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Book Museums of the Kingdom of Belgium as a Space of Socio-Cultural Communication

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The aim of the article is to analyse the features of the development of socio-cultural space of two well-known book museums in the Kingdom of Belgium: the Royal Library of Belgium and the Wittockiana Museum; to focus on the methods of promoting the collections that form the basis of the museum holdings, information services, and educational programmes. *Results.* The Royal Library of Belgium is defined as a unique high-tech socio-cultural space where the cultural life of medieval Europe is explored through images, histories, and characters from the Library of the Dukes of Burgundy. The analysis of the museum's website and blog materials leads to the conclusion that the national library takes its communication with user audiences very seriously. The Wittockiana is a museum of book art and bookbinding and an organiser of projects. The museum engages in diverse exhibitions, research, and educational activities. An interesting component of the museum's socio-cultural space is the bookbinding workshop, which serves as a basis for educational projects. *The scientific novelty* of the study is that for the first time in the Ukrainian scientific discourse, the development of the socio-cultural space of contemporary European museums is considered using the example of the book museums of the Kingdom of Belgium. *Conclusions.* The successful formation and development of the socio-cultural space of contemporary European book museums is largely the result of persistent and multifaceted research activities of such institutions. The Royal Library of Belgium is a vivid example of the development of the "media" concept of a museum as a socio-cultural institution. The museum's socio-communication space is developing in many areas, including the expert environment and public relations. The educational services of the Wittockiana Museum and the partner book workshop of the Royal Museum of Mariemont are considered as an experience worthy of in-depth study and implementation in Ukraine.

Keywords: book museum; culture; communication; educational services; Royal Library of Belgium; Wittockiana Book Museum

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Introduction

Many world-famous megacities “represent a single museum space” (Yakovets, 2014, p. 130). Brussels is one of the cities with a unique socio-cultural space. As the capital of the Kingdom of Belgium and the political capital of Europe, Brussels is rightfully known as a city of museums. The Royal Palace, the BELvue Museum, the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, the René Magritte Museum, the world-famous Musical Instruments Museum, the Parliamentarium, and many other institutions create a multicultural space in this city. They blend contemporary and historical European art, showcase careful preservation of national heritage, and demonstrate creativity in utilising the latest information technologies.

An extremely interesting component of this space is the book museums, particularly the Royal Library of Belgium (Bibliothèque royale de Belgique) and the Wittockiana Museum (Bibliotheca Wittockiana). The author had a unique opportunity to get acquainted with their exhibition and communication space during her stay in Belgium in 2022–2023 as a visiting researcher at the Free University of Brussels. Therefore, on one hand, this article is the result of continuing research into the digital projects of European libraries, archives, and museum institutions as media (Hryhorevska, 2022), as it involves the analysis and identification of features of media structures in the methods and forms of presentation, use, and popularisation of these museum collections. On the other hand, it introduces a new perspective on the communication activities of European book museums into Ukrainian socio-cultural discourse.

Recent research and publication analysis. The issue of analysing and predicting transformative changes in the development of socio-cultural spaces in cities, regions, individual countries, and the world as a whole remains extremely relevant. An important aspect of this process is the study of a cultural phenomenon such as the contemporary museum.

Among the vast array of scholarly works, we note the publications and thesis research of I. Yakovets (2014, 2018), S. Rudenko (2021), and S. Shemaiev (2016), which methodologically align with the author’s scientific approaches.

In her thesis *Contemporary Art Museum as an Artistic Pattern: Essence, Functioning, Development*, I. Yakovets (2018) explores the phenomenon of the museum from the perspective of an independent entity in global and European culture, which needs to find a new paradigm of activity that would meet the needs of society and its development. Yakovets (2018) examines the art museum through the lens of a fractal approach and applies the main fractal features of socio-cultural systems, including systemic properties (the presence of similar structural elements, their integrity), purposefulness (the presence of common vectors, development programmes), hierarchical determination, repeatability (any subsystem in one way or another replicates the configuration of the whole system), availability of management, and openness (p. 370).

We also share the point of view of I. Yakovets (2014) regarding the influence of the dynamics of museum communication spaces on overall socio-cultural development. “In the contemporary socio-cultural situation, the development of the global museum business is significantly influenced by the dynamics of museum communication spaces, which include exhibition activities, mass media, local and global communication networks, and museum audiences” (p. 129).

