



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

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SUMMING UP WITH OPEN ACCESS REPORTS

In its final stage, the three-year research project Eunamus is publishing a series of reports with findings and conclusions. This newsletter provides introductions to the three latest publications by visiting scholar Associate Professor Elizabeth Weiser. All reports from Eunamus are available as open access at Linköping University Electronic Press. Four more reports are yet to be published, one was published already in 2011 and one was published earlier this year. Links to published reports are available at www.eunamus.eu

At this very moment, the Eunamus consortium is busy finalizing the summary report **National Museums Making History in a Diverse Europe**. The report reflects upon the way histories are constructed and deployed in Europe's national museums – from art to universal museums, from ethnographic to history museums proper. Issues raised include: In what ways do national museums, and the histories they display, contribute to social division and cohesion? How might national museums be a force for greater social cohesion in Europe in the future? The question of cohesion is a key part of the Eunamus response to the European Commission's call



Sheila Watson and Simon Knell working on the summary report at Leicester School of Museum Studies.

for research to understand the 'interrelation between collective representations and uses of history and cultural evolution in an enlarged European Union.'

FINAL CONFERENCE

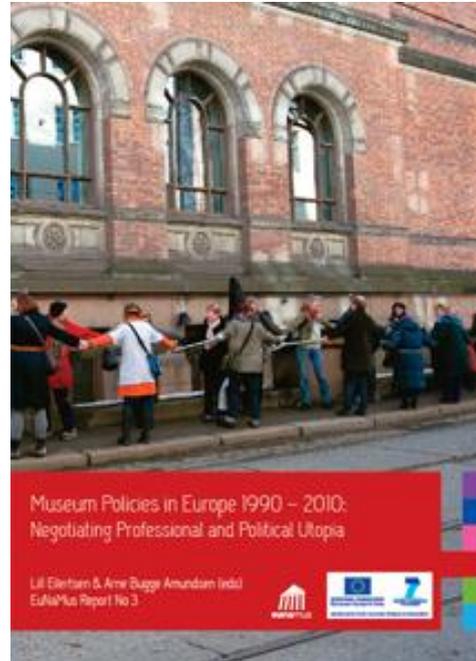
Cohesion will be a theme of the Eunamus grand finale in Budapest 12-14 December: the conference *National Museums in a Changing Europe*. This conference invites museum professionals, policy makers and researchers to consider project findings in the light of plenary talks by Andrea Whitcomb (Alfred Deakin Research Institute, Australia), Susanna Pettersson (Alvar Alto Foundation, Finland), David Anderson (National Museum of Wales, UK), Rhiannon Mason (Newcastle University, UK) and Thomas Cauvin, Center for European Studies, University of Michigan. Parallel session on museum practices will also feed into the discussions.

Central to this conference is a dialogue between museum professionals, professional organisations, policy makers and university researchers. While academic researchers can operate outside of the professional and institutional constraints that shape practice, the role of national museums in building greater European cohesion can only be developed within a framework of energetic, proactive professionalism. *National Museums in a Changing Europe* provides a forum for debate and dialogue between those who study national museums and those who daily shape these institutions and who are charged with taking these institutions forward.

PUBLICATIONS

Museum Policies in Europe 1990 – 2010: Negotiating Professional and Political Utopia is a comparative study of museum policies over the past two decades edited by EuNaMus partners Lill Eilertsen & Arne Bugge Amundsen from the University of Oslo. Using case case studies and extensive documentation from five countries, along with a report on policy changes at the level of the European Union, the report analyse how museums across the continent have taken on stronger roles responding to political and demographic changes. The report allows museum researchers, agents, and policymakers to better understand two key issues: How policymakers in different regions of Europe identify national museums as instruments for negotiating identity, diversity and change; and how national museums formulate their own position as political and cultural institutions. Its conclusion: The changes articulated by national and

transnational policymakers in the past 20 years are utopian, envisioning museums as change agents for a desired future. But the utopias take three forms that not necessarily compatible or universal.



EuNaMus research on museum policies demonstrates that 'old' nation-states, like France, were as likely as 'new' nation-states, like Hungary or Estonia, to see museums as change-agents for negotiating differences in the national identity. Nearly every nation studied had enacted new federal legislation on museums since 1990. Indeed, museum policy has been an arena for political and academic debates over national narratives throughout these decades, write Eilertsen and Amundsen, and the implications of national museum policies are very often tied into larger political agendas and debates. Thus, the report identifies three versions of utopia that seek to provide an agenda for national museums:

1. **A National Historical Utopia.** The oldest vision, this would seem at first glance to have lost legitimacy during the last 20 years. However, it becomes clear that as there is not

“one” European national museum, the histories of the museums are different and questions of national identity are still potent, the function of individual museums to provide a national communal narrative is still often felt as a viable need.

