

# Hémécht



## **Philippe Moulin**

Lehnsrecht, Lehnspolitik und Lehnshof der Grafen von Luxemburg im 13. Jh. (1. Teil)

## **Max Schmitz**

Eine unbekannte Urkunde des Markgrafen Jost von Mähren (1402)

## **Michel Pauly**

Das Zinsregister der Luxemburger Deutschordenskommende von 1457-1458

## **Christine de Léotard-Sommer**

Le *Bacchus et Vénus* du MNHA de Luxembourg et la Galerie de Fontainebleau

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**Laurence BRASSEUR, Decentring the Museum: Examining Young People's Perceptions and Experiences from a Sociocultural Perspective.** PhD thesis in Museum Studies, University of Leicester 2019; supervised by Prof. Richard Sandell.

The relationship between young people and museums has been a topic of discussion since the late 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The growing importance of audience-centred approaches and inclusionary practices has certainly played a part in fostering an interest in the subject. For decades now, museums have steadily developed their programmes and offers aimed at young people. Simultaneously, on a more theoretical level, research has sought to develop our comprehension of young people's needs and wants with regard to museums. Despite all these developments, however, some museums still find it challenging to engage with young people. Furthermore, the debate surrounding this relationship is often underpinned by generalizations about young people, such as a presumed lack of interest in or involvement with museums.

These presuppositions are unhelpful in that they impede our thinking about young people and museums. Previous research has principally investigated the subject from a perspective that takes museums as the starting point. Therefore, this thesis fills the gap in our knowledge by focusing on the relationship from the perspective of young people and drawing on literature beyond museum studies to critique existing assumptions. The thesis actively decentres the museum: theoretically,

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, young people are defined as individuals between the ages of 12 and 21, which equates to the age range of the participants in the study.

by using an interdisciplinary framework that relies especially on youth studies; and practically, by conducting fieldwork outside museums in settings that start with young people and their everyday lives. The premise was that by taking this approach, it would be possible to investigate the power inequalities that underlie the relationship between young people and museums – an issue that can only be fully examined at a distance from the museum as an institution.

The thesis addresses the following research questions:

- How do young people perceive, understand and experience museums?
- Which emotions do young people associate with museums and museum visits?
- Can museums genuinely be relevant to young people?
- What roles do the issues of power, representation and access play in the relationship between young people and museums?

The thesis starts by exploring the literature on young people and museums. The first part of the review investigates the subject from a museological point of view, in which two main discourses are identified. These centre around, firstly, the development of educational provision for young people, and secondly, the inclusion of young people in terms of representation and participation. However, the museological approach to the subject quickly reveals its limits. Therefore, the second part of the critical literature review examines young people's museum experiences from a broader perspective. By drawing on literature from such diverse fields as youth studies, cultural studies, sociology and law, the thesis locates these experiences in their wider social and cultural context. It becomes clear that young people are affected by social and cultural power imbalances.

In the research underpinning this thesis, the conceptual and methodological frameworks were closely related. Indeed, the methodology of this study not only helped to answer the research questions but also contributed to the research aims by filling some methodological gaps. Thus, the 'decentring the museum' perspective was applied to position this study in both theoretical and methodological terms. The methodological approach was influenced by grounded theory and ethnography, as this made it possible to generate rich data and construct theories in close connection to the data. For example, many of the concepts drawn upon in the theoretical part of the thesis originated during the fieldwork with young people; that is, they were rooted in the participants' own accounts of their wider museum experiences.

The fieldwork was conducted outside museums, in places where young people would feel comfortable and would not be compelled to participate (as they probably would have been in a school setting). Youth clubs appeared to be a natural choice, as they permitted the participation of young people from a variety of backgrounds and with different relationships to museums. Youth clubs in Luxembourg, in particular, offered an interesting and rich context for the investigation. An ethical and empathetic approach to the research and the participants was of prime importance.

