European national museums: Identity politics, the uses of the past and the European citizen

Executive summary:

EUNAMUS, a European funded project, has been the largest and most comprehensive comparative research project on museums ever undertaken. After three years of fieldwork in 37 European nations, the project finds that:

- National museums are Europe's 'cultural glue', contributing to the communal attitudes needed for communities to meet a future of sustainable and inclusive growth.
- National museums are part of an ensemble of public institutions that form a system of cultural representations of community.
- National museums are both places and initiatives that perform, suggest, or act on national identity. As such they can stabilize but also change that identity.

Project Context and Objectives:

The EUNAMUS project explores the creation and power of European national museums. National museums are chosen as prime objects because these institutions have acted as cultural forces, integrating diversities and commonalities on the level of the nation-state, over the last two and a half centuries. Thus knowledge of national museums may cast light on the contemporary and future roles for culture in changing societies.

More precisely this project isolates the ways in which national museums use knowledge, historical narratives, buildings and objects to negotiate identities, conflicts, values and senses of belonging. This is done in order to produce an understanding of how this particular institution may help to maintain creative diversity whilst also developing a common sense of shared European legacies. It makes recommendations on how national museums can be mobilized, at national as well as European levels, for increased social cohesion and international understanding – how they might act in the constant renegotiation of Europe.
These are the project's overarching objectives:

1. To define the national museum in all its social, political and intellectual complexity, through a systematic comparative study of the formation of these institutions as read in the context of the overall evolution of Europe.
2. To distinguish the active and intentional history-making that takes place in national museums and to reveal the historiographic practices which underlie national museums' uses of the past to mold collective sensibilities, notions of community and citizenship, and the boundaries of difference.
3. To make visible the material culture which itself unites and defines European sensibilities and values. Collections of objects and museum buildings form key distinguishing features of museums and it is essential to understand this resource as an implicitly uniting European heritage.
4. To interrogate the policy making and policy implementation actions of national museums. Policy is capable of mobilizing national museums, but how does it do so, and what role do museums have in its formulation?
5. To locate the European citizen as an active participant in national museums and 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 their operation as arenas for dialogue between European citizens about what it means to belong to the nation and to Europe.

EUNAMUS has been organized so that work runs parallel within seven different research strands:

- Mapping and framing institutions 1750-2010: national museums interacting with nation-making
- Uses of the past: narrating the nation and negotiating conflicts
- The museology of Europe: the language of art, the local nation and the virtual Europe
- Museum policies 1990-2010: negotiating political and professional utopias
- Museum citizens: experience and identity of audiences
- National museums, history and a changing Europe
- Communication – interacting with the public, museum professionals and culture politics

Building on our initial maps of the ways in which the founding and subsequent institutionalization of national museums has interacted with nation- and state-making in 37 European countries, our subsequent work focused more in-depth on how that interaction has developed narratives of unity and handled conflicts, how politics in the past two decades has placed its hopes on and resources into museums, and how audiences experience their visits to national museums. Methods have included extensive fieldwork using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, making this the largest and most comprehensive comparative research project on museums ever undertaken. Forward-looking work has been undertaken to provide stakeholders—museum professionals, policy-makers and citizens—with material for reflection and action. Findings have continuously been published in Open Access Reports and discussed at conferences and public events. The project's website, http://www.EUNAMUS.eu demonstrates the project's progress.

Project Results:
The presentation of the results will start with a summary of how museum policy in Europe has met contemporary challenges with a variety of strategies. From there we will move to the historical background and then to more in-depth conclusions concerning the ability to represent conflicts, diversities and unity, and how audiences experience these qualities in museums across Europe.

Policies and museums suggest paths to the future

Cultural policy is a dynamic mediator between the national museum (as part of the cultural constitution) and the political constitution of the state. The research strand Museum policies 1990-2010: negotiating political and professional utopia considers how nations deploy national museums in their national definition. It also explores how museums and the European Union build cohesiveness and negotiate change through involvement in the development and implementation of policy.

Two main issues are dealt with in our research— how policy-makers identify museums as instruments for negotiating identity, diversity and change; and how national museums formulate their position as political and cultural institutions. Case studies from France, Norway, Estonia, Hungary and Greece demonstrate the broad range of changes occurring throughout Europe, while the EU, through its cultural policymaking, is analyzed as a new actor in museum negotiations.
The period 1990-2010 is particularly important in renegotiating the meaning and function of national museums. The reason is obvious: the dramatic political changes in Eastern Europe concurring with major demographic changes in Western Europe have created a new political agenda for using culture and cultural institutions to smooth, reflect, or counteract the effects of societal changes. Since the 1990's museum policy has been an arena for political and academic debates on the relevance of national narratives and of the national perspectives in the museum field.

