



## MID PROJECT KEY OBSERVATIONS

### *Eunamus – European National Museums: Identity Politics, the Uses of the Past and the European Citizen*

*Eunamus is funded under the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Commission. It is designed to form a conclusive account of the roles of national museums in a Europe that constantly negotiates its borders and internal complexion, adopting ideas, traditions and communities from around the world.*

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## INTRODUCTION

All over Europe, national museums prove the richness and diversity of European heritage. This institutional form brings together objects and collections and displays them so as to provide compelling anchors for a national sense of belonging.

### **National museums need to take on new roles**

However, in times when identities thrive between national or regional particularities or, pan European and global forces, national museums need to take on new roles. Hopes are expressed for the national museum's ability to create cohesion and community as well as creativity and tolerance across borders and within multicultural nations. National museums are also seen as important for branding metropolises and regions as well as to attract various audiences such as citizens, tourists, entrepreneurs and investors. At the same time, a resurgent nationalism built upon ethno-politics develops in several countries.

In order to establish the stakes for the future of national museums, the Eunamus project presents, for the first time, a comprehensive overview of the development of European national museums.

How have national museums contributed to the emergence of contemporary Europe and its diversities and commonalities? What roles have they played in the development of nation states? How do they interact with historical and contemporary globalizing forces? These questions are explored in this paper as a result of this ongoing research project. Further research will develop knowledge on the ways in which national museums handle conflicts, their interaction with cultural policy and then the manner in which Europeans negotiate, represent and interpret their national and European selves in museums. Finally, the project will develop conclusions on the roles of national museums in maintaining diversity whilst also developing a common sense of shared values that might foster European collaboration.

## KEY OBSERVATIONS

### Several types of museums play roles as national museums

National museums are defined here as institutions, collections and displays, claiming, articulating and representing dominant national values, myths and realities. Today many nation states display an ensemble of national museums including one or more art museums; archaeology and history museums, ethnology and anthropology museums, cultural history museums, natural sciences museums, military museums, open air museums and several other types.

These key institutions have developed gradually during the last 250 years in relation to cultural, social and geopolitical changes. The diversification of museum types is partly caused by the splitting of existing collections and partly through a desire to express national identity via the utilisation of new categories of material heritage.

### A cultural constitution

During their development, national museums have become part of a cultural constitution, providing the political constitution of the state with a connective tissue of a shared history together with a shared material culture. The cultural constitution provides the political constitution with a more stable and plastic counterpart for negotiating conflicts in the cultural sphere.

### National museums provide the political constitution of the state with a connective tissue

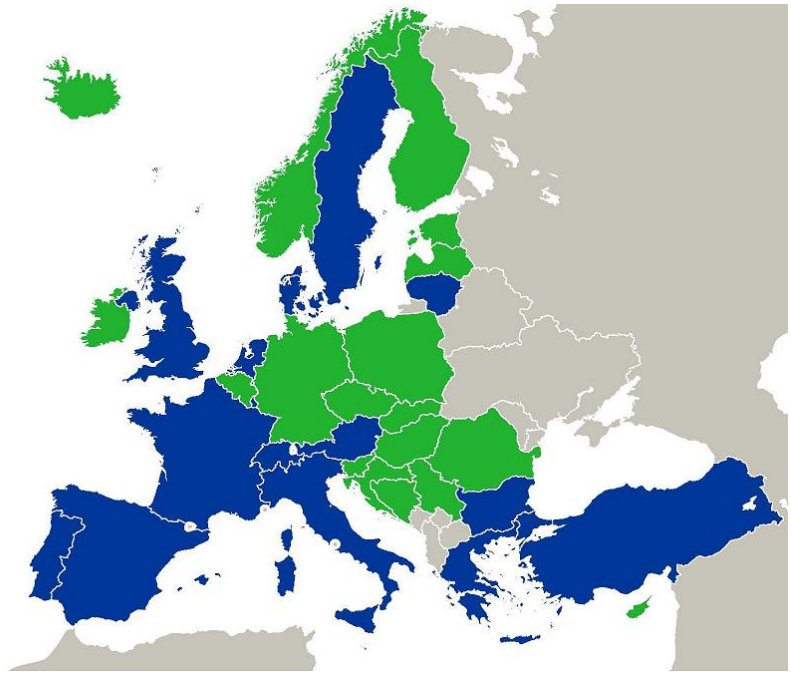
The distinction between the nation and the state is crucial for understanding the social and political functions of national museums. The nation refers to the imagination of a community in terms of shared symbols, history, language, religion, ethnicity and territory. Nations make people feel at home.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

As a rule, the cultural and the political constitution are two communicating vessels, mutually informing each other and, at the same time, difficult to separate.

Forming part of a cultural constitution, national museums shape the emergence of Europe's nation states. In this development, actors representing both civil society and the state have been decisive.

Most European nation states opened their first national museum in the nineteenth century. The only exceptions are the British Museum and the Louvre 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.

The following map (figure1) provides a useful starting point for understanding how Europe's national museums grew out of interactions between civil society and the state so as to promote nation-building.



