Collecting with(in) the city

Publication
CAMOC & COMCOL
Conference
09–11 October 2024

AMSTERDAM×MUSEUM

imagine IC

ICOM international council of museums

CAMOC ICOM international committee for the collections and activities of museums of cities

COMCOL ICOM international committee for collecting

Collecting with(in) the city

CAMOC & COMCOL Conference 09–11 October 2024

Collecting with(in) the city Publication is realized by:

Scientific committee on behalf of CAMOC and COMCOL
Andrea Delaplace
Annemarie de Wildt
Danielle Kuijten
Flora Nguye Mutere
Glenn Perkins
Leen Beyers
Njabulo Chipangura
Rachel Roy
Sandra Vacca

Imagine IC
Danielle Kuijten
Jules Rijssen

Amsterdam Museum
Imara Limon

Project Manager and Final Editor
Roísín Douglas

Layout Design
Bo Gijzen

Special thanks to
All contributors and Patrick de Bruin for the visual identity of the conference.

ISBN 978-2-487970-26-7

Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski

Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum by Marysa Otte
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Words from the Hosts	8
Keynote lectures	12
Collecting Activism	26
Digital City Experiences	44
Practices of (co)curating	62
Working with artists	116
Decolonial practices	130
City identities and conflict	152
Oral histories revisited	174
City Identities – plural narratives	188
Senses	210
Folk Perspectives	266
Rapid Ideas Collection - participants reactions	284

City identities and conflict

Amazigh heritage and museum governance: An analysis of the transition of the Municipal Museum

Omar Idtnaine

Biography

Omar Idtnaine is a museum curator at the Agadir Museum of Art, responsible for managing and preserving its collections through artefact care, restoration coordination, and exhibition design. He also organizes educational programs to engage diverse audiences and enhances museum operations through incident management and infrastructure improvements.

Introduction

Heritage, in its richness and diversity, is a major issue for contemporary societies. It is both a witness to the past, a vector of identity, and a lever for development. Museums, as institutions dedicated to the conservation, study, and enhancement of heritage, play a crucial role in its management and dissemination. However, museums are also spaces of power where representations of the past are negotiated and where tensions between different stakeholders are expressed.

In an international context marked by globalization, migration, and identity claims, the question of museum governance—i.e., how museums are managed and decisions are made—has become a central issue. Museums are increasingly being called upon by local communities, minority groups, and social movements that demand greater participation in heritage management and a better consideration of their perspectives and interests.

In Morocco, Amazigh heritage, rich in its history and culture, holds an important place in the cultural landscape. However, its recognition and enhancement have long been marked by political and identity-related challenges. The transition of the Musée Municipal du Patrimoine Amazigh to the Fondation Nationale des Musées (FNM) in 2023 is part of this context of transformation in museum policies and the search for better consideration of cultural diversity.

This research focuses on the challenges and issues of this transition, analyzing the reactions of local actors (associations and artists) and exploring the implications for museum governance. It aims to understand how museums can reconcile national objectives for heritage valorization with the expectations and needs of local communities.

The central issue of this study is the following: How does the transition of the Musée Municipal du Patrimoine Amazigh to the FNM address the issues of museum governance and the tensions between local identities and national representations of heritage? To guide this research, the following questions will be asked: What are the reactions of local actors (associations and artists) to the transition of the Musée Municipal du Patrimoine Amazigh to the FNM? What are the challenges of involving local actors in the management of museum collections?
How can museums reconcile national objectives for heritage valorization with the expectations and needs of local communities?

This research is based on a theoretical and conceptual framework that draws on works on museum governance, heritage studies, and identity theories. It is particularly inspired by the work of Desvallées and Mairesse (2010) on the expanded definition of museums, which emphasizes the social and cultural functions of museums, as well as the work of Nora (1984) on the “lieux de mémoire,” which analyzes the issues of constructing and commemorating the past.Moreover, this study takes into account reflections on the decolonization of museums and the restitution of heritage, which highlight the importance of considering the perspectives of indigenous communities and minority groups (Bennett, 2004; Hicks, 2020).

1. Amazigh heritage: A millennial cultural wealth

Amazigh culture, also known as Berber culture, represents one of the oldest and richest cultural traditions in North Africa. Rooted in a millennial history, it forms a fundamental pillar of Moroccan identity, although its integration into the national narrative has often been marked by tensions and claims. The Amazighs, or Imazighen, have developed a distinct culture characterized by a unique language, Tamazight, remarkable artistic and craft traditions, and an intangible heritage rich in oral stories, music, and rituals. However, despite this wealth, Amazigh culture has long been marginalized in Morocco's cultural and educational policies, leading to movements demanding its recognition and preservation.

The Tamazight language, in particular, holds a central place in Amazigh identity. Recognized as an official language of Morocco in the 2011 Constitution, it symbolizes a significant advance in the recognition of the cultural rights of the Amazighs. However, this formal recognition has not always been translated into concrete valorization in cultural and educational institutions. As Salem Chaker (2013) points out, "the constitutional recognition of Tamazight is an important step, but it remains insufficient without effective implementation in public policies" (Chaker, 2013, p. 45). This tension between formal recognition and practical application is at the heart of the current challenges related to the preservation of Amazigh heritage.

Amazigh tangible heritage, on the other hand, is manifested through artefacts such as carpets, pottery, jewelry, and traditional tools, which bear witness to ancestral craftsmanship. These objects are not only relics of the past, but also vectors of cultural transmission. As Gabriel Camps states, "Amazigh craftsmanship is a living expression of culture that connects generations and perpetuates traditions in a changing world" (Camps, 1987, p. 12). However, globalization and rapid urbanization threaten these artisanal practices, making their preservation even more urgent.