The results make it clear that European museums are often more different than similar, with individual national museums responding to highly localized contingencies of funding, philosophy, and personnel. However, reports from the field show that there are surprisingly few differences between 'old' and 'new' national states in Europe with regard to contemporary museum policies. Of course, to a certain extent it is valid to say that almost all European national states were established in the 19th century, since the prevailing ideology of nations and nationhood was fully developed during that century. However, in the 19th century a national state like France had a very long integrated history as a separate state, while states like Hungary, Norway and Greece were newly re-constructed as independent states, and it was not until the early 20th century that the Baltic republics became independent – in all cases as a result of long political and/or military conflicts. Hungary and the Baltic states were then re-occupied by a colonial empire in the 20th century and were not politically independent until after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989/1990. In this respect, then, France is an 'old' national state and Hungary, Norway, Greece and Estonia are 'new' national states.

In spite of these diversities, both 'old' and 'new' national states developed strong national museums focusing on the national history. Eventually that national history served as a basis for the narration of the history of colonial expansions: National museums in France, which is an 'old' nation-state and a former colonial power, for example, focused on the European and international position of the state.

With Norway as an exception, all the analyzed countries have passed new acts on museums since 1990: Estonia 1996, Hungary 1997, Greece and France 2002. These acts have contributed to defining organizational structures on a national level, in addition to determining which standards are expected by museums and which criteria should be used for state funding of museums. While Norway has passed no such general museum act, its museum policy has been actively developed through a series of white papers defining organizational structures, general scope and the specific aims of Norwegian museums.

The wide implications of national museum policies being developed at the top political levels of society are very often tied into larger national political agendas and debates. To give several examples, in Greece, national pride and autonomy has been at stake in discussions on the Parthenon marbles, while questions relating to democratic access to the national cultural heritage seem to have been discussed according to a right-left political distinction. In Hungary, museum policy questions have been related to the revision of the political past (Holocaust, Communism) and to a right-left political distinction at the government level.

In both Hungary and Estonia, discussions on museum policy have also been closely linked to the question of a liberal-capitalist economy and the consequences for cultural institutions in general. French museum policy, meanwhile, has been highly influenced by different presidents creating cultural monuments. In addition, the liberal and radical reactions to neo-nationalism and alleged racism from right-wing positions have had a severe influence on museum policy debates. Finally, Norway's state museum policy has been the object of major political interest and minor public debate, with one key exception: the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design has seen opponents fiercely defend the national canon of art being displayed in the 'National Gallery'. In general, however, museum policy in Norway seems to have become instrumental to the state ideologies of multiculturalism and minority rights. In these and other cases across Europe, politics external to the museums play a major role in setting their policies.

The overall rhetoric of the debates and decisions over museum policy in Europe since 1990 has been the explicit need for change. The pre-Communist states have expressed their need for revision of a museum policy defined by Communist dictatorships so that they can express a national and to a large extent ethnic identity with reference to national narratives and national displays in museums. Post-colonial France has expressed a need to open its national museums to new groups of visitors and make museums into arenas for cultural dialogue and understanding, with the catalyst for this rhetoric of change primarily the immigrant population from old French colonies. In Norway, sharing many elements of historical narratives with Greece as another 'new' European nation-state, the national museum policy quite predominantly has been changed in a multicultural direction with few or very critical references to the old national narratives prevailing in museums.

In contrast, for obvious reasons there is renewed interest in national narratives and national museums as expressions of national identities in several of the 'new' European states such as Estonia and Hungary. The changes in museum policy in Greece on the top level have also still had mostly national dimensions, focusing on the importance of the full display of the Parthenon marbles in the new
National museums in different regions of Europe do formulate their positions as political and cultural institutions following principles of cultural diversity and inclusion of minority voices—but the emphasis given to these principles varies. Most European countries have by now ratified, accessed or approved of the UNESCO convention of October 20, 2005 on the protection and promotion of cultural diversity. Preceded as it was by a critique that seems to have been increasing in many parts of Europe since the 1990’s, it therefore seems correct to state that critical voices against limiting human understanding and agency have contributed heavily to current museum policymaking all over Europe. However, this diversity critique, expressed by many leading politicians and museum professionals and museum organizations for 20 years, does not necessarily mean that the issue of diversity dominates actual museum policies across Europe.

Museum Utopias present differing goals
The political functions of national museums state how politicians and leading specialists and professionals intend to reshape the national museums and distribute new symbolic and material value to these institutions. Museum policies have been formulated, museum acts have been passed, re-organization and re-building have taken place. The actors in the museum policy development processes are many and not necessarily unanimous in their approach, due to geographic, occupational, and even personal differences. Politicians in the European countries and in the EU itself definitely play an important role, but museum policies are also influenced by politicians and decision makers on local, regional, and even transnational levels. In some cases as repeatedly exemplified by the countries analyzed here – other goals and perspectives might dominate museum policies on these levels, as opposed to the capital and the capital region, to national policy, to Brussels. Further, museum professionals are important policymakers, but again with the same variances as with the politicians. Individual museum directors might be in the forefront developing new, inclusive, dialogue-oriented national museums and exhibitions. In other cases, as with Estonia and Hungary, museum professionals and their organizations appear to be skeptical or even hostile towards attempts to develop new national museum policies, not least because such national policies might challenge the professional identity and independence of the specialized personnel in the institutions.

