



## **National Museums – Difficulties and Possibilities: A Museological Approach**

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### **Abstract**

It is very difficult to create and to run a national history museum. Why? Because stakeholders from outside, much more than for other types of museums, intervene and try to make their mark on the content of the museum. We have to consider also the fact that the past is lost forever. Nobody knows what really happened.

What can we offer then in a history museum? An exhibition based on historical research as a kind of temporary interpretation and provisional narrative. We have to evaluate and to weigh research results according to the best of our knowledge and to ethical standard. Every generation has to do it anew. One of the biggest pitfalls of narratives in historical exhibitions is a linear, one-dimensional presentation *ex post*.

Many of these statements are evident, but do our visitors really know it, too? They interpret our exhibitions simply as THE truth. They are less critical than with respect to other media (TV for instance). Why? Museums show original objects, hence the story they tell must be true, too. Several possibilities to convey the relativity of the narratives in our museums are presented.

## **A museological approach**

It is very difficult to create and to run a national history museum. This is an important lesson I learnt from the findings of the EuNaMus project. Why is it so difficult? Because stakeholders from outside, much more than for other types of museums, intervene and try to make their mark on the content of the museum. According to the political system of a country such an influence could be very heavy but I think it's never totally absent.

State organs define the role of a national museum, directly or indirectly. For instance: The museum has to celebrate the nation or has to convey security and identity to the citizens, even pride. In general a national museum must allow an easy acceptance of the past and a positive view of the glorious forefathers. Dark sides of the nation's history are concealed since they may accuse the behaviour of past politicians and rulers. Very often there is few or even no space at all for other views, but again this varies according to the independence of culture and the freedom of opinion.

Another difficulty lies in the fact that the past is lost forever. Nobody knows what really happened. Fortunately, of course, we profit from a very developed historical science, but – as critical it may be – we can only approach a possible truth and we are never sure to know THE truth. Our findings are never provable in all details; they can only be falsified. Hence “history” is a mental construction of the present and that's why objectivity is never possible. Any historical narrative is a kind of backwards prophecy *ex nunc*.

What can we offer then in a history museum? An exhibition based on historical research as a kind of temporary interpretation and provisional narrative. We have to evaluate and to weigh research results according to the best of our knowledge and to ethical standard. Every generation has to do it anew.

I said that every historical exhibition visualises a present day idea of the past. Let's just look at an example: An exhibition doesn't show how Charlemagne created the Franconian Empire. But: How the exhibition curator imagines that crucial period of European history some 1'200 years ago. In each historical exhibition we always have to define what image of the past has to be conveyed. It is an illusion to believe that there is an exhibition without message – declared or underpinned.

At a first glance the global message of a national history museum seems to be clear: Show the history of the nation. If we look closer at the rationale of a national museum we discover that is extremely difficult to define it. What should we show? How should we weight the different elements and epochs? Should we show the national history in a wider geographical context to overcome nationalism?

We certainly all agree with the following statements: No heroic and glorious narrative. No narrative making things seem better! Present also dark sides, conflicts and the like. But we all know: It is very difficult to open a museum also for other views than the generally accepted and more or less official ones.

One of the biggest pitfalls of narratives in historical exhibitions is a linear, one-dimensional presentation *ex post*, as if our forefathers hundreds of years ago intended to create the actual State. It happened as it happened – and not as it should have happened according to our imagined finality. In this context I can mention the Swiss example. On August 1<sup>st</sup> the nation celebrates the so called foundation of the Swiss Confederation in 1291. It is said that from there a

direct line leads to modern Switzerland. Hence in 1991 we celebrated our 700<sup>th</sup> birthday with pomp. Critical historians call such stories into question. What we could have celebrated in 1991 is 100 years of celebration of 1291... It seems that nations need such festive events to confirm national identity.

Such considerations are very crucial for the planned House of European History. It should avoid showing the 20<sup>th</sup> century “unification” of Europe plus some “forerunners” (that very dangerous term!), for instance Charlemagne! It would be very naive and dangerous to construct a direct line from the Roman Empire through the Carolingian Empire directly to European Union! Certainly the project leaders are aware of the enormous opportunity on one side and responsibilities on the other side they have!

I think that that the bulk of my reflections concerning the relativity of historical narratives seems evident! We all know this – or should at least know it!

But do our visitors really know it, too? They interpret our exhibitions simply as THE truth. They are less critical than with respect to other media (TV for instance). Why? Museums show original objects, hence the story they tell must be true, too. I think we have a big responsibility when we create historical exhibitions. Do we really assume it and understand it also as a real chance?

We have to take appropriate steps and measures to counterbalance such simplistic ideas. Without falling into a paralyzing and destructive relativism, we should communicate such facts to our visitors. This is also an ethic obligation.

As museologist I see many possibilities to convey the relativity of the narratives in our museums. It is crucial to be very lucid in this matter. Many of these aspects can be more easily dealt with in temporary exhibitions.

- Occasionally, in relation with an object or document of uncertain origin and context we can deliver different even contradictory interpretations.
- Parallel exhibitions on the same topic can “destabilize” visitors since the present different views and interpretations in. In 1991 I created an exhibition containing seven pavilions each showing an exhibition on 700 years of food (it was in a Food Museum). Each of these small exhibitions interpreted the objects differently and claimed to tell THE truth.
- Another possibility is to include historiographical elements by showing the view of former generations.
- I plead for author exhibitions. Nearly all historical exhibitions are created by “the museum” as an institution, declaring history ex cathedra in an anonymous and authoritative way (another reason for the museums’ credibility). I suggest mentioning the name of the responsible curator from the very beginning of the exhibition. Why do we assume our authorship and hence our responsibility only in books and rarely in exhibitions?
- Very close to the author is the global message of the exhibition. Again, I think we should declare it frankly. This is especially important for controversial themes like wars, social conflicts and the like.

A further possibility is the inclusion of the museum’s own history. The narrative could include also a critical view of the museum’s own past and of the way national history was presented in former permanent exhibitions explaining why this museum at a specific time in a political and

cultural context interpreted the past differently. And also why some contemporary museums are given a specific name like “House of History” and no more “History Museum”.

In applying one or the other possibility we certainly assume more credibility. Don't think that such approaches are purely intellectual exercises that don't attract visitors. I am convinced that every topic can be brought to an exhibition – if it is shown in an attractive manner. Modern expography offers so many exciting possibilities!

I am very pleased to collaborate on the fascinating project EuNaMus as a member of the Scientific Advisory Board. The research work on the creation and the history of national museums provides a wealth of insights into nation building processes. It allows a critical revision of existing historical museums and exhibitions. How is the past used and misused? What are the hidden or the purely political messages? Or even worse: Is there intentional incorrect information to brighten up the past? How are dark periods, conflicts etc. shown? Such critical remarks don't exclude an appreciation of many positive aspects. It's also legitimate to be proud of specific national achievements!

EuNaMus provides also the base for the discussions concerning the creation of new national museums, especially also the House of European History. Our project allows a well thought-out approach and helps avoiding pitfalls. It would be a pleasure for us to help and to collaborate.

I'd like to close with a dream of mine: Create a comparative exhibition (a kind of meta-exhibition) on narratives of exhibitions in different European national history museums. Such an exhibition – attractively designed for a general public – could be a wonderful start for the House of European History, couldn't it?