

Belgium

Report by

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Brussels

Introduction - Key Issues

This introductory section gives a short overview of the Belgian institutional structure in order to help understanding the way museums are organized.

Institutional structure of the country

The reforms of the State implemented in 1980, 1988, 1993 and 2001 have led to Belgium being turned into a federal country. Belgium consists of three geographical (and economic) regions - the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region and the Brussels-Capital Region - and three cultural communities - the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community. The three cultural (and speech) communities are a product of history: the country is situated at the junction between the Latin and Germanic languages: French, Dutch and German.

As a result of the reforms, the decision-making power is no longer exclusively in the hands of the Federal Parliament and the Federal Government. Each of the Communities and Regions has a Parliament and a Government, too.

The Communities are essentially competent for culture (including museums, libraries and archives) and education and the so-called personalized matters relating to health policy (health care policy and health education) and to assistance to individuals (family, youth, elderly, etc). The Regions are responsible in particular for the fields of the economy, energy (nuclear energy remains, however, a federal competence), public works, agriculture, the environment and transport. The federal authority retains among others: the foreign affairs, defence, justice, finances, social security, important sectors of public health and domestic affairs, etc. It supports also the activities of a series of federal scientific and cultural institutions.

The museums in Belgium

Museums are established, funded and managed by various entities and organizations: the cities and municipalities, the Provinces, the Communities, the Regions, the federal State, learned societies, and various public, semi-public and private organizations (e.g. universities, companies, etc).

In 1980, the general public competences in the sector of museums have been transferred to the Communities. A central administration responsible for the museum policy is installed in the Ministry of each Community (French Community: Unit Patrimony and Visual Arts of the Directorate General Culture; Flemish Community: Unit Visual Arts and Museums of the Administration of Culture; German-speaking Community: Department of Cultural Affairs).

During the various stages of the reform of the Belgian State, several institutions (mainly the major national museums) have remained under the responsibility of the federal authority so as to allow them to continue to preserve and develop as appropriate what is a priceless and indivisible heritage. Their tasks lie at both national and international level. Four of them are federal scientific establishments with a large autonomy, placed under the administrative control of the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (OSTC), namely the Royal Art and History Museums, the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, the Royal Belgian Institute of Natural Sciences and the Royal Museum of Central Africa. The Royal Museum of the Army and Military History comes under the Department of Defence.

There is no official and permanent body for consultation nor a general cooperation agreement between the Communities (and the federal authority) in the field of culture (and especially in the museum sector). Ad hoc solutions are thus defined when needed in order to facilitate coordination e.g., within the context of Belgian participation in international activities and programmes.

Definition of Museum

The definition of a museum in the Communities corresponds to the ICOM definition: (Statutes art. 2, §1)

“A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment. (...)”.

Existence of Museum-related Laws

Before the implementation of the institutional reform in 1980, all Belgian museums were governed by the royal decree of April 1958. The decree set only a limited regulatory framework and does not include any rule for official recognition. After the transfer of competence to the Communities, new legal and regulatory instruments have been set up.

The *Flemish Community* adopted a museum-related decree on the 20th of December 1996. This decree organizes the museums' official recognition and public funding. Several amendments were already made to this decree: decree of 18 December 1997 (establishment of a Council for Culture, a Council for Arts, a Council for Public Education and Culture and an Advisory Council for Cultural Affairs); decree of 7 April 1998 (more specifications concerning the official recognition and funding of museums).

The *Flemish Community* is currently preparing a general decree on heritage which will incorporate the museum sector. The decree is expected to be established in 2004.

In the *French community*, a decree has been adopted on the 17th of July 2002 and came into force on the 1st of January 2003. The decree lays down the rules for the museums' official recognition and public funding.

A *Higher Council for Museums* has been installed which is responsible for advising the Government and the administration on all museum policy related matters (and in particular on the implementation of the decree), either at request or on its own initiative. The Council comprises representatives from the different administrations and from the museum field.

In the *German-speaking Community*, the general rules of the museums' official recognition and public funding are laid down by the decree of March 19, 1982. Additional measures have been specified by the decrees of March 1992 and December 1998.

By virtue of a decision of the Council of State, the royal decree of April 1958 did not any longer apply to the *federal museums* since 1994. A new royal decree is in preparation for the federal institutions (scientific institutions, museum institutions, and mixed institutions).

Categories used regarding Type of Collection

The categories used in the *French Community* regarding type of collection are: art; sacred art; archaeology; regional; ethnography; technology; history; science; literature; special collections. These categories aimed principally at guiding users and are not used in the museum decree.

The museums that come under the *Flemish Community* are divided into five categories:

- cultural-historical museums;
- modern art museums;
- ancient art museums;
- museums for applied arts;
- technology museums.

The administration of the *German-speaking Community* does not divide museums into categories related to the type of collections. As regards ownership, most of the museums are non-profit-making organizations.