Amazigh intangible heritage, including music, poetry, and oral narratives, also plays a crucial role in the transmission of culture. Amazigh music, for example, with its distinctive rhythms and traditional instruments like the lute and ribab, is a powerful vector of identity and cultural resistance. As Cynthia Becker explains, "Amazigh music is not only an art form, but also a means of claim and resistance against cultural assimilation" (Becker, 2010, p. 78). This political dimension of Amazigh culture is particularly visible in festivals and cultural events, which serve both as celebrations and platforms for identity claims.

However, the preservation of this rich and diverse cultural heritage faces many challenges. The historical marginalization of the Amazighs in national cultural policies has led to the underrepresentation of their heritage in museum and educational institutions. As Moha Ennaji notes, "the absence of equitable representation of Amazigh heritage in national museums reflects a persistent neglect of local identities in favor of a homogenizing national narrative" (Ennaji, 2005, p. 102). This situation has prompted calls for greater inclusion of the Amazighs in the management and valorization of their own heritage.

Amazigh culture, with its linguistic, artistic, and immaterial dimensions, constitutes an invaluable heritage. Its preservation and valorization are essential not only for the Amazigh communities but also for the cultural diversity of Morocco as a whole. However, this preservation requires an inclusive and participatory approach that recognizes the cultural rights of the Amazighs and integrates their perspectives into national cultural policies. As Susan Slyomovics emphasizes, "the valorization of Amazigh heritage cannot be achieved without close collaboration with the local communities, who are its natural guardians" (Slyomovics, 2005, p. 56). This collaboration is all the more crucial in a context of museum transition, where issues of power and representation are at the heart of the debates.

2. The Municipal Museum of Amazigh Heritage: A central role

The Municipal Museum of Amazigh Heritage in Agadir, now known as Agadir Museum of Art, occupies a central place in the preservation and promotion of Amazigh culture while serving as a bridge between traditional heritage and contemporary art. Inaugurated on February 29, 2000, the museum was created to mark the 40th anniversary of the Agadir earthquake, symbolizing the resilience and cultural renaissance of the city. Designed by architect Abdelaziz Brakez, the building spans 1,069 m² over three levels, providing both a functional and aesthetic space to house rich and varied collections. From its opening, the museum became the first municipal institution in Morocco fully dedicated to Amazigh heritage, the result of collaboration between the Municipality of Agadir, French museographers led by the Philip Delice company, and local culture enthusiasts.

The museum's primary mission has always been to preserve and promote Amazigh culture, focusing on traditional craftsmanship and combating its gradual disappearance. The museum's collection, built through donations and acquisitions, includes a precious collection of Amazigh jewelry donated by Saïd Zitoun in 1995. These ethnographic objects, which testify to the richness and diversity of Amazigh culture, are complemented by artefacts illustrating local craft techniques.

Beyond its role as a conservatory, the Agadir Museum of Art has also established itself as a vibrant space for creation and cultural dissemination. Equipped with a space dedicated to temporary exhibitions, the museum has hosted hundreds of plastic art, photography, and artistic installation exhibitions since its opening. These events, highlighting both local and international artists, have allowed the public to explore artistic creation in all its diversity. This dynamic programming has made the museum an essential destination for art enthusiasts and visitors to the region, thus strengthening its role as a cultural and educational platform.

In 2023, the museum underwent a major transformation under the supervision of the National Foundation of Museums (FNM), becoming the Agadir Museum of Art. This change in purpose marked a turning point in its history, making it the first art museum in the southern region of Morocco. This new identity was accompanied by an exceptional donation from Moroccan collector Khalil Belguench, which included modern and contemporary artworks. This collection, which includes paintings, sculptures, and installations, interacts with the museum's ethnographic artefacts, creating a link between traditional heritage and modern artistic expressions.

The museum's permanent exhibition is organized around five main themes, each exploring a distinct aspect of Moroccan culture and art. The first, titled "Representing Cultural Traditions," immerses visitors in the visual traditions that shaped Moroccan identity, highlighting scenes of fantasia, adornments, and ceremonial objects. The second theme, "Urban Scenes, Between Exoticism and Modernism," explores the representation of Moroccan cities, balancing between the picturesque and modernism. The third, "Abstraction and Memory," focuses on the postcolonial artistic movement, while the fourth, "Landscapes," examines the representation of Morocco's natural landscapes. Finally, the fifth theme, "Figures and Bodies," explores the evolution of human representation in Moroccan art, from traditional portraits to contemporary interpretations.

In addition to its permanent exhibition, the museum continues to organize educational workshops and cultural events, further reinforcing its role as an institution serving the local community and visitors. Thanks to its dual mission—both as a conservator of Amazigh heritage and as a space dedicated to modern and contemporary art—the Agadir Museum of Art has become a place of convergence between tradition and modernity, offering a rich and diverse cultural experience

3. Methodology

This study, aimed at analyzing the issues surrounding the transition of the Municipal Museum of Amazigh Heritage to the National Foundation of Museums (FNM), employed a qualitative methodological approach. This choice was justified by the desire to gain in-depth insights into the perceptions, experiences, and discourses of the stakeholders involved in this transition. Indeed, qualitative methods allow for the exploration of the complexity of social phenomena and provide a way to account for the diversity of viewpoints.

The study relied on two main data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and content analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local artists and members of local associations. This method allowed for the gathering of detailed information regarding their reactions to the transition, their expectations, and concerns. The participant selection process was guided by a concern for representativeness and diversity. Participants were chosen based on their involvement in the local artistic and cultural scene, their connection to the museum, and their affiliation with various associations. An interview guide was developed to structure the exchanges while leaving room for participants to freely express their views. The interviews were conducted in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, which facilitated the richness and sincerity of the testimonies.

In addition to the interviews, a content analysis was conducted on publications and statements from key stakeholders. This method allowed for the contextualization of the data collected from the interviews and the identification of the issues and debates surrounding the transition. Relevant sources were identified through targeted documentary research, including newspaper articles, institutional reports, and publications from associations.

