

[from]

European Policy – Brief

December 2012

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 who have 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, multivocal 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 renarrating 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.