

English summary

Collections for cohesion. Museums of national history in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, ca. 1800-2008

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Today, many politicians and opinion leaders call for the establishment of a museum of national history 'to stimulate the national identity' and 'to bring the nation together'. In several European countries, exhibitions about national history are used as a tool to improve social issues, like the integration of minorities, and to foster historical consciousness. When studying the nineteenth century one can notice the same wish to use a museum as a way to give the people a sense of unity. Museums of national history were built to foster national unity and national consciousness. The (governmental) interest in opening museums of national history relates to the 'diverse material and immaterial past relationships' of both nineteenth century and today. This phenomenon has been interpreted from the perspective of 'historical culture'. The historical culture is dynamic in the sense that persons, groups, societies and institutions voice a different approach to the past in the form of culture, both material and immaterial, which can change over time. This thesis aims to relate the changes in this historical culture to the different arguments that were brought forward in debates on museums of national history. The investigation focuses on the discussions in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The central question this thesis aims to answer is: *what debates on museums of national history have taken place in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom ca. 1800-2008? What are possible national and temporal differences and similarities? And, how can these differences and similarities be explained by the changing historical culture in both countries?*

The first museum of national history in the Netherlands was established in The Hague in 1800. The Dutch Patriot Isaäc Gogel tried to bring the provinces of the Batavian Republic together with his 'Nationale Kunstgalerij' ('*National Art gallery*'). With it, Gogel attempted to unite the northern and southern regions of the Netherlands as a nation. Furthermore, the 'Nationale Kunstgalerij' was intended to re-educate people morally, as well as to set an example for contemporary artists. To achieve these goals the museum presented a selective view on the nation's past. The museum soon lost its primary function and was relocated and renamed several times. In 1838 the collection of the 'Nationale Kunstgalerij' was scattered over several museums, where it was displayed by object class. That is why during the second half of the nineteenth century several attempts were being made to erect a new museum of national history. The idea of Liberal minister J.R. Thorbecke - who was heavily criticized by opinion makers on his *laissez-fair* policy in the art sector - to create such an institution in the Ridderzaal ('*Knights' Hall*') of the Houses of Parliament was never realized. Also, the private initiative of a grand 'Muzeüm Willem I' ('*William I Museum*') in Amsterdam never received the necessary government funding. Private organisations like the artist society 'Arti et Amicitiae' and the 'Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap' (KOG) ('*Royal Antiquarian Society*') tried to fill the gap by organizing either temporary or permanent exhibitions on national history. Although widely praised on their attempts to visualize national history, 'Arti et Amicitiae' soon specialized in art-expositions, leaving the KOG-exhibition as the only privately founded collection on national history. In the end, the head of the governmental department of Arts and Sciences Victor de Stuers - famous for his fight against the

Dutch neglect of monumental buildings - instigated the plans for a new national museum in Amsterdam that would host a collection of paintings, historical objects and coins and medals. The history department, which would also provide some historical paintings, had already opened in The Hague in 1875 as the 'Nederlandsch Museum van Geschiedenis en Kunst' ('*Dutch Museum of History and Art*'). Ten years later this exhibition would be transferred to the new 'Rijksmuseum' ('*National Museum*') in Amsterdam. De Stuers' decision-making reflected the new culture of Dutch politics to abandon the old principle of *laissez-faire* in the world of art and museums. In 1929 the exhibition of the 'Rijksmuseum' was reorganized by separating art and history. The historian Johan Huizinga - then a member of a governmental commission on the museum sector - disagreed with this decision because he thought one needed to view paintings of artistic value, to experience 'a direct contact with the past' (the so-called 'historical sensation'). However, Huizinga never stopped the plans.

In 1998 the 'Rijksmuseum' presented a 'masterplan'. The museum wanted to combine the different collections in one exhibition, hence it would lose its specific exhibition on the history of the Netherlands. The writers of the 'masterplan' therefore pleaded for the establishment of a new museum of national history. Socialist politician Jan Marijnissen revived this idea in 2003. He argued that a museum of this kind was necessary because of a lack of historical consciousness amongst school children, and adults in general. Moreover, in his view, it would also stimulate a sense of 'collectivity'. In 2006, Christian Democratic MP Maxime Verhagen supported Marijnissen's strife and the Dutch parliament decided to build a museum of national history to stimulate the national identity. The Minister of Education Ronald Plasterk decided that this museum should be built in Arnhem. Most professional historians held themselves aloof from the debate about this museum of national history. Recently however, several of them tried to get involved with the decision-making by organizing discussions on the subject.