The content analysis was conducted using a thematic approach, which involved identifying and analyzing recurring themes that emerged from the documents. This approach helped highlight the major issues of the transition and the positions of the various stakeholders.

The choice of these qualitative methods is justified by their relevance in addressing the study's objectives. The semi-structured interviews allowed for a deep exploration of the perceptions and experiences of local stakeholders, while the content analysis provided a way to contextualize this data and identify the broader issues surrounding the transition. The complementarity of these methods enabled cross-referencing of information sources and strengthened the validity of the results.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Limitations related to the sample size should be considered. Although the participant selection process was guided by a concern for representativeness, the limited number of interviews conducted does not allow for the generalization of the results to all stakeholders involved in the transition. The limitations related to the subjectivity of qualitative data must also be recognized. The data collected during the interviews and content analysis are inevitably influenced by the perceptions and interpretations of both the participants and the researchers. Finally, the limitations related to the specific context of the study must be taken into account. The results of this study are specific to the context of the transition of the Municipal Museum of Amazigh Heritage to the FNM and cannot be directly applied to other contexts.

In addition to these methodological aspects, it is important to present the key stakeholders at the core of this study. Local artists constitute a key group of actors in the context of the transition. They play an essential role in the local artistic scene and maintain close ties with the museum, notably through exhibitions and collaborations. The diversity of their artistic practices reflects the richness and vitality of local creation.Members of local associations dedicated to promoting local heritage are another key group in this study. These associations aim to valorize and promote local heritage, and they carry out various activities in this regard, such as organizing cultural events and publishing documents. Their relationship with the museum is marked by partnerships, but also by demands, particularly concerning the place given to local heritage in the museum's programming.

4. Results

4.1 Reactions of local artists

In general, local artists expressed satisfaction with the transition to the FNM. This satisfaction is based on several key points. First, the transition is seen as an opportunity to increase the national visibility of regional artists. Indeed, the integration of the museum into the FNM signifies greater exposure at the national level, which can positively impact the careers and recognition of artists. The FNM, thanks to its network and resources, provides local artists with a larger platform to showcase their work and reach a wider audience.

Furthermore, the transition offers local artists opportunities for exhibitions in prestigious spaces. The FNM regularly organizes large-scale national and even international exhibitions, and the inclusion of the museum within this institution allows local artists to participate in these events and present their work in iconic venues. These exhibitions have a significant impact on the spread of Amazigh art, introducing it to a broader audience and contributing to its valorization.

However, it is important to note that this general satisfaction is accompanied by nuances and criticisms. Some artists expressed concerns about the potential loss of autonomy and proximity that might come with the transition to a national institution. They fear that the centralized management of the FNM may not fully consider the specificities and needs of the local artistic scene. Additionally, local artists have expectations regarding support for local creation. They hope that the museum will continue to play an active role in promoting local artistic creation, particularly by providing exhibition spaces, supporting young artists, and fostering exchanges and collaborations.

4.2 Reactions of members of local associations

The reactions from the members of local associations, key players in promoting local heritage, are marked by a mixed position.On one hand, the association recognizes the positive aspects of the transition. In particular, it emphasizes that the transition to the FNM has increased the museum's visibility due to the communication resources of this institution. The FNM has substantial communication means, which allow for broader dissemination of information about the museum's activities and collections.

On the other hand, members of local associations express concerns about the place given to the local collection in the exhibitions. They wish for this collection to remain central, and fear that the transition may lead to a dilution of the museum's local identity. Members of local associations insist on the importance of highlighting the local collections, which reflect the history and culture of the region. They worry that the FNM might prioritize more general exhibitions, to the detriment of the specificity of the local Amazigh heritage.

In response to these concerns, members of the local associations make several demands. Firstly, they call for the enhancement of the old collections in the exhibitions. They highlight the importance of contextualizing and interpreting these collections to make them accessible and understandable to the public. The members of local associations propose thematic exhibitions that would highlight the local collections, linking them to contemporary issues and fostering dialogue with the audience.

Next, members of the local associations demand the involvement of local actors in the management of the collection. They suggest creating an advisory committee, composed of representatives from associations, artists, and other stakeholders, which would be responsible for giving advice on the museum's direction and participating in defining the acquisition and valorization policy for the collections. Local association members stress the importance of involving local actors in decision-making to ensure that the interests and needs of the local community are taken into account.

Also, members of the local associations call for priority to be given to the local collection in the museum's cultural programming. They propose organizing cultural events that showcase Amazigh heritage, such as conferences, workshops, performances, and festivals. Members of local associations emphasize the importance of cultural mediation and heritage education to raise public awareness of the richness and diversity of Amazigh culture and promote its ownership.

5. Summary of results

The summary of results reveals a diversity of reactions among local artists and members of local associations in response to the on-going transition in the management of museum collections. Generally, artists express a mix of optimism and scepticism. Some welcome the opportunity for greater recognition of their work and their contribution to national culture, while others fear that this transition could further marginalize local voices in favor of a more homogenized national narrative.

Members of local associations, on the other hand, tend to be more critical, highlighting the risk of dilution of local identities and cultural appropriation by national institutions. Common points of convergence between the artists and the members of local associations include a shared concern for the preservation of cultural diversity and the need for equitable representation of different communities. However, differences emerge regarding the means of achieving these goals. Artists tend to favor a collaborative approach with national institutions, while members of local associations emphasize local autonomy and the protection of cultural rights. The factors explaining these varied reactions include differences in personal experiences, ideological perspectives, and the specific interests of each group. For instance, artists who have already benefited from national recognition are more likely to support the transition, while those who feel excluded or marginalized express more resistance.

6. Analysis of the issues

6.1 Tensions between local identities and national representation

The transition in the management of museum collections raises significant identity-related issues. On one hand, it offers an opportunity to strengthen national cohesion by integrating local cultural expressions into a broader national narrative. On the other hand, it risks erasing local specificities in favor of cultural homogenization. This tension is particularly visible in the reactions of artists and local association members, who oscillate between the hope for greater visibility and the fear of losing authenticity.