In S. Rudenko's (2021) thesis, *Socio-Cultural Purpose and Institutional Specificity of the Museum*, our attention is drawn to the author's perspective on the development of the "media" concept of the museum as a socio-cultural institution, the concept of virtual exhibitions, virtual museums, wiki-museums, etc. The researcher notes that "the concept of a wiki-museum involves the self-organisation of all interested parties to create new museum representations based on digital collections that are in open access" (p. 8). This concept follows the idea of "virtual museums," which has dominated socio-cultural and socio-communicative discourse since the beginning of the 21st century.

According to S. Shemaiev (2016), the interaction between libraries, museums, and archives is a social-communicative process with its peculiarities and should move to a new level of interaction — the level of convergence, the level of systemic collaboration between these institutions based on the convergence of their educational, scientific, and practical activities within the framework of the modern system of social communications (p. 6).

The article by M. Butyrina and V. Ryvlyna (2021) presents contemporary methodological approaches to analysing the functioning and development of mediatised museums, including the Louvre (France), the British Museum (United Kingdom), and the National Museum of New Zealand. The researchers proposed a methodology for analysing the structure and content of museum websites to identify media features, which is aimed at evaluating the level of interactivity of the website, multi-aspect analysis of website sections and forms of communication with users (pp. 210–211). In the scope of this research, the author uses this methodology to analyse and assess the websites of the Royal Library of Belgium and the Wittockiana Museum.

O. Hryhorevska (2022) studied the development of media culture within the context of digital library, archival, and museum projects in European countries. The research focused on several groups of European projects, including international, national, and regional ones. However, the Belgian library and archive and museum projects were not previously studied or singled out.

In a collective publication by O. Vovk, V. Rizun, and A. Mamchur (2014), dedicated to the analysis of exhibition activities in the Netherlands and Belgium, it is noted that "one of the most effective ways to gain experience is through direct acquaintance with the main exposition, the concepts of exposition and exhibition activities, and museum-educational scenarios in Europe's leading natural history museums" (p. 217). It is this method of direct acquaintance that is used in the research.

Aim of the article

The aim of the article is to present the results of the analysis of the development of the socio-cultural communication space of two well-known book museums in the Kingdom of Belgium — the Royal Library of Belgium and the Wittockiana Museum; to focus on the methods of promoting the collections that form the basis of the museum holdings, information services, and educational programmes.

The research results were obtained using a socio-cultural approach in combination with systemic, socio-communicative, and informational approaches. The research

methodology includes methods of systemic analysis, content analysis of scholarly publications and website resources of the institutions under study, generalization, etc.

Main research material

Two Belgian book museums, which differ in terms of scope, features of activity, and socio-cultural space, were chosen as the objects of the study. The first one is part of one of the leading cultural, scientific, and educational centres in the Kingdom of Belgium — the Royal Library (<https://www.kbr.be/>), while the second one is Wittockiana (<https://wittockiana.org/>), a unique museum of book arts and bookbinding, the holdings of which are based on a private bibliophile collection.

The Royal Library of Belgium (hereinafter referred to as KBR), also known as the Albertina, is the national scientific library of Belgium. The historical collections of KBR trace their origins back to the 15th century, and the library itself was established by a government decree in 1837. Its initial basis was the book collection of the Ghent bibliophile Charles Van Hulthem, which comprised 70,000 books. Today, KBR's holdings amount to approximately 5 million books. The special collection, which includes valuable and rare publications, contains 45,000 items, including 3,000 incunabula. Special attention should be paid to the digital library Belgica, which allows access to resources like the graphic works of Bruegel and digitised manuscripts from the library of the Dukes of Burgundy (213 documents). This particular collection forms the basis of KBR's museum collection.

The Museum of the Royal Library of Belgium is a unique space where research and education intersect. The museum's team invites visitors to explore medieval European cultural life through images, stories, and characters from the library of the Dukes of Burgundy. Visitors are offered three types of tours: profound (with detailed information about each exhibited document), overview tours with short but historically reliable information, and tours designed for a younger audience. The museum's exhibition space is very modern, technologically advanced, and allows you to immerse yourself in a research journey. The museum workers warn (and at the same time encourage) visitors that due to the special conditions for preserving manuscripts for the purpose of their protection, the exhibition changes every six months. As a result, from the end of May 2023, the museum displays a new collection of manuscripts, books, and engravings, with a focus on the works of Jacob van Maerlant and biblical books, narratives, and miniatures from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance era.

