

technopolis |group|

June 2017

Evaluation of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts Belgium

Summary of the Final Report



Evaluation of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts Belgium

Summary of the Final Report

technopolis _{group} June 2017

Petra Timmer, TiMe Amsterdam

Annemieke Biesma, Technopolis Group

Apolline Terrier, Technopolis Group

Geert van der Veen, Technopolis Group

With contributions of Judith Vermeer, Viola Peter, Sebastian Otte, Loïc Perroud, Technopolis Group

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

Summary

This evaluation report presents the findings of Technopolis Group in the evaluation of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (RMFAB), one of the Federal Scientific Institutes (FSIs) of Belgium. Technopolis Group and TiMe Amsterdam performed the evaluation in the period April 2016 - June 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 RMFAB. 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 RMFAB are one of ten Belgian Federal Scientific Institutes (FSI's) under the responsibility of the State Secretary for Science Policy. The RMFAB's main tasks, as laid down in the Royal Decree, are management, exploitation and presentation of the large arts collection, conducting scientific research related to the collection and delivering scientific and public services.

Locations and collections

The collection of the RMFAB covers a period extending from the 15th to the 21st century, and consists of around 20.000 objects. The collection is deployed into six separate museums:

- Old Masters Museum: Paintings and works on paper running from the 15th to the 18th century. Mostly works of masters from the former Southern Low Countries like Bruegel and Rubens. This collection is presented in the main buildings.
- Magritte Museum: The largest collection of works and documentation of Magritte in the world. It is housed in the main buildings.
- Fin-de-Siècle Museum: A collection of Belgian art, architecture, decorative art and other art disciplines, dating from 1868 till 1914. This presentation is also housed in the main buildings.
- Modern Art Museum: A collection of modern and contemporary, mostly Belgian art. In a new Modern Art Museum, the collection will be presented in a pluridisciplinary way, like de Fin-de-Siècle Museum. In the meantime, only concise, semi-permanent presentations are on show in the main buildings.
- Meunier Museum: The home and studio of social-realist painter/sculptor Constantin Meunier (1831-1905). This is a side museum in the Brussels quarter of Ixelles.
- Wiertz Museum: The home and studio of the Romantic painter, sculptor and writer Antoine Wiertz (1806-1865). This is the second side museum of the RMFAB.

Internal structure

According to the Royal Decree of 2002 the RMFAB should have 6 directors: one director general and five operational directors for five departments. In order to reduce costs, there is a formation of four directors, for three departments. Two of these director functions are filled: the director general function and the function of operational director of the Department for Support Services. The Department Service to the Public has an ad interim director (the head of the Educateam); the function of operational director Research and Conservation is vacant.

The *Department for Research and Conservation (Ancient Art and Modern Art)* is in charge of the conservation and study of collection pieces and conducts scientific projects related to the collections. This department used to make the exhibition plan, but currently the General Director is responsible for this.

The *Department Service to the Public* has several sub-sections: the Communication, Press and Events unit, the educational service Educateam, the Digital Museum, the publication unit, the museum shop, and the ticketing and reservation unit.

The *Department for Support services* is comprised of several units taking care of the internal operational functioning of the Institute: finances, HRM, ICT, translation services, security and facility management and internal communication.

Human resources

In January 2016, the RMFAB counted 243 staff members (200 FTE). There has been a significant drop in capacity, in 2008, the institute counted 285 staff members (228 FTE).

Financial resources, financial management

The RMFAB have six different main sources of income:

- BELSPO general dotation: a lump sum received from BELSPO for operational costs;
- BELSPO staff envelope;
- Research income: subsidies etc. generated from the research function of the Institute;
- Museum income: income generated by receiving visitors;
- Project income;
- Other income: income obtained through other channels such as sponsors and donations.

Overall, the total income remained stable between 2008 and 2011, then increased to reach €22 million in 2015. Most important sources were the museum income and the staff envelope. BELSPO projects were the dominant source of project income throughout the years.

