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

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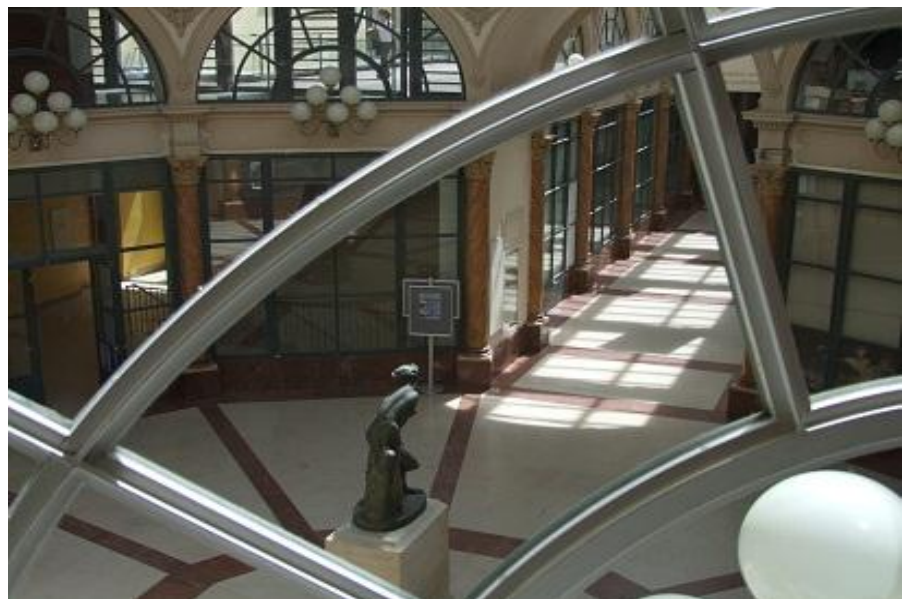
Several strands of Eunamus' research have now commenced and are progressing well. This newsletter presents the latest Eunamus news, conferences and research activities. We give special attention to Sheila Watson and Andy Sawyer's recent fieldwork on historiographical and material practices in museum displays.

WORKSHOP: Great Historical Narratives in European Museums (1750-2010): Building Nations, Looking across Borders and Remembering the Past

Presently, Eunamus researchers are writing papers for an upcoming workshop in Paris in late June. The main question that the Paris workshop seeks to answer is: How has museums produced master narratives of the nation and its history? The conference will expand further on earlier research within the project: [Mapping and Framing Institutions 1750-2010](#). Research within this first strand, on the development of European national museums, allowed the project to identify, but not to analyse, in any detail, some of the most powerful and explicit historical narratives relating to nation building processes.

National museums

refer to those collections and displays claiming, negotiating, articulating and representing dominant national values, myths and realities. They are therefore explored as historic and contemporary processes of institutionalized negotiations of what values will constitute the basis for national communities and for dynamic state-formation.



The venue for the Paris workshop:
Gallery Colbert at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art
Photo: Felicity Bodenstern

The workshop includes presentations by Eunamus authors as well as keynote speakers outside the project. It takes place 29 June – 1st July 2011 and is organized by: The Department of Art History and Archaeology, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne as part of the second research strand of Eunamus, [Narrating the Nation and Negotiating Conflict](#). Participation is applied for by sending an email to Felicity.Bodenstern@univ-paris1.fr. The full program is available online www.eunamus.eu.



DEVELOPING DISSEMINATION ROUTINES

The reports from both the conference in Paris and Eunamus' conference in Bologna on museum making processes, [Building of National Museums 1750-2010](#), will be available at the Eunamus website later this year. According to the routines for dissemination developing within the project, reports will be first available for comments and comparisons by project participants and invited discussants at the project's conferences. Following which they will be re-worked and published as conference proceedings, linked to the project's website. Results will of course also be communicated at other conferences and appear in future publications from participants.

The latest news from each conference is posted on the project's blog [Unfolding Eunamus](#), no later than a week after the conclusion of the conferences. [Posts from the Bologna conference](#) highlight how discussants Dominique Poulot, Tony Bennett, Stefan Berger and Peter Apor emphasised the transnational character of museum making processes.

The blog also reports on the workshop held in May:

[Representing Recent History: Museums of Communism in post-1989 Eastern Europe](#) organised at Central European University in Budapest. Project partners Constantin Iordachi and Peter Apor organized this workshop and they also plan to produce an edited collection on this subject.