- EUtopia. The cultural dimensions of the European integration project have been strengthened during the past several years’ political development. The EUtopian perspective is linked to a European citizenship based on common European values and identity, and the museums’ role is 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. The reports from Hungary, Estonia and Greece suggest that the EU has contributed to changes in national museum policy and practice through economic funding of specific museum projects, but that this effect also bears witness to the weakness of such processes: They change sectorial and temporal practice, but leave the rest of the field unchanged.

- Multicultural Utopia. The museum policy changes advocating strengthened emphasis on cultural diversity and multicultural ideology also have obvious utopian dimensions, at least with regard to leading national museums. However, the museum collections and the museums’ institutional history are likely so strongly linked to the national narratives that turning them into dialogic institutions or arenas for intercultural encounters is a very complicated mission. Presenting a temporary exhibition or writing new visitors’ guides does not change the impressive weight of institutional history and collection history reflecting on national perspectives. The successes of temporary exhibitions or provocative public debates are still left to convince on a general level. The most successful examples might be found in the transformations of the museums representing the French colonial past, the international Louvre collections, and the Sámi case. The success of the former two can be explained by the international and even Universalist approaches of their institutional past. The success of the latter is probably and a bit ironically due to the fact that the political rights of the only indigenous people in Norway have resulted in the Sámi launching their own national museum construction.

- National Historical Utopia. At first glance this seems to have lost legitimacy during the last 20 years of European museum policy development. When looking more closely, however, it becomes obvious that there is not ‘one’ European national museum; the institutional and professional histories of the museums are different. Examples from our reports suggest that the national agency still is productive and negotiable in several countries, particularly those in the East. These cases thematize the possibility of expressing both national and European perspectives when national museum collections are put on display. With ideological implications taken into consideration, in other words, cultural diversity or multicultural ideology are not the only obvious responses of the European national museums to the old aggressive nationalism.

National museums interact with nation-making
Given the importance of museums in the cultural constitution and the sweeping changes undergone by museum policies since 1990, then, EUNAMUS undertook the first-ever comprehensive examination of museums in 37 European nations. National case studies describe major foundational and restructuring moments of the museum system in each country, and provide an overview of the interface between cultural policy and national museums. The cases also assess the relative power of individual, civic, academic, professional and state initiatives in relation to the nation-making process. The most important institutions in the process are identified, as are central moments and con-troversies in each nation. Each case study also includes reports of individual museums in chronological order. What values and territories are represented in their displays? To what degree are these understood as manifestations of universal, civic, territorial, multi-cultural, national or ethnic values and identities?

A general pattern emerges from the data, showing that whereas elites clearly took museum-making seriously, many of Europe’s national museums grew out of interactions between civil society and the state in the process of nation building. The role for museums in the making of nations varies with the specific circumstances of the nation, but three groups of state-making trajectories emerge.

For Empires it has been both useful and historically possible to showcase amassed cultural riches as (in the past) the glory of science and enlightenment, and (today) to tune down racist, evolutionary and ethnic arguments. Large conglomerate states (empires, federal states) like the Ottoman, Austrian, British, Netherlands, Spanish, French and Russian/Soviet follow similar patterns. Large museums like the British Museum can argue strongly their universal value to mankind in defense of keeping the artifacts that find their way to the center of the empire from being repatriated. As most European countries have a colonialist past, this argument has also been invoked by Sweden and Italy in defense of their spoils of war. On the other hand, Italy, along with Greece, is also among the parties that demand items from illicit trade come back to ‘their proper home’.

New nation-states typically have a more coherent story of their long-standing culture as a theme through the national museum. This theme shows the roots of the culture in pre-history and how it has kept its coherence in cultural history even when suppressed by political occupation from outside. The more fragile the state-making process has been or still is, the greater the need for a coherent and clear argument of the existence of a historic community. The closer a fundamental threat to the sovereignty is in time, the greater the need for clear arguments on the direction of history, who is a traitor, what are the unique qualities and who and what safeguards national culture. Museums in new nation-states follow a form of this trajectory regardless of their differing processes to statehood: out of the assembling of territories (Germany, Italy), devolutions of former empires (Belgium, Luxembourg, Czech, Hungary, Baltic and Balkan states, Poland, Greece, Finland, Norway, Turkey), post-colonial liberation (Ireland, Cyprus, Malta, Iceland), and sometimes still in the making (Wales, Scotland, Greenland, Sapmi, Northern Ireland, Catalonia).

Old states made into nations (Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland) might have a more relaxed attitude toward the need for a strong and clear argument of national identity. Such an argument, so the thinking goes, has its own weakness in that it might have its opponents and actually display an uncertainty. It you know who you are, you do not have to talk about it so loudly.

Obviously these general principals are not determining precisely what happens in the making of museums and nations. Since museum-making is an active part of the choices made by actors, there are many variations responding to situations, regional and ethnic conflicts, pace of change and internal and external threats. As building national museums is a complex undertaking, cultural performance can be performed more or less successfully.

