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*Making National Museums:  
comparing institutional arrangements, narrative scope and cultural integration*

In many countries of the world, national museums had predecessors in royal courts, rooted in dynastic and aristocratic order, with differing organisation. The national dimension of the general development of museums was strong after the Napoleonic wars, but already in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it worked within a complex setting of “hybrid” forms of museums: the market place, wax cabinets and funfairs, industrial exhibitions, private collections, and dedicated associations for regional culture were clearly visible. From a citizen perspective, as well as for museum reformers, the public landscape was fluid and hybrid – prefiguring a post-modern description. The national museums have in this environment played an important role as officially sanctioned arenas for the establishment of national unity. Today, they are part of the re-negotiation of what it means to be a nation in a late-modern world of migration, internationalisation, globalisation and, in Europe, a growing community, the EU.

On the contemporary museum scene, the role of private actors as well as state agencies might instead be overemphasised. Today, museums often see themselves as spaces of negotiation between different ideas: scientific display, public education, political pride, reform or stability and entertainment. We can see a broad trend of establishing new and refurbishing old national museums to once again deal with internal differences in an integrative way and locate the nation in a new European and global context. The hope of salvation of museum establishments has been enhanced even more: not only to educate citizens and as a showcase of national glory, but as crucial parts of a new economy of travel and experience, expanding the place and space of the museum to the public sphere, rural and urban landscapes (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Giebelhausen 2003). Hence national museums are at a crucial focal point of contemporary cultural politics and also vital economic factors in nations all over the world. Especially in areas where new political integration is taking place and new understanding of citizenship is

developing, like in Europe, a relevant understanding of the work national museums do is vital knowledge for both policy makers and museum professionals.

From this perspective and as per necessity, it seems critical to clearly develop the research questions by combining several fields of investigation and refining their focus using a comparative approach in an effort to examine:

- the development, establishment, anatomy and narrative performance of museums in the public sphere. Museology has also developed rapidly in both a managerial and a more theoretical and critical direction. Parallel to these developments, there is a wide but uncoordinated body of monographs on separate institutions, often celebrating them but also historicising their creation.
- the construction of community and nationalism as parts of nation and state-making. This field has been extremely viable during the last few decades and has also involved the role of public memory, cultures of history and museums in the establishment and the structuring of a public national sphere.<sup>1</sup>

Rather surprisingly, reflections on public historical culture have not been de-nationalized by comparative approaches to the same extent as research on nationalism. Partly this is due to the fact that Cultural Heritage as a field is one of the complex responses to contemporary challenges attempting at producing more or less open constructions of collective identity with a new frenzy from the 1990s onwards. Furthermore, the competence for analyzing public history culture is multidisciplinary yet fragmented. Therefore, the need and benefit for trans-national, trans-disciplinary action to connect research and knowledge is extraordinary. Fields of knowledge already activated in practice in the present re-activation of national museum and with potential to create active research, reflexivity and training environment do exist also in different multi-disciplinary settings: public history (USA), history culture (Germany) and heritage studies in several countries. They often have a focus on a major national institution for public history to facilitate the current development. By bringing disciplinary and multi-disciplinary fields together with a sharp and comparative focus on national museums the program will form a new departure for understanding and working with the European diversity in this central institution.

**The purpose of this proposed program is to develop the tools, concepts and organisational resources necessary for investigating and comparing the major public structure of National Museums, as created historically and responding to contemporary**

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**challenges of globalisation, European integration, and new media. What are the forces and values of traditional national display in dealing with challenges to national, cultural and political discourse? This will be achieved by a series of conferences providing a venue for younger scholars and eminent researcher from Europe to gather and develop the multi-disciplinary competence necessary to understand and compare the dynamics of national museums in a framework for broader historical culture and identity politics.**

A general hypothesis is that the establishment, display and narratives of national museums primarily work as an integrative tool in bridging societal change, balancing the necessity to acknowledge differences and negotiate unity to the political structure forming national cohesion as a basis for trust and solidarity. The setting for these challenges does however change over time, facing dynamic tensions due to global and internal developments in the state-building process, and by the logic of the institutions for public exhibition themselves.

In formative moments for a state, renegotiating and legitimating its existence becomes more urgent than otherwise, vis-à-vis other territorial and historical claims from within and without. The origin of the nation or rather the moment where it is fundamentally re-negotiated might be in the transition from a dynastic state to a nation-state, by regional agglomeration, imperial dissolution, by establishing a post-colonial existence or, in our own time of global challenge, to nation-states of all origins. How are these challenges met? In what ways are national museums arenas for negotiation among conflicting forces or autonomous actors in themselves?