Detailed information about the "Rijmbijbel" (a rhymed adaptation of the Bible) written 750 years ago by Jacob van Maerlant in the Dutch vernacular is provided by the museum's blog. An extensive illustrated article explains that the origin of the copy preserved at KBR confirms it to be the oldest illustrated manuscript in the Dutch language that has been completely preserved (*The "Rijmbijbel" of Jacob*, n.d.). The complexity of the manuscript's restoration process and translation of texts by students of various educational institutions are revealed. The copy dates back to the last quarter of the 13th century. The manuscript is illustrated with 159 miniatures and 4 decorations in the margins. Certain images can be seen in the photos accompanying the article, but it is best to visit the exhibition and carefully examine the manuscript itself and the digitised pages of this unique work.

An analysis of the materials from the museum's blog — 12 high-quality illustrated posts from March 2021 to May 2023 — leads to the conclusion that the national library takes its professional communication with its supporters and potential user audience very seriously. The museum's socio-communication strategy is implemented according to all marketing rules. The authors of the posts immerse readers in the world of unique works, where texts of medieval medicine and astronomy or 15th-century dance choreography are explored. Each time, the text becomes a little adventure in which purely scientific facts and research results (and sometimes even assumptions) stimulate the reader for further exploration, making him a participant in the mysterious action and immersing him in a special socio-cultural space.

As an example, let's consider a collection of manuscripts written on black parchment using silver and gold ink. We are talking about the "Basses danses" folios, which belonged to Margaret of Austria, the daughter of Mary of Burgundy and Maximilian of Austria. The manuscript includes descriptions of 58 dances accompanied by musical notations of their melodies and choreographic instructions. The manuscript was created around 1500 and is now known worldwide as one of the primary sources for studying the aristocratic dance style known as "basses danses" (low style), in which dancers moved gracefully across the floor and barely got off the ground (*Unseen: A "black" manuscript*, 2022). The article's text and illustrations are supplemented with a short video with expert comments and music of this dance style. It is like readers of the blog actually attended a medieval ball.

In our opinion, the KBR museum serves as a vivid example of the development of the "media" concept of a museum as a socio-cultural institution (Rudenko, 2021). Among other things, KBR offers the opportunity to combine museum visits with various activities in the socio-cultural space of the national library, including workshops on painting and calligraphy, concerts, and discussions. When planning their first visit, users have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with answers to the most common questions about the museum's work and visit rules. In general, the museum's news is available to KBR subscribers on various social media platforms, including Facebook (with the largest following of over 11,000 subscribers), Instagram (3,500 subscribers), LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, and TripAdvisor. Therefore, it can be stated that the combination of a well-thought-out socio-communication policy with a high-tech socio-cultural space is the best model for the development of a modern book museum.

The Wittockiana is a museum of book art and bookbinding named after its founder. The history of the museum's development can be found on the Wittockiana website (<https://wittockiana.org/en/home-en/>). The museum's collection consists of 3,000 books, each of which is unique. The founder of the collection, Michel Wittock, was a passionate bibliophile and during his lifetime, he amassed a significant collection of books, manuscripts, and autographs. The collection includes thousands of works of decorative bookbinding, book catalogues, and bibliographies, scientific monographs, as well as rare catalogues of private libraries published by the owners themselves, catalogues of famous auctions, antique and modern bookbinding manuals. Michel Wittock had a fascination with rare and beautiful books, so the selection criteria included both the large format of the book and the uniquely small font in which it was printed. Since 1983, the Wittokiana was opened to the public as a private library for bibliophile friends of its owner. And in 2010, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation recognised Wittokiana as

a museum, allowing it to claim the status of a museum of book art and bookbinding in the Kingdom of Belgium and to organise relevant projects.

The museum conducts a diverse range of exhibitions, tours, research, and educational activities, the dynamics of which can be followed on the museum's website and its corresponding Instagram page (Wittockiana, n.d.).

