



# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## Agents of Change: How National Museums Shape European Identity

*Policy implications of EUNAMUS, an EU-funded interdisciplinary research project comparing the development of museums in 37 European countries.*

*On-going project*

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### INTRODUCTION

What do European cultures have in common, and what sets them apart? How can Europeans develop a shared sense of citizenship compatible with existing cultural identities in Member States? These are some of the fundamental questions being explored in a clutch of EU-sponsored interdisciplinary research projects that includes EUNAMUS. Focusing specifically on expressions of cultural identity as manifested in national museums, EUNAMUS is mapping diversities and commonalities in Europe's museum landscape in search of clues about how Europe might develop in the future.

**National museums can foster a sense of community that transcends national borders**

The consortium's preliminary findings support the notion that European policymakers should be doing more to recognize national museums as agents of social change. EUNAMUS suggests that these institutions should be encouraged to activate transnational connections in their collections and increase awareness of European and global values - not least for the purpose of countering the danger of aggressive nationalism which is currently resurgent in several European countries.

It is essential to understand that national museums, if carefully managed, can perform many parallel functions. On an economic level, national museums are important for branding cities and regions, attracting tourists, entrepreneurs and investors. Through their collections, these institutions also provide solid anchors for a national sense of belonging, a role they have performed for centuries. Today, however, pan-European and global forces are reshaping cultural identities, presenting national museums with fresh challenges.

Showcasing the richness and diversity of European heritage, national museums have the potential to foster cohesion and community across borders and promote tolerance within multicultural nations. In light of this, there are compelling reasons to invest in re-interpretations of existing collections.

## KEY OBSERVATIONS

### What is a 'national' museum?

An institution does not have to carry the label 'National Museum' in order for it to function as one. While European countries feature dozens of institutions that operate officially under the title 'national museum', many other institutions perform that role even though they don't bear the name. Indeed any institution, collection or display can be considered a national museum if it claims, articulates and represents dominant national values, myths and realities.

Over the years a number of European nation-states have built up impressive ensembles of national museums. Some of these are specialised institutions that focus on a particular aspect of a nation's identity or heritage. Common fields of specialization include art, archaeology, socio-political history, ethnology and anthropology, the natural sciences and military history.

The diversification of museum types has been brought about partly by the splitting of existing collections and partly through a desire to express national identity via the utilisation of new categories of material heritage.

### 'Cultural glue'

Evolving gradually over the past 250 years, Europe's national museums have developed into key institutions. They have become part of a 'cultural constitution', providing the political constitution of a state with the connective tissue of a common history that includes a shared material culture. This cultural constitution provides the political constitution with a more stable and plastic counterpart for negotiating conflicts in the cultural sphere. As a tangible stabilizing force, national museums can therefore be regarded as a kind of 'cultural glue'.

### When did national museums first emerge in Europe?

National museums have emerged at different points in time, with both civil society and the state playing decisive roles in their development. Most European nation states opened their first national museum in the nineteenth century. The only exceptions are the British Museum (London) and the Louvre (Paris) that opened in 1759 and 1793 respectively. National museums were not introduced into Bulgaria, the Republic of Ireland, Cyprus, Lithuania, Slovakia, Northern Ireland and the Sápmi nation until the twentieth century.

### Nation-building

Europe's national museums grew out of interactions between civil society and the state in the process of nation-building. The following map (figure1) provides a useful starting point for understanding this development:

<sup>1</sup> The distinction between the nation and the state is crucial for understanding the social and political functions of national museums. The nation refers to the imagination of a community in terms of shared symbols, history, language, religion, ethnicity and territory. Nations make people feel at home, but they also divide and exclude people. The state, on the other hand, refers to a sovereign, juridical and political structure.



Figure 1: (\*\*SOURCE\*\*)

The map displays two main lines of development<sup>2</sup>:

- Nations in which the first national museum was inaugurated in a politically sovereign state. (Marked blue on the map.)
  - Here national museums stabilized or legitimized states by transforming either royal or private collections into public museums.
- Nations in which the foundations of the national museums were established prior to independence. (Marked green on the map.)
  - The nineteenth century's empires harboured provincial museums with national aims. Some institutions labelled themselves 'national' without state support. In these cases, national museums played a particularly active role in nation-making. Collections emerging from civil society were mobilised to project a sense of national community.

### Two main lines of historical development

### Coping with change

**From a policymaking perspective, it is important to note that forces of cultural, social and geopolitical change have driven the development of national museums.**

### How do national museums deal with political and ideological change?

Exhibitions in national museums often last for decades. However, they do evolve over time, responding (sometimes rapidly) to political, ideological and demographic change. In many cases existing exhibitions are renewed and new museums added to the state's ensemble of national museums.

<sup>2</sup> A couple of important exceptions need to be noted here: The United Kingdom is uniquely composed of a union of nations forming a combined British nation state. Another unique case is the Sápmi nation, stretching across state borders in Northern Scandinavia.

**Resisting**

On the one hand, museums retain heavy inertia. Any national museum is a major infrastructural unit comprised of an extensive collection and an often massive and impressive set of buildings. It contains a vast accumulation of professional knowledge that may not be inclined to break out of its established patterns.

**Responding**

On the other hand, national museums can be sensitive to political change at different levels. Influences from transnational organisations and political actions beyond the nation-state can be as influential as national politics.

Significant revisions in national museums followed the dissolution of the Napoleonic, Ottoman and Austrian-Hungarian Empires. More recently, major changes resulted from the political transformation of Eastern and Central Europe in the late twentieth century - a process that is still having an impact on national museums today.