The impact of the transition on the construction and negotiation of identities is also noteworthy. Local artists often find themselves in a delicate position, navigating between their attachment to their community and their desire for national recognition. This duality can lead to a redefinition of identities, where the boundaries between the local and the national become more fluid.

The recognition and valorization of cultural diversity thus emerge as key elements to mitigate these tensions. An inclusive approach that respects and celebrates cultural differences can contribute to a smoother transition and a better integration of local identities into the national narrative.

6.2 Power and control over heritage

The transition in the management of museum collections also involves issues of power and control. Power relations between various actors — artists, local associations, national institutions — are often characterized by imbalances. National institutions, equipped with more resources and influence, tend to dominate the process, leaving little room for local voices.

The impact of the transition on the distribution of power and resources is therefore a key issue. If the transition is poorly managed, it risks reinforcing existing inequalities and further marginalizing local communities. Conversely, a well-managed transition, which includes a fair redistribution of resources and active participation from local actors, can contribute to a better balance of power.

Transparency, accountability, and responsibility are essential elements to ensure a just and equitable transition. National institutions must be held accountable for their actions and decisions, and local actors should play an active role in the decision-making process.

7. Discussion

7.1 Comparison of results with other case studies

Comparing the results of this study with other cultural transitions at the local level highlights both notable similarities and differences. In particular, the case of the management shift of the Agadir Oufella site, which was transferred to a local development company, presents specificities related to the historical, political, and cultural context of the region. In Agadir, this transition aims to reconcile heritage management with the needs of local and tourism development, while preserving the specific cultural values of the city and its inhabitants.

As in other regions of the world, the active participation of local communities and the recognition of cultural diversity are essential elements for the success of such a transition. However, in Agadir, the challenges are also influenced by the unique history of the Agadir Oufella site, particularly the reconstruction of the city after the 1960 earthquake, which deeply impacted the local collective memory. Heritage management in this context goes beyond mere material conservation; it also includes identity issues related to how the community reclaims its past while evolving within a modern development framework.

The political specificities of the region, notably the recent role of the local development company, as well as the challenges related to participatory governance, directly affect how this transition is perceived and implemented. Unlike other contexts where management changes may have been more centralized, the decentralized management at Agadir Oufella reflects a desire to bring heritage management closer to local realities while integrating economic and tourism development dynamics.

Thus, while analogies exist with other museum transitions worldwide, the historical and cultural particularities of Agadir significantly influence how this transition is carried out and perceived by local actors.

7.2 Analysis of the implications of the results for museum governance

The results of this study have significant implications for museum governance, particularly regarding centralized versus participatory management. Our analysis of the Agadir Museum of Art highlights the reality of "top-down" governance, which largely stems from the desire to harmonize policies and programs under the National Foundation of Museums (FNM). For example, initiatives like "Museum and Gallery Nights," organized nationally by the FNM, illustrate this centralization of management. Although these programs carry significant symbolic value and contribute to increased visibility for museums at the national level, they limit the autonomy of local museums, such as the one in Agadir, in decision-making related to programming, particularly in involving local artists in these events.

As a result, museum teams sometimes find themselves with little room to incorporate local specificities or tailor activities to the expectations of communities. For instance, the involvement of local artists, which is essential for a place-based approach, is often limited due to the directives and centralized control of these events.

This highlights the need for more participatory governance, where local stakeholders are better integrated into the decision-making process. Such an approach would foster greater acceptance of programs and enhance their legitimacy within local communities. To achieve this, it is essential that governance structures are adapted to the local context and include mechanisms for regular consultation, local advisory committees, and the inclusion of local representatives in decision-making bodies.

7.3 Reflection on the issues of local stakeholder participation in heritage management

The participation of local stakeholders in heritage management offers both advantages and limitations. Among the advantages, one can cite better representation of collections, greater legitimacy of decisions, and increased ownership of heritage by local communities. However, this participation can also face obstacles, such as conflicts of interest, power imbalances, and logistical challenges.

The conditions for the success of a participatory approach include open and transparent communication, an equitable distribution of resources, and adequate training for local stakeholders. It is also essential to ensure the representativeness and legitimacy of participants, in order to avoid risks of marginalization or cooptation.

Strategies to promote the participation of local stakeholders include the establishment of regular consultation mechanisms, the organization of workshops and training, and the creation of partnerships with local associations. These strategies must be tailored to the needs and capacities of local communities and be supported by strong political commitment.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the main issues and challenges related to the management of Amazigh heritage in the context of a museum transition. The results revealed a diversity of reactions among artists and members of local associations, oscillating between hope and scepticism in the face of on-going changes. The tensions between local identities and national representation, issues of power and control over heritage, and the challenges of reconciling national objectives with local expectations were at the heart of the analysis.

The central problem of this study was to understand how the transition in museum collection management could both enhance Amazigh heritage and meet the expectations of local stakeholders, while strengthening national cohesion. The objectives were to identify points of convergence and divergence between the different stakeholders, analyze the explanatory factors of their reactions, and propose recommendations for a more inclusive and participatory museum governance.

The main arguments and conclusions of this study emphasize the importance of a collaborative and transparent approach to overcome the identified challenges. The participation of local stakeholders, the recognition of cultural diversity, and the fair redistribution of resources are key elements for a successful transition. Participatory governance models, such as the creation of local advisory committees and the inclusion of local collections in national programming, have been proposed as viable solutions to reconcile national objectives with local expectations.

The future of Amazigh heritage management will largely depend on the continued efforts in participation and collaboration. Current initiatives need to be sustained and strengthened to ensure their long-term impact. This requires on-going commitment from national institutions, local stakeholders, and associations, as well as adequate resource allocation to support these initiatives.

