

Networking event ICOM CECA Belgium

KMSKA
2 March 2023





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Introduction

CECA, the Committee for Education and Cultural Action, is one of ICOM's oldest international committees and has more than 1,500 members across 85 countries. One of CECA's objectives is to promote and disseminate national and international developments around museum education.

In October 2021, CECA and ICOM Belgium, along with M Leuven, FARO, Bamm! and KU Leuven organised the annual international CECA conference. The conference was devoted to the theme of co-creation.

On 2 March 2023, 18 months later, CECA Belgium organised the first ever Belgian networking event, this time in partnership with ICOM Belgium, KMSKA (Museum for Fine Arts in Anwerp) and FARO, the Flemish Institution for Cultural Heritage. During this networking event, CECA members and other public employees from Belgium were able to get to know the renovated museum and, in particular, the KMSKA's public outreach and mediation projects. The programme was based around four themes: diversity, digital offerings, family programmes and accessibility. The aim of the networking event was to stimulate dialogue among colleagues, exchange examples and ideas and share new insights.

This publication summarises a few insights and reports from that exciting day and which we want to share with the network, both nationally and internationally.

Thank you to all the participants for their enthusiasm and especially also to all the partners who made the organisation of this networking event possible: ICOM Belgium, KMSKA and FARO, the Flemish Institution for Cultural Heritage.

— Stéphanie Masuy & Sofie Vermeiren
National correspondents for CECA Belgium

1. Each member country has one or two national correspondents who act as the contact point for CECA members. For Belgium, these are Stéphanie Masuy, Head of Public Affairs at the Museum of Ixelles (for the museums in Wallonia-Brussels) and Sofie Vermeiren, Head of Public Affairs at M Leuven (for the museums in Flanders). Their role as correspondents is to exchange expertise with ICOM Belgium and CECA. They ensure that information flows about CECA's resources and activities (such as via www.facebook.com/ICOM.CECA.Belgium). They also help publicise innovative mediation practices being developed in Belgium and abroad. You can reach Stéphanie at stephanie.masuy@ixelles.brussels and Sofie at sofie.vermeiren@mleuven.be.

Testimonial

Enjoyment at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp
— Nicole Gesché-Koning

On 2 March 2023, CECA Belgium organised its national networking event. It was a joyful, inspiring, and enriching day for all participants.

Six months after its reopening, the 'finest museum' ('schoonste gevoel' / 'le plus beau musée'), as it calls itself - using the superlative of 'schoon' (schone kunsten: fine arts) throughout its new communication - is certainly an appropriate and precise definition for the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, which ambitions to "shine through in everything it organizes, does and represents: a positive emotion that truly affects people". A museum which "connects across generations and cultures, amazes and challenges visitors, enriching them through an inspiring approach on a human scale for the pleasure of all." (<https://kmska.be/en/about-kmska>)

What a delight it is to see the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (KMSKA) benefit from such a well-thought-out renovation where the public and the works of art seem to be working in harmony. This professional visit was organised as part of the study day of CECA Belgium in collaboration with the KMSKA, ICOM Belgium and FARO, the Flemish Institution for Cultural Heritage. For many participants it was their first visit to the renewed museum, which reopened in September 2022 after more than ten years of closure. The tour was specially designed to explore the museum's many mediation and interpretation facilities by addressing the following four themes: diversity, multimedia, family programmes and accessibility.

During the visit, what strikes at first sight is the communicative enthusiasm of the staff and the passion they have, not only for enhancing and preserving the museum's fabulous collection, but also for sharing as widely as possible their love of art and the emotions it can arouse in each of us. "Het schoonste gevoel" is precisely the museum's motto. This "graceful feeling" can be interpreted as a deep sense of well-being encompassing emotion, appreciation, pleasure, delight, amusement - all of which emerge immediately from the visit. As a result of this positive DNA, the museum records a high level of attendance, as it was the case during our visit: the entrance hall was filled with school groups, guided tours and other visitors. If you are still not sure about the success of the reopening, the figures do not lie: around 400,000 people visited the KMSKA between September 2022 and February 2023.

