National museums in Europe
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The public museum such as it developed in Europe’s “long 19th century” was, with its tangible presentation of concepts of culture and nature, among those institutions which helped position the nation as the primary aggregate of human culture and society. The modalities and degree of intensity were differently inflected from case to case, from country to country, and between different types of museums: several types of museum could claim direct involvement in the nation-building process, while others, given their kind of collection, could be transnational (as with art museums), or local (as in some cases with antiquarian or ethnographical museums). Even so, amidst all these variables certain general trends can be noted.

In the late 18th century, and under the influence of the French Revolution, many princely or royal collections were transformed into public museums carrying in their name the appellation “national” to express the collectivity both of its ownership and of its purpose. The trend was not restricted to new Republics such as France and the Dutch “Batavian” Republic of 1795 (the 1793 Musée des Arts in Paris becomes National in 1794; the National Art Gallery in The Hague, 1798) but also affected the existing monarchies (witness the National Gallery in Stockholm, thus named in 1792), in line with the tenets of Enlightenment Absolutism. In the princely states of Germany and Italy during the 1770s and 1780s, court galleries and cabinets had been reorganised and opened to the public, e.g. in Dresden, Vienna and Florence. In the wake of these patriotically-minded initiatives, the new revolutionary museums presented the nation’s history, culture or arts as local manifestations of the grand theatre of human culture. These national and universalist perspectives were structurally yoked together, but the emphasis between them would shift in the course of the 19th century. Thus, the re-branding of the Louvre as Musée Napoléon in the empire years entailed a greater universalist pretension, which from the campaigns of 1794 had already inspired the confiscation and Parisian relocation of the art collections of subdued monarchs “for the benefit of liberated humanity”.

After 1815 the pedulum swung back to the earlier trend from the late ancien régime; the collections had now gained greater national value, and were given their “own” museums, in a rebound from the Revolutionary and Napoleonic confiscations. In the German lands, prestigious new buildings were created for the purpose: Prussia’s Altes and Neues Museum in Berlin (1830; 1841-55); Bavaria’s Glyptothek and Pinakothek in Munich (1816-30, 1826-36), and even the Gemäldegalerie of Dresden (1847-54, although Saxony as a French ally had been spared confiscations). Architects like Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Leo von Klenze and others created a specific museum typology, which made the national museum a recognizable element in city planning.

In addition, another type of National Museum emerged in these years in countries which enjoyed no state sovereignty. The Museums of Science and Arts both in Edinburgh (1854) and Dublin (1877) were motivated by national consciousness-raising among Scots and Irish; and in the Habsburg lands the National Museums of Hungary and Bohemia (founded in 1802 and 1818 respectively, with buildings built in 1837-47 in Budapest and 1885-91 in Prague) became important institutional agencies in the autonomy drives of Hungarians and Czechs.

Thus, in the post-Revolutionary decades, two parallel trends are noticeable, which each in their own way cultivated and proclaimed the nation: one carried by state authorities, the other by emancipation movements. In the latter case, museums often emerged from local learned
societies with a historical or archeological interest – the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin, for instance. The Société pour la recherche et la conservation des monuments historiques dans le Grand-Duché de Luxembourg, founded in 1845, played an appreciable role in the establishment of the newly independent state in 1867. The two trends, state-sponsored or carried by middle-class sociability, are illustrated in the twin cases of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nürnberg and the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum of Munich. The former was founded in 1852 by the antiquary and collector Hans von und zu Aufsess at the behest of the union of German historical societies which had formed at Grimm’s Germanisten Congress of 1847. Its aim was to illustrate German history and to bolster German identity by means both of textual documents (legal, linguistic, literary) and of material remains. A dynastic-monarchical response to this middle-class, sociability-driven initiative was given in 1855, when Maximilian II of Bavaria founded the Bavarian National Museum, an “institution for the keeping of the most interesting monumental remains of the fatherland” on the model of the Galeries historiques which had been established in Versailles in 1833 and the Musée des souverains in the Louvre (1852). The purpose was to confirm the unity of the various Bavarian provinces, including the newly-acquired ones, under Wittelsbach rule, by historically documenting the shared traditions in arts, crafts and manufacture.

Both the emancipatory and the state-endorsed national museums tended, from the mid-century onwards, to give primary exposure to that part of their collections which illustrated the nation’s own history and culture. In the cases just mentioned, the collection was exclusively national in scope. Likewise, in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Napoleon III founded in 1862 a Musée de l’archéologie nationale for Celtic and Gaulish antiquities, in order to bring together “les pièces justificatives, pour ainsi dire, de notre histoire nationale”, while the Museo Nazionale Etrusco (Rome, 1889) was intended to provide the Italian state with a prehistorical underpinning. However, other collections tended to present native materials in an internationalist surrounding, thereby highlighting their international standing. The Neues Museum in Berlin (1841-59) presented, amidst a universalist collection of non-European ethnographic material and of antiquities of Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek and Roman vintage, “national antiquities” (vaterländische Alterthümer) surrounded by monumental murals depicting scenes from Nordic mythology. A similar universalistically-framed arrangement for national antiquities was used in the Danish Nationalmuseet (Copenhagen, 1855) and in the Department of British Antiquities in the British Museum (1866).

This dual policy of universalistically-framed national collections also appeared in the various National Art Galleries. As of 1819, Madrid’s Prado showed Spanish baroque paintings alongside the usual Italian and Flemish masters; and following the acquisition of the Boisserée collection by Ludwig I of Bavaria (1827), the Alte Pinakothek in Munich could similarly present medieval German art. The fact that Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum collected little international material alongside its Flemish and Dutch masters was dictated more by financial constraints than by nationalist exclusivism.

Arts galleries became increasingly nationally-minded from the mid-century onwards. London’s Tate Gallery was established (1897) exclusively for British art, Munich’s Neue Pinakothek (1846) and Berlin’s Nationalgalerie (1871) for German works - the motto “to German art” (der deutschen Kunst) embellishing the tympanum of the Nationalgalerie, which, like so many Prussian-German projects of national art in these years, was conceived in an anti-French climate.

The “emancipatory” museum often emerged from middle-class initiatives carried by cultural associations; this is also noticeable in the ethnographic and open-air museums which from Scandinavian prototypes spread across Europe. Alfred Hazeldius’s decision, in 1872, to establish a museum for Nordic ethnography (known since 1880 as the Nordisca Museum, Stockholm)
was prompted by mounting apprehension that popular culture was being eroded by modernity: industrialization, urbanization and internationalization. The chosen format – reconstructing a rustic and agricultural environment in an open-air setting – led to a wave of open air folk museums, starting with Skansen near Stockholm (1891), and, in an anti-Swedish, particularist countergesture, the Norsk Folkemuseum near Oslo (1894). Frisian exhibitions of folk utensils and implements organized by the philologist-clergyman Joost Hiddes Halbertsma led to the establishment of a Frisian Museum (Leeuwarden 1881) and later to the Dutch Open-Air Museum in Arnhem (1912/18). The format has proliferated over many European countries besides, from Aarhus to Bucharest, illustrating the general tendency of Romantic Nationalism to root the nation in Past and Peasantry.

By 1870, the presence of at least one monumental national museum was considered de rigueur for the nation-state’s self-esteem and its educational presence in the public sphere. New nations (Greece, Romania), aspiring ones, and old empires invested in them, the latter, after 1865, with an increased nationalist or imperialist character, showcasing their acquisitions from overseas territories and beyond. While the national-ideological motivations behind these museums (variable as they were in the different instances) are by now well studied, research into their functioning among the population at large and in the public sphere is still in the early stages.

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