

National Museums and National Identity Seen from an International and Comparative Perspective, c. 1760–1918

**Interdisciplinary Research Project, Huizinga Institute,
Amsterdam, and Institut für Museumsforschung, Berlin**

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Objectives

The central question is how various countries in the nineteenth century designed and disseminated the image of a ‘national culture’ through their museums. This research project will cover the explicit documents spreading the museum’s image (the museums’ aims, promotional materials, and reports; the architecture of their buildings) and the implicit assumptions that lie behind the formation and categorization of a collection, as well as the way the collection was exhibited.¹

In this project local variations on the theme of ‘national identity’ will be studied from an international, comparative perspective.² By using this approach, museum-historical research will be advanced a step further, as in the past it has usually been restricted to case studies on individual museums, and few – if any – connections have been made between similar

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- 1 By ‘national’ is understood: founded, financed and run by national government. By ‘nationalism’ and ‘nationalistic ideology’ the definition provided by Niek van Sas has been taken as a starting point: a more or less coherent system of standards and values, which to justify its own position links a certain, often critical appreciation of the past to a set programme of action for the future. Van Sas as cited in Grijzenhout/Van Veen 1992, 79. For a lucid survey of recent literature on (and definitions of) patriotism and nationalism: Van Sas 1996. For a general survey on the shaping of states and nations in Europe: Schulze 1999. See also Thiesse 1999.
 - 2 Starts have been made for instance by: Scheller 1995 and 1996; Wright 1996; Lorente 1998; Pommier 2006 and Bergvelt 2006.

institutions in various countries.³ The research will depart from the basic assumption that the development of national, nationalistic museums in various countries was transnational in character, and that it also extended to colonial territories.

Another basic principle is that the national museum between 1760 and 1918 was a fundamentally different institution than the one to be found in the 20th and 21st centuries: the proposition that the ‘modern museum’ was created around 1760 will be contested.⁴

From a substantial number of studies it has already become clear that thinking about the fatherland and the nation took on a symbolic form, which was then spread farther a field thanks to the different types of material culture⁵ – the fine arts and architecture were the pre-eminent image-bearers. Particularly institutions of this sort that have been set up in the last two to three centuries (like societies, academies, universities and museums) appear to have played an important role in the development of ideas and the shaping of national identity.⁶ This field is very wide-ranging, and the research project proposed here will concentrate on national museums. It was these museums in particular which were selected to grow into gigantic complexes, situated at central locations in the respective capital cities (for instance the Museumsinsel in Berlin, the Museumsforum in Vienna and the imposing extension of the Hermitage in St Petersburg). Sometimes these museums are combined with other cultural institutions, some of which are not national (like the complex of museums at the Museumplein in Amsterdam comprising national and municipal museums (Stedelijk), and a private concert-hall (Concertgebouw).

In the various European states it is possible to detect differences in timing, intensity and specialization.

Working point by point, it will be possible to study developments, similarities and differences at various levels:

In Terms of Time

The starting point that has been chosen is ca. 1760 because the nineteenth-century national and nationalistic museums are thrown into greater historical perspective if they are not viewed separately from patriotic ideas, which were to be observed among their predecessors, the princely collections of the eighteenth century. If one states that a new type of museum stemmed from the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era, one must still not overlook the fact that a number of essential conditions had already been met in the form of the picture galleries and collections built up by enlightened rulers, like emperor Joseph II, grand duke Pietro Leopoldo of Tuscany and landgrave Wilhelm VIII of Hessen-Kassel.⁷ It is important to study the patriotically tinted proto-museums of the *ancien régime* in relation to the nineteenth-century national museums, because in this way continuations and shifts become more clearly visible, and a contribution can be made to gaining a historical insight into the period of transition from about 1789 to 1815.

3 For instance: Böttger 1972; Van Thiel 1983; Gaetgens 1984; Poulot 1986, Bergvelt 1998; Van Wezel 1999 and Conlin 2006. See for a survey on collecting and presenting since the Renaissance: Bergvelt / Meijers / Rijnders 1993 and 2005.

4 Cf. McClellan 1994, Savoy 2006.

5 For instance: Leith 1972; Nora 1984-1993; Craske 1997 and Beck / Bol / Bückling 1999.

6 For instance: Grijzenhout 1985; Gaetgens 1992; Mehos 2006; Bergvelt 1998 and Reynaerts 2001.

7 See for a survey of what was achieved in the, usually princely, museums in German-speaking countries between 1701 and 1815: Savoy 2006. See also: Meijers 1991/1995; 1993/2005 a and b; 2004 and 2007.