The challenges of sustaining initiatives and partnerships include the need to maintain open and transparent communication, ensure the representativeness and legitimacy of local stakeholders, and adapt strategies to the evolving political and cultural contexts. The creation of regular monitoring and evaluation mechanisms is also essential to measure the impact of initiatives and adjust strategies accordingly.

The participation of local stakeholders in museum governance presents significant advantages, including better representation of collections, greater legitimacy of decisions, and increased ownership of heritage by local communities. These benefits must be highlighted and valued to encourage the implementation of participatory museum governance models.

A call for the implementation of these models is essential to ensure fair and sustainable cultural heritage management. National institutions must be encouraged to adopt inclusive and collaborative approaches and integrate local stakeholders into the decision-making process. This requires strong political will and on-going commitment to participation and transparency.

References

Becker, C. (2010). Amazigh arts in Morocco: Women shaping berber identity. Austin: University of Texas Press.
Bennett, T. (2004). The Birth of the museum: History, theory, politics. Routledge.
Camps, G. (1987). Les Berbères : Mémoire et identité. Paris : Éditions Errance.
Chaker, S. (2013). Berbères aujourd'hui. Paris: L'Harmattan.
Desvallées, A., & Mairesse, F. (Eds.). (2010). Vers une redéfinition du musée?. Armand Colin.
Ennaji, M. (2005). Multilingualism, cultural identity, and education in Morocco. New York: Springer.
Hicks, D. (2020). The Brutish museums: The Benin bronzes, colonial violence and cultural restitution. Pluto Press.
Nora, P. (1984). Les lieux de mémoire. Gallimard.
Slyomovics, S. (2005). The performance of human rights in Morocco. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

City identities and conflict

Curating War. A Dynamic Heritage Approach in the In Flanders

Els Veraverbeke

Biography

Els Veraverbeke brings over two decades of experience in museums and heritage, with a distinguished career as Conservator-Director of Collections at the In Flanders Fields Museum, Yper Museum, and Merghelynck Museum. Her leadership has shaped innovative museum visions, strategic collection management, and institutional growth. Previously, she led collections and research at The House of Alijn, where she fostered creative approaches to heritage interpretation and achieved notable success in non-profit fundraising. Committed to advancing cultural brokerage and sustainability, Els combines collaborative leadership with strategic insight, empowering teams and enriching public engagement

Ypres: A City of Emotionally Charged History

Internationally, the city of Ypres in Belgium is recognised as a powerful symbol of the First World War. The city was completely destroyed during the war. Its reconstruction — from the physical rebuilding of structures to the reconstitution of social life — is itself a deeply emotional story. Today, Ypres is a vibrant provincial town. The legacy of the First World War remains omnipresent: monuments, cemeteries, and the surrounding landscape continue to bear witness to the conflict. Countless associations, ceremonies, and practices emerged as a consequence of the war. The presence of the international community — both tourists and residents — is often rooted in war history. The world is present in Ypres, and Ypres is present in the world. As a tribute, many streets and parks around the globe bear the name of the city. As a committed and engaged museum, the *In Flanders Fields Museum* assumes the responsibility of interpreting and giving meaning to the memory and heritage of the First World War today and for the future.

That task begins with the collection and curation of the museum's holdings. The first objects were acquired in 1927. Nearly a century of collecting reveals shifting curatorial visions and evolving approaches to war heritage. The compelling history of the museum's collection not only recounts the war itself, but also reflects changing ways of curating conflict. A new collecting policy was launched in 2023, placing contemporary practices of remembrance at the heart of its vision. Given the complexity of the subject matter, curating war heritage — both tangible and intangible, historical and contemporary — requires care, ethics, and sensitivity.

We aim to make the public active stakeholders in this collection, enhancing its social value for both present and future generations. We ascribe meaning to the past, present, and future of First World War heritage.

Connecting collections, A new collection policy

The *In Flanders Fields Museum* is Belgium's nationally recognised heritage institution dedicated to the First World War. War heritage is a complex and charged domain. How does one collect war? And how can a collection relating to a conflict over a century ago maintain relevance today? How can one shape a twenty-first-century collecting policy around such a theme?

In recent years, the museum was deeply engaged in the centenary commemorations of 2014–2018. With a new strategic phase launched in 2022, including a comprehensive collecting plan, the museum is now focusing on both the continued stewardship of its rich and diverse holdings — and the shaping of the collection of the future.

As Martin Gegner and Bart Ziino observed in *The Heritage of War* (Routledge, 2012), war generates new forms of cultural memory, which are transformed over time into both tangible and intangible heritage. Heritage is not fixed; it is continuously constructed through social and political processes by multiple actors. Heritage itself has a history: a history of meaning-making, of management, and of reinterpretation.

A good war museum highlights the value of peace — a principle the In Flanders Fields Museum embraces fully. The significance of the war heritage collection is central in this mission. Its emotional impact is visible in responses to stories and testimonies, from military artefacts to personal diaries.

As temporal distance from the First World War increases, so too does the need for a war museum. While previous generations heard the stories from eyewitnesses, today it is through objects, images, and documents that the narratives are told.The year 2022 marked a turning point. A new collecting policy placed a strong emphasis on documenting current commemorative practices, including the integration of ICE (Intangible Cultural Heritage and Education). This shift initiated a new phase of contemporary collecting and the development of a robust digital strategy. High-quality documentation, sharing, and linking of collection data are at the heart of this approach.

As a thematic museum with a world war as its focus, the In Flanders Fields Museum operates inherently on an international level. Across the globe, museums focus on the First World War — often with a keen interest in the Belgian front region. The IFFM's collecting policy is therefore framed within an international context.Collaboration with both international and local museums fosters knowledge exchange and alignment of collecting strategies. Such partnerships and participatory approaches strengthen the museum's policy.Through these networks, the collection is enriched — but also, professionals and amateurs alike, from specialists to enthusiasts, contribute vitally to the understanding of war heritage, both inside and beyond the museum walls.As an engaged institution, the In Flanders Fields Museum is committed to reinforcing the meaning and relevance of war heritage collections.