What defines a national museum needs some elaboration in the project. It is not only the question of finding a working definition for an analytical concept. The concept is in itself part of the cultural process, defined and contested by historical actors. As an analytical concept it is centred on two processes, bringing the moulding of public museum traditions together with the making of national master-narratives. This concept of a national museum can be identified and materialized in several different buildings and institutions. A national museum may be a single building hosting something labelled National Museum or perhaps a cluster of National Museums of culture, art and natural histories. **The different ways of organising the form and content of national public display is in itself the first of the comparative questions raised: What forces and intentions are materialised in the institutional division of labour between national museums?** This will be studied with a focus on the formative moments connected with the creation of a nationally legitimate state and compared with the structure around 2000 when public discourse of global challenge was becoming dominant in the academy and outside.

**The second question is related to the content of the narratives presented by the national museums:** what political order and what values are legitimised? Who are presented as actors (bad and good) in the formation of the nation, what “we” in terms of territory, class, gender, ethnicity etc..., forms the proper national community? What is the destiny of the people? Where does the narrative point towards in terms of an ethical and utopian dimension in the future. To read the message of the museum, it is necessary to know how the narrated landscape is situated in the wider historical culture: what is being emphasised by the invocation of the museum, and what alternative voices are openly or implicitly being downplayed.

**The third question has to do with the results: What is the place of the national museum in the culture at large.** The question will be answered in terms of visitor figures, by analysing its place in the public sphere and by assessing how exhibitions work at a reception level. To what extent is the narrative working its way successfully in the public sphere. Does it resonance in old dominant traditions stabilising and legitimising the present order? Does it present new programs trying to invoke a specific agenda and a yet not established viewpoint of the past in order to create a new future?

The methodology will focus on an international comparison supported by theories of institutions, performance and narrative. A national museum is an arena for communication both inwards and outwards. The idea of a nation’s uniqueness, legitimacy and sovereignty is necessarily negotiated into a coherent narrative incorporating a wide set of differences in its master narrative, since there can really only be one national cultural historical museum, one art museum, one natural museum, etc. – or it is not *the* National museum. This task might be pursued by many different actual museums, and contrasting views on history do actually compete.

On a structural narrative level, earlier research makes it plausible to believe that there are striking similarities between nations: stories of seniority, pastoral beginnings, national culture with unity in diversity, threats from outside and within, overcome by mass-movement, genius and entrepreneurship moving the country to its contemporary splendour, and so forth. Challenges facing the nation are also structurally similar in different countries.

Relevant research does exist and are brought together in anthologies but has rarely been utilised to answer cross-disciplinary and comparative questions. Several massive readers in the field suggest that research is ready for more systematic, comparative approaches. Perspectives on museums, nation and nationalisms are presented in (Preziosi & Farago 2004, Carbonell 2004, McIntyre & Wehner 2001, Bennett 2004). The literature on memory and nationalism is more overwhelming, often starting with Hobsbawm and works by Pierre Nora (Hobsbawm & Ranger

1992, Nora & Kritzman 1996, Gellner 1999, Smith 2001, Hroch 2000). The discussion of the relationship between history proper and the public cultural heritage has been animated both by questions of vulgarisation and ownership (Lowenthal 1996, Hodgkin & Radstone 2006, Barkan & Bush 2002). Analyses of narration and performance take departures from various standpoints from narrative theory to visitor evaluation (Ricoeur 2004, Hooper-Greenhill 2000). On the other hand, numerous monographs on specific institutions exist helping as a framework to begin comparative analyses. Research done in different disciplines is seldom combined and often develops in a rather closed disciplinary and/or national environment. A few comparative studies between separate countries have been published, but few if any attempts have been made to create out of this stock a more synthetic knowledge of the role of national museums in the making of a community or of how the national level deals with tensions and threats from within and without. The possible benefits by combining these fields in a coordinated multi-disciplinary and international project are therefore extensive.

To create a reflexive field of knowledge and research to interact with the contemporary dynamic of the museums, younger researchers from several disciplines and a number of European countries with different roads of nation-making and different roads to the European Union will be invited to conferences to meet leading scientist in the field. The conferences will be structured to provide both inspiration by key-note speakers and training in the form of workshops, where younger scholars are invited to present their own ongoing research. Successive issues concerning comparative research on the topic of the program will develop from framing the question, methodology to the arrangement of contemporary state of art research in a comparative and global setting (see B2.)

The theoretical issues that will be addressed at this stage of formation of a multi-disciplinary research field to be considered are directly related to making the comparative questions above operational:

1. What methodology is relevant, required and operative to map and compare narratives, and assess their role in the public sphere?
2. How are we to understand and define the national museum concept? Can both self-definitions and structural functional features be pursued at the same time, and how are these to be delineated more precisely?
3. How can the comparative scheme and ambition be designed to capture different museum traditions and different nation-building processes to lay the foundation for a fruitful comparison?

We would expect to find variation in the use of national museums adopted by nations in different paths to (or from) their statehood. In 19<sup>th</sup> century-old nations, old empires have another context to work in than those created by amalgamation (Germany, Italy) or dissolving empires (Habsburg, USA, Canada etc). Today similar differences might be attached to old empires like Portugal, Holland, England and Denmark, but with an interesting variation in their response to the post-modern discourse of multi-culturalism, globalism and travel industry. This opens for less determination, since the political and professional stance in these issues might vary dramatically, even within neighbouring nations with similar histories.

