

Belgium

Reported by

Dominique Warnotte,

Conseil bruxellois des Musées asbl

Introduction

The last EGMUS survey in Belgium dates back to 2007 and pertained to figures of 2006. Why has our collaboration in this project been suspended momentarily just when this project allowed bringing together the Walloon, Flemish and Brussels museums in order to make a joint representation at the European level? This is what we will try to explain. However, in order to understand the complexities of the organisation of the museums in Belgium and more particularly in Brussels, some notions of the institutional structure of our Kingdom are necessary. To be clear, it is most certainly our strong wish to relaunch EGMUS.

Short historical review and institutional structure of the Kingdom of Belgium

Belgium is a constitutional monarchy created in 1831. The different reforms of the State between 1980 and 2001 have made of Belgium a federal state.

Belgium is constituted of **three geographical** (and economical) **entities**:

- Flemish Region (the North)
- Walloon Region (the South)
- Region of Brussels-Capital (the Center)

And of **three cultural communities**:

- Flemish Community
- French Community
- German-speaking Community (South-East)

The three cultural (and linguistic) communities are a product of history: the country is situated where Latin (roman) languages and Germanic languages meet: French, Dutch and German.

There are **four linguistic regions**:

- region of **French** language
- region of **Dutch** language
- **bilingual – multilingual** region of Brussels-Capital
- region of **German** language

The **bilingual** and now even **multilingual** region of Brussels-Capital: in 2008, it counted 1,048,491 inhabitants, of which 295.043 (28,14%) of foreign nationality as well as almost 200,000 Belgians naturalized since 1990, representing 45 different nationalities (with some small groups of less than 1,000 persons). This means that 50% of the population is of foreign origin (and likely to increase to 60% in 2015), as opposed to only 5% in the rest of the country. The official status of Brussels being bilingual, Brussels has in fact become multilingual. French remains the predominant language in the region, but is only the language of 56,8% of the population, whereas Dutch is the language of five to 10% of families, and 28% of inhabitants have another mother tongue. The use of English is constantly spreading. French / Dutch bilingualism is a phenomenon that also exists along the language border (cf. Brussels' cultural Plan, www.reseaudesartsabruelles.be/rab/projets/rab-bko-projets/plan-culturelbruxelles).

One should not confuse between linguistic regions and the Regions which constitute the federal entities of the State. As a result of the reforms of the State, decision power lies no longer exclusively with the Federal Parliament and Federal Government. Each of the Communities and Regions has its own parliament and government. The **Communities** essentially have the power to decide on any person-related matters such as **culture** (incl. museums, libraries and archives), **education** and **health** as well as assistance to individuals (families, youth, retired persons, etc). The **Regions** are responsible for territory-related matters such as economy – including tourism –, agriculture, public infrastructure, energy (only nuclear energy remains federal), environment and transport.

The federal **authorities** still have, among others, following competences: foreign affairs, defence, finances, social security, justice, interior, etc. They also fund the activities of a series of **federal institutions for culture and science**. The current political discussions intend to decentralize further and grant more powers to the Regions as opposed to the federal authorities, notably as far as finances, social security and health care matters.

Situation of Brussels

The Region of Brussels-Capital corresponds to the territory of the administrative entity of Brussels-Capital comprising 19 municipalities among which **Brussels-City**, capital of Belgium and of Europe.

Decrees adopted by the French and Flemish Communities apply to unilingual institutions in Brussels.

Although certain museums receive subsidies from a single community or benefit from a convention with one of them, not a single Brussels museum belongs exclusively to the French or Flemish Community. In effect, many institutions cannot be considered as belonging exclusively to the one Community or the other because they are bilingual. Bilingual institutions are partly governed by separate commissions:

- **COCOF**: Commission communautaire française,
- **VGC**: Vlaamse Gemeenschapscomissie,
- **Common Communities' Commission**,

which are all composed of members from the Region. These commissions perform an organizational task, notably for cultural events. The Common Communities' Commission deals with bi-community initiatives such as houses for the elderly, hospitals, etc. Its competences are extremely limited.

The institutional structure of Belgium is very complex and it is sometimes difficult to determine which entity is competent for which matter. But it does put us in pole position for the book of records: Belgium counts effectively six parliaments or representations for a total of 10,827,000 inhabitants (and 1,048,491 in the Region of Brussels-Capital – www.bruxelles.irisnet.be/fr/region).