Strategy and management plan

Based on the Royal Decree each FSI Director-General develops his/her own management plan. The Management Plan 2011-2017 concluded that the RMFAB were not in optima forma, and should be transformed into a scientific art historical stronghold as well as a top-end Brussels cultural attraction. The following principles for realising this vision were formulated:

- The restoration of the buildings to modern museum standards.
- Rearrangement of the collection to realise a more attractive presentation of its national and international art to attract more visitors.
- The creation of a modern, (inter)nationally connected art historical research institute, focusing on Early Netherlandish and Belgian art, that unites the scientific functions and facilities of the RMFAB and other FSIs.
- Modernisation and professionalization of various service and support functions.
- More financial autonomy, in keeping with political and governmental tendencies towards future autonomy for the FSIs, and present budget cuts.

Now in 2017, it can be concluded that the RMFAB are performing well. With a well-developed entrepreneurial spirit the museum management has taken the museums fate in their own hands. The RMFAB staff seems to be doing all the right things according to normal museum practice.

A lot has been achieved in recent years.

The RMFAB have realised a significant increase in visitors. With 500.000 visitors/year they are among the largest tourist attractions of the city. Self-generated revenue increased significantly as well.

Strong efforts have been made in professionalising museum management and staff and in improving management procedures. The new management structure is well suited and the staff seems passionate, committed and engaged with the RMFAB.

However, although many things have been achieved, the goals from the Management Plan are only partially met, and longer-term strategy and internal reorganisation seem to have stalled. The organisational culture is not fully open and cooperative. Support from part of the staff for the continuous renewal process is lost.

Quite alarming is the large backlog in building maintenance. The ancient art presentation is – apart from the Bruegel presentation - out-dated. There is no permanent exhibition space for the modern art collection.

The above issues cannot be solved within the context of a bureaucratic Federal entity in times of decreasing budgets. Support must therefore be obtained from the political level. However, at present there is a lack of buy-in from federal government.

Research function

The RMFAB have an important task to facilitate and carry out scientific research and disseminate the results. Research is always related to the RMFAB collection, especially regarding its top collection of Flemish Primitives, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Rubens, Van Dyck, Jordaens, Belgian art of the Fin-de-Siècle, Magritte. The curators initiate or participate in (inter)national scientific research. The RMFAB present their scientific results in publications, exhibitions and (inter)national symposia and conferences.

University scientists can carry out their research in the museum. The RMFAB have an important art history library and art historical archives and offer various digital instruments as research tools.

In the Management Plan 2011-2017 these are the ambitions regarding the research function:

- Have a central role in relation to the universities that should be further developed and strengthened.
- Have structural partnerships with universities enriching the university curriculum in the arts and historical sciences and developing competencies of the museum science team.
- Have an internationally recognised reputation for its museological (museum-technological) knowledge.
- Be a place for scientific dialogue between Flemish and Walloon researchers.
- Contribute to the further integration of the FSI's in the European science field.
- Form an Art History Research Institute, making art historical research in Belgium more visible and more focused.

Usually there are three to four major research projects running simultaneously in the Old Masters Department, and two to three in the Modern Art Department. In addition to the art history oriented projects the RMFAB participate in one project that is conservation oriented.

The library at the RMFAB is recognised as a resource of national importance. In addition to its own internal archives, the RMFAB house an important archive of modern and contemporary art in Belgium which is a major resource for the study of Magritte and Surrealism.

There is a strong tradition of research at the RMFAB. Research is carried out by curators, research assistants and project staff. There is a good record of scholarly publications at the RMFAB, of high standard research covering relevant subject areas. These include collection catalogues, exhibition catalogues as well as books and articles. There are several examples of significant research projects some of which have been carried out with external partners. Overall however, at present the current level of research is not in keeping with a museum of this stature.

The RMFAB have an unusual constitution in the museum world in that it is established as both a scientific institute with a function to carry out academic research and a public-facing museum providing services to a wide audience. This scientific mission is an important part of the justification for FSI status and federal funding. In most national museums, these two functions are seen as being mutually supportive and an integral part of the mission. At the RMFAB, however, the research function risks becoming alienated and separated from its public function. As funding for research becomes scarcer and staff numbers decline, there is the potential for this separation to become even more marked. In general, the research that is now being carried out seems disconnected, in part driven by the agendas of other institutions and in part by the interests of individual curators. There is little sense of a coherent overall programme serving the mission of the museum.