For example Sweden and Denmark are both former small conglomerate states or empires and today modern welfare states of a Nordic (social democratic) stance. Within these similarities there are remarkable differences in the use of cultural heritage politically. In Sweden a multi-cultural discourse dominates museum policy, while in Denmark education is canonical; Danish culture is a promoted way to integrate and even discern between accepted and non-acceptable immigrants. How and with what consequence is this reflected in the negotiated narratives of National Museums?

## **Program for six European workshops (preliminary)**

Six three-day conferences/research training activities will be organized. They aim at dealing with theoretical, methodological and organisational issues in establishing training in comparative culture heritage competence, directed towards the dynamics of national museums institution as an important case.

For each activity a call should be made for younger researchers to present a paper and apply for a travel grant to participate. It is important at every call to choose among the applicants to give due attention to participants with knowledge from a wide range of national as well as disciplinary experiences. While the issues will be presented thematically, introductory presentation of the state of the art of the questions under scrutiny will be given by some of the most suitable participating scholars. Ample of time for discussion on the issues will be useful since the formal presentations well chosen but restricted to one or two for each half day. Each of the themes below will be allocated its own event, starting with lunch day 1 and ending with lunch day 3 to be able to work with two overnight stays.

The themes are chosen to work as an accumulative learning process, starting with developing the comparative question and methods, moving on to substantial comparison of both historical and comparative experiences of different institutional arrangement, differing narrative

and performative strategies and evaluation of the overall performance of National Museums in European historical culture.

Each event in itself is an important training experience for the participants. They will get the methodological skill and multi-disciplinary over-view needed to assess the integrative working, the play of exclusion and inclusion, always performed in the museum. The series of event will constitute a learning process over time developing competence for comparative cultural research and substantial knowledge of the working of National Museums institutions in Europe.

## **1. Setting the frames: nations, sciences and professionals defining National Museums**

Linköping University, Sweden, 26-28 February 2007

How are we to understand and define the national museum concept? Can both self-definitions and structural functional features be pursued at the same time and how are these to be delineated more precisely? How are politicians, the public sphere, university disciplines and civil society negotiating the concept of National Museum in different nations?

## **2. Shaping the national museum: nineteenth century conceptions and practices of purpose, value, influence and organisation**

Museum studies, Leicester University, 18-20 June 2007

The definition of national museum is done in policy and in practice. What kind of narrative and performance are allowed and fostered at different national museums? Hence an institution is created as part of national policy and historical culture. A focus on narrative aspects of museum performance needs to be carefully considered not to be stranded on neither abstract functions of inclusions and exclusions or detailed iteration of exhibitions.

## **3. European national museums in a global world**

Department of culture studies and oriental languages, University of Oslo, Norway, 19-21 November 2007

The intention of the conference is to explore how the museum has dealt with the Other. How are internal and external enemies dealt with? What happens when European national museums are confronted with expectations of responding to multi-cultural processes in a globalized world. This exploration will have two main directions: 1) What kind of political, rhetorical and practical strategies do national museums develop being met by such expectations? and 2) To what extent is it possible to combine the concept of a national museum with a multi-cultural approach? What is the role of a European dimension versus universalised citizenship and human rights? It would be expected that the responses have differed widely between European national museums, and

therefore the conference should both focus on these differences and develop theoretical and methodical tools to describe and to analyze these differences.

## **4. Comparing European national museums: territories nation-building and change**

Linköping University, Sweden, 25-27 February 2008

Museums interact intensively with different roads to the nation-state and different perceptions of roles in the European community. Here patterns of museum culture will put side by side with variations in nation-building and variations in the making of national communities. What role does national museums play in negotiating difference within nations and what role does it play in the overall culture to define national identity, European values and human rights.

## **5. European National Museums in a technological world**

Museum studies, Leicester University, 16-18 June 2008

The European Commission's research frameworks have funded projects which utilise culture as the subject matter for technological investigation and development of a knowledge-based society. The dream of an integrated knowledge space drawing particularly upon the wealth of material held in national institutions raises many issues for these institutions. If access to a nation's culture becomes international, does the national museum inevitably justify the claim of being a 'universal (world/global) museum'? In the borderless world of networked media, what distinguishes a national museum? Does a transformation take place? How will the concept of the national museum develop beyond the simple representation of existing ideas and collections? How do new information architectures on the web reconstitute the old architectures of Europe's national museums?

## **6. Concluding conference: European national museums encountering a globalized culture**

Department of culture studies and oriental languages, University of Oslo, Norway, 17-19 November 2008

The intention is to go further from this platform, both in depth to stimulate research where lack of knowledge hinders analyses, and to widen the comparative approach beyond the European horizon, since the museum culture has been expanded to both colonies and is rapidly reinterpreted in a post-colonial setting facing rapid change.