern and multicultural notion of national origins. The collecting and display of material culture, in particular human bones, appears to establish a link with an ancestral homeland and this link extends beyond prehistory into ancient, medieval and modern eras. At the same time, in developing their national story, nations select certain historic events to which they attribute particular importance, and these are frequently located within the medieval period. Using case studies this paper will begin to question how and why these narratives contribute to a modern nation's sense of itself and how museums contribute to nation building within the wider context of a European identity.



### **Alexandra Bounia: Museum citizens: experience and identity of audiences**

This presentation aims to discuss the role of national museums in contemporary European society from the citizen's perspective. Drawing on a large-scale research in different European countries, from the UK to Estonia and Latvia, Sweden and Germany to Italy and Greece, and using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, we are going to record and understand various aspects of visitors' experience, aiming to gain some understanding of the citizen's values and perspectives. By these means we aspire to acquire a useful insight into the actual social relevance of, and possibilities for, representations of the past, the present and the future in museums. Some of the questions that will be discussed are the following: How do national museums today reflect the modern, diverse nation? How do individuals use national museums to construct themselves, their nationalism and their European identities? Do they understand how museums construct 'Others' in terms of ethnicity, social character, gender, age, etc.; and how this impacts upon their sense of community? How do European citizens use museums to develop a sense of their European selves and a shared view on the past, present and future of Europe? Visitors' responses provide answers to some of these, but also new questions for research.

### **Uta Protz: The Museum as Diplomat – the British Museum, the Musée du Louvre and the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin in China**

Since 2006, the British Museum, the Musée du Louvre and the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (together with the Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden and the Bayerischen Staatsgemäldesammlungen München) have all sent major loan exhibitions to Beijing. This paper reflects on the use of culture in international relations, examines contemporary British, French and German cultural policy towards China, and, more specifically, compares and contrasts the aim, focus, scope and success of the exhibitions the three countries showed in Beijing. What is the potential, what are the limits of the museum as diplomat?