2. **An EUtopia.** The cultural dimensions of European integration have been strengthened during the last two decades, linked to a European citizenship based on common European values and identity. Museums’ role is thus to contribute to transnational cohesion and integration. There are many political actors and strategies sustaining this perspective, but it remains open whether there are any convincing successes.

3. **A Multicultural Utopia.** Throughout Europe, museums are following principles of cultural diversity and inclusion of minority voices. However, the collections and institutional history are likely so strongly linked to the national narratives that turning them into dialogue institutions or arenas for intercultural encounters is a very complicated mission.

In short, national museums are under both internal and external pressure to respond to a changing Europe. The dramatic political changes in Eastern Europe concurring with the major demographic changes in Western Europe have created a new agenda for using cultural institutions to smooth or counteract these effects. At the same time, the dramatic nature of these changes engenders a need to reaffirm historical identity. The working group has found that museums and those involved in museum policy are responding to pressures by repositioning themselves using a combination of five techniques:

- **Re-formulation**--Challenging the aims and scope of their collections and narratives;
- **Re-narration**--Using national museums as instruments for a correction of collective memory;
- **Re-mediation**--Using new media and new ways of inviting users into existing or new museum institutions;
- **Re-organisation**—the sometimes massive government-initiated organisational changes that have in many cases strengthened political control at the expense of museum professionals; and
- **Re-professionalization**—the entry into museum policymaking of new groups who have deeply influenced the museum field both theoretically and practically, including consultants, artists, economists and architects.

Elizabeth Weiser

Great Narratives of the Past: Traditions and Revisions in National Museums. Conference Proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Paris 28 June – 1 July & 25–26 November 2011 provides 36 case studies from multiple nations that analyze the historical narratives authored by museums to shape the political, military, territorial, social and economic constructions of the nation. The editors, Dominique Poulot, Felicity Bodenstein, and José María Lanzarote Guiral of the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, write: “Museums themselves have responded to the accusation of representing the powerhouse of the nation’s elite by developing policies that reflect the desire to engage in a more open

relationship with the public and promote their image as institutions ‘not of confinement but of exhibition,’”, noting that, as the case studies indicate, the “museum seems to pivot between perceptions of progress and conservatism, tradition and revision.”

National Narratives

Reports from across the spectrum of time and space show museums in service to the larger political agendas of their nations—from Hungary’s use of the museum to assert its nation-status during the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Scotland’s attempt at the same today; from Eastern European service to the educational aims of the socialist state to Sweden’s attempt at multicultural extra-national narratives in the 1990s; from the grand narratives of independence told in Norway and Turkey to Spain’s growing awareness of the impact of its colonialism on its own history. As national museums narrate the nation, these authors demonstrate, their nations’ concerns equally narrate what (and how) the museums would exhibit. “Despite the large chronological and geographical scope of this collection of texts, the overall structure places emphasis on the idea that narratives of the past are accounts based on the diversity of materials or factual sources used to illustrate them, constrained by conventions that bestow particular values or meaning upon them,” write Bodenstein and Poulot.

Thus, for instance, several authors point to the role of memorials as models for the initial



Narratives told by national museums, and they see the increasing ambiguity in exhibits devoted to the continent’s “great men” as evidence of more modern narratives. Indeed, a number of authors note that it is in temporary exhibits where innovative story-telling and alternative versions can most readily be found, uncomplicated by the permanence of the traditional artifacts found in the permanent collections. Such innovations turn a light onto the constructed nature of historical narratives, yet as Bodenstein and Poulot point out, this does not mean that their material content is mere invention. The report, thus, ties EuNaMus to the larger studies of the Narrative Turn in science/social science research.

The nation’s story is often the “master narrative” above all alternatives, and museums are working to overcome nationalist master narratives in a variety of ways, report authors note, discussing such tactics as an increased focus on regional and ethnic museums, a focus on transnational entities such as German-speaking peoples, and, for the British Museum, a repositioning as a place of universal

tolerance/debate. Other authors, however, document the opposite trend, as nations put a new nationalist twist on transnational narratives (such as that of the Vikings).