In the 21st century, the role of the museum curator is being re-defined and re-shaped in response to wider shifts in the profession. New demands have arisen such as the need to exploit digital technology or to increase audience numbers through innovative exhibition programmes and activities. Traditional hierarchies have been replaced by new models and curators have to adapt to new processes, different working methods and a change in status. It is not unusual to find that curators feel undermined by these changes but this is especially marked at the RMFAB where there is evidence of resistance to change to an unhealthy degree. The Museum Director has spearheaded a very necessary drive to open up the museum to new audiences and to professionalise the public-facing services. The lack of buy-in by curatorial staff to this change (for example in embracing new digital projects) is very apparent as well as a general dissatisfaction among long-serving staff with modernisation and culture change.

The Management Plan of the RMFAB rightly stresses the need to establish partnerships to develop research capacity, for example, with universities. However, these partnerships are hard to manage

because teaching institutions have their own agendas and they are also more likely to be engaged in 'pure' rather than 'applied' research. The concept of 'collection-based' research based on material objects seems under threat at the RMFAB; also, the potential for technical art history using the knowledge that comes from conservation and technical analysis is underdeveloped at the RMFAB. While there might be a natural partnership in this regard with KIK/IRPA, this relationship seems to be marked more by rivalry rather than collaboration.

Museum function

In the management plan 2011-2017 the strategic objectives regarding the collection, acquisitions, conservation, restoration and presentation are stated:

- The RMFAB must pursue their policy of enriching the collections;
- Assume a European position which must be reflected in both its programmes and its collections;
- Establish new selection criteria for contemporary creation as a challenge;
- Follow closely the new developments in technology and media and adapts its methods of preventive conservation;
- Realise a redeployment of the collections according to renewed themes;
- Enhance the rediscovery of the Belgian heritage with its exhibition and research programme;
- Set up a systematic plan of action regarding restauration.

These objectives are coherent and justified for a museum of this stature.

As in most of the older and major European museums, the RMFAB host a strong collection of a high level. Several areas are of world class.

The presentation of the collection at the RMFAB is very uneven in quality and balance. Considerable differences exist between, on the one hand, the Magritte Museum and the Fin de Siècle Museum and on the other hand, the Old Masters Museum and Modern Art presentation.

The six different museums (of which four are separate museums in one location) make the overall brand of the RMFAB unclear and fragmented. Although some of the separate museums (esp. the Magritte museum) have a strong brand this does not help the museum in its communication.

The Digital Museum can be considered an international reference. The collection management of the RMFAB is well-organised.

The policy for acquisitions is hampered by the reluctance of the federal level to release the budget still in reserve (€4 million).

The RMFAB have successfully developed a more public oriented temporary exhibition programme, although at the expense of more specialized smaller exhibitions. There are risks in the fact that the director is exclusively responsible for the exhibition programme.

Service function and outreach

To improve its client orientation, the RMFAB have several strategic objectives: valorisation of the collections, reinforcement of the involvement of the institute on the international scene and

development of infrastructure framing the activities for the public. The activities to the public must align to new technologies to keep the offer of the Institute up-to-date.

Important changes and improvements in the recent period are the creation of the Digital Museum in order to serve the public online; implementation of technical innovations to present art in a virtual way (the Bruegel box for example) and the Musée sur Mesure, an educational and public engaging programme for special audiences. Furthermore, a professional Marketing and communications team has been set up, including a specialised employee for sponsoring.

Important works of art contribute to a nation's identity and provide narratives for the cultural memory of a nation. With a focus on Belgian top artists in a context of international top-art (from Bruegel to Magritte) the RMFAB strongly contribute to this narrative and identity.

The RMFAB have outstanding programmes for audience building, engagement and education. The museums have an important function in stimulating tourism to Brussels. The museums are, with some 600,000 visitors per year, one of the main attractions in the city. A large part of the visitors is of foreign origin (70-90 %).

Communication has made excellent progress. There seems still quite a potential to increase the number of visitors for the leading museum in the capital of the EU.

Focus on positive communication is essential: the publishing of photos of the museum showing buckets for collecting rainwater leaking from the roof may put some pressure on the government, but could have a disastrous effect on the image of the museum with private collectors, international institutions and the general public in Belgium.