The ensemble of museums studied provides a complex corpus for narration, which is also used differently according to the path of modernization and specificities of each nation. The division of museums represents firstly the division of nature and culture in western thought. Secondly, they represent and contribute to the scientific division of knowledge into professionalized fields, with different pieces that make up a more or less complete image of the knowledge-based worldview. Thirdly they interplay with each other and satisfy both the need for a concerted and coherent idea of the nation and the need for nuanced niches and approaches to satisfy contradictory values.

National museums narrate the nation and negotiate conflict. Narratives of the past are accounts constrained both by the materials or factual sources used to illustrate them and by conventions that bestow upon these materials particular values or meaning. What, then, has allowed the national museum to coherently present ‘great histories’ – those vast epics spanning major chronological and geographical subjects? Our 36 case studies 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 national 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.

Today many museums are working to overcome nationalist master narratives in a variety of ways, including an increased focus on regional and ethnic museums, a focus on transnational entities such as German-speaking peoples, and, for the British Museum, a purposeful repositioning as a place of universal tolerance/debate. Other, however, document the opposite trend, as nations put a new nationalist twist on transnational narratives such as that of the Vikings.

Narratives on conflicts, disputes and issues of repatriation are among the most central tools for national museums to negotiate, interact with and even shape political communities. National museums are increasingly called upon to provide forums for dealing with highly sensitive issues of traumatic past events – particularly those related to situations of political violence.

National museums deploy three narrative perspectives
National museums write their narratives in the language of internationalism, the nation, and ideology.

- Internationalism: The internationalist museum engages in the collection of European or global material culture, perhaps within particular disciplinary bounds (art, numismatics, costume). Internationalism developed out of a desire to be a central or dominant culture in control of knowledge about the world and was often accompanied by colonialism, national expansionism, trade, and economic, political or military muscle. Established as a norm by the British Museum and Louvre, internationalism became a signifier for nations that wished to see themselves as equivalents in cultural development. Internationalism became most established and normalized in the movement and representation of art objects, and particularly paintings, and thus in the establishment of a European history of art. In other fields it has been accompanied by contestation over possession.

The degree to which a nation can adopt this post-national position in its institutions on social liberalism, the possibilities for internationalism and institutional autonomy. The motives for this kind of development are numerous and not all result in post-national narratives. Of all the national museums in Europe, the British Museum best typifies this philosophical transformation. Here the significance of cultural objects has been rebalanced: Greek objects are no longer viewed as personifying artistic perfection, just as African objects no longer exemplify primitivism. The autonomy of the institution, beyond direct government interference, together with a desire to defend against morally powerful national claims for repatriation, have made this post-national repositioning politically and ethically essential. Of course, visitors to this museum might view this mix of power and enlightenment as confirming that this museum is still a British national museum.

- The nation: The nationalistic paradigm, which developed in national museums of kinds in Europe during the run-up to unification in the nineteenth century, is still very strong today and continues to serve nation-building agendas globally. These nation-defining and nation-building narratives often produce a view of the nation as something ancient and natural and thus a foundation on which to build community. For example, the Hungarian national narrative, played out across different national museums and symbolic spaces in Budapest, makes frequent reference to the importance of St. Stephen, the monarchy, the Christian church, and the nation's centrality in Europe. Elsewhere, archaeological and folk-life museums are central to forging national origins in a distant or mythological past and making an authentic link between people and place. In Greece, the Neolithic past came to accompany the dominant classical model in a revised story of national origins.

The definition of national traits in art and culture also permit nations to make claims to international significance, as seen in the role of the national galleries in Budapest to promoting an international understanding of the contribution of Hungarians to Fauvism. Strongly nationalistic museums continue to be proposed in Western Europe and developed in the Balkan nations today, as in other parts of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

- Ideology: A third kind of narrative is purely ideological and has been most developed under totalitarian fascist and communist regimes. These present the most extreme examples of the instrumentalization of the past. In Romania, Bulgaria and the Baltic States, among others, the national museum became associated with Soviet indoctrination delivered to citizens through compulsory museum visits which invoked the virtues and truth of Soviet Man. In these countries, state propaganda and indoctrination extended to all aspects of cultural life, frequently making connections to older national institutions which exploited folklore and ethnography to build national origins, such as Nazi Heimat museums which exploited narratives based on the archaeology of the Roman Empire.

Besides the possibilities for resurgent nationalism, post-totalitarian national museums also engage in historical critique contrasted with
re-invention: the display of violence and atrocities; the comparison of Fascism and Communism; a 'nostalgic exoticism' of everyday objects; a mystical concept of the nation; a transnational or pan-European implication. In Romania, a reconnection with the peasant past involved a turn away from written narratives towards a more aesthetic encounter. In Albania, Slovenia and Bulgaria the past is variously demonized, historicized or made an object of mockery. It has also been reflected upon with fondness, though not in national museums, as in Berlin's DDR Museum. It is recognized, of course, that to some degree all museums are ideological.