Situation of the Belgian museums

And what about the museums in all of this!

Different status (according to their management structure)

The museums are established, funded and managed by different entities and organisations: the cities and communes, the Communities, the federal State, public organizations, semi-public or private entities (e.g. universities, commercial companies, private companies, etc). In 1980, the general competences in the public sector of the museums have been transferred from the Federal State to the Communities. Each community created its own Central administration responsible for museum policies:

- French Community: Directorate general of Culture, section of Heritage and Visual Arts.
- Flemish Community: Administration of Culture, section visual Arts and Museums.
- German-speaking Community: Department of Cultural Affairs.

There is no permanent or official consultation mechanism between the entities, nor any framework for agreements between the Communities (and the federal authorities) in the cultural sector (and even less so in the sector of museums).

Ad hoc solutions are envisaged whenever necessary in order to facilitate coordination, e.g. for the participation of Belgium in international activities and programs. Despite the many reforms, the **federal museums** (equivalent of the national museums in France) have remained under the federal authority (science policies) in order to be able to preserve and develop a rich and indivisible héritage, which is as important on national level as it is on an international level. Four of these institutions are federal scientific institutions with an important degree of autonomy and under the administrative control of the “Office fédéral de la Politique scientifique”:

Royal History and Arts Museums

- Musée du Cinquantenaire
- Porte de Hal
- Musées d’Extrême Orient (Japanese Tower and Chinese Pavillon)
- MIM (Museum of Music Instruments)

Royal museums of Fine Arts

- Ancien Art
- Modern Art
- Magritte
- Constantin Meunier
- Antoine Wiertz

Natural Sciences Museum

- (or «Institut royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique»)

Royal Museum of central Africa

- (Flemish Region).

The **Royal Army and Military History museum** is governed by the Ministry of Defence. And the **Museum of the National Bank of Belgium**, contrary to what one might expect, does not depend of the federal government, but of the Bank itself, which is a private limited company (SA). It is thus a museum-company in a way. The different state reforms have caused some inconveniences for some federal institutions which have become part of a Community. For instance, the national Botanical Gardens of Belgium (situated in Flemish Region), has not come out of these reforms harm-free and has seen great practical difficulties: plants, buildings and land now belong to different public authorities whereas initially the Gardens depended on the federal Ministry of Agriculture. Different authorities often refer questions to each other and renovations are often postponed. Thus, several greenhouses had to be closed for many years before they could be restored, which led to the loss of many plants. On the level of staff, the hiring of Dutch-speaking employees was preferred because the Gardens are now in the Flemish Region.

The future of Federal Museums is equally uncertain. Which authorities will, in the case of new transfer of powers to the Regions and Communities, finance these museums and maintain their buildings? The integrity of the collections should certainly be maintained. Besides the federal museums, there are also:

- the **community museums (or provincial)**, those belonging to the communities;
- the **municipal museums**: these are quite numerous and depend directly of the city or commune which manages them, e.g. the «Maison du Roi» and the Museum of Costume and Lace;
- the **private museums** in the form of a non-profit organisation (asbl) e.g. the CBBB (Centre belge de la Bande dessinée, or comic strips) Autoworld Brussels (asbl), or in the form of a foundation, university or company: Musée Maurice Carême (Foundation), Musée de l'Informatique (private individual), Musée de l'Eglise orthodoxe (Church), D'Ieteren Gallery (company), Musée des Plantes médicinales (university), etc.

Legislation regarding museums: A Belgian story!

Prior to the institutional reforms of 1980, all Belgian museums were governed by the Royal Decree of April 1958. The Decree offered a limited regulatory framework and provided no rules for the official recognition of museums as such. After the transfer of competences to the Communities, new legal instruments and regulations have been issued. The **Flemish Community** only has two museums which belong exclusively to the community: the Museum of Fine Arts of Antwerp and the Castle of Gaasbeek. However, it grants a large number of subsidies to Flemish museums (58 to this day), namely those that meet the criteria set by its Museum Decree and its executive decrees of 1996, but since 2004, the museums depend on the Erfgoed-decreet («Heritage Decree» www.kunstenenerfgoed.be), more generally, covering also libraries, archives, etc. The aim of the Decree is to render the museums more visible in Flanders and to improve their quality. In order to be recognized as a Museum, the ICOM¹ – criteria must be fulfilled.