RESEARCH NEWS: [Museum Citizens: Experience and Identity of Audiences](#)

This summer visitors to major museums might meet Eunamus researchers handing out questionnaires. Our aim is to investigate visitor's use and understanding of national identities and national museums. The quantitative data collected will be followed by qualitative studies, including focus groups and interviews. Alexandra Bounia, from the University of the Aegean in Greece, leads the investigation of museum citizens in collaboration with the University of Leicester and the University of Tartu.

She reports:

The last week of February 2011, the research team for the research strand [Museum Citizens: Experience and Identity of Audiences](#) gathered at the University of Tartu in Estonia for an intensive workshop. The aim was to discuss the findings from the pilot studies that took place at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh and the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens. Furthermore, to exchange ideas and views, to finalise methodology issues and finally to decide on the case studies. It was the most exciting start to a rather exciting project which is currently in full progress. This summer, data will be collected from nine European countries: Estonia, Latvia, Sweden, the UK, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Germany and Spain. A second workshop, to clarify issues of analysis, will take place in Leicester during November of 2011, while the final conference of this WP will be in Athens during early spring of 2012.



Workshop participants



SPECIAL FEATURE: Fieldwork on European material culture and museum narratives

The University of Leicester in the UK is one of the most active partners in Eunamus. Their work brings together several research strands. They have already delivered reports addressing when and why national museums were established in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland for [Mapping and Framing Institutions 1750-2010](#). The last six months they have conducted extensive fieldwork for the subprojects [Uses of the Past: Narrating the Nation and Negotiating Conflict](#) and [The Museology of Europe](#). In addition, they will undertake visitor research for the research strand: [Museum Citizens](#), and the fieldwork has informed and supported planning for this. Sheila Watson and Andy Sawyer estimate that the notes and data so far collected (including over 100 Gb of images) will take some time to fully assess, and that some of these results will also inform Eunamus overall integrated research strand [National Museums, History and a Changing Europe](#).

The remainder of this newsletter is dedicated to Sheila Watson and Andy Sawyer's first comparative reflections on the ways objects are made to convey compelling narratives in museum displays:

As of April 2011, members of our group have visited Berlin, Dublin, Edinburgh, Gdansk, Gdynia, Istanbul, London, Oslo, Portsmouth, St Petersburg, Stockholm, Warsaw, and Edinburgh. We have looked at two cities from countries not in the European Union for comparative purposes (Istanbul and St Petersburg), and expect to visit three or four more to complete the work. Most of the work has been in connection with assessing common or shared themes evoked by material culture in the making of the nation and of Europe, but we have also been studying the overt construction of museum narratives, especially around origins, conflict, tension, and commemoration.

Enduring narratives confirm current national borders

One of the most compelling and enduring narratives we have come across is the idea that nations are very old and can be linked to some form of ethnic identity that exists beyond historic time. This ethnic narrative is sometimes as much a product of the museum as of the intellectual thinking of the curatorial staff and designers. Our work is in progress and thus we present here some examples of first impressions.



Two techniques used by the National Museum of Scotland. To the left: Many labels use an outline of modern day Scotland to locate finds which inadvertently give an impression that Scotland is a very ancient nation. To the right: Objects from different time periods and cultures relating to Butchery and Marrow Extraction are presented so as to avoid a progressive narrative of peoples and cultures.

Both the national museums in Stockholm and Edinburgh go out of their way to try and avoid linking their prehistoric collections some form of primordial nationalism expressed through essentialised ethnic origins going back to prehistory. However, by selecting material culture from the past beyond writing and memory, selecting to display it in a national museum, and focusing almost entirely on the cultural markers of those people who live in the geographical area now occupied by the nation, the museums inevitably present a past that appears to confirm current national boundaries and suggest implicitly that these are ancestors of many people currently inhabiting the nation. Inclusive text such as the use of the word 'we' as well as the repetitive location of objects in current landscape locations with modern names, reinforces, unintentionally, a complex ethnic origin of the nation.

While Sweden and Scotland attempt to offer a many cultured view of the prehistoric past, the Military Museum in Istanbul, Turkey, by comparison, promotes the idea that the Turks can be traced as a coherent ethnic group back many millennia and that the current inhabitants of Turkey are descended from these people. The Deutches Historisches Museum in Berlin locates the origins of the Germans in the tribes who resisted Rome. In both these cases ethnic origins are linked to a coherent and cohesive culture that evolves over time.