National museums produce necessary histories: Case study of the Second World War

National museums use their narratives to produce histories that are politically contingent, conforming to expectation so as not to offend and responding to a contemporary political context, perhaps to implicitly express the value and values of the institution, to meet perceived public need, or to realize the potential of the objects possessed. This is apparent in the kinds of history produced by different institutions across Europe of the Second World War – a pan-European historic event. In many countries in Europe the history of the Second World War is complicated by defeat, the humiliation of occupation, civil war, collaboration with the enemy, side-changing, betrayal, locally-supported genocide, territorial change, mass population loss, and post-war occupation. For Europe, and for most nations within Europe, the war itself provides no easy narrative of glory or commemoration.

- In Russia, the Second World War is remembered as the Great Patriotic War, a name which refers to, as was exploited at the time, the Patriotic War of 1812, when Russian forces expelled the Napoleonic invasion. Unsurprisingly, the Military-Historical Museum of Artillery, Engineer and Signal Corps in St. Petersburg displays a glorified narrative of military victory and heroic generals. With no reflection on the methods used to force men to fight, this is a history quite unlike that found in modern history books on the Eastern Front.

- In Poland, the phoenix-like revival of nation and people from the ashes of destroyed cities has become part of the national myth. Such patriotic renditions require a rebalancing of the narrative: a diminution of failure and an elevation of escape, recovery, and an indomitable spirit. The (post-Communist) Warsaw Rising Museum shrinks the conflict to a few months of 1944 and focuses on suppression by the Nazis, 'betrayal' by the Allies and bitter Soviet oppression. The catastrophic depth of the tragedy has the effect of making the recovery of the nation all the more remarkable and admirable, and by remembering the war dead in the museum, a debt is paid and those sacrificed continue to act, giving strength to the nation.

- The National Museum of Military History in Sofia dwells on the Bulgarians as victims of Allied bombing before the nation swapped sides in 1944. In the present history the country's actions as one of the Axis powers for most of the war, is diminished and rather more emphasis put on Bulgaria's subsequent role in the Allied victory.

- The Athens War Museum adroitly sidesteps the Greek Civil War of the 1940s. Here, after cursory references to key leaders of Civil War factions during the Nazi occupation, visitors proceed to an uncomplicated liberation in 1944. While the Nazis have receded into history, the Civil War remains politically alive.

- The displays in the Army Museum in Stockholm present Swedish neutrality as honorable and permit Sweden to remain untainted by war. The audio guides, however, reflect on Swedish collaboration with Nazi Germany, which allowed troops and supplies to proceed through its territories during the battle for Norway. Here the juxtaposition of the traditional interpretation and a newer, more critical one allows Swedish citizens to choose which national history they wish to accept: They can decide for themselves whether the Swedish government's collaboration was deeply patriotic or cowardly. This act of writing a necessary history does more than simply permitting the audience the possibility of negotiating history.

National museums narrate reconciliation

The post-Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa had a profoundly positive effect on global expectations for reconciliation in conflict zones. In Europe, the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, which led to cross-border collaborations to establish reconciliationary historical narratives centered on key historical moments in the development of the north and south of the island, demonstrates the potential on this continent for narratives that are critically balanced.

The capacity of museums to contribute to the handling of conflicts is a vital capability, though one rarely exploited in institutions centered on nation-building. Conflict resolution requires selective or necessary histories of a particular kind, which can offer plural perspectives and narratives whilst simultaneously encouraging cross-community empathy.

The museum response to conflict today can be placed along a continuum, from efforts that add to conflict to efforts that seek to neutralize it to efforts that aim at genuine reconciliation.
ADDING TO CONFLICT-Museums that represent to mobilize present current hostilities from a partisan perspective, making museums partners in political conflict and increasing tensions as well as damaging professional credibility.

NEUTRALIZING CONFLICT-Museums that naturalize the status quo ignore/obscure contentious issues. This is a dominant mode for national museums seeking to be nonpartisan, but only works within a strong national consensus–diverse audiences can question its deflections. Museums that orchestrate diversity acknowledge difference but domesticate it into ‘united in diversity’. This approach is commonly used by exhibitions on national popular culture to represent regional and class differences and, today, new immigrant groups.

PROMOTING RECONCILIATION-Museums that frame community consensus appeal to values of democracy and human rights as universal goals actively promoted in the democratic world. Within a certain culture this is more or less regarded as impossible to deny, and is the approach used in promotions of a ‘modern’ European identity. Museums that distance for a new future attempt to put the past behind in order to encompass a future free from it. However, too rapidly creating history as distance silences needed voices and can make the past return in destructive modes. Museums that promote working through past atrocities openly address conflict with the goal of understanding historical trajectories, acknowledging questions of guilt, and accepting repercussions for the present to move into the future.

National museums are part of a larger ensemble of European heritage.

Museums, therefore, have a great deal to accomplish if they are to support European cohesion—but they do not do so alone. Opportunities for connecting identities are not only communicated in explicit messages in the museums but also through the ways in which capital cities, national art museums, national, regional and local museums, as well as online museum-like spaces, are organized.

National art museums and capital cities produce a shared sense of European identity, and this recognition of shared heritage has underpinned collaboration, loans and travelling exhibitions. At the same time, a preference for high art, for representations of established themes and actors, and for Christian symbolism is maintaining a narrow exclusiveness in the definition of Europeanness.

