

# Emerging new trends in the European museum panorama

## Massimo Negri

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REPORT 7 New trends in museums of the 21st century<sup>1</sup>

### From growth to recession

If we look at the situation in one of the Western countries which has invested more and with more continuity in the museum sector in the first decade of this century, the United Kingdom, we can say that the phenomenon of the expansion of the number of museums as well as the renovation of existing institutions is passing a sudden and brutal transition from growth to recession. Sara Selwood, in her essay 'Practical futurism, the value of culture and key cultural trends of the future' in 'The challenges facing museums on-site and online in the 21st century' and 'Future Forecasting: the challenge facing museums and cultural institutions' (2012), estimates that the support for museums went up by around 95% in the UK in the period 1998-2010. Since 1994 "museum and gallery projects have benefitted from £1.42 billion from the Heritage Lottery Fund alone". The former Prime Minister Tony Blair spoke of this period in terms of 'a Golden Age for the arts'. But the Museum Association's survey about cuts in public spending and museums estimates that between April 2010 and June 2011 the recession had already led to closures. "They found that nearly a quarter of museums have reduced their opening hours" (Sara Selwood, *ibidem*). Looking at the future, "on the basis of the current situation it has been estimated that by 2020, about a quarter of the 650 local authority museums in England will close or merge with another organization" (S.S.). In other terms, in a period of two years it seems that the Golden Age has been archived and the whole sector has fallen into a dramatic condition of reduction of the services offered to the public. Unfortunately the situation is not very different in the rest of Europe, apart from the fact that in some countries the effects of cuts in public spending have been diluted in time and the impact consequently has been a bit less traumatic, but the trend is clear and the consequences seem to be unavoidable. "In Latvia state subsidies for museums in 2010 were reduced by an average of 15%", *Nemo News* 1/2010. "The Prado, Spain's leading art museum, will receive 30 percent less state funding this year. The Reina Sofia, home to Picasso's 20th century masterpiece *Guernica*, will get 25 percent less and the Thyssen-Bornemisza 33 percent less. Spain's conservative government has slashed spending on culture by nearly 20 percent this year to 722 million Euros (\$940 million) as part of the steepest budget cuts since the country returned to democracy following the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975", (*Global Post*, March 2013).

"The French Ministry of Culture and Communication has recently announced its budget for the year 2013: a €7.363 billion fund will be allocated to culture and communication; €3.55 billion for the cultural field (museums, heritage, archaeology, etc.). This means a 2.3% drop, compared to the total budget of the year 2012, and a 4.3% drop for the cultural budget", (*Fédération internationale des coalitions pour la diversité culturelle*, October 2012). France announced last month that it was cutting cultural spending next year by 4.5 percent, *Le Journal des Arts*. In 2011 the Louvre's state subsidy had drastically decreased to just over half of the museum's 2010 budget. In The Netherlands "When federal, provincial and regional budgets for 2013 were finally set, the combined effect was a reduction of about 22 percent, or a loss of about \$632 million from the country's cultural sector". "Faced with about \$2.5 trillion of debt, the Italian government has implemented widespread austerity measures, and shrank its cultural budget by a third in the last three years, to \$1.86 billion". "Perhaps the most devastating European cultural funding cuts have been in Portugal, where the debtladen government in 2011 reduced federal operational

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lemproject.eu/WORKING-GROUPS/museums-in-the-21st-century-1/7th-report-new-trends-in-museums-of-the-21st-century>

grants by 30% and then simply dissolved its ministry of culture”, (Nina Siegal, 5 March 2013 in *Art in America Magazine*).

In this panorama, the only country which seems to go against the tide is obviously Germany: “The German culture budget will rise by 8 percent, even as the country’s overall federal budget is decreased by 3.1 percent. However, France’s culture budget of €2.43 billion (\$3.09 billion) is almost twice Germany’s culture budget of €1.28 billion (\$1.63 billion) even though Germany has about 20 million more inhabitants”. (*Blouinartinfo*, 13 November 2012).