Overall conclusion

The RMFAB are performing well. The vision presented in the current management plan is clear, showing a good sense of strategy and direction. Despite the complex governance of a Federal Scientific Institution and the lack of autonomy in essential management processes, a lot has been achieved in the past years. With a well-developed entrepreneurial spirit the museum management has taken the museums fate in their own hands. The RMFAB staff seems to be doing all the right things according to normal museum practise.

As a result of its activities, the RMFAB have realised a significant increase in visitors. With 500.000 visitors in 2016 (a decrease of more than 30% compared to 2015 because of terrorist attacks in Brussels) it is one of the largest tourist attractions of the city.

Self-generated revenue increased significantly as well: entrance fees, visitor spending, sponsors and research income all increased. At present the self-generated income is approximately 50% of the total income, already definitely above average for comparable museums.

Although many things have been achieved, the goals from the Management Plan are only partially met and longer-term strategy and internal reorganisation seem to have stalled.

Apart from the Magritte collection and concise collection presentations, the modern art collection is not shown because of postponement of setting up a new modern art museum.

Recommendations for the RMFAB

- Re-evaluate and renew longer term strategy to meet present circumstances and opportunities. Involve all staff in strategy renewal at institute level.
- Focus on realistic options and reduce the number of strategic targets. Invest in long term planning.
- Work on realising buy-in at government level. Develop a public affairs policy/strategy to improve relations with political stakeholders
- Investigate ways of incentivising government support.
- Consider an overall Advisory Board of very senior level advising director and management on museum policies and involve them in improving relations at ministerial levels as well.
- Continue to improve internal communication.
- Strengthen project management skills, work on a matrix organisational form, bridge the gap between the different departments (island culture).
- Cooperation with neighbouring museums and art centres could be beneficial.
- Develop a marketing strategy as leading framework for communication efforts. More marketing budget, visitor research (visitor survey) and marketing effort is needed.
- Continue the good work in educational programmes and Musée sur Mesure.
- Develop a strategy to rejuvenate the research function at the RMFAB and better align research with the public-facing activities of the museum.
- Take steps to encourage more engagement from curators in the exhibition and publication programme by restarting a dialogue, providing mutual clarity on duties and expectations, etc. Recognise individual expertise and interests but find ways to channel and direct these into the overall research strategy.
- Develop and implement a branding strategy to prevent fragmentation of communication while using the different strengths of the collections.
- Develop a new permanent presentation for the Old Masters.
- Restart constructive discussions with the federal government to realise a permanent public visibility of the modern art collection.
- On the short term, a way of presenting a temporary selection of highlights of the collection from Old Masters to Modern Art should be explored.
- The digitization of the collection should be completed.
- The Digital Museum should be better integrated in the rest of the RMFAB. The digital collection should also be available to English on-line visitors.
- A more clearly defined acquisitions policy should be developed, also to enable the federal government to renew efforts to acquire works of art.
- A longer-term exhibition schedule should be developed (3-5 years ahead) in order to facilitate efficient exhibitions development and planning.

- The exhibitions should be based on works from the permanent collection with an emphasis on the scientific content of the exhibitions to connect collection based research and exhibitions better.
- Scientific content could contribute to attracting larger audiences.
- Involving more curators and researchers to challenge the ideas for temporary exhibitions would increase buy-in and could even increase quality.
- The creation of an intramural exhibition module of medium size, based on the modern art permanent collections.
- “Focus” exhibitions concentrating on Magritte’s work could also increase repeat visits and attendance of local visitors.
- These exhibitions would also produce exhibition modules easy to export and could be an important source of income for the museum.

Recommendations for the federal government

- Regard the museum as a crucial asset for culture, the economy and social change.
- Show leadership by instilling pride in a world class cultural asset.
- Protect the extraordinary and irreplaceable collections by taking the responsibility for the buildings where they are housed (the present situation is a national disgrace).
- Appoint two operational directors to complete the board of directors and hereby give the RMFAB adequate managing power.
- Invest in the potential of a modern art museum for Belgium.
- Introduce tax-deductible-incentives for private donors to culture.
- Reduce the administrative burden for FSI’s (SELOR, financial rules).

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
www.technopolis-group.com

