

technopolis |group|

*July 2017*

# Evaluation of the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH)

---

## **Management Summary**



# Evaluation of the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH)

## Management Summary

technopolis |group| July 2017

Max Meijer, TiMe Amsterdam

Anke Nooijen, Technopolis Group

Loïc Perroud, Technopolis Group

Viola Peter, Technopolis Group

Jasper Schipper, Technopolis Group

Chiel Scholten, Technopolis Group

Geert van der Veen, Technopolis Group

Judith Vermeer, Technopolis Group

Commissioned and funded by the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO)

# Summary

---

This evaluation report presents the findings of Technopolis Group and TiMe Amsterdam in the evaluation of the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH) in Brussels, one of the Federal Scientific Institutes (FSIs) of Belgium. Technopolis Group performed the evaluation in the period April 2016 - March 2017, upon commission by the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO).

The objective of the evaluation was an integral assessment of the scientific-, service- and museum- functions of the RMAH. The evaluation was based upon a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods; a key component was the review by a panel of international experts.

## Background

The RMAH are one of ten Belgian Federal Scientific Institutes under the responsibility of the State Secretary for Science Policy. This means that the RMAH have their own management, but no separate legal entity. They are part of the Belgian State.

In the near future BELSPO and the FSIs will face major changes. BELSPO, currently a separate administration, will be integrated as a Directorate General into the department of Economic Affairs. The FSIs, currently part of BELSPO, are likely to become autonomous organisations. However, at present these decisions have not yet been realised and no concrete timeline for this has been agreed upon.

The main tasks of the RMAH on an operational level will however remain the same: the management and exploitation of its large arts and history collection and delivering science and scientific services.

The formal governmental position and the tasks of the RMAH are laid down in a Royal Decree. The assignment is since 2008 defined in the revised article 1 of the Royal Decree on the Federal Scientific Institutes, which states:

*“The Federal Scientific Institutes fulfill entirely or partially tasks that concern scientific research, scientific expertise, experimental development, preservation and valorisation of their patrimony or provide services to third parties and more particularly for the Belgian research community as a whole. They additionally provide services that are associated to these tasks”.*

The RMAH do not have a clearly defined mission statement that specifies the impact that the Institute aims to achieve. The current mission was indicated by RMAH’s staff as:

*“to bridge the gap between scientific research and the wider public, whereby the museum gathers and shares new knowledge in its presentations and productions for public inspiration, learning and enjoyment.”*

The management goals for the next three years (until 2018) are set in the RMAH’s Management Agreement with BELSPO, with focus on:

- Research at an internationally acknowledged level on the RMAH's collections and in the research domains of the institution with the aim to share the acquired scientific knowledge.
- Preserving, extending, and keeping an inventory of the collection of the RMAH and, if needed, restore objects according to Unesco guidelines, as well as maximize the number of objects accessible to the public.
- Sharing the scientifically acquired knowledge of the museum, through varying initiatives, with the government in the context of policymaking, the scientific community in the context of knowledge exchange and the general public in the context of education.
- Managing the collections by means of a digital collections database.

Currently the organizational and management structure of the RMAH is subject of internal reorganisation. Driver is the General Director's ambition to proceed towards a more efficient, effective and dynamic institute, both in terms of input, throughput and output.

Change will be based on four priorities: a. saving the collection and buildings of the RMAH; b. improving the operational strength of the RMAH; c. maximizing the RMAH's public and scientific visibility; d. safeguarding the (inter)national scientific reputation of the RMAH.

Precondition is the implementation of a new organizational chart and subsequently the appointment of new staff functions. Until now four major departments (Antiquity, Decorative Arts, Archaeology and Non-European Civilisations, and Musical Instruments) all led by a department head, are the organizational backbone of the Institute. Each of these departments is subdivided into ten (collection related) units. Currently the organization is moving towards an organization focused on functional departments, clustering the science-, public- and services functions of the RMAH. Beside these output oriented clusters, generic functions are introduced through designated coordinator positions.

For the successful further implementation of the new organizational chart the need for management improvement is felt. The current Director General ad interim repeatedly requested for a full mandate and the appointment of senior staff to establish a more manageable span of control. The Science cluster, the Public cluster and the Services cluster, therefore should be managed by Operational Directors. Due to the lack of funds the RMAH could not appoint these executives. The consequence is that the General Director is currently line-manager of all 17 coordinators/heads of services. Consequently, all problems land directly on the desk of the current Director General ad interim, which in practice proves to be unmanageable.

### **The venues**

The RMAH consist of four museums:

- The *Cinquantenaire Museum*, the main museum located in the Parc du Cinquantenaire, presenting the vast collections of artefacts from prehistoric times with a strong emphasis on Antiquity, European applied art and non-European art.
- The *Halle Gate Museum* presenting the history of the tower and the city of Brussels in medieval times.