During this period of transition a process of creating states and nations was underway in the different countries of Europe, which was brought to a temporary halt at the end of World War I.

By finishing in 1918, the discussion on the reallocation of the object-categories within the museums – the most common division being the separation of history and art – can be dealt with as a prelude to the developments in the twentieth century. In the Netherlands, but also in other parts of Europe, there were signs of a tendency to extract works of art from their historical ‘environment’ and to look at them exclusively in terms of their formal and stylistic distinguishing characteristics and similarities, irrespective of their period and place of origin. What the discussions make clear, in any case, is that traditional views on art and history were shifting.

The formation and expansion of museums did not take place at the same time all over Europe nor under the same circumstances. It is true that nationalistic ideology formed the basis for founding museums, but the actual building activities called for a period of economic growth: that is why, for instance, the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum (founded in 1798) could only move into a new building of its own in 1885.

The question is, where did specific developments have their origins, how were they disseminated and through what channels.

In Terms of Specialization/Discipline

This project does not only cover national museums of art (which in general are dedicated to painting and sculpture, and sometimes also include arts & crafts or artefacts from classical antiquity). The research project will also extend to museums of national and natural history, sometimes in combination with archaeology and ethnography. A comparison between these distinct types, which correspond to the fields of science in which collections were already being built up in preceding centuries is a good way of highlighting a number of general, even international characteristics typical of the national museum. At the same time this approach can show where specific, national ideals sometimes conflicted with more general international standards.

Developments in the various sciences and the role of the relevant museums as national vehicles of culture may lead to the discovery of difficult, if not strained relationships. The research questions here are: how do the various national historical museums compare to one another in their presentation of national history; what was the relationship in the different countries’ archaeological museums between ‘classical archaeology’ and treasures from their own soil; how were the demarcation lines drawn up between museums on the one hand national (often contemporary) art, and on the other international art; how did ethnographic museums present their own colonies; what was the relationship in natural history museums between their own native flora en fauna and international scientific taxonomy? For arts & crafts museums an added factor comes into play: the function of promoting national arts & crafts⁸- something which by the way was also an 18th-century princely tradition.

In Terms of the Administrative System

The early nineteenth century shows a specific process in the countries which had developed into a centralized constitutional state like the Netherlands, Italy and Germany. During the process of creating states and nations, relations between municipal, regional and national collections also shifted. In the Netherlands, municipal collection sometimes served as a basis for national museums (as in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam); in Germany and Italy,

8 Tibbe 2005a and 2006.

collections which during the *ancien régime* had been princely, and as such belonged to the central authorities, lost their exceptional status and became (parts of) regional or national museums. These shifts had an effect on what was seen as municipal, what was seen as regional and what was seen as national identity.

A special place was reserved for the national museums in the colonies.⁹ In 2005 an exhibition took place in the Netherlands and in Indonesia to mark the two countries' 'shared cultural heritage', in which they looked closely at how the collections in the reciprocal national museums had developed in the 19^{de} century.¹⁰ It would be interesting to make a comparison between them and the national museums in other European colonies.

By employing a comparative approach, continuity and shifts in the development of national museums can better be distinguished from one another, and the general characteristics of the development can be more clearly set against specifically national characteristics.

Planning

Following on from a pilot workshop in 2001¹¹ and a symposium in 2003¹², two international conferences have been programmed:

- 31 January – 2 February 2008, Amsterdam:
The Napoleonic collection and museum policy as a catalyst: the development of the national museums in Europe, c. 1794–1830

Below you will find a description of the contents and aims of the first conference.

- Mid-2009, Berlin:
Scientific Specialisation and the National Museum, c. 1830–1918
The central issue here will be what role developments in various scientific fields played in the shaping process of museum institutions. The various types of museums – scientific, ethnological, archaeological, technical and art historical – will be examined from this perspective. A prominent position is reserved for the museum situation in Berlin: this conference will mark the reopening of the Neue Museum (1841–1855/'59), which will be analysed as a prototype and model of the specialised, science-based museum.

The papers of both conferences will be published by the Institute für Museumsforschung.