From military collections to a dynamic heritage approach

Human history comprises countless chapters on war — many of which are commemorated in museums. War heritage is often collected, managed, and interpreted within broader contexts: urban or national histories, military narratives, or arms collections.

The In Flanders Fields Museum holds a unique position. A century of collecting since the 1920'as has resulted in a remarkably diverse and layered assemblage. This is not only a reference collection on the First World War — it also bears witness to shifting perspectives, evolving methods, and changing attitudes toward war heritage across generations.

A war museum presents complex challenges in all areas of museum practice, particularly in collection policy. What is war heritage? How does one collect war? How can such heritage be managed, displayed, and shared? In short: how does a museum curate war?These questions are part of our daily work at the In Flanders Fields Museum. We take them seriously, not only in practice, but also as research questions that guide a reflective, inclusive, and forward-looking collecting strategy.

Until the 1990s, war heritage was largely synonymous with military artefacts from the war years. Internationally, war museums were often embedded within national military contexts. While the early predecessors did not fully adopt this militarised lens, their collecting was still predominantly military in nature. From the late twentieth century onward, the scholarly and curatorial lens began to shift. War came to be seen not only as a military conflict, but as a total event that touched lives, bodies, landscapes, and identities. Through this human dimension, the museum's collecting profile changed fundamentally.

Since the 1990s, the personal perspective has become central. War is part of everyday life. This vision now informs the museum's entire heritage strategy — including its collection policy. Diaries, letters, photo albums, and other ego-documents are preserved as literal carriers of life stories. But many other items in the collection also embody personal narratives, emotions, and experiences.

Often, it is not the object's material qualities that matter most, but the stories they evoke and represent. War heritage is clearly more than just tangible matter. It encompasses objects, narratives, and practices. It concerns not only the past, but also how we, today and tomorrow, relate to remembrance and loss.

War is not only curated by museums; it is also inherited by society — through rituals, traditions, and acts of memory. First World War heritage includes objects, images, documents, and sounds, but also traditions, commemorative rituals, and landscapes.

The In Flanders Fields Museum collects and documents all these dimensions: material, immaterial, and environmental. These elements are never static. Rituals change. Landscapes evolve. Cultural memory is always in motion. As a museum, we aim to remain alert and responsive to this evolution.

Together with others, we seek to recognise, collect, research, and safeguard war heritage in a participatory way. A core principle in this approach is the maximum digital accessibility of the collection — making heritage more widely available and strengthening its social relevance for the present and the future.

A History of the museum, from the 1920s actual collecting to a place of memory

In the late 1920s, a war museum opened in the centre of Ypres — a private initiative by British veteran Leo Murphy. At the same time, many other souvenir-related ventures emerged, ranging from shop displays to commercial sales. Murphy's museum stood out for several reasons: its central location, the attempt to build a coherent collection, and the provision of contextual information through captions and guided tours. Leo Murphy (Manchester, 1891 – Ypres, 1951) had served in France during the First World War. After the conflict, he returned to the continent and settled in Vlamertinge, near Ypres. During this period, large numbers of British visitors came to Ypres and the surrounding Salient as part of pilgrimage journeys — often to sites where

loved ones had fallen. Murphy established the British Touring and Information Bureau on the town's main square, offering travel packages and battlefield tours. He was a founding member of the Ypres Branch of the British Legion and served as chairman of the Ypres Branch of The Old Contemptibles' Association. In the off-season, Murphy worked as an electrician. By the late 1920s (or early 1930s), he had opened the Ypres Salient War Museum. In 1937, this collection — or parts of it — was relocated to the newly rebuilt western wing of the Cloth Hall (Lakenhallen). Shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, and at Murphy's request, the collection was transferred to the United Kingdom, where it was exhibited at Gloucester Place in Brighton. Several objects from his collection were later incorporated into the holdings of Ypres's newly established Municipal Museum.

In the 1920s, the city of Ypres — like the wider region — underwent extensive reconstruction. Wartime debris was cleared, and large-scale rebuilding ensued.

Before the war, Ypres was home to one of Belgium's oldest municipal museums, located in the Vleeshuis (Meat Hall). The collection primarily focused on fine and decorative arts. However, the Vleeshuis was completely destroyed during the First World War. In the postwar years, the building was rebuilt and designated solely for museum use. The renewed institution gained momentum through acquisitions — particularly via bequests, such as the significant 1927 legacy of Hélène Ceriez-De Hem.

In addition, the museum launched a public appeal for donation, what we now call participatory collecting. This resulted in a highly eclectic collection of paintings, furniture, sculpture, prints, coins, medals, commemorative plaques, flags, photographs, and more.

Among the donations were personal and official wartime memorabilia. The museum actively sought First World War items, especially official documents and objects related to the military conflict. Heads of state and commanding officers were even invited to contribute a signed photograph along with a personal item. This marked the beginning of a civic war heritage collection — a body of artefacts reflecting Ypres's wartime identity and public memory. Today, many of these objects are part of the core holdings of the In Flanders Fields Museum. The postwar reconstruction of Ypres's iconic Cloth Hall (Lakenhallen) was a lengthy undertaking. Work began in 1928 and continued until 1967. Before the Second World War, key elements were already restored: the belfry (1929–1934) and the western and northern wings (1934–1939). Later came the city hall (1957–1967), the Nieuwerck, and the council chamber. Amidst the reconstruction, plans emerged to integrate museum functions into the building. Even before full completion, a first exhibition space was inaugurated: in 1937, a room within the belfry was designated to display objects related to the Groote Oorlog (Great War) in Ypres. The war-related holdings of the Municipal Museum were incorporated into this display. The terminology reflects the historical moment: prior to the Second World War, the term "First World War" was not yet in common use. The conflict was still referred to as the "Great War".