Use of space tell stories

Medieval origins are key signifiers of national identities in several national museums we have examined. Here this is often made explicit through the physical layout of the building. The museum is a cultural medium which is experienced in the body and it can begin a story without explanation through the use of different spaces through which the visitor moves. In Oslo the notion of the nation is constructed when you literally walk through a door from the Vikings into a room with a wonderful medieval ceiling and material relating to the medieval church.

In Stockholm the idea of the medieval nation begins at the top of the stairs once the visitor has seen the Viking collections. In Scotland the nation is confirmed with the Declaration of Arbroath (1320) when the visitor walks into the first exhibition space on the ground floor.

We have a lot of data about how museums materialise the nation, and it is too early to be able to make definitive statements. For example, Stockholm's Historiska Museet often exhibits the past in a light, questioning, and at times almost playful manner, whilst Berlin's Deutsches Historisches Museum seems more concerned with chronology and completeness. Again there are some striking similarities across the continent: on HMS Victory, visitors are not allowed to take photographs of 'the shrine' (that is, the place where Nelson died after being carried below decks); and 'shrine' is a loaded term, but it could almost be applied to the Atatürk display at Istanbul's Naval Museum at the other end of the Europe. But we have a lot of detailed work to do to test these impressions before they can be useful.

Conflicts evoke emotions

Many museums display histories of past conflicts in relations to particular objects. It is a quite a difficult subject for us to address dispassionately given Europe's history. Also, if you are sitting in Stockholm or London, it is all too easy to forget that for many Europeans, past conflicts and wars are not only 'history', but affect their lives today. Stockholm Armémuseum's *Fredssoldater – Soldiers of Peace* exhibition reminds us of this. It concludes with a body bag of the type used by Swedish troops in UN operations such as that in Kosovo in 2004.



Kulturehistorisk Museum, Oslo: the Medieval gallery. Visitors walk through the Viking gallery and come into this view of the Medieval Norwegian Christian nation - fully formed.

Similarly, in London's Imperial War Museum, one of the first objects visitors see is the twisted wreck of a car. It was destroyed by a bomb in a Baghdad marketplace on 5 March 2007. It was not possible to count or identify the human remains from the explosion, though the museum notes that Haji Muhammed, who owned a cafe nearby, lost five sons in the attack. If the wars in the Balkans in the 1990s, and European troops' engagement in the Middle East more recently, are too recent for any of us to assess fairly, the museums have at least enabled these objects to speak eloquently about the human cost of war



Imperial War Museum, London: conceptual artist Jeremy Deller created this installation incorporating the remains of a car, wrecked by a terrorist explosion in Baghdad. European engagement in Iraq remains a controversial topic, but the car provides a striking reminder of the human cost of conflict.



Ships are powerful symbols for nations

Historic ships are striking 'objects' in their own right, and museums are often home to, or look after, these exhibits. For the British, HMS *Victory* in Portsmouth has a powerful presence, associated with the great age of sailing ships, with a naval victory of Trafalgar, with the heroic figure of Nelson, and with the past glories of British naval supremacy. Its context is also significant: from the deck of the ship, visitors can see a lot of maritime heritage, including other historic ships, the Royal Naval Museum, and the *Mary Rose* Museum (the *Mary Rose* sank in 1545 but has been raised and preserved). Furthermore, Portsmouth is still a naval dockyard, and visitors will also be able to see Royal Navy's latest Type 45 class warships, which are often moored very prominently, just a few hundred yards away.

A very different ship can be seen in Gdansk, where the first ocean going vessel built in the Gdansk shipyard after the Second World War was built, a coal and ore ship.

Photos: Andy Sawyer and Sheila Watson

The prototype coal-ore carrier's keel-laying ceremony took place in April 1948, and official speeches were followed by consecration by a priest. On board are exhibits about the ship itself and the life of the crews who sailed in it, and nearby the museum gallery covering the period after 1945 provides a context.

There is a lot more work to do on the data we have gathered on these exhibits (and many others) before we can provide useful reports mapped onto the requirements of the project, but already we may see narratives coalescing round these objects: for the British, an argument for the importance of control of the seas, and for the Polish, the preservation and celebration of the and achievements of their nation, made in spite of conquest and occupation.



Historic Dockyard, Portsmouth: the bows of HMS *Victory* with the Union Jack flag, the Royal Naval Museum's Trafalgar Gallery, and HMS *M33* (just visible in the yellow painted dry dock), dating from the First World War. In the background of this patriotic scene, a modern warship, HMS *Diamond*, commissioned by the Royal Navy in May 2011.

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Project information:

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