

about ...

the National Museum of History and Art

Recently rebuilt, the National Museum of History and Art allows us to grasp the passage of the centuries in Luxembourg, down to its architectural concept. Through its stunning contemporary infrastructure in the very heart of the old city centre, the Museum embodies the successful marriage of old and new, the technologies of today and the heritage of yesterday.

The exhibits are displayed in chronological order on ten floors, half of which are below ground. From the depths of Prehistory to the most recent artistic experiments, the visitor climbs from floor to floor as if walking through the corridors of time.



National Museum of History and Art: main façade

Level -5: Prehistory

The collections in the Prehistory section cover almost one million years.

Many original prehistoric remains (stone tools, pieces of pottery, bones) are displayed in two principal spaces according to the era to which they belong (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic): the first is dedicated to the “hunter-gatherers”,

Palaeolithic and Mesolithic nomads, and the second to “farmer-breeders”, Neolithic settlers.

These two spaces are structured around two life-size reconstructions, a Palaeolithic tent and a Neolithic house, providing an understanding of the shift from a way of life based on a predator economy to a production economy. A third reconstruction tells of the techniques of cave excavation.

Grand Duchy of Luxembourg

System of government: Constitutional monarchy

Neighbouring countries: Germany, Belgium, France

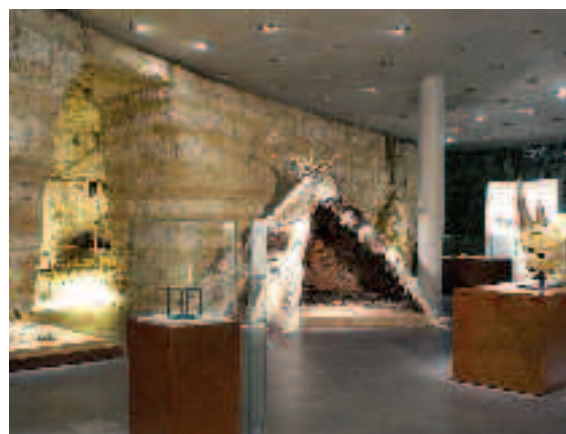
Area: 2,586 km²

Population: 455,000 inhabitants of which 177,400 are foreigners (2005)

Population density: 176 inhabitants/km² (2005)

Unemployment rate: 4.8% (October 2005)

Parallel to the biological evolution of man, the visitor can discover how the technical inventions of our pre-historic ancestors evolved. Moreover, the concept, which consists of a chronological trail spread over an area of more than 700 m², allows the visitors to explore the collections according to their own thematic preferences (evolution of climatic conditions, flora and fauna, habitat, combustion, nutrition, funeral rites and so on).



Immersed in time: the Prehistory section

Level -4: Protohistory

This section, which revolves around three great periods, the Bronze Age, the Early Iron Age and the Late Iron Age, takes full account of archaeological reality (the further you go back in time the more infrequent the material traces of a civilisation), the level of research in Luxembourg (the absence of remains does not necessarily mean that a civilisation was not present in the country, but simply that no major discovery of it has yet been made) and the intrinsic importance of a certain number of sites and discoveries.

In the middle of the 8th century BC, metallurgy was introduced to Western Europe, enabling the manufacture of new types of weapons and tools. It gave rise to a real industry which was at the origin of the prosperity of a small number of chiefs, eager on exchanges with the Mediterranean area. In Luxembourg, archaeological remains from this period are primarily funerary.

The major event during the Late Iron Age (500-100 BC) was the appearance, from the mid-2nd century BC onwards, of the first urban residential structure of the Celts, the oppidum. Another upheaval occurred with the Gallic Wars (58-54 BC) which led to the Romanisation of the land of the Trévires.

The territory of Luxembourg offers some major sites from those last decades (1st century BC) of the late La Tène: the large funeral chamber in Clemency, the aristocratic tombs of Goebange-Nospelt, the necropolis of Lamadelaine and the oppidum on the Titelberg, capital of the Trévires before the foundation of Trier (Trèves).



The Museum's central atrium: between space and time

Levels -3, -2 and -1: The Gallo-Roman era

Containing a wide variety of finds, this rich collection presents half a millennium of Roman domination of the territory which is now the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. The exhibition begins with the phase of Romanisation, then illustrates the conditions of life during the long period of Roman peace, and finally prepares, in the Late Antiquity room, for the transition to

the Early Middle Ages. The tour of the collections is thematic, dealing *inter alia* with the daily life of the time, the luxurious villas of the more privileged, the representation of faith in life after death and religion in general. The highlight of the exhibition is without doubt the Mosaic of the Muses from Vichten.

The Vichten Mosaic

Created around 240 AD, the Vichten Mosaic for the most part presents the mythological and literary subject of the Nine Muses, daughters of Zeus, Father of the Gods, and the Goddess Mnemosyne. They are reproduced in the order used by the Greek author Hesiod (around 700 BC): Clio, Euterpe, Thalia, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Erato, Polyhymnia and Urania. In its central medallion, the Muse of epic and elegiac poetry, Calliope, accompanies the poet Homer.