Daring choices

A certain willingness to take risks has proved to be successful at all levels. Starting with the building itself, which restoration was able to integrate past, present and future by preserving the building's envelope - thus respecting the original architecture - but inserting a new modern volume into the old courtyards - a solution already used at the Louvre or the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, for example. The ancient and modern collections are displayed in a new, perfectly designed space. The photographs of Karin Borghouts make it possible to follow the transformation of the museum step by step in the temporary exhibition 'The Making Of'.

A museum focusing on education

The KMSKA has brilliantly succeeded in placing public education at the centre of its project by addressing an astonishing variety of visitors, from the layman to families ('The 10'), to the visually impaired and the blind ('Radio Bart'), through the artist that lies behind each of us by inviting the public to draw or to be creative ('I can't draw', 'Creative at heart' or 'Fancy a challenge?' projects). The layout of the museum itself, the multimedia proposals (touch screens, VR experience, app...), but also the voluntarily very accessible labels are also part of the rich panel of mediation devices. While the museum has opted for bilingual texts (NL-EN) for the sake of general readability, an application offers comments in ten languages (including sign language).

The 10

Designed for children and their families, this fabulous and adventurous trail attracts all visitors intrigued by Christophe Coppens' ten amazing installations. In collaboration with the Opera House in Brussels La Monnaie/De Munt, the artist has selected ten details from different paintings. These have been sublimated into ten bold installations, inviting the visitor to look at art differently. Although some art critics consider these installations horrible, out of place and outrageous, one must confess that even if the task was risky, the result is truly convincing. Imagine in the Rubens Hall, in between two pompous traditional cardinal red velvet benches, a huge dromedaries sofa replicating a detail of Rubens' *Adoration of the Magi* (1624)! Or the amazing hand which rotates and seems to fall from the ceiling, reproducing a detail of Marinus van Reymerswale's *Saint Jerome* (1541). Not only do you easily spot the painting the installation is referring to, you also spontaneously start looking at all the hands in the surrounding paintings and beyond. Finding out which of Joachim Patinir's small painting has inspired Coppens's enormous rock set in the middle of the room requires a curious eye. But how joyful then to enter this huge detail of the *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* (1516-1517). And did you spot the fly? Is it a detail of Willem van Aelst's *Fruit and a Glass of Wine* (1659), the Master of Frankfurt's



The Painter and his Wife (1496) or another painting? Children and all interested visitors may discover the ten humorous installations along with a free booklet (18.510 distributed up until January 2023). One certainly learns a lot!

Radio Bart

Have you ever really seen all the details of a painting? By sitting next to Bart, a blind museum employee in his mobile radio studio, people are invited to closely look at one work for at least ten minutes. This experience, available two days per week (has already seduced 659 visitors between September 2022 and March 2023). Building on this success, Bart trained three new visually impaired colleagues to invite visitors to explore the world of an artwork from a new and unexpectedly rich perspective.

"While describing the painting, I saw new things I wouldn't have seen otherwise. It was really liberating."

— Dorien, participant *"The Finest Hundred"*

"It was a fascinating experience. I found the invitation to describe a work in such a way that a non-sighted person can still imagine the image special, challenging and enriching. It also made me feel safe that no prior art historical knowledge was required of me."

— Patrick, participant *"The Finest Hundred"*

Ironing in Rik Wouters' time and nowadays – Multimedia is everywhere.

Two screens set in front of Rik Wouters' *Woman ironing* (1912) invite the public to see the painting through different perspectives: for example, by watching video interviews of two young boys, a curator and a lady working in an iron office. The screen also invites you to play with the painting: you may change the incidence of light, shape, or color. Diving into the masterpieces thanks to these in-depth screens attracts many visitors. In another part of the museum, one can also enter a real old masters' painting studio through virtual reality, and in a big immersive space, visitors merge into large scale projections of surprising details.