- The *Musical Instruments Museum* (MIM) focuses on Belgian musical history, European and non-European instruments and their musical traditions. It is located in the centre of Brussels on the Hofberg (Montagne de la Cour) in the former Art Nouveau department 'Old England'.
- And finally, the historic buildings (currently closed for renovations) housing the *Museums of the Far East*: the Japanese Tower, the Chinese Pavilion and the Museum for Japanese Art, all clustered at Laeken.

Furthermore, the *Temple of Human Passions* - a pavilion in the Jubelpark (Parc du Cinquantenaire), also called the *Horta-Lambeaux Pavilion* - is managed by the RMAH as well.

All premises are state owned and maintained by the Federal Buildings Agency.

### **Resources**

The RMAH currently have five main sources of income. The BELSPO general dotation (a lump sum received annually to cover operational costs) and the BELSPO staff envelope (direct funding by BELSPO of staff salaries) can be considered base-funding. Furthermore, there is Museum/general public income (the 'own' income generated by visitor oriented or external activities) and Research income (research projects funded by third parties), and finally Other income (e.g. subsidies, private funds, etc.).

The largest source of income is the BELSPO staff envelope, approximately €7,8m annually. The BELSPO general dotation has been quite stable around €5m to €5,5m over the years. The museum/general public income increased from around €2m in 2010 to €3,3m in 2015. Research income fluctuates below € 1m, but goes up to €1,4m in 2015.

Overall, there has been a steady increase of income: from €14,75m in 2008 to almost €19,5m in 2015.

As major expenditure categories, the RMAH face *Staff costs* (paid for by the BELSPO staff envelope), *other staff costs* (not paid from the staff envelope), *Operational costs* (general e.g. energy, maintenance costs, housing etc.), and finally *Investments* (buildings, equipment and machines, collections, library, other inventory). The total expenditure is fairly stable over the years: about €18m annually.

When compared for the period 2008-2015, it immediately becomes apparent that - though there are differences between years, expenditure is often higher than income - only in the years 2012 and 2015 income is higher. Especially in the years 2008 to 2011, the balance is quite negative. In these years, savings were used to fill up financial gaps. In 2008, the RMAH had €4,5m in savings (surpluses from previous years), in 2011 only €1m was left. The RMAH did however continue to save money for larger projects. And indeed, in the following years RMAH were able to save money again. Only the final year of this analysis (2015), shows a rather large positive margin. Because of tighter budget regulation and tighter expenditure control (as part of austerity measures) the income in 2015 was €1,4m higher than the expenses.

### **HRM**

On average, the RMAH had 336 employees and 281,4 FTE in the period 2008-2016. The HRM data over this period of time show a steady decline of the number of FTE. In 2008, the RMAH's total FTE is more than 328, while this number decreased to 241 FTE in 2016. This indicates that the institute lost more than a quarter of the total FTE since 2008. The majority of the RMAH's staff is contractually employed (75%). The other 25% is statutorily employed. Although the total number of FTE is decreasing over the years, the ratio between contractually and statutory FTE (3:1) remains the same. The average age of the staff is fairly high, which is a risk for operations when staff retires. Most staff are employed in the support services. According to the RMAH the number of staff is too low, while attracting new staff is restricted, due to government regulations.

### **Research Function**

The RMAH's scientific research is executed in the four collection-related departments. As a federal scientific institution – the RMAH hold firm to a wide variety in their research function, including the collection of scientific data, scientific research, valorisation and dissemination of results, participation in scientific missions and projects and the production of scientific and popular scientific publications. However, the absence of an institutional strategic research agenda is felt at all levels at the RMAH, while the level of expertise varies by department.

The overall scientific ambition for the future, however, is not only to increase the amount of specific collection related research, but to increase the level of expertise of the scientific staff as well. In general, the RMAH feel the need to increase its public significance and make research more visible to the scientific community and the public. An institutional science strategy is necessary for this.

The lack of an institutional science strategy is reflected in the output and presence of the RMAH in the (international) research landscape. Collaboration and participation in (international) research projects depends largely on individual scientists and their networks. Altogether, the *peers* endorse the scientific potential of the RMAH but conclude that the ambition in the area of research is rather limited in relation to the quality of the collection.

### **Museum Function**

The museum function of the RMAH is not described explicitly in the formal strategy. The current change and ambitions of the institute however reflect an intended change towards a more open and visitor oriented museum.