National museums are experienced by diverse visitors.

Finally, to understand the actual social relevance of, and possibilities for, potential utopic visions for national museums, EUNAMUS explored citizens’ values and perspectives in relation to national museums in the research thread Museum citizens: audience identities and experiences. This research is the most extensive comparative visitor study of national museums ever undertaken in Europe, yielding both survey results and a series of case studies for quantitative and qualitative research.

Surveys were conducted with over 5300 museum visitors, who filled out questionnaires at nine European national museums on their expectations of the museum and its relationship to their personal identity. Between May and September 2011, EUNAMUS research teams canvassed the Estonian National Museum, the Latvian Open-Air Museum, the German Historical Museum, the National Historical Museum of Athens, the Nordiska Museet, the National Museum of Ireland, the National Museum of Scotland, the Rijksmuseum and the Museum of the History of Catalonia.

Data were presented both as an aggregate of all respondents and broken down by individual museums. Asked about their purpose in visiting a national museum, 8 in 10 respondents said that they were seeking either 'pleasure/entertainment' or 'education/learning'. While they weren't explicitly there to 'experience the past', they did feel that preserving and remembering national historic heritage was the legitimate role of a national museum. Visitors also said they expected 'national' museums, by definition, to present a complete story of the nation. Outside of Germany – especially in young nations and former East Bloc countries – national identity formation continues to dominate visitor interest over regional or European identity.

The visitor surveys indicate that national identity for both the museum and its visitors continues to play a central role in peoples’ conceptions of the social self. Similarly, visitors to each museum claimed a single national identification over pluralistic alternatives such as hybrid national identity (two or more heritage roots), a transnational (European) identity, cosmopolitan ideals, universal humanity or an individualistic identity.

The quantitative mapping of the survey research was complemented by interviews and focus groups carried out with visitors and
minority groups at six European national museums. Examining the connections that can be made between national, European and minority identities and the ways these frame very different experiences of the national museum, researchers determined that whilst visitors were, on the whole, convinced that national museums represented a shared, collective identity, minority groups’ views differed discernibly.

Despite collectively forming a substantial section of the European population, minority experiences were largely absent from national museums, a situation that was recognized by less than 10% of museum visitors overall. Moreover, as noted by participants in the EUNAMUS focus groups, non-European minorities do not expect to be represented in Europe's national museums. Data suggest that European minorities regard European citizenship positively because it allows them to retain their own identity. Non-European minorities, however, are more ambivalent. For them, aspects of European identity can help safeguard their rights, but other aspects can present further barriers to integration. Personal and national identity was especially complex and important to minorities because they were constantly negotiating their relationship with the dominant culture, but the silence in national museums and lack of recognition of their contribution to national society only confirmed their status as 'Other'.

Potential Impact:
4. Potential impact: Making of ‘cultural constitutions’

National museums vary greatly as they respond to local variations of political context, resources, collection legacies, museum practices and professionals—and this variety is universally desired. It was clear from our case studies that no one associated with museums—professionals, researchers, or visitors—desired homogeneity. At the same time, national museums necessarily shared a number of features. While European countries feature dozens of institutions that operate officially under the title ‘national museum’, many other institutions perform that role without the name.

Thus, EUNAMUS employed an operational definition recognizing that 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 specialized 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.

These diverse institutions formulate the cultural cohesion that is necessary for a political constitution to remain intact. They are, as we have called it, part of the ‘cultural constitution’ of Europe, providing political constituencies with a more stable counterpart for negotiating conflicting allegiances. As a tangible stabilizing force, national museums are Europe's ‘cultural glue’. Speaking the shared language of arts and culture, they strengthen solidarity between communities even when economic or political crises threaten uncertainty. They contribute to the communal attitudes necessary for the Europe 2020 vision of sustainable and inclusive growth to succeed.

In fulfilling these goals, museums face four competing demands: telling the uplifting story of the nation, providing multiple forms of identity, relating the national narrative to outsiders, and inducing citizens towards tolerance and cosmopolitan values. Subsequent research has demonstrated that museums and those involved in museum policy are trying to balance the pressures of this competition 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-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.

Re-organization
-the sometimes massive government-initiated organizational changes that have in many cases strengthened political control at the expense of museum professionals.
It is clear that visitors to national museums draw reassurance from the constancy and integrity of the objects on display. In some respects the static and unchanging aspects of the museum are as vital to its contribution to social stability as is its willingness to be more inclusive. In difficult times, museums act as repositories of past glories and hold the potential for their re-ignition.

At the same time, museums wrestle with nationalistic master narratives and seek to reformulate them. Over the past two decades, multiculturalism has been a significant motivator for this reformulation. Museums following principles of cultural diversity and inclusion of minority voices seek to turn the national narratives into arenas for intercultural encounters—but this process has been complicated by their own role in upholding the socially stable narrative.

The 5000 visitors surveyed by our teams across Europe overwhelmingly agreed that national museums of all kinds, not just nationalistic ones, are key institutions in representing national values. Reflection on the manner in which national confidence and security controls and constrains national narratives, however, has allowed some museums to renarrate the national values in new ways.