The **French-speaking Community** also has its own decree (www.culture.be), equally based on the definition of ICOM. They were adopted in July 2002 and its executive decrees apply since December 2006. They determine the rules for the official recognition of museums and the criteria for public subsidies. The French-speaking Community has only 1 museum belonging to it exclusively: the Royal Museum of Mariemont benefiting from a relative autonomy. However it counts many so-called «mixed» museums, i.e. to a large extent subsidized by it, e.g. La Fonderie – Musée bruxellois de l'Industrie et du Travail, or le Château de Seneffe. The major handicap of this system is that museums have to pre-finance their costs as well as the salaries of their staff, waiting for the allocation of a subsidy. At present, 11 museums benefit a special status. These are the "subsidized" museums. These museums benefit from a special subsidy from the French-speaking Community, granted in the form of a global amount for a specified period and the museum has to justify its use only after receipt. In the **German-speaking Community**, the general rules for official recognition of museums and their public financing were established by decree in March 1982. Additional measures have been decreed in March 1992 and December 1998. The German-speaking authorities have been much quicker in organizing their own regulations. A supervisory body exists at federal level: «Conseil supérieur des Musées» or High Council of Museums, responsible to advise Government and administration on all matters related to the museum policies (and in particular the acceptance of the decrees), either upon request, or on its own initiative. The Council is composed of representatives of the different administrations and institutions involved with museums. (By decision of the Administrative court «Conseil d'Etat», the Royal Decree of April 1958 concerning the granting of subsidies to museums is no longer applicable to federal museums since 1994. A new Royal Decree is in preparation for the «mixed» institutions). The intermediate situation creates numerous problems which we have already mentioned.)

Categories of museums by Community

The categories used by the Communauté française for the different types of collections are: art, sacred art, archeology, region, ethnography, technology, history, science, literature and special collections.

The purpose of these categories is mostly to guide the visitors and they are not used in the Decree (which is just as well, otherwise the Decree would classify the “Musées royaux d’Art et d’Histoire”

¹ «A museum is a permanent institution, not aimed at making profit, to the service of society in general and its development, open to the public, acquiring, conserving, researching, communicating and exposing, with a purpose of study, education and delectation [...]»

under one category whereas its collections cover almost all categories). Tourism in Wallonia is focused on the Green Tourism and open air events, contrary to Brussels and Flemish cities whose profile is more centered around the concept of ‘City of Art’ and cultural tourism. The nature of the museums is very diverse in Wallonia in order to correspond to the public’s demand. The French-speaking Community (www.culture.be) counted less than 100 museums in 1958. End 2003, it counted already 473 museums. Different categories have come to light varying from the museum stricto sensu to the exhibition hall. The museums are sometimes (re-)named to appear more attractive and less focused, e.g. the “Espace gallo-romain d’Ath”.

Out of 473 institutions referred to above, there are 194 museums, 203 museum collections, 3 ecomuseums, 18 economuseums, 11 experimental centers, 33 interpretation centers and 11 exhibition centers. In the French-speaking Community, heritage sites are often linked to daily life scenes which constitute important collections of the museum institutions in the French-speaking Community (one third of collections).

The museums which depend on the Flemish Community can be subdivided in five categories as follows:

- cultural and historical museums;
- modern art museums;
- ancien art museums;
- applied arts museums;
- technology museums.

The German-speaking Community has no categories or classifications of museums according to the types of collections. Considering the ownership of the museums, they are mostly non-profit institutions (asbl).

Situation of the Brussels museums

All categories of museums are represented in Brussels:

- Some 15 federal museums;
- Regional museums (or rather “mixed” cf. supra);
- Some 15 municipal museums (museums of the City of Brussels, e.g. Maison du Roi / Musée du Costume et de la Dentelle / Bruxella 1238, the museum of Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, the museum of Fine Arts of Ixelles, etc.);
- Some 60 private museums (e.g. AMVB: asbl, recognized by the Flemish Community, the ‘Fonderie’: asbl mostly subsidized by the French Community; the Archives and Museum of Flemish Life (asbl) in Brussels are recognized by the Vlaamse Gemeenschap (Flemish Community); the Brussels Museum of Industry and Work «Musée bruxellois de l’Industrie et du Travail» (asbl) is mostly subsidized by the Communauté française (French Community).

