

Muz., 2018(59): 157-162  
 Rocznik, eISSN 2391-4815  
 received – 05.2018  
 reviewed – 05.2018  
 accepted – 06.2018  
 DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0012.2305

# HIGH STANDARD – WHAT KIND, THEN? THE NEED TO INTRODUCE AN ACCREDITATION SCHEME FOR POLISH MUSEUMS

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**Abstract:** In the Act on Museums, chapter 3, the National Register of Museums is described as an official list of institutions representing both a high standard of their activity and extremely important collections. In accordance with the Act a relevant Regulation concerning the Register is to specify the manner in which the Register should be kept, the application form for candidates, the mode and conditions of making entries, and control circumstances. However, the Regulation does not indicate either the requirements to be met by museums or the criteria of their assessment; only in the case of the application form does it mention the range of analysed issues. This situation resembles taking part in a contest devoid of rules: the evaluated categories are known from the application form, but there is no reference to the goals toward which museums should strive, or to criteria according to which a given institution will be assessed positively or negatively.

Even though members of the classification committee are distinguished specialists undoubtedly capable of assessing the standard of a given museum, evaluation deprived of criteria becomes purely subjective and indeterminate. Such countries as the United Kingdom use accreditation systems that make it possible to apply for a certification of the high standard of museum activity. Binding accreditation schemes clearly specify requirements addressed to museums, leaving no doubt which element is being assessed and according to what sort of criterion. This process also has a positive impact on the unification of museum management and delineates the direction museums should take in order to improve the quality of their work. Such standards refer both to strategic issues associated with the management of the museum as an organisation and its collections, and to the offer addressed to the public.

**Keywords:** museum management, high standard of performance, importance of collections, National Register of Museums, British accreditation scheme, Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom, Arts Council England.

## Principles of the functioning of museums in Poland

The general purposes of museums and their tasks are defined and recorded in the Act on Museums.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with art. 1 museums collect and preserve natural and cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible), inform about the values and contents of their collections and diffuse them,

foster cognitive and aesthetic sensitivity, and provide access to their collections. These objectives are realised by means of multiple activities listed in art. 2, such as the cataloguing and scientific classification of collections, maintaining accumulated monuments in conditions safeguarding their proper and secure preservation and conservation, arranging exhibitions as well as educational and promotion activities,

etc. Regulations intent on rendering precise the functioning of museums had been formulated for the purpose of elaborating demands pertaining to some of the tasks. In the domain of collection management they concern, i.a. the range and course of protecting museum collections against fires, robberies and other threats of damage or loss of exhibits,<sup>2</sup> the range, forms, and manners of recording museum objects,<sup>3</sup> the course of documentation of the terms, manner, and procedure of transferring museum exhibits outside the seat of the museum<sup>4</sup>, as well as questions connected with obtaining permission for temporary export of objects abroad<sup>5</sup> and the legal protection of movables borrowed from abroad for a temporary exhibition (so-called museum immunity).<sup>6</sup> The Act in question also regulates certain problems connected with staff management, such as conditions necessary for holding particular posts in a museum.<sup>7</sup> The majority of legal regulations, however, outline only a general framework of the functioning of museums and are to a considerable extent insufficient (and often excessively ambiguous) to be recognised as an indicator of the standards of the functioning of a museum. Regulations are particularly laconic in the case of recording collections and their relocation, and do not provide guidelines allowing complex management of the collections and their documentation. As a rule, museums work in accordance with their years-long practice frequently founded on already annulled regulations – they base themselves on the so-called blue line book, i.e. a collation of legal acts together with a presentation of the year 1967 and an expanded edition from 1970.<sup>8</sup> In turn, museums with a short history and devoid of own experiences borrow from the not always good practices of other museums or attempt to solve problems on their own, sooner or later colliding with an absence of unambiguity and contradictory regulations. Consequently, we cannot speak about a joint scheme of the functioning of museums or a homogenous standardised model of activity addressed to them.