9 General works: Anderson 1991 and Tibbe 2005b; on Indonesia: Bloembergen 2002.

10 Ter Keurs / Hardiati 2005.

11 University of Amsterdam, 16 February 2001, symposium *National museums and national identity (Europe, c. 1760-1918)*. With reference to the concept produced by Ellinoor Bergvelt and Debora Meijers (January 2001): *Proposal for an interdisciplinary and internationally comparative research project: National museums and national identity (Europe, c. 1760-1918)*. This was a closed workshop; there were 16 participants.

12 University of Amsterdam, 17 January 2003, symposium *Het Museale vaderland, The nineteenth-century national museum viewed internationally*. There were about 50 participants. The five lectures given at this symposium have been published in the special issue of the journal *De negentiende eeuw (The nineteenth century)*. 27 (2003), no. 4: *The museological fatherland*: Bergvelt / Tibbe 2003; Van Wezel 2003; Hoijtink 2003; Bergvelt 2003; Tibbe 2003 and De Jong 2003.

Napoleon's Legacy collection and museum policy as a catalytic agent. The development of national museums in Europe, c. 1794–1830.

Conference to be held as part of the research project National Museums and National Identity seen from an International Comparative Perspective, c. 1760–1918. Huizinga Institute, Amsterdam, and Institut für Museumsforschung, Berlin. Amsterdam, 31 January- 2 February 2008.

The Napoleonic Wars had a huge impact on European museums.¹³ In the year 1794, the starting point of this project, Napoleon's first campaign took place, and with it the first of a series of transportations of works of art from the conquered areas to Paris. A preliminary climax in these tempestuous museological developments was the founding of the museum in the Louvre around 1800, in which the French armies' 'spoils of war' were exhibited – later more commonly known under the name Musée Napoléon. This outstanding example of a national museum made a great impression on Europe as a focal point for the finest and most comprehensive international art collection ever brought together in one place. At the same time in the states that had been robbed of their art and scientific treasures it strengthened the need to create their own museums.

After Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig (1813) and again at Waterloo (1815) the Allied Powers reclaimed both their artistic and scientific collections – with varying levels of success. On its return, the regained war booty was accommodated in national museums (e.g. The Hague: Mauritshuis; Berlin: Altes Museum), each of which only show a fraction of what had been gathered in the Louvre. For a long while Napoleon's ideal art museum determined the way people thought about these institutions in Europe. The same holds for the other revolutionary museums, like the Musée des monuments français, that was dedicated to the saving of their 'own' items of cultural value, but which also helped to spread the idea of 'conserving national monuments and historic buildings' at an international level; and the Musée d'histoire naturelle that placed French science in an international perspective, in the same way as the Musée Napoléon had done for art. This 'ideal' situation was also to be short-lived in terms of scientific artifacts: just like the works of art, the looted scientific objects had to be returned to their places of origin. This was how the returned Dutch collection came to be accommodated in the renamed, but already existing, Koninklijk Kabinet van Natuurlijke Historie in Leiden.

Although national museums were founded during the whole of the nineteenth century in the various European countries, for this conference the year 1830 was kept as a provisional boundary line. By this time a temporary milestone has been reached in founding and extending museums in several capital cities (e.g. Berlin, Munich, Paris).

This period deserves to be studied from an international, comparative perspective. By studying Napoleon's accumulation of looted collections of art and scientific objects in Paris, as well as their later retrieval by the robbed European states, and by studying the reactions and effects these processes elicited, we can form a better picture of this enormous shift in the European 'museum landscape'. The aim is to come to a better understanding of the way in which this period in modern museum history stimulated thinking in terms of national identity all over Europe and the way it was shown by the various national museums. By employing a comparative approach it will be possible to examine the national variations against the background of international patterns. In this way nationalistic tendencies in historiography will also be highlighted and moreover avoided.