Entertainment

People do like to let themselves go occasionally. Some painters specialized in scenes of unrestrained behaviour. Men and women rolling on the floor fighting, or enjoying a drink or two or perhaps each other. Such scenes showed decorous citizens what they were not supposed to do.

As well as painters of history pieces, there were painters of alehouse scenes, brothel scenes and colourful festive scenes. These representations also drew the interest of rich bourgeois ladies and gentlemen. Though they may have been lacking in restraint, too, they had to condemn that sort of behaviour. The paintings serve as an example. You can read them as lessons in wisdom, moderation or love. But secretly, citizens would also steal a laugh at them. Rather like today's brazen reality television.

Last but not least: allowed to laugh and enjoy unusual settings

Works of the collection are not presented in a chronological order. Grouped by theme, the emphasis has been set on a series of short texts easy to understand. And why not decide to hang a painting portraying drunk people slightly side wise? But what if a visitor touches the painting, wanting to put it back straight? Worth taking the risk for the pleasure of watching the smile on the visitors' faces upon seeing the artwork.

Creativity to enjoy

Every visitor is invited to interact artistically with the museum: by using the drawing material put at disposal throughout the museum or attending the Open Studio open to all. In the latter, you are invited to create your own collages and discover the magic of colors and shapes or the importance of movements. A mediator is available at all times to create links between your creation and works from the museum's collection.

Conclusion

"How nice, as a parent of a visually impaired child, to not feel for once that we are coming back from a barren trip. We have visited many museums, zoos and other attractions where she saw little to nothing because "the objects" were too far or in poorly lit areas. You play not only with light and dark but also with color, sound, textures and structures."

— Lisa, through Instagram

In times of fear for the world's future, thank you to this "finest museum" for aiming at reaching as many audiences as possible, making sure that each visitor gets the feeling of being welcomed, and for offering us a truly inspiring day. Our experience has confirmed that the KMSKA is "more than just a showcase for art": a place full of magic where it is up to us to come and cultivate our capacity for wonder.

Report from the discussion on “Diversity”

Everyone needs to get involved with diversity in the museum!

The discussion started with a presentation of the museum's diversity policy by Sophie Verbeke and Dennis Marien, members of the KMSKA public mediation team.

When KMSKA was closed, a working group was set up with representatives from the museum's various departments to develop a common strategy around diversity, accessibility and inclusion.

The starting point was to take stock of the various existing initiatives and define common objectives. Then, based on the budget they developed an action plan that contained priorities and which was integrated into the museum's overall strategic plan.

Discussion and main ideas from participants

The discussion led the participants (one French-speaking and one Dutch-speaking group) to share their thoughts/recommendations around encouraging diversity within a museum.

Take the risk of shifting the lines of the traditional institutional framework.

Diversity starts at the museum. This means developing hierarchical relationships that are fair within the museum institution. The people in charge of mediation, audiences or relations with the museum community (community builders) are still too often go unnoticed or are only involved at the end.

If we want to broaden our target audience and give space to new initiatives, we also need to empower people who up until now have been left behind.

Listen to the audience

Be humble: “We are not the visitors”, we should not assume we know what they want. Talk to them, test, co-create and take recommendations from of different types of audiences into account.

Provide a warm welcome

A warm and personal welcome is crucial. This includes specific support for people who are less familiar with the museum or have accessibility issues.

Differentiate in approach

Prioritise:

- A wider range of profiles/skills for mediators: training, wider recruitment of minority groups, better integration into the museum's permanent team, ...
- more inclusive and diversified discourse: not assuming the object at all costs, the visitor's interest as a starting point, ...
- more flexible opening hours: night events with special programming, ..
- varied use of the museum: a space where people feel comfortable, a meeting place and social mix, ...
- free admission, prices adjusted to the needs of visitors
- multiple programmes and activities: interdisciplinary, co-creative, participatory, multi-sensory, ...
- meetings with drinks or food that can create a sense of community.



Report from the discussion on Family Programmes

An Van Hertum, who is responsible for families as part of the KMSKA's public mediation team, explained how the museum opted for a trail with large objects on display specifically for families with children aged 6 to 12. This was a bold choice because the objects take up a lot of explicit space and are very present for all to see. The course was called 'De 10'.