## Requirements of the National Register of Museums

The National Register of Museums (further as: Register) was established for the purpose of confirming the high standard of activity and the significance of collections in museum institutions in Poland.<sup>9</sup> Listing in the Register depends in particular on the importance of the collections, the employment of a team of well-qualified employees, an adequate building for the collections, and a permanent source of financing.<sup>10</sup> In accordance with the Act on Museums – *a registered museum shall benefit from a special protection and financial assistance of the state*.<sup>11</sup> The Act grants the registered museum *the pre-emptive right to purchase from entities whose activity is based on offering artwork items for sale*<sup>12</sup> and *the pre-emptive right to buy directly at auctions*.<sup>13</sup> At present, the Register includes 127 institutions, which received the special status of a Registered Museum.<sup>14</sup>

In accordance with the Act on Museums, the Regulation of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of 13 May 2008 on the way of keeping the National Register of Museums (further as: Regulation) is to define the Register inscription

application form, the conditions and procedure for inscriptions, and the circumstances under which an audit can be ordered to verify whether a museum still meets conditions for being listed in the Register.<sup>15</sup> In accordance with the Regulation museums are inscribed into the Register upon a motion filed by the organiser of a museum and a decision made by the Minister of Culture and the Protection of National Heritage, after gaining the opinion of a ten-person classification commission established by the Minister from among outstanding specialists dealing with museology and affiliated sciences.<sup>16</sup> An example of the inscription application form was defined in the Regulation – the museum adds documents, such as a copy of the foundation act of the museum, its statute and organisation rules, most recent financial report, etc.

The Regulation does not indicate the requirements, which a museum must meet or the criteria of the assessment of applications. Premises contained in the Act on Museums are to be generally observed, but the qualitative standard indispensable for a museum to be classified as suitable for the Register is not indicated. One can find out what sort of categories are assessed upon the basis of information, which the given museum is obligated to present in the submitted application – nonetheless, mention is made only of the range of problems to be analysed by the commission. The majority of questions contained in the application form accumulate typical account data, such as the number of publications, exhibitions, museum exhibits, etc.; more extensive descriptive information (e.g. a characteristic of exhibitions) is also partly required. Nonetheless, these issues refer only to a small degree to the management of the institution – procedures, policies or strategies of activity. In the case of certain questions it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which information is connected with the high standard of activity, as in the case of questions about possessing a photography studio or commissioning this type of work outside the museum; this depends on the sort of institution, the number of collections, spatial conditions, and economic justification, and does not have to be linked with the good or inferior quality of the activity of the institution as such. Apart from asking about the principles of accumulating collections, which could provide a certain vision of the future growth of collections, the application does not take into account questions connected with plans or strategies for the future activity of the given institution.

The above situation is the reason why institutions aspiring to the rank of a registered museum are not informed what is expected of them or how and upon what basis will assessment take place. The Regulation concentrates on the technical aspect of inclusion into the Register and the eventual removal from it but does not define requirements and conditions to be successfully tackled by the museum nor does it render precise criteria of the assessment made by the classification commission. Despite the fact that such a commission is composed of persons who are outstanding specialists and who are without doubt capable of judging the level of a museum upon the basis of their experience and the information contained in the application, an assessment deprived of uniform criteria becomes purely subjective and inestimable.

## The accreditation system and museums

Accreditation systems function in numerous domains. Their purpose is to attest that a given organisation fulfils its tasks on a level that meets specific high standards. By way of example, the evaluation of the quality of education at schools of higher learning, carried out by the Polish Accreditation Committee,<sup>17</sup> decides whether a given school of higher learning will obtain the right to conduct a certain course or not. Importantly, such an assessment is pro-quality and periodically verified.

Standardised systems of museum accreditation exist in such countries as the United Kingdom or the USA. Associated obligatory schemes clearly define requirements to be met by an accredited museum, leaving no doubt as to which element of its activity is evaluated and according to what sort of criterion. Moreover, criteria contained in accreditation schemes offer distinct information about the way in which an exemplary museum should function, and what exerts a positive impact on the standardisation of managing a museum and delineates the direction that institutions should follow for the sake of improving quality. Such standards refer both to strategic questions connected with managing a museum conceived as an organisation, museum collections, and the offer proposed by the institution to the public.