Between March and May 2016, I conducted five focus groups in five different youth clubs, with a total of twenty-four participants aged between 12 and 21. The focus groups were held in various parts of the country to reflect the diversity (in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomic status) of Luxembourgish society. The discussions were semi-structured and mostly non-directive. A major characteristic of focus groups is that they foster and rely upon an exchange between the participants. Discussions can get very lively, and different participants may hold different views on a specific subject; thus, the researcher is able to collect a range of perspectives and experiences. Although it is important to be mindful of the questions to be covered during the sessions, the researcher should be flexible enough to follow unexpected turns in the conversation, as these can reveal new areas of interest.

The thesis discusses the findings and answers the research questions in two stages. In stage one, young people's views and experiences are explored from a museological standpoint. This perspective highlights the variety of interests and needs of the focus-group participants, and the complexity of their views about museums. For example, many of the participants' museum perceptions were centred on the institutions being places for learning – in the broadest sense of the term. Most importantly, learning, play and entertainment were thought to be intimately connected, building on and reinforcing each other to create relevant experiences.

In addition, the focus groups revealed the diversity and even tensions that underlie the ways in which young people interact with museums. This was apparent in the images that the participants had of museums. For example, the participants recognized the importance of museums and thought that these institutions were, in theory at least, for everyone to enjoy (irrespective of age or level of education, for example). On a practical level, however, museums were not seen as places that were designed with young people in mind. A further polarity can be found in the participants' notion of the museum as a place for being with others and as a place for being alone. Most participants saw museums as social places; that is, places that they like to visit with friends, family or a partner to share experiences and exchange impressions. At the same time, many participants emphasized the need for autonomy during their visits. They stated that they would rather visit in a small group (with one or two friends or relatives) than in a larger group (such as the school), which they considered to be too constraining. In addition to longing for solitary moments during group visits, the participants related that visiting museums on their own made it possible to engage with the content on a deeper level and to have restorative experiences.

In stage two of the thesis, the discussion moves away from a purely museological approach to young people and museums in order to focus on the wider social processes that underlie the relationship. Firstly, the analysis shows that museums have the potential to be relevant to young people and suggests that relevance is indeed important, as this may play a role in making visits memorable. However, it also reiterates that young people need to be viewed as individuals with different

backgrounds, needs and wants, rather than as an undifferentiated group. Secondly, the investigation reveals that the relationship between young people and museums looks different if attention is turned to how young people (rather than museums or adults) experience it. For example, the focus groups highlighted that young people and museums potentially operate in very different cultural contexts. This becomes particularly apparent in the finding that cultural, rather than structural, barriers affect young people's engagement. The cultural gap that was most obvious in the participants' descriptions related to museums' communication and advertising. In addition, the analysis shows that museums (and society) may have different understandings from those of young people about what constitutes 'culture', 'participation' and 'engagement'. Therefore, rather than relying on stereotypes and claims about young people lacking interest in culture and museums, the notions and definitions themselves should be called into question.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the thesis reveals how power imbalances affect the relationship between young people and museums, particularly by creating barriers to access. These inequalities exist not only between museums and young people, but also between facilitators of visits and young people. For the focus-group participants, the school is a particular source of tension. The didactic nature and teacher-centred approach of certain school trips, and the fact that these trips are compulsory, act as barriers to engagement. Apart from creating hurdles, enforced museum visits (and other compulsory activities in the museum) pose ethical questions with regard to young people's right to express their opinion and make decisions. Indeed, depending on the context, the denial of choice may testify to a paternalistic and patronizing attitude rather than a respectful and empathetic approach towards young people. The thesis also reveals that young people may feel disempowered when visiting museums. Some of the focus-group participants reported that museums intimidated them in various ways and made them feel uncomfortable. In addition to the fear of not knowing or not understanding, participants experienced the fear of not having the right to belong. In other words, some young people thought that it was normal not to have the right to belong in the museum if they did not know or understand.

In conclusion, the findings have a number of implications for museum practice and research. On a practical level, they expand our knowledge about young people's relations with museums. On a broader level, they have significant implications for the understanding of how power operates in the relationship between young people and museums. Therefore, the thesis makes the case that it is important for museums and facilitators to acknowledge the diversity of young people, value their points of view, and respect their autonomy and freedom of choice.