The vast collections, estimated at 1 million items, registered under ca. 350.000 inventory numbers, are thematically or geographically arranged and managed in the four collection departments: The Antiquities Department takes care of Egypt, Near East, Iran and Classical Antiquities. The Applied Arts department is subdivided in sculpture and furniture, textiles, metals and jewellery, glass, stained glass and ceramics, and carriages. In the National Archaeology and Non-European Civilizations Department, national archaeology, popular cultures and the history of Brussels, non-European civilizations, and the Archaeological service for the Brussels Capital Region are found, while all music-related collections are

clustered in the Musical Instruments Department. The RMAH collections represent the whole range from world class quality to national significance.

Though the RMAH's collection management systems are state of the art, collection management, maintenance and storage are currently a major concern. Large parts of the collection are threatened, especially by the poor storage facilities.

The permanent presentations and temporary exhibitions reflect the wide scope of the RMAH's collections and themes. Incidental investments by BELSPO led to museological and scenographic improvements of important collection galleries. Despite this, approximately ten major galleries are closed to the public, due to structural problems, the state of maintenance or lack of security staff. The Museums of the Far East have been closed since 2013 due to the bad state of the buildings. Reopening is not planned yet.

Recently the museum has been very successful in developing collection based or -related thematic temporary exhibitions (on Egyptian Sarcophagi and Japanese Prints). This new exhibition format was a striking example of the potential of the RMAH's exhibitions programme and results. The Japanese Prints exhibition (*Ukiyo-e*, October 2016-February 2017) showed not only a new perspective on the museum's collection, but with some 70.000 visitors, the project attracted a large public and was a financial success as well.

### **Service Function**

The RMAH have the ambition to be an increasingly popular visitor destination by offering an inviting and stimulating on-site and on-line experience, including the galleries, libraries, educational facilities and restaurant(s), museum shop(s) and digital information. The added value is the sum of all functions. The service strategy aims at outreach and access.

Recently the RMAH defined their major focus groups: the general public, school groups and special interest visitors (e.g. scientific researchers, scholars, students).

The three scientific libraries at the Cinquantenaire Museum and the MIM-library serve the museum's staff and are accessible for external researchers, students and other special interest visitors. The institute furthermore holds important institutional archives and a photographic library primarily at the service of scientific researchers, but catering for special interest 'audience' as well.

The general on-site facilities such as service areas (e.g. hospitality desks, cloak rooms, shop(s), restaurant(s), etc.) serve all, whereas others offer specific services to special interest groups (e.g. lecture rooms, libraries). The client satisfaction concerning the service level of the Cinquantenaire Museum and MIM as perceived by the general public has been surveyed. BELSPO's own visitor evaluation monitor indicates a high level of satisfaction, at both the Cinquantenaire Museum and the MIM. Visitors rated the Cinquantenaire Museum 8,6 and the MIM 8,1 on average on a 0-10 scale.

### **Position**

The Cinquantenaire is Belgium's leading museum of archaeology and decorative arts, it holds impressive and (inter)nationally significant collections from across the globe and sits in a fine site as part of an ensemble of buildings and attractions within an international capital city of



over 2 million people. Against this background, annual visitor numbers between 150.000 and 200.000 are strikingly low, even more so when one considers that half of these are school groups and one third have come for temporary exhibitions. Recently, as is the case with other cultural institutes in Brussels, the RMAH experience the negative influence on the attendance figures (off line), caused by the tragic terrorist attacks and the continuing terror threats in Brussels.

Currently the RMAH work on redefining their branding-strategy. One of the issues is the use of different brands, like 'Cinquantenaire' as an overall citation quote for the RMAH. It is mentioned in interviews that 'Cinquantenaire' is very confusing, since the *Autoworld Brussels* and the *Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History* are housed at the Cinquantenaire complex as well. This rebranding process is the starting point for the implementation of a revised marketing mix. More explicit target setting is recommended: how many visitors are needed to call the RMAH's performance a success?

The same applies to the RMAH's online visibility. On line data evaluations show that, while the *number* of online articles in which the RMAH are mentioned is relatively high compared to the other FSIs, the average *reach* of these articles seems rather low. The number of Facebook followers of the RMAH is currently higher than the average of the FSIs (but still low).

### **Overall Conclusion**

The RMAH are an institute with enormous potential. This applies to both the functions related to the collections, the scientific research and the service level of the institute. That potential is now only partially realized. Overall, it is not performing at a level that might be expected from a national museum of this size and importance. The number of visitors to RMAH museums gradually dropped from 380.000 in 2012 to 275.000 in 2016 (also influenced by the 2016 terrorist attacks). The visitors that do come highly appreciate it. The research programme shows little cohesion.

Budgets have decreased, the number of staff has reduced, some of the buildings are closed, collection storage facilities are suboptimal, and an institutional research strategy is lacking.