The composition and the decorative elements attribute the work of art to studios in the city of Trier. This polychrome mosaic of extraordinary artistic quality was discovered in an almost perfect state of preservation. It once adorned the reception hall of one of the most remarkable Roman villas ever discovered in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. It is among the most beautiful known representations of the Muses from the Roman era and is an eloquent example of the philosophical and literary culture of the elites in the cities of Roman Gaul.

Earthworks carried out to construct a new farm in Vichten led to the discovery of this exceptional site in the spring of 1995. Those same works also caused irreparable damage to almost half the Roman building. During emergency excavations undertaken by the National Museum of Luxembourg, only a small area (285 m²) of the remains was accessible to the archaeologists.



Vichten Mosaic, around 240 AD (10.36 x 5.92 metres)

Levels -I and +I: The Middle Ages

This section boasts a wealth of historical and iconographic sources which supplement the information emerging from archaeological research. The introduction to the genesis of our country in the Middle Ages, illustrations of the multiple aspects of life in those days as well as the religious influence prevailing in daily life are the principal themes of the exhibition. The medieval department is spread over two levels: the Early Middle Ages are to be found on level -I of the Museum, as a logical progression from Late Antiquity, whilst the four rooms on level +I are dedicated to Luxembourg history from the Carolingian era until the beginning of the 16th century.



The historic houses in the rue Wiltheim harbour the decorative arts section

On several levels: The medals collection

The medals collection consists of some 100,000 items: coins, medals, tokens, balances and monetary weights, dies used for minting coins, notes, decorations, religious medals, pilgrim insignia and other seals. The numismatic exhibition, spread throughout the entire Museum, displays a representative sample of Celtic, Roman, medieval and modern money. A very special area houses a selection of Roman intaglios found in Luxembourg. The emphasis is placed on the production of money in Luxembourg from the 13th to the

17th century, as well as on the circulation of money in our region dating from the Celtic era. A number of exhibits originate from archaeological digs carried out in Luxembourg, in particular on the Titelberg and in Dalheim.

Furthermore, a group of medals recalling the conquests of Louis XIV in Luxembourg as well as decorations from the end of the 19th century give an overview of the other aspects of the collection.

Old buildings: The decorative arts / popular art and tradition

This section combines the decorative arts as well as popular art and tradition under the same roof. But it goes broadly beyond the framework of its title by including the period from the 16th to the 20th century in other aspects. Synergies result, which contribute to the richness of the cultural project.

The section is defined as a territorial museum dedicated to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. One room houses a selection of objects of decorative art from



Medallion pot-pourri in fine porcelaine, Joseph II, white decor relief, around 1780



Firebacks are on display in the old cellars

neighbouring countries; another presents paintings under glass from several European regions.

The department is housed in an ensemble of exceptionally well preserved buildings formerly occupied by noblemen and patricians. The museographic concept has frequently been dictated by the existing architecture. A major part of the exhibition presents both a chronological and a thematic similarity between the

container and the contained, made of furniture, everyday objects, ceramic and silverware. The typology of these buildings, the layout of the rooms, staircases and fireplaces *in situ* are integrated into the exhibition programme and drawn to the attention of the visitor as much as the collections which have come from elsewhere.

For some years, post-medieval archaeology has also been used to illustrate different subjects.

The fine ceramics of Villeroy & Boch, Luxembourg

In 1766, Jean-François, Dominique and Pierre-Joseph Boch decided to leave the tiny earthenware factory their father François Boch had founded in 1748 in Audun-le-Tiche, Lorraine, and established a ceramics and stoneware factory in Septfontaines, close to the City of Luxembourg. Boasting the title "Fabrique Impériale et Royale des Pays-Bas autrichiens" [Imperial and Royal Factory of the Austrian Netherlands], the factory rapidly flourished as it produced items more accessible than porcelain and more resistant than earthenware. It immediately seduced minor nobility and local and regional bourgeoisie, and was even imitated throughout the Austrian Netherlands.

From 1815, Septfontaines played second fiddle to Mettlach (Germany), where a factory was founded in 1809 by the son of Pierre-Joseph Boch, Jean-François Boch. The latter merged in 1836 with Nicolas Villeroy, owner of the earthenware factory in Vaudevrange (Saar), in order to avoid competition between them. Thus was born the company Villeroy & Boch.

Until the beginning of the 19th century, production at Septfontaines developed in two distinct directions: obtaining the best value for money and the creation of difficult and costly art objects. The first line came very broadly to prevail over the second. This explains the success of Luxembourg manufacture.

Level +I: The arms and fortification section

The arms and fortification section reflects the long military history of the city which was once a major fortress known as “Gibraltar of the North” until the Treaty of London in 1867 ordered its dismantlement. The collection of the National Museum of History and Art contains firearms and artillery.

Although the City of Luxembourg was a very important fortress for centuries, the armaments industry hardly developed here. The only name that should be mentioned is that of the Schwartz family, in which the trade of armourer was handed down from father to son for three centuries (from the beginning of the 17th century until 1930).