The objects were designed by Belgian artist Christophe Coppens. The installations are enlargements of remarkable, amusing or bizarre details in paintings. The children can then go looking for the paintings in question. Together with the artist, the museum chose ten details to elaborate on. There is a (free) booklet with illustrations by Coppens accompanying the trail. The booklet includes quite a few blank pages because the museum really wants to encourage children to look and draw.

Key concerns for the museum in developing this family trail were:

Support base

Support is needed from colleagues and to this end, a working group was set up with employees from various departments. Everyone was invited to the table to prepare the installations together with Christophe Coppens. Even more colleagues were involved during lunch presentations and they helped become ambassadors of the project. But it also needed support from the (future) public. The museum therefore tested extensively with the test panel of hundred people "De Schoonste Honderd".

Quality

The museum needed more than just altarpieces by Rubens that could fill this role. That is why they choose to work with Christophe Coppens. He has extensive experience with tactile objects and fabrics, trained as a theatre maker, directed an opera at La Monnaie ... He managed to bring materials and colours into the room in a balanced way, and also managed to make the objects disappear into the room despite their size. Coppens created the installations in collaboration with the Monnaie Theatre's studio in Brussels as they have a huge amount of craftsmanship.

The facilities will remain on site permanently for the next five years. Five of them are in the old section, and five in the new one. If there are changes in the collection, then replicas will be managed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this group highlighted the following around developing family programmes in museums:

- Family programmes will only be successful if they are supported by the management, as well as by all museum departments and staff.
- Reception staff and heritage custodians also play a crucial role in welcoming families, so it is important to involve them too, providing them with training and information and engaging with them to find solutions together.
- Collaboration with external partners can provide a renewed, fresh perspective.
- Collaboration and co-creation with children have a clear added value when developing specific tools such as audio tours for families.
- To ensure a successful offer, it is crucial to run trials.
- Provide programmes or offerings that families can engage with themselves, that way a facilitator is not always needed, as museums need to consider not only attracting visitors but also how many they can cope with.



Report from the discussion on Multimedia

Veerle De Meester, Manager of Exhibitions at KMSKA, clarifies the choices the museum made in the process towards the development of multimedia on display. The museum focused on two core principles:

- digital applications must have a clear added value for the visitor and thus contribute to the experience;
the collection/content is always the starting point in all digital applications.
- During the development, the museum had four types of visitors in mind: the enthusiast, the 'young parent', the hipster and the child.

Around them, the following applications were designed:

VR

In the VR room, the museum uses VR glasses to show what Rubens' painting studio would have looked like in his time. With this application, the museum targets families and young people but it works for all visitors. The reception staff has the job of every morning checking that the VR glasses are in working order. The material does suffer due to the heavy use. The museum also partly relies on external expertise to help with technical issues.

Immersive experience space

This space offers a moving projection of four particular details from paintings on the walls of the room. There is an accompanying soundscape. This gives visitors a way to look more closely at details; but this room is also perceived as a resting point in the course around the museum. The application was chosen with families in mind but here too, almost all visitors seem to enjoy this feature. Technical production and execution involve many different parties which means that follow-up requires a lot of attention.

In-depth screens on room

These screens were devised for enthusiasts who want more information about a work; but ultimately any audience can use them. Thanks to the four coloured buttons, the visitor gets to a different type of info each time. The red button leads to content, the blue button provides information that Google cannot give us (that is, more in-depth), the yellow button gives a voice to different people and perspectives that talk about the work (because a wider audience needs a variety of voices), and the green button leads to a game or animation.

App

The app offers various tours, texts in multiple languages, audio clips and more. The app also lets visitors indicate their favourite works. The museum has found that not all visitors find the app easy to work with. People can certainly visit the museum without using the app, but it does offer extra features. Visitors who do not have their own device can borrow one, but the museum does not really actively promote this because it means a lot of extra work for the staff at the reception desk. The KMSKA itself can add and change things in the app. All the texts have also been written in-house. The museum made a comparative study of apps beforehand in order to make the best possible app. In time, the plan is to have visitors help evaluate the app.