The undeniable trend towards a reduction of public spending in the cultural field - and more specifically in favour of museums which frequently also suffer because of the competition of performing arts which in many countries are considered more appealing for the public - seems to be a distinctive character of our historical period all over Europe. But this is not true in a global perspective. The Chinese government has announced its intention to open 1,000 new museums in the next 10 years. “Museums — big, small, government-backed, privately bankrolled — are opening like mad. In 2011 alone, some 390 new ones appeared. And the numbers are holding. China is opening museums on a surreal scale”, (Holland Cotter, *New York Times*, 20 March 2013). The Louvre in Abu Dhabi is estimated to make an investment of \$1.3 billion and the new Guggenheim Museum designed by Frank Ghery will cost in the area of \$600 million within a three-year budget. In Doha (Qatar) the Museum of Islamic Art, designed by I. M. Pei, opens to the public this year at an overall cost of around \$300m. At 45,000 m<sup>2</sup> it is the world’s largest Islamic museum, and will attract scholars, academics and visitors from all over the globe. Within the total area of 64,000 m<sup>2</sup>, dedicated to the great names of the world, there will be other museums: the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, designed by Foster and Partners and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, which will be the Guggenheim’s largest outpost in the world and the only one in the Middle East, designed by Frank Gehry, a center for performing arts and entertainment designed by Zaha Hadid, and a maritime museum by Tadao Ando. The Louvre Abu Dhabi, according to the project, will borrow the works of several French museums - 300 in the first year, 250 in the fourth year and 200 from the seventh to the tenth year - and for 15 years France will provide four exhibitions annually. Finally, the museum will help to create a collection that will progressively replace the works of the French with its own collection. The United Arab Emirates, in turn, are committed to pay approximately €700 million in 30 years, that will benefit the Louvre and other museums participating in the operation. To what extent the economic recession will influence the apparently endless proliferation of museums which has characterised the European panorama in the last decades is too soon to know. After the fall of the Berlin Wall there were similar worries about the future of museums in the Communist countries, where the role of public spending and of public institutions were under scrutiny and frequently led to privatisation, with the effect of depriving the public sector of a part of its assets. To this it has to be added the discussion about restitution which also affected the possible destiny of some museums’ collections. However, in the end, in spite of the temporary economic difficulties of post-Communist societies in the transition era and in spite of the political and cultural earthquake which affected those communities, we witnessed a large movement of re-adaptation of museums (namely museums of history previously focused on the regime propaganda) as well as the birth of a relatively large number of new institutions. We could even say that the trend of establishing new museums was not directly affected by the financial shortages. Therefore we can say that in principle the future of European museums is not necessarily severely affected

by the recession in quantitative terms, but in practice there are at least three elements which put possible future evolution in a different perspective from the recent past. The first element is the depth of the recession, which is very heavy - perhaps even more serious than the Great Depression of the 1930s. Secondly, its persistency, which is affecting European economies for a long time. Thirdly, the change in the cultural climate, which reflects the sense of uncertainty and anguish inspired by the recession process.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall creative energies were liberated and the new political freedom encouraged a process of rediscovery of cultural identities which implied also a certain public interest for the enhancement of museums as cultural agents in a new democratic society. But in today's Europe we are facing a cultural stagnation linked to a widely spread sense of instability and political uncertainty which is not very encouraging for the growth of a new breed of museums, although with some notable exceptions. However, museums have proved to be animals with several lives and we cannot exclude the possibility that the current crisis could generate not only *more* museums in quantitative terms, but *new* museums in terms of their qualities. For instance, we can take for granted that the next generation of museums will give special attention to their sustainability both with regard to their organisation and to their tangible assets. Sustainability as a mark of quality will not necessarily improve the quality of the visitors' experience and equally will not be visibly perceived by museum's users, but it will be an intrinsic feature of the museums of the coming decades. According to some economists, however, the economic crisis can also offer opportunities to museums. Ilde Rizzo in her contribution to the Kenneth Hudson Seminar 2010 identifies the following three areas for developing a new fruitful approach to crisis management:

*Relationship with the public.* There is an increasing debate about promoting active citizen participation, not just to get an economic advantage through the volunteers, but as a programme for involving citizens in the museum activities...

*Relationships across institutions.* An emerging tendency is the enhancement of partnership; it may be helpful for large as well as small museums to reduce the existing excess of capacity.

Kaufman (2009b) reports that 5 of 63 museum directors surveyed by the American Association of Museums take into consideration mergers with other institutions or groups. Collaboration generates benefits in terms of economies of scale and cost control, deriving by grouping purchases and by reducing contracting out. Collaboration develops synergies and improves processes and practices such as for instance, coordinating exhibition schedules and openings, enlarging the opportunities for region-wide collaboration and creating centres of excellence to provide services to other nonpartner museums... *Attitudes toward society.*

Museums will enlarge their role meeting the demands of new social and economic categories and enlarging as much as possible their audience with targeted programs..."