### The Museum Accreditation Scheme in Great Britain and Northern Ireland

The first version of the Museum Accreditation Scheme in Great Britain and Northern Ireland was created already in 1988 in order to support museums in the implementation of standards and the identification of domains of development. The original name of the scheme is highly characteristic – this was to be a register of museums representing a confirmed high level. In 2004 the name of the scheme was changed to “Accreditation” in order to better depict its purpose, which entailed not so much the selection of a small and exclusively registered group of institutions as universally raising the level of the functioning of museums.

An updated version of the Museum Accreditation Scheme, recognised as the British standard, was issued in 2011.<sup>18</sup> Support for the standard, its development as well as conferring accreditation are the responsibility of the Arts Council England,<sup>19</sup> cooperating with the Welsh Government, Museums Galleries Scotland, and the Northern Ireland Museums Council.

The standard takes into account different types, dimensions, and ranges of the activity of museums; consequently, large and prosperous museums are not judged with the same yardstick as small ones with a limited budget, thanks to which the latter are not excluded from the possibility of obtaining accreditation. Main emphasis was placed on increasing an awareness of professional standards and encouraging museums to pursue development based on effective planning, responsible collection management, and taking social needs into consideration. In addition, in 2014 this scheme was supplemented by detailed guidebooks concerning particular groups of criteria supporting the achievement of the standard.<sup>20</sup> The guidebooks in question assist in completing accreditation both from the technical

point of view – by explaining the way in which a museum should prepare its application as well as the fashion in which accreditation takes place, and from the viewpoint of contents – by referring outright to accreditation requirements, with due attention paid to demands made of assorted types of museums. Furthermore, the Arts Council successively publishes on its website such additional documents supporting museums in achieving accreditation as lists of sources – guidebooks, textbooks, regulations, standards concurrent with accreditation requirements, advice provided by inspectors assessing museums, or models of the applied policy.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, while creating the Scheme its authors did not devise requirements from scratch but made use of already functioning solutions – e.g. in the case of numerous questions concerning the management of collections it is outright demanded that the SPECTRUM standard should be applied.<sup>22</sup>

The foremost element of the accreditation program is a document containing a list of requirements necessary for accreditation and divided into three categories: **Organisational health, Collections, and Users and their experiences**. Each category contains numerous requisites described in detail, which correspond to points in the accreditation application. The purpose of the first category is to demonstrate the heretofore and, predominantly, future stability of the institution from the financial and organisational viewpoint. The second is to guarantee stability in the maintenance of the collection within the accumulation of collections and their protection, conservation, and suitable documentation. The third indicates the extent to which the museum offer focuses on serving society by means of high-quality amenities (encompassing both exhibition and educational activity and accompanying facilities concentrated on the needs of the users).

Significantly, prime emphasis has been placed not such much on report information, such as the number of organised exhibitions or the recording of collections, as on strategy, e.g. devising policies and plans of functioning and the evaluation of heretofore work – by way of example, does the museum analyse the degree to which its exhibitions reach visitors, and does it draw pertinent conclusions while planning its activity. As regards collection records the Polish application concerning entry into the Register contains a question about the number of insufficiently documented collections (a problem occurring, for all practical purposes, in all museums with a longer history) while the British accreditation scheme focuses on the requirement of possessing written lists of policies, plans, and procedures concerning the supplementation of insufficient documentation.

The accreditation process is multi-stage and encompasses – after filing the application – several visits paid by inspectors affiliated with one of the institutions entitled to grant accreditation. In a situation when a museum does not meet all the accreditation requirements the application is rejected, although if the museum reveals activity aimed at attaining the delineated standards it might be granted Provisional Accreditation for 12 months. This period can be prolonged by another 12 months if the museum demonstrates distinct progress and the extension of the process is the result of a situation, which the institution does not impact. Full accreditation is granted for a period of three

years, after which the institution is obligated to apply for another assessment enabling it to retain the status of an accredited museum.