Categories used regarding Type of Ownership

The categories used regarding type of ownership (in the French Community) are as follows:

- museums that are completely supported by the French Community;
- museums that are partially supported by the French Community;
- others.

Existing data – Basic Figures and Diagrams

As was already mentioned in the introduction, no permanent mechanisms of cooperation exist between the Communities (and the federal authority) in the museum sector. There is no official agreement for the drawing up of national statistics. An informal ad hoc concertation group was set up in 2002 in order to coordinate the collection of data and information. The group comprises contact persons of the Flemish, French and German-speaking Communities, of the Federal Observatory of the publics of the FSEs and a collaborator of the STIS (Scientific and Technical Information Service) who is running the secretariat.

French Community

A total of 472 museums were registered in 2003. The average annual museum attendance totals ca. one million visits. All of the data gathered are used merely for internal purposes and are not published.

A project called AICIM ("Accès Informatisé aux Collections des Institutions Muséales" -- Computerized access to the collections of the museum institutions), already drafted in 1997, started in May 2001. AICIM is carried out by the association "Museums and Society in Wallonia" ("Musées et Société en Wallonie") with the financial support of the French Community. The project aims at computerizing all the catalogs of the museum collections through a common software and thus facilitating the exchange of information between the different museums. The project is dedicated to the museums recognized or subsidized by the French Community.

Flemish Community

A set of statistical information about museums in the Flemish Community is available via the website <http://aps.vlaanderen.be/>. Information can be found on the visitors' age and educational level, about how many times a year museums are visited, international comparisons, etc.

In 2001, a visitors survey was carried out in the Flemish museums. Detailed information can be asked to the responsible of the survey (sofie.vandenbussche@skynet.be).

In 1999, the Flemish Community started the project ADLIB. The project aims at computerizing the catalogs of the collections of all the Flemish Community museums with a standard software in order to be able to exchange data in an easier way and to present collections on the Internet. Many museums already became ADLIB members and a users group ADLIB was created. But more work still has to be done. Some museums also decide to use their own system instead of ADLIB.

Brussels Region

In February 2001, the Brussels Museum Council made a survey in order to find out more about the visitors of the museums located in the Brussels-Capital Region. The following information was obtained. 45% of the visitors are foreigners (10% from the UK and 9% from France). Among the visitors who are living in Belgium, 55% come from the Brussels Region, 33% from Flanders and 17% from the Walloon Region. Art museums are mainly visited by foreigners and the other museums by Belgian visitors. The age of the visitors is mostly between 25 and 54. Younger people and seniors are less present. A majority of visitors are interested in the permanent collections and a significant part of them come back to visit the museum again. More detailed statistics can be asked from the Council: info@brusselsmuseums.be.

Federal museums

An "Observatory of the publics of the federal scientific institutions" placed under the administrative supervision of the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (including the four major Federal museums mentioned in the introduction) has been created a few years ago. Two reports have been produced on museum-visiting and on the sociological profile of visitors and users, respectively. A third report about

the sociological profile of visitors will be realized by the end of 2003. In 2002, the attendance in the four museums totaled about one million visits.

A strategic study was carried out on the digitization of the cultural and scientific heritage held by the federal scientific establishments. The study was carried out in March 2003 and gives, among others, a comprehensive inventory of the collections, skills, resources and needs of the establishments.

List of References

Portals and directories of museums

Basic information and links to the websites of the major Federal museums can be found on the website of the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office: http://www.belspo.be/belspo/res/institut/esf2_en.stm.

Lists of the museums of the French Community can be found on the official portal for museums in Wallonia (<http://www.lesmuseesenwallonie.be>) and on the websites of some museum associations, i.a.:

the association "Musées et Société en Wallonie" (MSW) (Museums and Society in Wallonia): <http://www.msw.be/>;

the association "Association des musées du Hainaut" provides a list of the museums in the province of Hainaut: <http://www.chez.com/gamh/homepage.htm>.

The administration of the Flemish Community has built a website giving information on ca. 300 museums in Flanders and in Brussels. A separate list of the museums officially recognized by the Flemish Community is provided (ca 50 museums): <http://www.tento.be>.

The Brussels Museum Council ("Brusselse Museumraad/Conseil Bruxellois des Musées" - BMR-CBM) was created in 1995. This umbrella organization aims at promoting the museums located in the Brussels-Capital Region (approx. 80 federal, community, private and municipal museums). The Council operates a website on which a short description of all members can be found: <http://www.brusselsmuseums.be>.

ICOM Belgian National Committee

The two following professional associations form the Belgian National Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM):

Vlaamse Museumvereniging (VMV) in Flanders: <http://www.museumvereniging.be/>;

Association francophone des musées de Belgique (AFMB) in the French Community: <http://www.muse.ucl.ac.be/Icom/AFMB.html>.

The VMV and AFMB provide a framework for consultation between Belgian museums, on the one hand, and with foreign museums, on the other hand. Both organizations are mainly concerned with exchanging experience and practices, organizing museological workshops, discussing professional problems and being an interface with government agencies.

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