

HOW WERE THE MUSEUMS IN EUROPE DOING 2018?

Twenty representatives for the European Museum Academy have written reports on the situation for museums in as many countries.

There are some remarkable trends shared among museums across Europe. The tendency to be ever more focused on the visitor's experience is clear. This is where museums raise some funding – mostly for exhibitions and programs but in some countries like Bulgaria, Denmark, Northern Macedonia, Serbia, Sweden and United Kingdom there are also capital investments in new buildings for both existing and new museums. In some countries there are still big needs for restoration works on existing museum buildings, but the financial situation does not make it possible to fund this work now even though it in the same countries is possible to fund national jubilees as in Romania. In other countries like Moldavia the preservation and restoration occupy such big revenues that almost all other needs in the museums get very low priority and instead make museum work as a career choice less favorable. The investment in visitor experience can be measured in the level of museum attraction and most countries have high visitor numbers and have had that for some time. Then it is even more impressive that it is possible to sustain the already outstanding high numbers as in Sweden and increase the numbers with app. 30 percent over a four-year period as in the Netherlands.

Museums in represented countries are mostly run by the state, however, the budget is not sufficient to use it in various fields at the same time. This results in distribution of financial resources based on the decision of 'priority'. Museums, which need reconstruction receive investment, whereas others, which need training of staff, digitalization of their archives, have to wait for their turn to benefit from funding. Therefore, museums tend to seek for other ways to receive financial income to cope with current developments in the museum sector. One tendency is the demand for updated legal regulations on heritage sector, which would allow museums to obtain funding from private companies. An example given in the reports is providing tax incentives for private firms when they support museums financially. This has already been implemented in countries like the Netherlands, Denmark, but currently a serious demand in Serbia. The outcome of this implementation gives more opportunities to museums, in terms of staff training, exhibition quality, better infrastructure and in time it enables these countries to have a pioneering impact in the museum world.

Another tendency is the financial situation for museums. In several countries there is a clear development towards very low growth, no growth or even reduced public funding. In the Scandinavian countries and in Estonia, Slovenia and the United Kingdom we see a change in the balance between central government and regional or local authorities in funding museums. The change is characterised by the government concentrating its resources on state run museums and become more restrictive in contributing to the funding of regional and local museums. The governments expect and try to stimulate the regional and local authorities to play a larger role. The situation in Turkey is however different in this respect

as the central government in Turkey is active in both financing and controlling the quality development in the many new museums which are established on municipal level.

In almost all countries in Europe we can also detect a strong tendency about private initiatives and involvement in museums. There are however differences both in the form and in the level of private involvement. In the Netherlands larger and smaller private owned and run museums for private collections emerge in rapidly growing numbers and may be a replacement for the traditional donation of such private collections to existing public museums. In other countries like Cyprus and Slovenia there is not a long tradition for private museums, and they are emerging recently – even though that in Cyprus one major private museum seem to be a success story many small private museums are struggling financially and professionally.

In many of the countries, there is an umbrella association where museums come together and benefit from several opportunities, such as networking, staff training, seeking solutions to common problems, publications, researches, dissemination of information on trends in museum sector, conferences and awards. Inasmuch these associations are national, there are also regional, international heritage related associations which are advantageous for museums to be part of as in the UK, Scotland, Slovenia, the Netherlands, Sweden, Turkey, Czech Republic, Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia and so on.

The quality development of museums and national museum communities in Europe is everything but homogeneous. In some countries like Norway the development with concentrating museums by merging into larger organisations continues. In other countries such as Luxembourg, Montenegro, Scotland and Serbia larger museums in the capitals are dominating the museum scene and that domination seem to be growing even stronger now. In Austria the system with the “Museum Seal of Excellence” has proven itself to be valuable and more than a third of the registered Austrian museums have now developed to the quality level needed to acquire the seal.

Digitization of cultural heritage and accessibility for all are two important issues that need further developments. Visually impaired and other disabled visitors’ experiences, attracting more children, providing language support for tourists and/or migrants are considered important factors in Luxembourg, Serbia, Austria and Moldova. Digitization of cultural heritage, providing and/or improving digital services such as virtual museum tours are seen as significant aspects for further promoting access for all.

Museums face economic, social, cultural issues. The more the money invested in museums the better the quality of exhibitions, staff training, sufficient number of employees, access for all, without relying solely on tourism as a source of income. Museums today do not only aim for conservation, research and exhibition, but also for making a social impact. We could say that proper policies, that are agreed upon after a wide inclusive sectoral meeting in each country, would let museums catch up with the new developments they are going through as well as with the discussion what museums mean today.