

Mobility of curators: A proposal to CODART members Frank Bergevoet

Cultural policy in Europe is based on the so-called principle of subsidiarity, meaning that the European Union and its executive branch, the European Commission, have no formal control in this area. The EU respects the cultural autonomy of individual member states and allows each state to formulate its own cultural policy without Community interference. In contrast to areas such as agriculture, foreign relations and the environment, where far-reaching agreements have been made at EU level, there are no agreements, guidelines or regulations when it comes to issues concerning culture. It is of the utmost importance that our cultures do not become generalized, streamlined or standardized by European laws and regulations.

While the EU's respect for the cultural autonomy of member states is a valuable asset, there are also disadvantages: it is inconvenient that laws for the prevention of illegal cross-border trade in cultural heritage goods and laws regulating government indemnity schemes for exhibitions differ from country to country. Adhering to the principle of subsidiarity is not actually the most suitable solution to either desirable or undesirable collection mobility.

It should be noted that the absence of EU laws and regulations does not mean that the EU refrains from all cultural involvement; far from it, there is a "Cultural agenda 2007-2013" and a "Work plan for culture 2008-2010." However, participation in these programs is optional and member states join on a voluntary basis. The three main points of the "European program for culture 2007" are: cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue; culture as a catalyst for creativity; culture as a key component in international relations. Under the first set of objectives, the Union and all other relevant stakeholders are supposed to work together to foster intercultural dialogue to ensure that the EU's cultural diversity is understood, respected and promoted. To do this they should, for example, seek to increase the cross-border mobility of artists and workers in the cultural sector as well as the cross-border dissemination of works of art.

It may not have escaped your attention that in recent years the "dissemination of works of art" or collection mobility has received considerable attention from member states holding the EU presidency. The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Finland and Germany, respectively, have focused attention on this theme through conferences and publications. This has resulted in important milestones such as the report "Lending to

Europe" (2005), produced by a group of experts led by Ronald de Leeuw; the "Action plan for the EU promotion of museum collections' mobility and loan standards," (2006); and the "Bremen Declaration" (5 May 2007). In 2008 the European Commission proposed the installation of a new working group for collection mobility, which it is hoped will contribute to the European Agenda on Culture for the period after 2013. The group, known as the OMC working group on collection mobility, consists of museum professionals and other civil servants in the cultural sector from most EU countries. In 2010 the working group will present its proposals for the enhancement of collection mobility within Europe. Important topics for discussion are: government indemnity schemes, illicit traffic of cultural goods, prevention of theft, long-term loans and exchange of experts.

In 2007, the exchange of experts was the central theme of a conference in Bremen entitled: "Building up trust and networking." The various conferences and meetings at the European level that I have attended over the past years have shown, without exception, that trust is a key factor for successful international exchange of museum objects. Collection mobility is facilitated when staff from the lending institution know and trust their colleagues at the museum on the other end, and people feel generally confident about each other's methods. It is important, therefore, not to focus solely on eliminating barriers that might hinder loan traffic, but also on staff exchange, in particular staff dealing with loans such as curators, exhibition organizers, registrars and conservators.

Regulations, procedures and standards vary from member state to member state; it is essential that this information can be readily found. One solution is to post English translations of the relevant regulations, procedures and standards in an Internet forum for foreign colleagues. Such a forum already exists for the different government indemnity schemes that apply within Europe. By and large you can also find museum regulations in translation. What might be even more effective is to have a museum exchange scheme enabling, for example, curators to spend a minimum of three months at a museum abroad. In this way curators could familiarize themselves with internal procedures elsewhere, and identify possible obstacles to collection mobility.

Within the EU a number of funding possibilities actually seem to be available to realize such an exchange. My impression is that museum directors avail them-

selves of these opportunities only sparingly and that compared to the exchange of artists, for instance, the exchange of museum staff is lagging behind.

Within a subcommittee of the OMC working group, co-chaired by Spain and Ireland, The Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage (ICN), along with representatives from the remaining EU member states, is looking at ways to enhance the mobility of museum experts. Members of CODART, with their expert knowledge of Dutch and Flemish masters, could play a key role in this project. They have been sharing knowledge and experiences for years. Furthermore, the special relationships based on mutual trust that have been forged within CODART might provide a suitable basis for an international exchange of museum curators. As we develop plans for the future, it will be helpful to build on the tried and true models of museums that have successfully exchanged curatorial staff. We also need museums interested in an exchange program to come forward in large numbers. Consider this article as a call to do so. Only together can we translate the concept of European mobility into concrete action. Please share your recipes for success with us. CODART members or museums wishing to participate in the exchange scheme for curatorial staff can contact frank.bergevoet@icn.nl.

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LITERATURE

- "Action plan on the EU promotion of museum collections' mobility and loan standards," 2006
- "Bremen declaration on the 'mobility of museum collections,'" 5 May 2007
- Ronald de Leeuw, et al., "Lending to Europe. Recommendations on collection mobility for European museums," April 2005 (available on the CODART website under selected publications).

CODART website wins Best of the Web Award



This past April the CODART website www.codart.nl was selected as the best museum professional's site in the "Museums and the Web" 2009 Best of the Web Award contest, organized by Canada-based company Archives & Museum Informatics. At the annual congress "Museums and the Web," an international panel of museum professionals selected websites in nine categories.

The award clearly indicates the success of the recently completed website renewal project carried out by Wietske Donkersloot and Gary Schwartz. In the framework of this renewal, CODART has improved the look-and-feel and the usability of the website, edited and expanded its content, and added new features. Also deserving much credit for the new form and structure of the site over the years, are Occhio (Amsterdam), in charge of the technical development and support of the website, and Typography Interiority & Other Serious Matters (The Hague), responsible for its design and layout.

The development of the site has been supported by the Mondrian Foundation, the Prince Bernhard Cultural Foundation, the Dioraphte Foundation, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Friends of CODART Foundation.

It is the second time CODART has won this award. In 2003 the CODART website was voted as best museum's professional site for the first time.