The Brussels Museums Council (Non-Profit Institution)

Who are we? – A network of museums

The Brussels Museums Council (CBM) represents and works with app. **90 museums of the Region of Brussels-Capital**, whether they are federal, municipal, of a Community or private. Their rich collections in the field of art, techniques, industry, sciences, folklore, literature, history and many other areas offer a different view of Brussels and an original view of different cultures around the world.

Some historical background

The Brussels Museums Council is a not-for-profit association created in 1995, **at the initiative of some fifty curators and staff of Brussels museums**. It was created in response to a desire of museums, expressed at round tables on tourism in Brussels in 1994. The necessity seemed to exist to elaborate a common policy in order to improve the image of Brussels in respect of tourism and culture. During its first years, the Brussels Museums Council consecrated its time on making an inventory of the capital's museums and creates a **guide and map of museums** in Brussels. Our association counts, at present, 90 museums and is known for developing numerous quality projects. **Its secret: the strong involvement of the museums and a dynamic team**. All of our activities are in both French and Dutch. We also propose, during the «Nocturnes» (evening visits) or the Museum Night Fever (night visit), tours in English, and sometimes even in German, Spanish or Italian. Our website www.brusselmuseums.be is trilingual (FR, NL, EN) and our special site www.museumtalks.be permits to discover collection objects in 24 languages!

Our objectives

- **promote and represent the museums and the diversity** of their rich collections, often unique;
- **develop collaboration and solidarity between the Museums;**
- **support Museums**, develop their qualities and bring about solutions to the specific problems which they encounter.

Sources of financing

The CBM receives subsidies from the French-speaking and Flemish Communities, the Region of Brussels-Capital, the Flemish Region (for the Nocturnes and the Museum Night Fever in the context of their promotion of Brussels) and the City of Brussels. However, these subsidies do not suffice to fund daily operations in the most optimal manner, nor do they cover the costs of all projects. We therefore rely on sponsoring to make our budgetary ends meet. The search for sponsors is often long and difficult. We also try to obtain direct subsidies from the French-speaking Community. Apart from institutional funding, there are also members' contributions as well as the sponsorship of the National Bank of Belgium.

Our internal functioning

The general assembly, in which each Museum which is a full member has a voting right, establishes every year a list of priority projects. **The Board** supervises the execution. The Board consists of the curators and/or staff members of the Museums. **Permanent staff** of five and a half employees executes the projects on a daily basis.

Our activities and achievements

The Museum Guide

The CBM has edited a guide available in three languages – French, Dutch, and English – describing each Brussels museum and its location in an original way. The last edition of this work dates back to June 2003. It is the only guide of its sort to have been checked by the curators themselves. At the present day, no new edition has been planned.

The Museum map

All the museums and their location are visualized on this very practical map which also contains information such as visiting times and opening hours. A new, updated version of the map has appeared in June 2010.

The Brussels Card

The Brussels Card allows its holders to visit, during 24, 48 or 72 hours, no less than 30 museums among which the most important of Brussels. It also contains coupons granting price reductions to attractions, restaurants, cafés and shops in Brussels. It offers free access to public transport in Brussels. Its objective is to render the Museums in Brussels more attractive and more accessible.

The website-portal www.brusselmuseums.be

This trilingual site (FR, DE, EN) assembles, on one single site, almost all of the Brussels museums and offers a good overview of the collections in our city. It also presents the activities of the CBM. There is, notably, a window destined at schools and groups. It is updated regularly (e.g. access for disabled ...) and should soon be renewed with a fresh layout. Certain activities like the Brussels Card, Museum Night Fever and Museumtalks have their own URL address.

The «Nocturnes» of the Brussels Museums

The first edition of the «Nocturnes» was organised in 2001 in the context of the Belgian Presidency of the EU. With almost 4,000 visitors, it was already considered a success, crowned in 2001 with the price of “Ambassadeur du Tourisme” (“Ambassador of Tourism”) by the Brussels Tourism Office.