Challenges and Opportunities

Several reports describe the move toward non-chronological narratives both in art and in history museums. Indeed, one researcher points out that museum arrangement in general is spatial as well as temporal, unlike other narratives, and this three-dimensionality allows for contrasting /contradictory stories. Others raise intriguing questions about museums' approaches to new historiography, including two which examine the "eternal present" of ethnography museums as either a disengagement with political modernity or an assertion of non-dominant modes of storytelling.

Many raise the challenges of tourism—what one author calls "the trap of the spectacular merchandising of history." Yet a number of reports look toward the increasing circulation of peoples—and artifacts--throughout Europe as providing opportunities for expanded arenas of study. New media are also looked to for their ability to expand the spread of culture and allow its comparative analysis, moving toward what one researcher termed "intense proximity," or the examination of how various national cultures have interwoven with each other in both unity and division to forge modern Europe.

Finally, however, what these 36 reports show us is that, despite many similarities in the narratives both of the museums and told by the museums, difference is flourishing and unique circumstances—in some cases even individual personnel—add their own particular twists and

turns to the great narratives of Europe's museums. As Poulot concludes, "a new generation of establishments is more set on provoking memory than on providing a kind of unified narrative." Museums as provocateurs of 21st century collective memory may well become the newest chapter in the story.

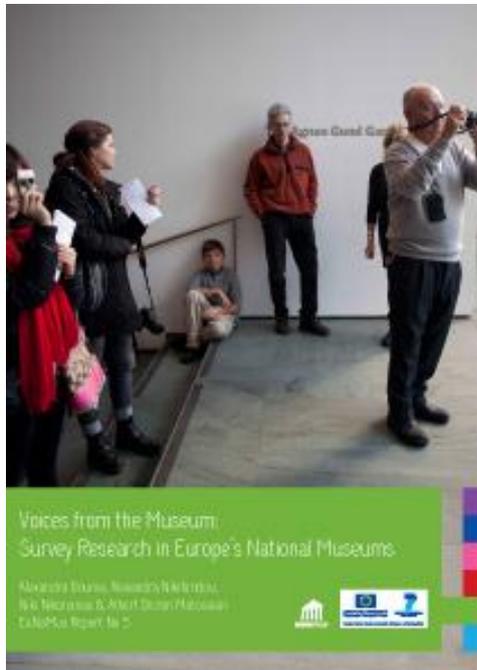
Elizabeth Weiser

Voices from the Museum: Survey Research in Europe's National Museums

Visitors have a fairly traditional view on national museums. More than half the people who visit national museums come from another country, and museums can greatly influence visitors' understanding of the nation they're visiting by the emphasis they place on particular objects and stories in their exhibits. This is one of the findings of the EuNaMus working group 6 report, "Museum Citizens: Experiences and Perceptions of Audiences in National Museums across Europe." The report presents the results of surveys of 5356 visitors to nine European national museums during the summer of 2011. The project was spearheaded by Alexandra Bounia of the University of the Aegean, with the report written by Bounia along with Alexandra Nikiforidou, Niki Nikonanou, and Albert Dicran Matossian.

Researchers went into national museums in Estonia, Latvia, Germany, Greece, Greece, Sweden, Ireland, Scotland, the Netherlands, and Spain (Catalonia) from May to September 2011 to distribute a self-completed questionnaire consisting of multiple-choice, scaled and open-ended questions. Those who opted to fill out the questionnaires tended to be well educated (68% attended/had attended higher education institutions), with a median age between 31 and 45. Half were white-collar

workers, another quarter were students. While over three-quarters were visiting with friends and family, approximately equal numbers (roughly one-quarter each) said they came to learn as said they came for entertainment.



Visitors tended to have a fair clearly definition of “national museum” in their minds, telling researchers that national museums are mainly about a specific nation, they narrate an important part of the nation’s history and do so in a comprehensive way, they hold national treasures or important collections, and they promote or represent national identity and the notion of the nation. In some of the museums, visitors also commented on advanced methods of presentation and interpretation as signifying for them that this was a museum “big” enough to be considered national. Interestingly enough, the European or international scope of some of these museums was given as an argument both for and against their national character.

It was clear from their responses that respondents ranked museums highly as reliable sources of information on national

history, something that presents both challenge and opportunity for museums hoping to influence people’s thinking about the future. While virtually everyone agreed that museums exist to explicate the past, only three-quarters agreed that they should demonstrate how this past impacted the present, and less than half thought that museums should present implications for the future. It seems that discussions of the future should be clearly connected to displays of the past for the majority of visitors to feel comfortable considering them—or perhaps they simply had not seen enough exhibits linking past with future to consider it an option.