In 1964, Ypres hosted a large temporary exhibition marking the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of war — titled "50 Years Later". Public interest in war heritage was growing, as was recognition of the collection's cultural and commemorative value. In 1968, the museum moved to the ground floor of the newly completed eastern wing of the Cloth Hall. It reopened under a new name: the Ypres Salient Museum. As the name implies, the focus now explicitly centred on the First World War as experienced on the front lines in and around Ypres.

The Ypres Salient Memorial Museum (1985)

Initially, the *Ypres Salient Museum* focused heavily on the display of weaponry. Many of its objects were local battlefield finds. In 1985, the museum underwent a nominal transformation — becoming the *Ypres Salient Memorial Museum 1914–18*. This subtle rebranding marked a shift toward remembrance and reflection. In 1989, the City of Ypres acquired the extensive private library of the late Dr. Alfred Caenepeel, a veterinarian with a deep personal interest in the First World War.

Through his professional contacts with local farmers, he had assembled a unique collection of battlefield finds — including artefacts linked to the first gas attacks near Steenstrate (Langemark). While this development introduced a new dimension to the museum's operations, its core mission remained unchanged: the collection and presentation of First World War heritage, with a specific focus on the Ypres Salient.

In Flanders Fields Museum (1998-)

By 1995, the city of Ypres recognised the need to reprofile its existing war museum. With the First World War centenary on the horizon, ambitions grew. Plans were drawn up for an expanded and conceptually strengthened museum, housed within the historic Cloth Hall. This transition coincided with a broader shift in the heritage field. Internationally, the concept of heritage was being redefined: no longer limited to monuments or fine art collections, but now embracing contested, historical, and emotionally charged heritage. At the same time, the museum paradigm itself was evolving. Institutions that once operated as closed bastions of scholarship began to prioritise public engagement. The historiography of the First World War underwent a parallel transformation. Military history gave way to more socially and culturally oriented interpretations of the war experience.

In 1998, the *In Flanders Fields Museum* opened its doors. It offered a new vision of what a war museum could be — establishing a pioneering, internationally recognised narrative. Unlike many war museums founded within military or nationalist frameworks, the IFFM embraced a deliberately polyphonic and human-centred approach. This vision extended across exhibitions, collecting strategies, educational outreach, and audience engagement.

The museum's collection policy was fundamentally reimagined. The military-historical core was no longer privileged; instead, the concept of war heritage was expanded. Alongside militaria, the collection of war art grew in importance, and increasing attention was paid to the life stories of individuals who had experienced the war — initially in exhibitions, and progressively through active collecting. This commitment to polyphony requires critical knowledge: Which voices are present in the collection? Which are missing?

By documenting life stories from before, during, and after the war, the museum situates the First World War within a broader historical continuum — encompassing, for many, the Spanish flu, the Great Depression, and the Second World War. This biographical approach allows for nuanced connections to be made — even to contemporary issues.

Collaboration and Networking with Collectors

Alongside institutional collections, a substantial amount of First World War heritage is held in private hands. This collector community is both active and diverse — spanning generations, regions, and national contexts, and comprising individuals as well as groups. Some collectors focus on a specific typology (such as particular weapons, trench art, or memorial cards), while others concentrate on a location (e.g. Ypres or occupied Leuven), a specific unit, battle, or theme. Many are recognised experts in their field of interest.

The In Flanders Fields Museum invests actively in building relationships with these collectors — fostering dialogue, exchanging knowledge, and receiving input on acquisition opportunities and research. One collector in particular holds a special place in the museum's network: Mr Philippe Oosterlinck, who has been collecting First World War heritage for over 65 years. His collection is largely complementary to the museum's holdings, with a strong emphasis on military history. A significant portion of his collection is currently on display in the museum's permanent exhibition. Of particular note is his unique assembly of complete uniform sets from various national armies that fought on Belgian soil.

Please Touch: Developing a Handling Collection

The In Flanders Fields Museum collects, preserves, researches, and presents a substantial and diverse body of war heritage. While the core museum functions remain a priority, increasing emphasis is placed on enhancing the social relevance of the collection. To this end, the museum is exploring ways to engage with its collection beyond traditional exhibition — particularly in educational and outreach contexts, both inside and outside the museum's walls.While the permanent and temporary exhibitions prominently feature collection items, the institution seeks to go beyond static display. There is a growing need for a handling collection: a separate body of material culture that can be used for educational, participatory, and sensory experiences — free from the stringent conservation restrictions of the main heritage collection.

The museum collection is governed by professional protocols: careful selection, conservation, interpretation, and research. These protocols ensure that objects are passed down responsibly to future generations — but they also impose strict limits on use.The handling collection, by contrast, is designed for interaction. These objects are meant to be touched, held, and explored. The collection includes selected original pieces (not subject to weapons legislation), as well as high-quality replicas and reproductions — created specifically for educational and tactile engagement. The scope and content of the handling collection align with the museum's curatorial vision. In addition, digital and digitised materials can supplement physical objects — offering flexible and accessible pathways to interpretation. In doing so, the museum redefines its collection as not only an object of preservation, but also a resource for experience, participation, and emotional engagement

Intangible Heritage : Commemorative Ceremonies and Museums

The First World War inflicted catastrophic damage — on individuals (death, trauma, displacement), and on the physical environment (the destruction of villages, nature, and landscapes). In its aftermath, a commemorative landscape emerged: cemeteries, monuments, rituals, and traditions — all part of an ongoing effort to cope with the scars of war. Commemorative practices are highly diverse. Some are personal — such as pilgrimage visits, laying a poppy wreath at a grave, or attending a reburial. Others are collective and ceremonial, such as the daily Last Post Ceremony beneath the Menin Gate in Ypres.