Every Thursday evening, from September until December, between 17 and 22 hours, come 50 museums (with a system of rotation) open their doors and offer visitors an evening with a convivial atmosphere and pleasant activities. The objectives are to attract attention to the permanent collections, to diversify the public, to render the city evening life more dynamic. We are celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Nocturnes which, the past year, have attracted almost 18,000 visitors. (Last figures : 22,913 visitors in 2010).

Museum Night Fever

Brussels, like most other European metropolis, organize annually a Night of the Museums. Its particularity is the priority it gives to a young public (age 18-35) through communication and programming, hence the name Museum Night Fever. Some twenty museums are open between 7 pm and 1 am, and the evening is prolonged with an afterparty at the “Palais des Beaux-Arts” (Fine Arts Palace). The event has attracted 12,000 visitors. www.museumnightfever.be

Survey of museum visitors

“Who visits the Brussels museums? Why? How to better reach the visitor? What are the expectations of groups visiting museums? [...]” This survey, realized in 2001, has allowed answering the aforementioned questions and better adapts the promotion and workings of museums to the expectations of the public. Ten years later, we think about repeating the survey, a pre-survey has indicated that an identical survey would deliver the same results and it would be preferable to orient future research to precise target groups (e.g. old age groups, etc) to determine real needs (cf. below).

Daily service to Museums

The CBM proposes different services to its members: numerous databases, advice, analysis of their strengths and weaknesses, promotion, newsletter, figures of visitation, participation to EGMUS, participation to scholarships, hosting the EMYA in 2005, organizing a museum tour for children, seminars, etc. The CBM plays an important role for Brussels museums. Similar associations cover the remaining regions of Belgium.

Other associations of Museums in Belgium

The Belgian Committee of ICOM consists of two professional associations:

- the Association of French-speaking Museums of Belgium (AFMB) in the French-speaking Community (www.afmb.be);
- the Flemish Museum Association (VMV – www.museumvereniging.be) active in Flanders, with very limited activities at the present time.

These associations constitute a network of museums on the one hand, as well as a link to foreign museums on the other. The two organizations aim to promote museums, exchange experiences and practices, organize workshops on museum science, discussion platforms for common problems, seminars, ... An association of Museums and Society in Wallonia also exists (www.msw.be) and is somewhat the mirror association of the CBM. Idem for FARO in Flanders (www.faronet.be), a Dutch-

speaking platform supporting museums, libraries, and archives. Finally, the federal Museums have an “Observatoire des Publics” and the Region of Brussels-Capital has an “Observatoire du Tourisme” (www.obs.irisnet.be).

Legal status of staff in Museums

The federal museums employ civil servants, hired by contest, whether it is for the post of curator or guardian. After a certain number of years of service, the staff is appointed on a permanent basis. For certain specific projects, these museums also hire employees on the basis of contracts for limited duration. This tendency is becoming more widespread, together with another tendency which is to replace retiring civil servants by employees with a contract for an unlimited duration. Numerous members of a voluntary work force, mainly drawn from the circles «Amis du Musée» (Friends of the museum), strengthen the staff, notably for tasks of reception. Municipal museums hire staff recruited by the City. The private museums hire staff with the status of contractual employee or self-employed and often work with members of a voluntary work force. The «Musée de la Banque nationale» (National Bank Museum) works with staff employed by the internal staff of the National Bank of Belgium, notably for the management and control tasks. As for museum guides and reception staff, they are hired on contracts by year. Most of the guides at federal museums and other are self-employed. In the French-speaking Community, the majority of guards are unemployed being reintegrated.

EGMUS and the Belgian museums

Belgium has become a participant of EGMUS in 2002. The research on a Belgian level was coordinated by the Ministry of Science, and more precisely the SIST (Service d'Information scientifique et technique). The CBM took part at the research in collaboration with the French-speaking Community, the Flemish Community (“Culturele Biografie Vlaanderen”) and the “Observatoire des Publics”.