- Transnational circulation of people and objects across Europe is one way to disrupt the nationalistic master narrative. The simple fact that ease of travel has meant wider audiences viewing what had been localized displays has led to old paradigms being challenged and new questions raised. EU-sponsored digital collections such as Europeana further allow the remediation of collections to achieve wider access even from home.

- EUNAMUS research on narratives in museum spaces has upheld temporary exhibits as places where innovative renegotiations can most readily occur, as these exhibitions can be more dialogic, more contemporary, more inclusive, more interactive, and more embracing of ambiguity. International traveling exhibits add the extra advantage of presenting familiar themes from new and unexpected perspectives.

- Finally, the collaborative, reprofessionalizing initiatives—cooperation and travel—between museums, museum professionals, and museum scholars that the EU has sponsored for many years showed benefits time and again in museum professionals’ awareness of other paradigms and interest in pursuing transnational initiatives.

Focused interviews in multiple nations demonstrated repeatedly that minority communities want to be engaged with their nation’s museums but often feel excluded by static and exclusive displays. The assumption of many art and history narratives is of an essentially white, Christian, highly educated audience. The necessary, politically contingent histories of national museums can incorporate reconciliation and plurality without sacrificing control of the narrative. Internal reflection on the audience effect of architecture, display, and story will permit greater understanding of the manner in which ‘necessary’ stories are produced.

Examples from other museums are also highly useful as museums seek to reinvigorate the balance between collection and audience. It is here that the EUNAMUS reports, which together comprise the largest collection of theorized analyses of European museums ever compiled, provide researchers and professionals with an invaluable database. Such a broad depiction allows us to see patterns across museums rather than simply individual examples. It is this diversity of similar examples—these patterns—that can allow museums to exercise their creative capacity to develop their own bridge-building histories that best fit their local scene.

As part of the cultural constitution of Europe, national museums can provide an institutionalized arena for negotiating new understandings of the nature of political community. The very manner in which unity and difference, threats and hopes are negotiated prepares the nation for both stability and change. Germany provides an example where national museums have been able to negotiate difficult historical periods with great success. In other countries, museums are often still struggling to come to terms with their own difficult pasts.

National museums provide the stability of master narratives, but regional, local, and ethnic museums can disrupt overly nationalist narratives with alternative histories. While individual local museums cannot provide the necessary plurality, taken together, these sub-national museums form a mosaic of identities that remind people they are citizens at many levels—and these multiple avenues of belonging may allow for the easier inclusion of European citizenship among the mosaic.

National and local/regional museums working together in consortia such as Sweden’s former Samdok (now the Network for Contemporary Collection) or ICOM’s International Committee for Collecting (COMCOL) can reflectively re-organize the national history to
best balance plurality and authority and provide people with the multi-layered cultural glue necessary for Europe's transnational citizens.

Finally, direct political interference in the operation of museums, whether in Paris or Berlin or Eastern Europe, causes the national museum to lose the trust of its audience. National and transnational narratives coexist uneasily in national museums due in large part to the varying utopian ideologies articulated by Europe's various policymakers. While it is tempting to see museums as instruments for social vision, throughout European history such a close identification of museum display and governmental policy has been associated with totalitarianism, as was evidenced in the Nazi Heimat museums and later in Soviet interventions in Eastern Europe.

Nevertheless, national museums are at their most effective when working in harmony with the government agenda, and politicians should expect national museums to play an active role in future society. In that light, EUNAMUS researchers endorsed four major recommendations for policy-makers:

1. National museums should above all strive for the ever-shifting balance between stability and change.
   For museum professionals and their collections, this would first mean a re-examination of all aspects of the national collection, considering how to reformulate conflict-promoting partisan displays. It means re-narrating histories to begin to address openly the absence of unresolved painful episodes or unassimilated peoples, as well as the complications left out of stories of 'good vs. evil' or 'victim vs. perpetrator'. It means thinking seriously about the national identity created by the history depicted.
   It also necessarily means collaboration across divisions with those who are the 'Others' in a national story, as debating together how to stage conflicts, acknowledging that stories are unresolved, and discussing openly the history of excluded voices all model the attitudes necessary for the effective change.
   For officials of the European Union, this means supporting museums to do something they are better able to achieve than almost any other entity in Europe today, to provide safe spaces for difficult discussions. It means funding attitudes, not infrastructure, including efforts to reformulate overly nationalistic, one-sided, or exclusionary collections. It means supporting innovative experiments in the audience development necessary to engage citizens in attitudinal shifts.
   It also means collaborating with museum professionals in the formulation of policy rather than dictating desired policies, recognizing that it is the museum staff that has the best sense of local contingencies in the balance to maintain the necessary authority to allow change to occur.
   For European citizens, this means allowing museums to tell more ambiguous, open-ended, multifocal histories. It means interacting with and contributing to those stories, speaking up to preserve the national heritage while recognizing that new perspectives may entail sometimes difficult shifts in understanding and identity.