Levels +3, +4 and +5: The Fine Arts

Dealing with the plastic arts from the past to the present, the Fine Arts section is essentially dedicated to painting, sculpture and photography.

Formed to the greater extent by donations, legacies and loans, the collection of old paintings includes Italian works from the 12th to the 16th century as well as examples from Northern schools. The collection is also enriched by 16th and 17th century Flemish paintings, as well as several works by the Dutch, French and Italian

schools of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. *Bacchus, Venus and Love* (painted around 1531) by Rosso Fiorentino is the jewel of the collection of old paintings.

The collection of modern and contemporary art in the Luxembourg National Museum of History and Art gives an overview of the various artistic currents of the 20th century and emphasises the “École de Paris” of the post-war period and the style of the New Figuration which evolved in the 1960s.



Joseph Kutter, *The Champion*, 1932, oil on canvas (loan)

Joseph Kutter (1894-1941)

Joseph Kutter studied at the Academy in Munich, where he was acquainted with German expressionism and later discovered Cézanne.

Returning to Luxembourg in 1924, the painter looked towards France and Belgium, without nonetheless forgetting Germany.

It is first of all in landscapes and bouquets of flowers that expressionist trends appear in Kutter's work, and some influence from after 1918 Vlaminck can be traced too. Does he not translate the simplest subjects, the banal, the daily, with pathos, contrasting light and obscurity, dramatising colour? In his landscapes, with their strong linear perspectives and in particular in his snow-covered views as well as his flowers, Kutter creates compositions

Finally, the collection of Luxembourg art consists of works by artists both dead and alive who are generally either of Luxembourg nationality, born in Luxembourg or married into a Luxembourg family. In addition there are works by certain painters and sculptors who, at some time in their lives, were resident on the territory of what is now the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and who sometimes asserted an artistic influence here.

A vital function of the Fine Arts section is the organisation of temporary exhibitions aimed at awakening public interest.



On the airy mezzanine: Luxembourg art

and forms that are less distorted and more solid.

Clearly the human figure is of greatest importance to Kutter. He compares himself less to a German like Hofer, who does not despise the anecdote, than to a Frenchman like Gromaire who cares essentially about shape.

What distinguishes the Luxembourg artist is that he is an “[...] extremely fine colourist using barbaric harmonies that are certainly raucous, but powerful” (Louis Vauxcelles, *Excelsior*, 1-11-1930), “who discovers the rich polychromy of medieval stained glass windows” (Waldemar George, *Beaux-Arts*, 11-11-1938). It is broadly this rich palette, like fire smouldering beneath the embers, which distinguishes him from the Flemish expressionists, especially Permeke, whose monumental style Kutter appreciates.

Despite those various influences, it cannot be denied that Kutter, living alone in Luxembourg, was able to assert that originality so clearly defined by Joseph-Émile Muller: “The Luxembourg artist Joseph Kutter occupies a special place in the expressionist camp. He is neither crude nor barbaric nor rustic; he is less brutal than vigorous, and although he knows upheaval of the heart he never reflects it in a convulsive or chaotic style”.



A blend of old and new

The National Museum of History and Art is the fruit of an international competition organised by the Fund for the Renovation of the Old City in 1997. The winning project by the Luxembourg architect Christian Bauer succeeds in its aim of doubling the former exhibition areas without the museum detracting from the surrounding buildings as in the past. These are reconverted into residential buildings, thus responding to the mission of the public body in charge of revitalising the oldest district of Luxembourg.

Burrowing under the Place du Marché-aux-Poissons (the "Fish Market"), half of the collections are located within the very bedrock itself, surrounding remains which had been known previously but which until then had not been accessible to the public, including the medieval cellar of the former Provincial Council. This revelation of history is accompanied by a contemporary educational tour developed from a spatial point of view by the designer Richard Peduzzi and the curators of each section of the museum. The National Museum of History and Art can in fact be visited from five floors below ground, starting with the prehistoric collections and then passing to the Gallo-Roman treasures and recent discoveries from the Middle Ages, housed in the new part. Beneath the roof of the former "Hôtel de Scherff", contemporary art and the works of Luxembourg artists of the 19th and 20th centuries

are on display. Now renovated, the building has been part of the Museum since its opening in 1939.

The external view of the Museum is emblematic for the approach between old and new. The Place du Marché-aux-Poissons, the first in the City after the demolition of the Provincial Council, has been transformed into the forecourt of the Museum, reinvented by the architect after having been used for years as an open-air car park. Christian Bauer did not seek to compete with the old façades surrounding the square: full advantage is taken of their design and form by placing them in counterpoint to a very conceptual design space entirely made of stone.

On an urban planning level, the new square offers unexpected respite. The greatest surprise the Museum has in store is the fact that the visitor has to transcend a hermetic façade in order to reach the interior of the building. The new entrance, to the side of the main façade, is as smooth and abstemious as the square, built of the same material. Having crossed the threshold, the visitor is dazzled by a world of light upon entering the atrium of the Museum. Following the slope beneath the glass roof or taking the lift, the visitor can discover the different sections at leisure, following the order inspired by the spirit of discovery inherent to the new National Museum of History and Art.

Impressum

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