### **The response to uncontrolled proliferation of collections: deaccessioning**

In an article published in Summer 2003 in *Museum Practice magazine*, Wim van der Weiden, at that time director of Naturalis in Leiden, expressed the opinion that "deaccessioning artifacts and specimens will enable museums not just to survive in the 21st century, but to thrive". His opinion was based on the awareness of the serious problem of evergrowing collections packed into over-full storerooms, a solution to which was not the typical curator's attitude of "if in doubt, say no", opposing any form of deaccessioning or de-placement of collections. van der Weiden's statement was also based on the opinion of Keith Thomson, Director of the University of Oxford's Museum of Natural History, who said that "in the future museums will no longer be defined by their collections, but collections will be defined by museums". An example of this intellectual process is offered by the possible different museological uses of industrial heritage (a comparatively recent notion in itself). A collection of industrial items can be presented as a document of social history or as a resource for a museum of history, science and technology as well as a design museum, which is more focused on an aesthetic approach. But industrial objects can also play a role in a museum of military or political history. In other terms the same category of physical resources can be used and interpreted according to very different lines of interpretation and can be the core material of very different categories of museums. In this sense it is true that the meaning of these objects is determined by the philosophy of museums and not vice versa. This qualitative process will probably be interconnected in the next future with the need for clear policy as far as the quantitative aspects of a

collection are concerned. Both for economic reasons (less money for collection management) and for museological reasons (a line of storytelling not necessarily based on a large amount of objects in show). This trend towards a 'more stories with fewer objects' approach is also encouraged by a certain inclination of contemporary exhibition design in favour of maximising the aura of individual objects more than impressing the public with the quantity of items assembled. Consequently we could say that for the moment the era of showcases with up to 70-80 archaeological fragments is declining in favour of a more selective exhibition philosophy. The overwhelming growth of collections and of objects which are worth collecting as a document of the consumer society inevitably leads us to the question of "what to save and what to lose". It is a matter of fact that many museums during their life have lost a clear vision of their collecting policy. Acquisitions are frequently determined by personal cultural interests of the director or some passionate initiatives of the Board or of the Friends of the museum. Donations with strong obligations to be observed (such as the integrity of a collection, where a certain number of pieces are of minor interest) frequently represent more of a problem than the enrichment of the cultural assets of the museum. Storages are filled beyond their physical capacities, generating serious problems of conservation and access. The lack of financial resources limits the efficiency of conservation programmes, also due to the large number of items which will never be put in show. The lack of expertise within the curatorial staff of the museum leads to a situation where certain collections are 'parked' in the storage without being studied and interpreted adequately. Hans Lochmann (Museumsverband für Niedersachsen und Bremen) describes in the following terms the German state of the debate about deaccessioning:

- Selection criteria are rarely transparent
- Too little consideration is given to the question of which criteria should hold: the age of an object perhaps, or its beauty, its rarity, its symbolic significance?
- Evaluation criteria are subject to change (...)
- Planned acquisitions are the exception Federal Regional museum advisors (Länder) have reservations about a general directive on disposal, and even about disposal *per se*:
- Hardly any museums have a collections concept
- Dispersal (i.e. giving collection items to other museums) is a rare practice
- Concern about decisions that reflect nothing more than current trends
- Fear of irreversible decisions
- Fear of political malpractice<sup>7</sup>

But the question of deaccessioning can be also related to the emerging difficulties in the financial situation of public institutions. In this respect, an episode reported by the *Museums Journal* in May 2013 is very meaningful, where Patrick Steele writes: "Northampton Borough Council (NBC) is facing a legal challenge from Spencer Compton, the 7th Marquis of Northampton, over the ownership of its Egyptian and geological collections, which include a statue of Sekhemka dating from 2400 BC. Compton has requested that the council return the collections, including the statue, to him, under the terms of a deed of gift, signed by Northampton's town clerk and the 4th Marquis in 1880. The *Museums Journal* understands the council is disputing whether the statue of Sekhemka, which it is looking to sell, is included in the deed, as it is not mentioned specifically. "An NBC spokesman said: "We still wish to sell the statue of Sekhemka and are working with Arts Council England to achieve an ethical disposal." Meanwhile, cuts to the Northampton Museum's budget will see the post of collections officer merge with that of museum development officer, while the roles of museum manager, senior education officer, education officer, and development officer will work from offices in the Guildhall rather than being based at the museum."