13 Recent publications and exhibitions on the subject: Jourdan 1998; Denon 1999; Grijzenhout 1999.

The issues will be addressed on three levels:

1. The Looting Process

- a. *Criteria for selection.* It is well known that the French armies were accompanied by art experts and scientists, of whom the most famous has become Dominique-Vivant Denon.¹⁴ But how exactly did they choose what to take in the different countries? Which objects were selected for the museums in Paris and based on which artistic canons and scientific paradigms was this selection made? Officially speaking, the objects were supposed to contribute to the ‘the general good’, the ‘*instruction publique*’ and the promotion of art and sciences – criteria which, by the way, since the last quarter of the eighteenth century had been common among many of the despots so hated by the French revolutionaries.¹⁵ However, the question is to what extent did these confiscations take place according to these criteria.¹⁶
- b. *Protest or acceptance?* It seems that the first campaigns of looting, those in the Southern Netherlands in 1794, met with hardly any protest from press and public. This was attributed to the enthusiasm with which the French ‘liberators’ were welcomed in the area under Austrian rule.¹⁷ But weren’t the collections in themselves not considered as ‘Patrimonial estate’ or ‘national’ heritage? Did these concepts exist at all? A few years later, by contrast, the French confiscation of art from Italy and Germany did arouse a great deal of protest among others from leading scholars and men of letters like Aloys Hirt and Friedrich Schlegel. The arguments they used were that works of art should not be taken out of their ‘natural context’.¹⁸ Moreover, various national and municipal authorities tried to actively prevent or curtail the theft of art.¹⁹ Was the French urge for annexation the reason that national cultural consciousness was brought into being? Or are there other, nationally determined factors responsible for the differences in reaction?

2. The Paris Museums

- a. *Conservation, restoration and modes of display.* It mattered very much to the French that the initial foreign accusations of mismanagement could be refuted, and they could do this by implementing an active conservation and restoration policy. Since their argument for seizing the cultural items was that in doing so they would be ‘rescued’ from the hands of despots who only kept them for their own personal use and had not taken good care of them. This was why the French placed such a great emphasis on the public presentation of the booty. However, from 1775 onwards the looted galleries and museums, particularly in Germany and Italy, had already begun experimenting with progressive techniques and methods in all these areas themselves. As far as principles of organization were concerned, the galleries in Vienna and Florence – with their arrangement of exhibits according to schools and periods – had been looking a lot more modern since the 1780s than the museum in the Louvre did in the first ten years of its existence.²⁰ In this respect it is important to look at the Parisian museums in an international perspective in order to be able to rate the pretensions of the

14 Denon 1999, Gallo 2001.

15 Meijers 1991/1995, 1993 / 2005 a and b.

16 Savoy 2003.

17 Wescher 1978; Gould 1965.

18 Savoy 2003 and 2004.

19 Wescher 1978.

20 McClellan 1994; Meijers 1991/1995, 2004 and 2007; Pommier 2006.

Napoleonic policy at their true value. When doing this it is interesting in particular to find out how the treasures of the conquered countries were displayed in Paris, and in what ways their significance changed in their new surroundings.²¹

- b. Here too the criticism of the phenomenon of the ‘museum’ current in the period should be discussed, as it emphasized that it was wrong to take objects from their ‘natural’ surroundings and move them to a different geographic setting, and to house them in the rooms of a museum for which they were not made.²²
- c. *International reception.* What kind of reaction did the new Parisian museums provoke on an international scale?²³ How much impact did they have on the public, either French or foreign? At first, seeing national art treasures in a foreign collection led to feelings of regret and uneasiness, but soon the visiting public are said to have admired the way products of all manner of arts and sciences were on show, as it was on a scale hitherto unknown. For instance, Friedrich Schlegel, notwithstanding his former protests (mentioned under 1.b), wrote a lengthy and complimentary report on the new Louvre.²⁴ The Dutch minister of Home Affairs, Roëll, was delighted to see the highlights of Classical sculpture from Italy on exhibit; on the other hand, he described the presence of Dutch paintings, and even worse that of objects and animals from the collection of the late Stathouder, in the Paris museum as an evil sign of the oppression of his country.²⁵ Paris, as capital of the Empire, was visited by many foreigners; a lot of travel diaries still survive (and have been reprinted), and several guidebooks remain too.²⁶ Do the authors of those diaries, mostly experienced travellers or art connoisseurs, compare the looted objects from different countries? Do they show any signs of regretting the loss of objects that aroused national pride or were linked to their national identity? And, on the other hand, what do the travel guides tell the public about Parisian museums? Are there any reports on the emergence of a new, more ‘democratic’ type of museum public, or did they just attract more tourists and become more of a consumer commodity? In this section the reactions of the countries that weren’t invaded by the French might also be analyzed.²⁷