Many rituals are tied to the calendar — such as 22 April (the first gas attack) or 11 November (Armistice Day). Yet new practices continue to emerge, often prompted by contemporary events, research, emotion, or personal motivation. Some traditions were revitalised during the centenary years (2014–2018), supported by growing heritage communities.

It is crucial to document these practices. While some rituals have been extensively studied, there remains a lack of structured research into the impact of war on commemorative culture in Flanders. The multiplicity of remembrance forms reflects the global nature of the conflict. People from around the world were involved in the Western Front. The war affected everyone — from schoolchildren to commanding officers.

How do we remember such a wide range of participants? Which traditions have endured? What forms of commemoration exist — from intimate and participatory to formal and state-sponsored? First World War commemorations are abundant, in Belgium and globally. Often, a specific person or group is central. But how can museums represent such practices without losing sight of inclusivity and polyphony?

The In Flanders Fields Museum plays an active role in the commemorative landscape. It is both a documenting institution and a participating actor, especially in pilgrimage-related events. This dual role raises important questions — not only about how to present remembrance but

also how to invite the public to experience it meaningfully. The museum is especially committed to fostering new practices, including those that focus on the remembrance of civilian victims. Connecting WWI remembrance to present-day conflicts can be powerful — but it must be done carefully, with meaningful intent and ethical awareness, together with heritage community. This term we use to indicate everybody that is involved, from experts to amateurs, from participants to researchers. . The museum is therefore seeking frameworks and tools to apply its curatorial expertise in war heritage to the realm of commemorative practices.

At the same time, remembrance tourism brings its own rituals and expectations, influencing local traditions and raising further curatorial challenges. As part of its collection policy, the museum is now documenting evolving commemorative practices. On the one hand, it is mapping existing archives and visual sources. On the other, it is proactively recording new rituals. But this leads to curatorial questions: Do we prioritise endangered, lesser-known practices — or the most active and visible ones? Do we focus on diversity of location, scale, subject, or level of community engagement? These are the complex questions the In Flanders Fields Museum, in collaboration with peer institutions worldwide, is actively exploring. The most important World War One museum gather once a year and the topic of intangible heritage is a important topic discussed in this group.

Material Culture and Emotion: The Role of Emotions in Collection Policy

The classical concept of the museum — rooted in the accumulation and care of tangible objects — is being reshaped in the 21st century.Digital collecting, intangible heritage, and changing expectations are redefining what it means to collect and preserve. Museums originated as repositories of material culture, but collection typologies have diversified dramatically. At the same time, the growing professionalisation of conservation has brought rising costs and mounting workloads.The British research project Heritage Futures offered critical insights into sustainable collecting, urging heritage institutions to reflect carefully on what they designate and treat as “heritage”. Yet physical collections remain vital. They are essential to exhibitions, installations, outreach, research, wellbeing initiatives, and participatory engagement.

The emotional dimension of objects has long been explored in the field of emotion history, and is now gaining prominence in heritage studies, museum theory, and institutional practice — especially with regard to public audiences and visitor experiences. But what about the emotional dynamics within museums? Do emotions have a place in collection policy? How are they acknowledged or integrated? War heritage is, by its nature, emotionally charged. It evokes loss, fear, anger, grief — but also remembrance, resilience, and hope. In 2014, the *Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Berlin* explored this theme in the exhibition Krieg. Emotionen im Ersten Weltkrieg. Other platforms — such as the Emotions in the Museum conference (York, 2020) and Reimagine Collecting (COMCOL, 2021) — have underscored the need for theoretical frameworks and critical reflection. At the In Flanders Fields Museum, this issue touches the

heart of its mission. The museum seeks to build a polyphonic reference collection on the First World War. Its inclusive and open approach to war heritage is valuable — but it also raises curatorial challenges: How do you make informed selections amid an abundance of available material? Is the process guided by professional detachment, or by emotional resonance? Can — or should — emotion be a valid selection criterion? Many objects in the museum’s collection carry emotional weight — shaped by their historical context, but also by the experiences of donors, staff, and visitors.

The museum therefore places emphasis on story and context. These are made explicit in exhibitions. But how can such meaning be preserved and sustained within the collection itself? Through biographical research into objects and studies of visitor responses to emotionally loaded exhibits, the museum is generating new insights into how emotions shape collection practices and interpretive strategies. At the University of Antwerp, research is currently underway on the role of emotions in collection policy — especially within museums that deal with contested or painful heritage. For instance how do we collect and deal with skeletons, photo’s of death bodies, ashes etc. in collectionpolicies, from collecting till sharing and presenting. Of how do deal with weapons? As machines that got better, saying more efficient or do we emphasise the impact on people, wich injuries of number of death they cause?

This includes analysis of donor motivations, staff reflections, and the evolving relationship between emotional content and curatorial practice. Have emotions always played a role in acquisition? Are they now addressed more deliberately — more reflexively, more explicitly? What emotional responses do museum objects evoke in visitors? How do exhibition design and sensory engagement contribute? The war heritage collection at the *In Flanders Fields Museum* illustrates how emotions, time, and context are constantly reconfigured — shifting with each new generation. By the focus on people, how we collect and the data we are registrating in combination with the way we share our collection to the public is how we try to do this.

Conclusion

Curating war demands ethical awareness, emotional intelligence, and methodological innovation. At the In Flanders Fields Museum, war heritage is not confined to the battlefield or the archive; it extends into landscapes, rituals, and communities. The museum’s collection policy reflects an ongoing commitment to inclusivity, polyphony, and critical reflection — acknowledging that heritage is constructed, contested, and constantly evolving. By documenting not only the war itself, but also how it is remembered, felt, and represented, the museum affirms its role as a space of public dialogue and shared responsibility — curating the past with an eye toward the future.

ISBN 978-2-487970-26-7

AMSTERDAM×MUSEUM

imagine

ICOM international council of museums

CAMOC ICOM international committee for the collections and activities of museums of cities

COMCOL ICOM international committee for collecting