In addition, the museum also developed mutoscopes (a 19th century device in a digital package and made in collaboration with a woodworking department from a technical school in Antwerp), a donor screen at the reception desk (which gives visibility to important donors to the museum), and Ensor screens (which contain considerable amounts of information about the research the museum conducts).

The museum collaborated with production house De Chinezen for the development of the on-screen multimedia and the app was created by the developer of KMSKA's website. Everything was extensively tested by the test panel of De Schoonste Honderd.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this group highlighted the following around developing digital applications in museums:

- A strong vision and digital strategy, supported by management, are needed.
- Bring different departments and partners together as different views only make the application better and, in addition, you also create (internal) support along the way.
- It is important to maintain this well as applications stand or fall by users being able to use them.



Report from the discussion Accessibility

The KMSKA Case: Accessible Language

An Sijsmans, member of the KMSKA public mediation team, explains that the museum's hall texts are the result of a collaboration between the departments for collection research and public affairs. Short and powerful museum texts (no more than 60 words for object texts, no more than 120 words for hall texts). The target group that they had in mind was the recreational user: +13 years, not a connoisseur, a passer-by, a non-specialist visitor. In short, the general public. They found inspiration in a booklet published by Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum (Marleen van Soest and Annemarie Vels Heijn, *Kort en krachtig – 50 tips voor goede museumteksten*).

In addition to these short museum texts, the museum also offers tours using the museum app. De Hoogtepuntentour (the Highlights), for example, delves deeper into 25 works. There is also a more extensive tour if you want even more. Both tours are inclusive and suitable for both sighted and non-sighted visitors, allowing them to talk about their visit together. Just as the room texts, the audio clips were kept concise (no more than two minutes). They start from a short description to which some context is then added to keep it interesting for the accompanying person too. There is also the option of Flemish Sign Language or International Sign Language in the app's language menu. The deaf community in Antwerp was consulted and they expressed a preference for videos in sign language displayed on their own smartphones.

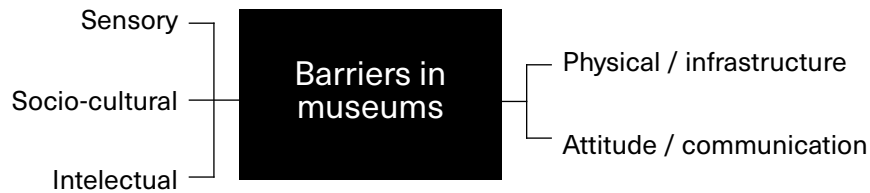
There have to date been no surveys around the other forms of audience guidance and it is at this point too early for feedback. This will be provided at a later stage.

The collaboration between the public operations team and the rest of the museum captured the imagination of the other workshop participants. This is not the something that all museums do and it was seen as very positive.

Accessibility: a broad concept

A second part of the discussion looked at possible barriers in museums for certain target groups. Using the diagram below (from M Leuven), the different thresholds were scrutinised and discussed.

Experiences about these thresholds were shared and many museums recognised a number of issues. Participants agreed that regular training of employees is crucial. Especially around the reception of visitors with special needs and the presentation of the offer that has been developed for them. It is not only reception staff that needs training but also guides, heritage guardians, volunteers.



Decision

Based on the interesting examples and discussions, the group came up with three recommendations.

1. Inclusive work benefits everyone

It should be possible for everyone to use adjustments to texts and other mediation tools. Clear signage is useful for everyone, quiet/calm areas is something many kinds of visitors can appreciate. Therefore, starting from a specific target group and work from there is a great way to work.

2. Attention to accessibility is a shared responsibility

The entire museum must work with accessibility, not just the departments that work with the public. A charter can help. It is a shared responsibility for all the staff.

3. The importance of training

Training around accessibility and welcome is important for all staff. That builds support and involvement. It is also important that specialists are hired to run these courses.



Colophon

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