3. Restitution and After

- a. *The process of restitution.* Negotiations which got underway in 1813, after the Battle of Leipzig, deserve a special mention, as for the first time in history they dealt with the restitution of plundered art and items of cultural value. Which particular arguments and methods did the allied forces use and how successful were they? Up to the present day this process has only been described in detail for a few countries and we have only a global idea about what happened in Paris,²⁸

21 Baensch 1994. See also Poulot 1997 and Bordes 2004.

22 Quatremère de Quincy 1796.

23 See for instance Poulot 1997.

24 Schlegel 1984.

25 Roëll 1978.

26 Kok-Escalte 1977.

27 For developments in Great Britain: Jenkins 1992; Prior 2002; Whitehead 2005 and Conlin 2006.

28 Blumer 1936 (Italy); Ideology 2002 (Italy); Brenninkmeijer-de Rooij 1976-1977 (stadholder’s collection); Vlieghe 1971 (Antwerp); Savoy 2003 and 2004 (both Germany). What happened in Paris is described in general terms in Gould 1965, 116-130, Wescher 1978, 131-145 and Pommier 1999. The latter states that (p. 257) that he couldn’t give more than an outline of the events in Paris in 1815 and that in a number of countries research should be carried out.

however, comparative studies have still to be carried out. It is striking that Italy only got back about a half of its art treasures (of the 506 paintings, 249 were returned) and the Netherlands were given back two-thirds of what they had lost (126 of the 200 paintings).²⁹ There is evidence that this difference was related to a desire to spare the new French king from the house of Bourbon.³⁰ It was indeed very complicated to trace all the objects which had been scattered over different buildings inside and outside Paris. Furthermore, the Parisians were unwilling to return the allied forces' 'property'.³¹ To what extent did they also enter into deliberate deception, that is to say: to what extent did the French deliberately make a fool of the national delegates when exchanging objects? Or did they select what was to remain in France on the basis of specific scientific and artistic principles?

- b. *The effects of restitution.* In most countries there had been a form of public museum before the French Occupation, usually allied to the princely court. What was the effect of the return (in most cases partial) of the collections to the countries of origin? Were the museums released from their former royal /princely ties and were they given a separate place in the town's landscape or not?³²

How was the transition from royal or princely collections to national museums implemented in each country? This relates both to representation (the change from the prince/monarch to the nation / state) and to the type of public. How consciously did they try to attract a different sort of public for the national museum when compared to the royal / princely museum?

- In what sense were the Parisian museums exemplary?
- In terms of their categorization of art and sciences and In terms of presentation?

If we limit the field here to the presentation of paintings, especially the many paintings by Raphael originating from different countries brought together in the Musée Napoléon, these left a lasting impression because one could see how this master painter's work had developed. However, it should be remembered that in the past some collections had a larger number of works by one artist (for instance in Vienna a room full of Titians, in Düsseldorf a wealth of Gerard Dou's work and in Munich numerous paintings by Rubens). The way the Raphaels were shown in Paris served as a source of inspiration for the Orangerie in Sanssouci near Potsdam which was, it's true, not a national museum but a royal summer palace: there, in a large room, an overview of his work was shown in the form of copies³³.

At the other hand, it is known that the director of the Rijksmuseum, when reorganizing the national museum in 1817, was opposed to the way in which Dutch paintings had been presented in the Louvre, as there paintings by

29 Gould 1965, 128 (based on Blumer 1936) and Brenninkmeijer-De Rooij 1976-1977.

30 Gould 1965, 131.

31 Cornelis Apostool, director of the Amsterdamse Rijksmuseum, was sent to Paris to bring back the former art collection belonging to the stadholder; he wrote a detailed report of this. The text of the lecture he gave in 1821 has been partially preserved: Bergvelt 1998, 89-90.

32 See for Berlin Vogtherr 1997 and Van Wezel 1993 / 2005 and 2001.

33 See Bartoschek/Hüneke/Paepke 1993.

Rembrandt and Van der Werff had been hung next to one another. He wanted to avoid such an 'irritating variety'.³⁴

Was it just a case of imitation in the various countries where the recovered objects were returned (not just works of fine art but also antiquities and natural-history objects) or was it a case of moving away from what was to be seen in the Parisian museums?

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34 In a letter on the arrangement of the Rijksmuseum from Cornelis Apostool to the permanent undersecretary for Education, Art and Science, 19.5.1817, as cited in Bergvelt 1998, 101-102.

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