Joint projects of the Wittokiana Museum with other cultural and educational institutions are extremely popular. As an example, we can mention the exhibition *Design-a-book. Recherches et Créations en Belgique* (12.02–30.04.2023) presented in collaboration with Atelier du Livre de Mariemont, the book workshop of the Royal Museum of Mariemont. The exhibition is dedicated to contemporary practices of book design in Belgium, and as its organisers note on the museum's Instagram page, "Guided by the same desire to study, transmit, and display books, these two institutions join forces to make creativity in this field visible" (Wittockiana, 2023). The examples of contemporary book art presented at the exhibition contribute to research and innovation, invite discussion on the transformation of the material carriers of the book itself, reading practices, writing, and more. In this case, the museum's partner was the book workshop of the Royal Museum of Mariemont (*Atelier du Livre*, 2023), whose creative and research projects deserve separate study, including projects like the "Art Residence". Within this project, every 2 years, the Royal Museum of Mariemont offers a selected artist artistic, financial, and technical support for a 15-day stay in Mariemont and the realisation of a certain artistic project. Applicants can be novice artists as well as experienced professionals, both Belgians and foreigners. In general, the workshop offers various internships, seminars, workshops, consultations, and extended training courses. Among the thematic areas for long-term courses and workshops in 2023–2024, "Narrative Illustration" is noted as the newest direction.

Research activities of the Wittokiana Museum have several vectors. The first direction deals with book-related aspects that are relevant to the material construction of the book, its internal characteristics, or define its originality and historical uniqueness as an edition; the study of the origins of books or the personalities of collectors that are significant for the history of the Belgian regions and European history in general. Experts study the process of collaboration between the author, graphic artist, publisher, and bookbinder. The second direction involves researching the process of collecting as a social and cultural practice. The Wittockiana initiated a series of scholarly seminars, which they and their partners position as "learning days" under the title "What Collecting Means" ("Ce que collectionner veut dire"). The goal of these events is to document the experience of collecting, which is essential for preserving cultural heritage, through discussions among scholars from the academic world, collectors, and other players in the museum world. As stated in the publication on the portal of the foundation for education and development in the field of art and culture collections, *Collectiana*, after the success of a first study day devoted to the themes of collecting, in 2020, Wittokiana returns with a new focus — "Collectors and Museums" (*Bibliotheca Wittockiana*, 2020). The third aspect that the Wittokiana team is studying is the exhibition book activity, its practical side, and the introduction of innovations. This direction is realised in collaboration with the research network RIMELL (Interdisciplinary Research on Museography and the Exhibition of Literature and Books). Therefore, the museum defines itself as a place for applied research on the subject of book exhibitions.

The Wittockiana museum also has a separate area of work related to educational and practical activities — the bookbinding workshop. As members of the Wittokiana team note, “... the bookbinding Workshop created in Wittokiana complements the museum’s dynamics, providing a daily impetus to creative bookbinding” (*Bookbinding and gilding*, n.d.). The educational activities of the museum are carried out through a series of specialised seminars and workshops that are united by a common theme, such as bookbinding and gilding courses. Classes are focused on different levels of training of visitors, with each instructor offering their own specific course focus. At the time of my direct acquaintance with the museum’s activities in January 2023, the bookbinding workshop offered the opportunity to choose from among five experienced practitioner-teachers who are recognised experts in creating bibliophilic bookbindings for private collectors. It is also worth noting that almost all teachers are graduates of the institution of higher education in the field of visual arts La Cambre (<http://www.lacambre.be/fr>).

Through various practices, course participants discover the world of restoration and bookbinding tools, materials, and techniques while working on their own projects. Restoration of books, making book covers, cases, or containers designed for the protection or display of books are carried out within the framework of individual creative projects under the guidance of an instructor. Training takes place in small groups and is fee-based. The concise information about the courses presented on the museum’s website does not allow us to assess the number of participants, but the museum’s Instagram page offers promotional videos of bookbinding courses, showcasing the use of specialised equipment and bookbinding techniques. Additionally, fragments of workshops with different age groups, including children, can be seen. During school holidays, the museum also offers a special programme.

The socio-communication activities of the Wittokiana Museum also include the “Friends of the Museum” association. The museum is most active in communicating with its supporters on the social network Instagram — 81 posts, and 1237 page followers.

We did not aim to compare the activities and spaces of socio-cultural communication of the book museum of the Royal Library of Belgium and the Wittokiana Museum, as these institutions perform quite different tasks. Therefore, it is worth noting that in terms of interactivity and the quality of material presentation, the website of the Royal Library of Belgium deserves the highest praise, while the educational activities and the creation of a unique socio-cultural space with a clear focus, as demonstrated by the Wittokiana Museum, are worthy of in-depth study.