**Case study: Romania****Coping with ideological shifts**

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, an ethnographic collection of Romanian Peasant Art was formed with the intension of creating a museum. The museum remained unfinished, and when the Soviets took over the building they removed the ethnographic collection to make room for two Communist propaganda museums: the V.I. Lenin – I.V. Stalin Museum and the History Museum of the Romanian Workers' Party. After the devolution of the Soviet Republic, the ethnographic collection was reinstalled, and since 1990 the building has housed the Roman Peasant National Museum. This example shows how different political systems can exploit the mutability of a cultural concept to construct vastly different national museum experiences and ideological expressions.

**Creating frames for identification**

National museums play a key role in nation-states by articulating 'great historical narratives' which promote feelings of national belonging. They connect audiences to ancestors, 'glorious pasts' and a specific piece of land, thereby creating frames for identification.

**Negotiating demographic shifts**

Today, the pressures of demographic change are challenging the viability of some traditional narratives in Europe's national museums. Multicultural influences are prompting many to rethink narratives hitherto based on the assumption of a nation having a homogenous (or at least particular) ethnic or cultural composition.

**The growing importance of the multicultural paradigm**

National museums are at the centre of debates concerning the multicultural project in Europe. While senior politicians in several countries (including Holland and Britain) have questioned the merits of multiculturalism, the growing importance of the multicultural paradigm has prompted many museums to highlight a 'diversity' of histories and the 'dialogue of cultures'. Reflecting the realities of an increasingly transnational world, this development has given museum collections a new social function.

### Case study: France

#### France has embarked on several reinterpretations of existing collections aimed at negotiating the multicultural paradigm

In 2000, the Louvre in Paris opened its doors to the 'arts premiers' (ethnographic art). This was regarded as a policy shift acknowledging the equality of masterpieces of all the arts. That policy was given full expression with the opening of the *Musée du Quai Branly* in Paris in 2006. The new museum, founded under the banner 'dialogue of cultures', was extremely well received by the public and has registered over six million visitors. 2007 saw the creation of the *Musée national de l'histoire et des cultures de l'immigration* which seeks to represent the integration of immigrant populations in French society. Finally, the former museum of French ethnography is moving to Marseille as part of a new museum project (set to open in 2012) dedicated to the cultures of the Mediterranean.

### International relations

Since the twentieth century, national museums have increasingly served as agents of cultural diplomacy. Conscious of their function in addressing international audiences, many are coping with the weight of the past by using it as a means to promote mutual understanding. Transnational professional networks and organisations play important roles in this development.

### Nation-making policy options for national museums:

#### What options do national museums have in performing their nation-making function?

National museums can play a variety of roles in the making of nations and states and have three types of actions (not mutually exclusive) available to them at any point of time:

#### A. Pro-active

Anticipating new ideas of the nation or the formation of a state

#### B. Re-active

Forming part of a political and cultural movement to reinstate the national independence of a territory.

#### C. Stabilizing

Adopting more inclusive policies, reasserting key attributes of national identity or reinventing of the nation as modern and progressive.

National museums may also lose their relevance. This is often the case when national museums prove unable to respond to challenges of contemporary society or maintain professional standards, due to lack of resources or public support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

- Recognize that national museums can serve as agents of social change. Carefully managed, they can perform many parallel functions and should not be regarded only as sanctuaries of historical relics.
- Recognize that national museums provide citizens with a connective tissue. This cultural glue is vital for social cohesion. It can also help solidify support for state actions and foster confidence in representative democracy at national and European levels.
- Invest in re-interpretations of existing collections and the development of temporary exhibitions.
- To prevent aggressive nationalism, stimulate national museums to activate transnational connections in their collections and increase the awareness of European and global values and processes.
- Be aware that national museums may not be automatically sensitive to societal change due to their complex heritage of buildings, collections and professional knowledge.
- Activate citizen's interest in museums and stimulate interactions between citizens and museum professionals.
- Balance the need for reflecting political ideology in museum spaces with respect for the institution's professional competence.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS

### Objectives

Eunamus (European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen) is concerned with understanding how the national museum can best aid European cohesion and confront the social issues which test European stability and unity.

The project's overarching objectives are to:

1. Map the development of national museums in Europe in relation to the overall cultural evolution of Europe.
2. Distinguish the active and intentional history making that takes place in national museums.
3. Make visible the material culture which itself unites and defines European sensibilities and values.
4. Interrogate the policy making and policy implementation actions of national museums. Policy is capable of mobilising the national museum, but how does it do so, and what role do museums have in its formulation?
5. Understand museum audiences' experiences and identities.
6. Create reflexive tools and knowledge for policy makers, museum professionals and the public in order to facilitate the operation of museums as arenas for dialogue between European citizens about what it means to belong to the nation and to Europe.

### Methodologies

Eunamus combines a range of methodologies for its case studies. A comparative analytical aspect is important to the project throughout.

These are the main methods used :

1. Analytical comparative history on the development of national museums in 37 countries.
2. Analysis of great historical narratives in museum spaces and studies of the ways in which national museums deal with conflicts and transnational heritage.
3. An extensive fieldwork including an analysis of buildings and exhibitions in twelve capital cities. Analysis of online museums and studies of the interplay between national and regional museums.
4. Analysis of policy documents in a selection of national contexts.
5. Audience studies by quantitative and qualitative survey methods in nine national museums.
6. Compilations, contextualisations and cross-analysis of case – studies.

**PROJECT IDENTITY**

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**Website**

[www.eunamus.eu](http://www.eunamus.eu)

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**Further reading**

The foundation for the analysis presented here is published as Open Access: Building National Museums in Europe 1750–2010. Conference proceedings from EuNaMus, European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen, Bologna 28-30 April 2011. Eunamus Report No. 1 [http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp\\_home/index.en.aspx?issue=064](http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp_home/index.en.aspx?issue=064)

Two conferences organised by Professor Dominique Poulot at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne also informed the analysis.