The last survey has been conducted in 2007. It related to figures of 2006 (report 2006). Subsequently, the FARO association, previously the “Culturele Biografie Vlaanderen” withdrew from the project as it found the results obtained were not comparable with other countries, each country having adapted its form to the reality it is faced with. With the withdrawal of Flanders from the project, it was difficult to continue EGMUS. Ever since, the French-speaking Community is working on a new project of databases for museums in the French-speaking Community. Those data relate to numerous questions of EGMUS and would be available to professionals of the museum sector. FARO developed a similar project for Flanders. It works on a new instrument («moniteur») allowing measuring the evolutions in the cultural field based on certain indicators. Numerous questions of EGMUS will be addressed in this study. The system will be tested end 2010 and the first major survey will take place in 2011. The SIST is still interested in the project, as are the ‘Observatoire des Publics’ and the CBM. We wish to relaunch the project, or at least, to the extent possible, reach an agreement with the French-speaking Community and FARO to gain access to their data and possibly obtain national data relevant for EGMUS.

Museum visits 2009 and conclusions of the pre-survey of visitors

Figures for museum visits in Brussels

79 museums have responded to the inquiry on museum visits 2009, which represents an enormous increase in replies compared to previous years. For the year 2009, visits to these museums alone total 3,250,690 visitors. In 2008, we had registered a total of 2,631,442 visitors for the merely 41 museums that had replied to the inquiry. It is therefore extremely difficult to obtain fully reliable and comparable figures on museum visits and to draw conclusions. However, the «Observatoire du Tourisme» in Brussels offers comparable figures marking an overall 1% increase in museum visits and tourist attractions compared to 2008. The increase would, therefore, be minimal.

Moreover, the figures regarding museum visits are not representative as to the work, effort or quality which a museum displays or a collection provides. However, one must recognise that museum visits are effectively constantly on the increase since 2005. Some measures taken to attract the public's attention to museums:

- The CBM projects;
- Free entry to federal museums every 1st Wednesday of the month as from 1 pm (since numerous years);
- In the museums of the French-speaking Community, free entry one Sunday every month;
- In Flanders, since 2008, young people up to the age of 25 years enjoy a reduced entry fee of only one euro. The museums of the City of Bruges have particularly felt the positive effect of this measure. Elsewhere in Flanders, we were not able to evaluate the situation as, prior to 2008, no reliable and comparable data were available on museum visits.

Conclusion of the pre-survey museum visits

The CBM has itself organized a limited survey in 2010 to see whether it might be of interest to renew the survey conducted 2001, and also to verify the impact of the CBM's work on museum visits. (580 inquiries in three museums in Brussels during two distinct periods). It appears from this pre-survey that:

- the Nocturnes are the most widely known activity among the public;
- the foreigners, less educated and business travellers are the most difficult to reach, but all other demographic classes of the population are reached;
- the CBM should have as a goal that museums translate their explanations and descriptions of exposed objects in more languages;
- certain museums are not yet attractive enough for children → the CBM could support them with educational projects;
- the signs pointing towards the museums should be improved;
- communication: publicity by spreading the word is most efficient;

- a new extended survey would deliver largely the same results as in 2001 and if organized, should be oriented to different target groups in order to be useful for the CBM (communication, marketing, etc).

Conclusion

The federal structure of Belgium influences the organisation of our museums. There is no central Belgian authority operating in this sector. The different organisations involved in museums in Belgium, rarely collaborate, but they do attempt to work in the same direction. Their objectives seem to be achieved, at least for Brussels, considering the sharp increase in museum visits since 2005. As far as digitalisation is concerned, the federal museums are the most active, as well as the largest museums in Flanders and Wallonia. With the assistance of the “Service d’Information Scientifique et Technique” (SIST), it is possible to obtain a broad overview of progress realised in the field of digitalisation. The CBM, the French-speaking community, the “Observatoire des Publics” and the SIST hope to rejoin their efforts soon and be able to conduct another survey in the context of EGMUS.

List of References

www.museesdebruxelles.be/images/activite/balefr.pdf

www.brusselsmuseums.be

www.museumnightfever.be

www.afmb.be

www.msw.be

www.faronet.be

www.obs.irisnet.be

www.reseaudesartsabruelles.be/rab/projets/rab-bko-projets/plan-culturelbruxelles

www.bruxelles.irisnet.be/fr/region

www.kunstenenergoed.be

www.culture.be

www.museumtalks.be

www.museumvereniging.be