Conclusions

Every museum, especially a museum of books, is a special space where research and education intersect. It’s a place where communication with society results in both new knowledge and emotions, aesthetic satisfaction, and immersion in processes of reflection and observation is no less important than the effective use of complex information technologies. The successful formation and development of the socio-cultural space of a modern European book museum is largely the result of persistent and multi-vector research activities of these institutions, as demonstrated by our

research objects — the Museum of the Royal Library of Belgium and the unique Wittokiana Museum of Book Art and Bookbinding.

Both museums are actively developing their own socio-cultural communication spaces. The Museum of the Royal Library of Belgium is a vivid example of the development of the “media” concept of the museum as a socio-cultural institution, whose activities are based on scientific research and are linked to the overall development strategy of the national institution. The museum’s socio-communication space is developing in many areas, encompassing both the expert environment and public relations. The active use of social media by the institution itself ensures the museum’s active presence in the information space. It is well known that social media facilitate the exchange of ideas and opinions among all participants in the communication process — the public and the institution, between visitors and experts, and more. The experience of the Museum of the Royal Library of Belgium allows us to conclude that the combination of a well-thought-out socio-communicative policy with a high-tech socio-cultural space is the best model for the development of a contemporary book museum.

At the same time, the educational services provided by the Wittokiana Museum and the bookbinding workshop of the Royal Museum of Mariemont are considered by us as experiences worth further study and implementation in Ukraine. Despite its limited presence on social media and the conciseness of the institution’s website, the museum performs a wide range of research, educational, and communication functions.

The scientific novelty of the study is that for the first time in the Ukrainian socio-cultural discourse, the communication activity of a contemporary European museum is considered using the example of the book museums of the Kingdom of Belgium.

The perspective for further research includes studying the offerings of educational services of European museums, which thus expand their influence on the potential user audience. Additionally, various partnership projects of art museums with other institutions of the cultural sector, such as other museums, archives, libraries, and civil organisations, which also play a significant role in preserving and popularising cultural heritage, deserve separate attention.

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Музеї книги Королівства Бельгія як простір соціокультурної комунікації

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Мета статті — проаналізувати особливості розвитку соціокультурного простору двох відомих музеїв книги Королівства Бельгія: музею Королівської бібліотеки Бельгії та музею Віттокіана (Wittockiana); акцентувати увагу на методах популяризації колекцій, які лежать в основі цих музейних зібрань, інформаційних сервісах та освітніх послугах.

Результати дослідження. Музей Королівської бібліотеки Бельгії визначається як особливий високотехнологічний соціокультурний простір, де відбувається дослідження середньовічного культурного життя Європи через зображення, історії та персонажів з бібліотеки герцогів Бургундських. Аналіз матеріалів музейного сайту та блогу дозволяє дійти висновку, що національна бібліотека дуже відповідально ставиться до комунікації з аудиторією користувачів. Віттокіана — музей книжкового мистецтва та палітурної справи й організатор проєктів. Музей здійснює різноманітну виставково-експозиційну, дослідницьку та освітню діяльність. Цікавим складником соціокультурного простору музею є палітурна майстерня, на базі якої розвиваються освітні проєкти. *Наукова новизна* дослідження полягає в тому, що вперше в українському науковому дискурсі розвиток соціокультурного простору сучасного європейського музею розглядається на прикладі музеїв книги Королівства Бельгія. *Висновки.* Успішне формування та розвиток соціокультурного простору сучасного європейського музею книги значною мірою є результатом наполегливої та багатовекторної дослідницької діяльності таких установ. Музей Королівської бібліотеки Бельгії є яскравим прикладом розвитку «медійної» концепції музею як соціокультурної інституції. Соціокультурна комунікація музею розвивається у багатьох напрямках — це й експертне середовище, і зв'язки з громадськістю. Освітні послуги музею Віттокіана та партнерської книжкової майстерні Королівського музею Марімонта розглядаються як досвід, вартий поглибленого вивчення та впровадження на теренах України.

Ключові слова: музей книги; культура; комунікація; освітні послуги; Королівська бібліотека Бельгії; музей книги «Віттокіана»