Questions on how the national history is presented in the museum yielded similar findings. Only 12%, one in eight, of the visitors surveyed saw any controversial history in the museum they visited, either because there was none or because they did not look for it. Similarly, only 15% thought there were any stories missing from the museum’s historical narrative, and 10% thought there were missing groups. Interestingly, nearly half the respondents said they did not know if stories or people were missing, although those who did routinely named minority groups and stories of past controversies as the missing elements. Here again it appears that there is an opportunity for museums to engage in more dialectical exhibitions, raising questions and encouraging dialogue.

Dialogue might well help museums with another of the survey results: most people, when prompted by a list of possible roles, tended to agree that the national museum also had a role in telling the stories of ordinary people (83%) and the relations between each nation and Europe (62%).

However, most people did not volunteer either of these as roles they themselves thought of for national museums. It seems that people have not considered these options or could not see them in the national museums they visited, but they nevertheless seem to like them.

In sum, the report authors note, national museums should reflect on the stories they present, on the reasons for their selections and on the consequences: does such an approach reflect their role as keepers of national history and identity, or their role as status-makers of a given nation or society? Where does this leave the role of the nation within Europe and the world, and how does this promote understanding of a larger, cosmopolitan and multicultural perspective of the world?

Finally, in an era when museums are turning increasingly to narratives, both written and oral, visitor surveys reflect the continued importance of artefacts in (re)creating the past and national identities. It is the “star objects” in each museum, those the museum chooses to highlight and those that are aesthetically pleasing, that people most readily recall—and it is the narrative surrounding these objects that allows visitors to put the object into context. This working group’s study reaffirms, in other words, that museums have great power to shape the historical perceptions of visitors—power they might well use to help these visitors consider the complexities of the present and future, as well.

Elizabeth Weiser

In the pipeline: **Voices from the Museum: Qualitative research conducted in Europe’s national museums** Jocelyn Dodd, Ceri Jones, Andy Sawyer & Maria- Anna Tseliou (eds)

Presenting findings from interviews and focus groups carried out at six European national museums with visitors and minority groups, this study looks at the connections that can be made between national, European and minority identities and how these frame very different experiences of the national museum.

INTRODUCING ELIZABETH WIESER

Elizabeth Weiser is an Associate Professor of Rhetoric in the Department of English Studies at the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, in the US. Under a grant from the Mershon Center for International Security Studies, she is spending the autumn semester working with Eunamus. She studies how national museums promote and reflect particular narratives of the past, values of the present, and choices for the future in order to promote a rhetorical identification of individuals with their larger communities. Over the past three years, her research has taken her to nearly 20 countries on six continents.



"The opportunity to work with the gifted researchers of Eunamus is a tremendous boon

to someone who believes so strongly that knowledge is best made across disciplinary boundaries," Elizabeth noted. "The Eunamus project is particularly exciting to me, and not only because we are dealing with the same subject, national museums--we also share a belief that these museums can be spaces to explore dissenting perspectives without the need for one perspective to win over the other, but instead for all to consider alternatives. In our contentious world, where so many important decisions need creative, communal action, such spaces are particularly critical."

EUNAMUS IN GREEK



Eunamus is proud to announce the publication of the edited volume *National Museums in Southern Europe: History and Perspective* by Kaleidoscope Publishers. The target group is museum professionals and historians in Greece. The book, edited by Alexandra Bounia

and Andromache Gazi, examines the creation and development of national museums in southern Europe. The questions raised are why, by whom, when and with what material, with what effect and what future opportunities these museums are shaped and how they affect the development of the wider museum landscape in each country. Important questions concern, moreover, the way in which national museums manage issues "difficult heritage", and how they faced ideological / political conflicts and tensions.

A number of publications, edited collections and peer-reviewed articles, will follow the end of the project at the start of 2013.

ROUTLEDGE CONTRACT

National Museums and Nation-building in Europe 1750-2010: Mobilization and Legitimacy, Continuity and Change is contracted with Routledge for publication in late 2013. This forthcoming volume is edited by Peter Aronsson (University of Linköping) & Gabriella Elgenius (Oxford University) and contains contributions by Peter Apor, Peter Aronsson, Tony Bennett, Stefan Berger, Gabriella Elgenius, Ilaria Porciani and Dominique Poulot. They have all worked with the historical and comparative material amassed by Eunamus to make more general statements on the working of museums both in different state-making processes and by the division of labour between museums of different types.

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