2. National museums should balance the opportunities of new media with ongoing care of collections
   For museum professionals and their collections, this means participation in professional digitizing projects such as Europeana, balancing their professional expertise to present accurate, fair, nuanced interpretations of cultural artifacts with their digital visitors’ expectations of new media democracy that allows a polyphony of online commentary.
   It also means continuing to care for their material collections, as these are the ongoing foundation of museums' authority in the world.
   For officials of the European Union, this means that the funding of digital collections, while important for opening up cultural heritage to presentation, discussion, and debate (particularly by audiences historically alienated from museum spaces), cannot come at the expense of the management of material collections.
   For European citizens, this means multiple entry points into collections across Europe.

3. National museums should work more closely together, foregoing past competition.
   For museum professionals and their collections, this means participating actively and often in exchanges and transnational dialogues. It means sharing museological expertise and innovative practices. It means listening with an open mind when colleagues explain the local contingencies that make for wide variations between museums, but also being willing to challenge unexamined assumptions.
It also means an ever-greater emphasis on the circulation of objects, via traveling exhibits and carefully curated new media sites, to promote an ‘open access’ to the combined cultural heritage of Europe. It means re-examining and perhaps re-narrating overly localized or outdated displays with an eye toward the interwoven histories of other European communities.

For officials of the European Union, this means a renewed emphasis on funding what we might call the ‘intangible heritage’ of museums themselves—the people and their innovative ideas that promote professional exchanges, collaborations, and increased access.

For European citizens, this means greater engagement with the heritage of all of Europe, and a willingness to hear one’s own history from a variety of perspectives.

4. National museums should partner with regional and local museums to promote the mosaic of identities within each nation.

For museum professionals and their collections, this means the development of local-regional-national networks to promote the rational engagement of professionals and communities. An ongoing, theme-based organizational model such as that of the former Samdok ensures a healthy balance between regional difference and thematic commonality of interests.

For officials of the European Union, this means rethinking the potentially divisive policy of funding regions over and above national entities. Instead, a funding focus on regional-national collaboratives would promote unification of the mosaic of identity which makes up European citizens without undermining the stability provided by current nation-states.

For European citizens, this means the potential for greater community input into cultural heritage collections, as well as engagement around cross-cutting themes of interest.

Summary of dissemination activities and exploitation of results

A comprehensive plan to communicate with stakeholders – academic community, policy makers, museum professionals, NGO:s, civic society and museum audiences has been implemented with a rich website (see http://www.EUNAMUS.eu/ online) as a hub. Together the website, regular e-mail alerts, newsletters, and a blog with an associated twitter feed have formed an effective and powerful set of tools for dissemination with an increasing reach. The number of daily visits to the website increased when the newsletter and calls to EUNAMUS conferences were distributed and the traffic to the website has increased throughout the project.

The dissemination tools have invited stakeholders to share the project’s cumulative research process. At regular intervals, the project has met its national reference groups, honorary advisors and its scientific advisory board, including representatives from European stakeholder organizations. Throughout the entire project, a relevant academic community has been invited to conferences and workshops all over Europe to enhance preliminary findings. Most conferences have included a public event with invited policy makers and museum professionals at national and European levels. Efforts to reach out to civic society have been made by the way of press and radio which has been approached and invited to the public events by press releases.

After input from various stakeholders, findings have been developed and published as rich Open Access reports addressed to researchers and museum professionals. Then these reports have been condensed into Policy Briefs addressing policy makers, policy administrators and museum professionals. In particular two public events – a mid project conference in Brussels and the Final conference in Budapest – have centered the project’s policy relevant findings and secured its dissemination by inviting beforehand identified information multipliers and stakeholder organizations.

The potential impact of the project is noticeable in the ways in which the project succeeded in establishing itself as a major player in the international arena for research on museums and the uses of history. Younger researchers, museum professionals, and committees for new museum projects, have regularly made contact with the project, asking for participation and dialogue. In particular, Christine Dupont, representing House of European History (a European Parliament initiative), testifies to how important EUNAMUS’ research and conferences have been for the initiative’s knowledge development.

Throughout the project, dissemination has been approached as a forward looking and long term endeavor to develop relations with relevant information multipliers. In order to develop tools for networking, information has been gathered by subscribing to newsletters, and attending conferences and meetings. In particular, the project coordinator’s extensive networking with relevant stakeholders paid off in terms of invitations stakeholder events. To present and communicate the findings as a comprehensive and unified whole the
dissemination manager has collaborated closely with a professor of rhetoric, a skilled designer, an electronic open access publisher and printers.

All in all, thanks to the planned efforts and the project participant's cumulative networks, EUNAMUS' findings have multiplied in terms of both channels and reach. The 226 items on the project's list of dissemination activities points to:

1 website
1 initial identity brochure
1 final summary brochure
3 policy briefs
9 newsletters
9 open access conference proceedings and reports
14 international invited conferences and workshops
22 focus groups
38 blog posts
111 individual conference and workshop presentations
166 visitor interviews
5236 visitors surveyed
86418 visits and downloads at website
2,000,000 radio listeners

Project identity

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List of Websites:

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Related documents

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