The map displays two main lines of development:

### Two main lines of development

- 1) Nations in which the first national museum was inaugurated in a political sovereign state. Here national museums stabilize or legitimize recent or long-established states by transforming either royal or private collections into public museums. (Marked in blue on the map.)
- 2) Nations in which the foundations of the national museums were established prior to independence. The nineteenth century's empires thus harboured provincial museums with national aims or institutions labelling themselves national without state support. National museums here were active parts in nation making. Collections emerging from civil society were mobilised to project a sense of national community. (Marked in green on the map.)

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.

Grey areas have not been covered in this phase of Eunamus research.

## Negotiating political and ideological changes

Comparative historical analysis gives evidence that national museums negotiate political, ideological and demographic change.

### The dual nature of national museums

Exhibitions in national museums often last over decades. But in periods of rapid political and societal change, exhibitions may be renewed and new museums added to the state's ensemble of national museums.

### Resisting change

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.

### Responding to change

On the other hand, national museums also prove to be sensitive to political changes. The creation of national museums is very much an ongoing process. Here, influences from transnational organisations or political actions above the level of the nation state might be as influential as national politics.

In terms of historical development, significant revisions in existing national museums followed the dynamics of modernization and political turmoil after the dissolution of the Napoleonic, the Ottoman, the Austrian-Hungarian Empires, and not least the liberation of East and Central Europe.

Romania provides a striking example of museums being sensitive to ideological changes. Here, an ethnographic collection of Romanian Peasant Art was created for a museum at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The museum remained unfinished and the Soviets took over the building, moved the ethnographic collection and made 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 houses the Roman Peasant National Museum. This example shows how different political systems can exploit the mutability of the Romanian peasant as a concept and as a category to construct vastly different national museum experiences and ideological expressions.

## Great historical narratives, the negotiation of demographic change and national museums in transnational relations

### Creating frames for identification

National museums negotiate central values in nation states by representing great historical narratives. Encompassing both history and geography, great historical narratives bring together and structure national museum's exhibitions. They are keys to promote feelings of national belonging and sentiment because they connect audiences to ancestors, glorious pasts and a specific piece of land. In providing representations of the past, they create frames for identification.

### Negotiating demographic change

Today, national museums have been chosen as sites where the ethnic, cultural and artistic identities of the nation are being actively negotiated. A particular focus of this negotiation is the tension between beliefs regarding the past state of the nation - invariably of a homogenous or at least particular ethnic or cultural composition with particular traditions and material representations - and the present challenge of demographic change and the ways in which this will alter this older, often mythological view of the past and of the nation.

### The growing importance of the multicultural paradigm

National museums are at the centre of debates concerning the multicultural project - a project interpreted in various ways across nation states in Europe. Demands from minorities, groups and regions for a fair representation in national museums produce vital and on-going negotiations. In parts of Central and Eastern Europe it has been seen as a new project for national museums following the break up of the Soviet Empire. Nevertheless in Holland and Britain, but also elsewhere, senior politicians have questioned the success and correctness of multiculturalism. In other countries, the growing importance of the multicultural paradigm has prompted many museums to introduce a 'diversity' of histories and 'dialogue of cultures' giving their collections new social function in an increasingly transnational world.

France has seen several highly controversial reinterpretations of existing collections aimed at negotiating the multicultural paradigm:

In 2000, the Louvre, as a statement of equality of the masterpieces of all of the arts, opened its doors to the "arts premiers" (ethnographic art). This policy was given full expression with the *Musée du Quai Branly's* opening in 2006. The new museum, founded under the name of the "dialogue of cultures" was met with huge public success and has already been visited by six million visitors. A different preoccupation motivated the creation of the *Musée national de l'histoire et des cultures de l'immigration* that has since 2007 attempted to represent the integration of immigrant populations in French society. Finally, one should mention the move to Marseille of the former museum of French ethnography as part of a new museum project whose perspective is multidisciplinary and comparative, dedicated to the cultures of the Mediterranean and set to open in 2012.

## National museums in international relations

National museums have always claimed to represent the world outside of national borders – Natural history museums, the British Museum and the Louvre both stand as essential models of the universally orientated national museum. Today, this heritage is difficult, causing these institutions and others to deal with demanding international relations.

Increasingly throughout the twentieth century, national museums have become agents of cultural diplomacy providing avenues for reflection as they try to come to terms with the weight of the past by using it as a means of promoting mutual understanding. Transnational professional networks and organisations play important roles in this development.

### Both reactionary and progressive

National museums are open to political changes and policy developments. They have played a variety of roles in the making of nations and states. In general, national museums are neither essentially reactionary, nor essentially progressive. Instead, three types of actions, not mutually exclusive, are available for any national museum at any point of time.

- A. Pro-active.  
When national museums, civil society actors or regional authorities anticipate new ideas of the nation or the formation of a state
- B. Re-active.  
When national museums form part a political and cultural movement to reinstate the national independence of a territory.
- C. Stabilizing.  
When national museums are instrumentalised in actions to stabilize the political and cultural identity of the nation such as through the adoption of more inclusive policies, the reassertion of key attributes of national identity, or the reinvention 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.

# EUNAMUS 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.

These are the project's overarching objectives:

1. Mapping the development of national museums in Europe in relation to the overall cultural evolution of Europe.
2. To distinguish the active and intentional history making that takes place in national museums.
3. To make visible the material culture which itself unites and defines European sensibilities and values.
4. To 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. To understand museum audiences' experiences and identities.
6. To 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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### 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.

The information and views set out in this document are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Union.