

# Legacy and *Perestroika*

## Changes in museums at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s

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### *Summary*

The second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s was among the most cataclysmic periods in the history of museums in Estonia. The critical changes that occurred during the Baltic revolution also had an effect on the cultural sphere, which experienced major changes on the institutional, imagological and ideological levels. This article concentrates on problems of museums – how the meaning and role of memory institutions changed in society, the most important cultural and political steps in the area, and what the museums did to maintain their active position during the period of change. The architectural competitions organised during this period, as well as the problems associated with the construction of museum buildings, have not been covered in the article.

The era of *perestroika* was a monumental period of redefining history, allowing museums to write a new history discourse and reveal several previously undisclosed areas in the museum environment. This period is marked by the opening of the Revolution Museum of the Estonian SSR, as well as the first exhibitions of national history. However, the rapid changes in society inevitably brought about some difficult times for the memory institutions by the beginning of the 1990s, which in turn led the society to question how reasonable it was to maintain museums.

The entire society was repositioned in only a few years, thus thoroughly changing the cultural hierarchy and values which had been in place previously. Changes in the cultural policy also became apparent after 1987. However, building a new system on top of the Soviet-style centralised and censored cultural policy was difficult, as no-one concentrated on cultural policy – including museum policy – at the turn of the decade, in the conventional sense, which gradually led to the deterioration of the reputation of the culture in general. While at the end of the 1980s, the notions of supporting culture and sustaining the emerging state of Estonia were almost synonymous, once independence was re-established, the culture lost much of its central appeal and, at the beginning of the 1990s, politicians tended to value statehood over cultural issues.

Simultaneously, the difficult times required an increase in investments, as the museums were in desperate need of modernisation. Sadly, this was only possible by using the museums' own resources. The state also failed to initiate the creation of a new history narrative (for example, in the form of an occupation museum or a museum concentrating

on the history of the 20th century), which was accomplished in several other countries of the Eastern Bloc. However, a plan was beginning to emerge, in the financial forecasts of the first half of the 1990s, to construct new buildings for the Art Museum of Estonia and the Estonian National Museum in the near future. Several museums were closed down during this period, especially the more ideological and self-initiative based museums. The period of increasing support for culture ended with the emergence of the market economy and, above all, the monetary reform of 1992. The number of museum visitors also significantly decreased at the beginning of the 1990s.

These years brought about some significant ideological changes in museums. In December 1987, the Revolution Museum was established in Estonia as a branch of the State History Museum of the Estonian SSR. It was a typical Soviet-style revolution museum, and aimed to interpret all topics from the standpoint of ideology. It is, nonetheless, possible to observe clear changes in the exposition that occurred over the period 1985–1987, in the course of clarifying the exposition plan. In 1987, the initial scheme was supplemented by contemporary events, the most significant of which were, for example, the visit of Gorbachev, the phosphorite issue, the national heritage movement and the focus on the deportation of 1949. The changes were in perfect compliance with the principles of uncovering history, which were generally pursued during the Gorbachev era. Whatever took place in society was also evident in the museum halls.

During the Singing Revolution period, the ideas of nationality and national culture emerged in the focus

on interpreting the past. An entirely new concept of history was developed around the notions of nationality and national identity and, in turn, this brought about some changes in the general identity of memory institutions.

Clearly, there was a need for new myths, which was eventually achieved by attempts at contrast with the exposition typology of the Soviet era. The transition was naturally gradual, being faster for temporary exhibitions and permanent displays presenting the 20th century, and considerably slower for permanent exhibitions of older periods.

During the course of only a few years, a new exhibition language was evolved around the national paradigm. While the expositions of Soviet-time history museums revolved around class struggle and economic relations, the national paradigm was mostly based on the fight of the nation for its spiritual and political independence, through which the preservation of the nation became the centre of the narrative.

At the end of the 1980s, museum expositions were dominated by a strong focus on the past, which emphasised the wish of the people to get back everything that they once had, whether that be the values of the former period of prosperity, any previously banned subjects or hidden stashes. The exhibitions of this period were characterised by a holistic approach to history, a strong sense of self-centredness and a rather narrative and postulating manner of representation, supported by the principle of clear identification and contrast. It is fair to say that these principles remained valid until the beginning of the 21st century, and are partially in force even today.

A breakthrough came in 1989, when museums massively started to display the national history of Estonia. That year brought about an explosion of exhibitions on the topic of national history. The first exhibition to reflect the new history discourse and the story of the Republic of Estonia was 'Three-Coloured Estonia', at the Estonian History Museum, in the Great Guild Hall. It was an exhibition based on permanent collections, displaying items from the times of the Republic of Estonia. The exhibition caused a small emotional storm among the public, as a result of which hundreds of exhibits from the time of the Republic found their way to the museum.

Another major exhibition was related to national art, which was a field of significant public interest back then. During the course of the 'Baltica '89' folklore festival, the Estonian National Museum organised the biggest temporary exhibition of all time, 'The National Art of Finno-Ugric Peoples', in cooperation with the national museums of Finland, Hungary, Mari, Udmurtia, Mordva, Komi and Karelia. During the following years, national culture became one of the most important topics of conversation, and touched almost all Estonians in one way or another. This period was also the peak of sewing national costumes and collecting national heritage in Estonia. In addition to the national culture, the Estonian National Museum also started to concentrate on new issues in the first half of the 1990s, changing the general identity of the institution from an ethnographic museum to a memory institution engaged in cultural anthropology and research. Recruitment of new employees also brought the notions of everyday life, home and family into

the spotlight of research – in the 1990s, the new values turned the Estonian National Museum into a research centre on the everyday life of the 20th century.

There was strong public interest in the history of Estonia at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. In addition to museums, this need was fed by the press, citizens' movements and new publications of historical literature – these three channels became the most important sources of information that interested the society the most in the 1990s. During that brief period of time, memories became extremely important to Estonians, contributing to the emergence of a new national and political identity. This period peaked at the end of the 1980s.

However, rapid changes in the society brought memory institutions to a very difficult position. The crisis was caused by numerous economic, museological and ideological issues. Sociability and social activity were contradictory due to the previous emphasis on ideology, which is why the role of museums as active and attractive intermediaries was left without any significant public support. Failure to actively relate to the community seriously deteriorated the relationship of memory institutions to the general public. It took years for museums to start to gradually re-establish their position in society.

*Translated by Urmas Pail  
proof-read by Richard Adang*