



Interview with a Passionate man: Michel Draguet

Director-General of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium



What is it like being the CEO of such great museums?

It is a huge challenge because about 700 people are working in this place with an incredible collection present in the museums. There are 10 federal institutions amongst which 3 are about space: the Royal Institute of Meteorology, the Royal Observatory, and the Institute for Space Aeronomy. The others include the Royal Library, the State Archives, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, the Royal Museum of Art and History, the Royal Institute of Artistic Patrimony, the Museum of Natural Sciences, Museum of Central Africa. It is a challenge to transform and bring together all museums making it the center of attention. Brussels is the capital of Europe but Belgians are not aware of the richness of this patrimony. However, we have a huge heritage and we need to show it to greater public.

Could you highlight some of the most important collections of the museums?

We have very rare artifacts. Our museums host some of the most amazing collections in the world. We are one of the first in the world for having Japanese prints. We also have one of the top collections coming from Fiji, very important for the world's cultural and historical heritage. The collection for Africa was so huge that we have created a special museum dedicated to this continent. As Director of the Museums, my task is to

manage this patrimony, to multiply and to initiate new events that put the collections in the spotlight.

What is the most challenging part of moving the museums forward?

I think, for the future, the most important challenge is to be connected to the technological revolution. If I compare it with the musical world, a part of the music industry was destroyed, but now there have been adaptations which brought the music industry back on track. In the olden times, music was played on a gramophone with a big black disc, but today everything is digitalized. As for the museums, the technology and the multimedia systems is also a challenge, because there are positive and negative issues. The positive attributes are that we could get more information, more contexts, more ways to make known the etymology, the art, the patrimony, the heritage to the people. The negative aspect is that you can find a lot of informations on the Internet without going to the museum. This creates income problems. If one is not interested in the beauty of the work, but just in the information, it's easier to visit a museum website. Although, I believe that the destiny of museums will be similar to this of the music industry, where, at the beginning, there will be a lot of difficulties, but in the end, the adaptations will come to light and positive aspects will take over.

What is your vision for the museums?

The vision is not just to create a museum, but to mix strategies and organize exhibitions which produce the outcome of experience gaining. The museum must be an experience now!

How do you propose to implement your vision into reality?

It is easy to make a proposition but much more complicated to realize it. In Europe, we are in a deep structural crisis which raises the question about the future of the Union.



It is clear that we must invest in the future. Investment means returning to the basis of Europe, i.e., to the culture. I am talking here about the patrimony and its resources.

What are the missions of Belgian museums?

We have a classical mission, which means, conservation of patrimony. We are not the owners of the artwork, it belongs to future generation. A green policy is also actions with an important heritage because of its durability. People without culture are people without future. The second aspect is to learn about the past and its values to better understand the future. The third point is that we are an industry where entertainment is the key feature.

How successful have the museums been in its missions?

When I started my job in 2005, we had about 300,000 visitors annually. At present, this number almost doubled. One may doubt that a museum is more an company than an administration. There will be a huge exhibition in the USA from October 2013 to March 2014, and we will take a part in it. We will, thus, be more visible on the world's map. It's a challenge for the excellence of the collection and of the scientific research.

How do you see the future of these museums?

At the end of 2012, we will be opening a museum called "Fin de Siècle" ("Turn of the Century" Museum). It will exhibit the Belgium Modern Art between 1880 and 1914. In 2013, we will inaugurate another Contemporary Art museum, which will review the concept of modern and postmodern art, a real "cutting-edge lab" showing that there is another way to present the late 20th-century mastery.

In what way do these innovative ideas differ from other museums?

We work with the concept of an ideal museum. We changed the way of presenting a piece of art to the public using new technologies and other means. The "public" has been changed to "publics" and the "idea", to "ideas". Museum is the ultimate place where you can find every social level together. In this case, we need a new definition of a museum, which could convince people of the importance and uniqueness of the site. The identity of the museum is the identity of the project.

What about the museum holdings?

Some of the buildings are artist houses with ample collections of these creators. The highlights of our acquisitions are Flemish paintings, some 15th and 16th-century selections, amazing works of Rubens, etc. Dutch paintings are also in our possession, along with the late 19th and early 20th-century masterpieces. All these expositions are related to Brussels location and Brussels art history as a crossroad of the world genius development.

