The book could equally well be titled “The Underrated Heritage”. It is typical for us Poles not to appreciate our own cultural legacy. Consequently, the Polish conventional wisdom has it that our museum collections cannot compare with their counterparts from Western European museums (whether they are from the Louvre, Museo del Prado or some less renowned places). But the book explains that the answer to the question why a country with such a historical narration, fine tradition, and cultural potential has not yet created its outstanding national collection is not that trivial.

The publication does not begin with a standard introduction, but rather with a dialogue between Dorota Folga-Januszewska (long-standing Deputy Director at the National Museum in Warsaw and currently professor at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw) and Andrzej Rottermund (Director at the Royal Castle Museum in Warsaw), the two eminent museologists and art historians. In this way the readers are very soon attracted to the conversation on the history of Polish museology, its specific features, concerns and challenges of the present. By no means are the controversial topics avoided, including the issue of obscure provenance and so called “preservation” (more precisely, nationalization) of private collections in the first years of the People’s Republic of Poland. The interlocutors also point out that today the museum collections management should be more flexible and modern. Finally, they mention their concerns over the potential broad public access to Polish collections.

The more and more dynamic development of private museums in Poland is also underscored in the publication, with the remark that they can arrange their collections in a much more flexible manner than the public museums. Further, the book makes the audience familiar with the fact that historical propaganda (in Poland called “historical policy”) has been implemented in our country for a much longer time than one would at first suspect, as many museums in principle were set up to be “the shrines to Polishness”.

In the following chapters the history of creation of particular types of museums is presented. Thus, there is an outline of national, local, church, residential, historical, archaeological, ethnographic, university, science, natural history, and technology museums. Additionally, there are references to Polish museums existing abroad, i.e. established in times of partitions or after WWII when due to obvious political reasons the museums functioning in Poland could not fulfil all their missions.

The particular chapters are authored by established theoreticians and practitioners within the field of museology. Apart from Dorota Folga-Januszewska they include the following persons: Przemysław Mrozowski (Deputy Director for Research, Education, Museum and Collections at the Royal Castle Museum in Warsaw and lecturer at the Faculty of History and Social Sciences of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw), Jacek Miller (Director of the Department of Cultural Heritage at the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage), Paweł Jaskanis (Director of the Wilanów Palace Museum),
Antoni Bartosz (Director at the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków), Ewa Wyka (Deputy Director for Stocktaking at the Museum of Municipal Engineering in Kraków), Krzysztof Jakubowski (Director at the Museum of the Earth of the Polish Academy of Sciences) and Jerzy Litwin (Director at the Polish Maritime Museum in Gdańsk). In the postscript there is a list of museums not mentioned in the main text, as well as of those newly established and merely planned.

As the publication has the character of a picture album, the illustrations are important as the text itself. They depict numerous exhibitions and the museums’ exteriors and interiors. The proper historical perspective is provided with the archival photographs of the national museums in Warsaw and Kraków while under construction, and with the exhibition at the Sukiennice Museum in Kraków. The album was published in Polish and English and makes an excellent companion to culture and art displayed in the Polish museums.

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