The discussion about a museum of national history in the United Kingdom started approximately half a century later than in the Netherlands. Philip Stanhope promoted his idea of a 'National Gallery of Portraits' in the House of Commons in 1846 and 1852. His third attempt, dating from 1856, this time in the House of Lords, finally became a success. Stanhope's museum of national history would be a gallery of 'men who are most honourably commemorated in British History as Warriors or as Statesmen, or in Arts, in Literature, or in Science.' The gallery would act as a motivation for contemporary men, who might attempt to achieve 'great deeds' when they could earn a spot in this National Portrait Gallery. A secondary aim was to educate contemporary portrait painters. In this last sense the National Portrait Gallery matches the Dutch 'Nationale Kunstgalerij'. However, this cannot be said of the Portrait Gallery's main goal. The National Portrait Gallery was erected to stimulate a sense of patriotism, but it did not function as an institute to unify different provinces. The Portrait Gallery's goal to stimulate national pride did resemble the goals of the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations*, the World Fair that was held in London in 1851. However, the fact that the National Portrait Gallery was soon moved from a small governmental building to the renowned South Kensington Museum - a museum of art and industry which was loosely based on the Great Exhibition - has more to do with problems in finding a better-suited location, than with the resemblance between the goals of the World Fair and the Portrait Gallery. The press warned potential visitors of the political influence in the making of the National Portrait Gallery, although the museum was never properly funded. After temporary relocation to what is now called the Bethnal Green Museum - due to a potential fire hazard in the South Kensington location - a private investor funded a new building. Since 1895, the National Portrait Gallery is therefore situated at St. Martin's Place in central London.

Although the National Portrait Gallery functions as a museum of national history in Great Britain today, in 2007 politicians decided that a new 'Museum of British History' had to be established in London. The Conservative Lord Kenneth Baker launched this idea in 1997 as a project for the celebration of the new millennium. However, he never got funds to realize his plan. Baker re-introduced his plan in 2007 and it received a positive response from prime minister Gordon Brown, because it fitted in his 'Britishness'-campaign. Brown thought of visualizing a grand narrative of Great Britain's history, in order to tighten the bond between England, Scotland, Wales and North-Ireland. He saw the United Kingdom crumbling down because of the growing independence of these regions. On top of that, Brown wanted to include the history of minorities in the national historical narrative of the United Kingdom. The private British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol had the same objective. This museum wanted to present a history of the British Empire and Commonwealth, in which both British natives and migrants would recognize themselves. Not only did they visualize this goal with promotional posters - which showed a young black British guy on one window and an old British lady on the other - but it was also recognizable in the exhibition. The museum showed the history of the British Empire both from a western and a non-western perspective. By 'celebrating how hundreds of thousands of people from the former colonies enriched British culture' they tried to stimulate social cohesion.

The debates about museums of national history in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom reflect the changing historical culture in which they took place. The nineteenth century historical culture of both countries was characterized by a strong focus on national history. Historical fiction resurfaced as a genre, in which the nation dominated. Statues of people of national historical significance were raised and there was a growing interest in folklore. On top of all, both history education and professional history writing were solely national. In fact, history writers saw the nation as a synthesizing concept to write history. Modern historians, on the contrary, know that the nation-state is a political construction and therefore they are wary in contributing to the use of the past in constructing this nation-state. This could explain the different attitude of nineteenth-century historians on the one hand and present day historians on the other hand to the establishment of museums of national history.

A similar nationalisation of historical culture has taken place in the late twentieth century. More and more, national history is seen as an instrument to improve social problems. Both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have a national curriculum in history education to foster historical consciousness. Furthermore, the present-day museums of national history in both countries are meant to stimulate social cohesion, in which they resemble the Dutch 'Nationale Kunstgalerij'. The dynamics in historical culture may, however, differ from the nineteenth century museums. The tendency these days lies towards national inclusion instead of exclusion. Politicians would like to incorporate the different histories that exist in societies today into one national history instead of excluding nations from this national history, which was often the case in the nineteenth century. The museums of national history all concurred to the visualization as a characteristic of the historical culture. In the nineteenth century this happened by displaying objects from the past, today it is achieved by multimedia. By visualizing national history they all try to be *collections for cohesion*.

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