The Institute is mainly focussed on improving its operations and not so much on strategy.

The management structure of the RMAH has been modernised and redesigned in 2016-2017. With this restructuring staff positions have changed as well. The staff is generally positive about this change, seeing it as a good starting point for further improvements.

In addition, the institution's primary process shows serious imperfections. The state of the buildings is partly disastrous. This leads to serious defects regarding collection management and physical conditions of buildings facilities. This endangers the preservation of the collections or leads to the closure of galleries.

The current performance of the RMAH is influenced both by internal and external barriers to success. Defining and rearranging these requires a clear strategy and tactical action.

### **External factors**

External constraints include the current governance culture, lack of institutional autonomy (and mandate of its director) and the slow, outdated bureaucratic federal framework. These circumstances seem currently more paralyzing to the RMAH than the lack of resources. The dependency on the Federal Building Agency shows an undermining and retarding impact on building maintenance and much needed renovations.

### **Internal factors**

Internal threats are the uncertainties about focus and direction of the institute. This is extremely important, since the transformation of the RMAH needs a clear and convincing strategy and central narrative that will convince stakeholders and make them support RMAH's ambitions and transformation. Evidence of the institutes future public significance should convince external stakeholders and trigger their commitment.

A new mission and vision are urgently needed as a start and guideline for future change and development. The RMAH are currently an institute that suffers from a fatal lack of clarity as to its identity, its mission and its audiences: what it is for and whom it is for, who are the friends and the enemies? The peers concluded that

*“there are reasons for this lack of clarity: RMAH’s four sites perform very different roles for very different audiences... At the same time the Museum’s position as an FSI privileges the Museum’s ‘scientific purpose’ distorting the mission of a public institution founded with predominantly educational and cultural goals.”*

Of course, for the RMAH, the Federal Government and its agencies are the primary partners in search for sustainable solutions. Nevertheless, immediate action within the institute itself is extremely important. ***The RMAH need to find ways to move beyond traditional positions that take the value of collections and catalogues for granted, and break out of the negative litanies about the limits on resources.***

The General Director is appointed ad interim without a formal mandate that is needed for change. This fact, together with a very wide span of control (due to the absence of formal Operational Directors) weakens leadership, strategy and operational management, needed for change.

### **Recommendations to the RMAH**

- The most important task for the RMAH is to regain focus, driven by a reviewed mission and vision.
- This new mission and vision should be appealing to all stakeholders and kindle external support and commitment. Internally it should be the guideline for strategic directions and operational priorities concerning the research and museum functions.
- The ambition should be nothing less than becoming the number one national museum in the capital of Europe, an institution that compares well with national museums in other European capitals.

- Wrap up and urgent implementation of the new organizational structure with three Operational Departments (Science, Public, Support functions) is recommended as an important precondition for the change towards a more visitor oriented and visitor engaging museum.
- Set management and administrative procedures should be developed and implemented to increase the cohesion in the organization and give guidance to staff.
- Development of an overall institutional research strategy, based on excellence, priorities, (international) partnerships and significance.
- Collection management and care should be a priority of the RMAH. Beside collection-management planning, immediate threats need to be addressed and priorities set concerning physical conditions, storage rooms, building maintenance and security issues.
- An overall narrative needs to be developed based on a clear understanding of existing and potential audiences. This must be the starting point for audience development, rebranding, and a display and interpretation strategy to guide future permanent gallery refurbishments and temporary exhibitions.

### **Recommendations to the federal authorities**

- The federal authorities should take their responsibility of preserving the unique and outstanding collections kept at the RMAH on behalf of the federal government. The RMAH should be actively supported before further, irreparable damage is inflicted to the collections.
- Since the physical condition of the RMAH's listed monuments endangers the future preservation of this Belgian architectural heritage and the collections they accommodate, the federal authorities concerned should show their responsibility and take immediate action to prevent further deterioration.
- Professional autonomy is a precondition for any efficient and dynamic museum, cultural entrepreneur- and leadership. Redefining the museums' formal position as FSI and further study concerning the possibilities of a future as 'arm-length' federal museums in Belgium are therefore strongly recommended. Best practices and benchmarks are available in e.g. the Netherlands 'State funded museums'.
- The appointment without any further delay of a RMAH Director General with full mandate and competence and the authority needed for change, is a precondition for a successful implementation of the recommendations to the RMAH mentioned above and based on the authority needed for change.



technopolis |group| The Netherlands  
Spuistraat 283  
1012 VR Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
T +31 20 535 2244  
F +31 20 428 9656  
E [info.nl@technopolis-group.com](mailto:info.nl@technopolis-group.com)  
[www.technopolis-group.com](http://www.technopolis-group.com)