Accreditation systems in Ireland and the USA are similar. The former – modelled on its British counterpart – was introduced in 2014 by the Heritage Council in Ireland.<sup>23</sup> Here too the fundamental division of requirements addressed to museums is composed of three categories: general management (policies, plans, guarantees of financial stability), collection management (care for the collections and their documentation), and public services; the third group deals with policies and plans connected with exhibitions and education to a degree much more detailed than the British scheme. In the case of the USA, accreditation is a fragment of a widely delineated Continuum of Excellence program conducted by the American Alliance of Museums.<sup>24</sup> American accreditation is granted for ten years.

A characteristic feature of the above-outlined accreditation systems is the fact that they focus not on museum reports on attained indices but on showing the institution's stability, well-conceived mission, and associated program. The Polish Register calls for, predominantly, demonstrating heretofore undertakings, but the above-mentioned foreign programs expect a presentation of information concerning the existing museum and its future.

### Would this make sense in Poland?

It could be said that the general premise of the Polish Register of museums and the British accreditation system are rather concurrent – both are interested in confirming a high standard of functioning and take into account suitable staff, seat, and stable financing of the institution. That which in the Polish Register comprises the entire required information is in the Accreditation Scheme barely an introduction to a detailed and complete description of qualitative demands.

It is easy to notice that within the range of data analysed in the course of the assessment of museums the Polish and British systems differ, first and foremost, as regards their approach to management issues and those connected with society's expectations of museums. While comparing Polish questions and problems indicated in the discussed accreditation system it becomes obvious that in Poland small emphasis is placed on requirements pertaining to the creation of policies and strategies associated with the development of a museum. In the Accreditation Scheme a whole section concerning collections consists, for all practical purposes, of demonstrating cohesive principles of collection management (presentation of policies and plans concerning the accumulation, preservation, and documentation of collections), which in the Polish application is limited to numerical data about the collection, a description, and general principles of collection accumulation. Significantly – the British standard does not render the obtaining of accreditation dependent on the special importance of possessed collections, and thus does not exclude local museums, which cannot boast of collections on par with those of national museums, but without doubt are institutions functioning on a high level.<sup>25</sup> In the case of the Polish Register the significance of possessed collections is the first to be mentioned, but

here too there is no explanation of how and in what sort of context is this importance assessed (e.g. can collections essential only on a local scale be recognised as collections of sufficiently large impact?).

Changes of regulations occurring in Poland in the wake of systemic transformation resulted in a situation in which numerous aspects of the functioning of museums are not regulated in detail. Quite possibly, authors of currently functioning regulations intended to offer museums more freedom in shaping their policies, but the outcome means that in the majority of cases any sort of a standard is absent as a point of reference. In some instances the restriction of attention paid to detail generated contradictions between particular regulations, as in the case of, e.g. principles controlling the concurrence of collection documentation with the actual state of things – in the past attention was paid to obligatory methods of inventorisation, which was the direct consequence of the specificity of museum collections calling for other methods than those applied in the case of objects inventoried in ordinary institutions.<sup>26</sup> Today, there is no indication how museum inventorisation compares to the Accounting Act, which it contradicts<sup>27</sup> and museums are left to face this problem on their own. For quite some time members of the museum staff have been postulating the introduction of changes in the regulations, which would instil uniformity and establish a certain standard. It seems, however, that it is impossible to regulate every aspect of the functioning of a museum by means of a regulation, and that a sound solution would be to introduce an accreditation system imposing standards based on good practices and subjected to constant evaluation and development – in principle more flexible than legal regulations, which do not keep up with transformations occurring in the world. The point of departure for such a system could be precisely a National Register of Museums containing exemplary institutions representing the highest standard in the country.

It could be recognised that the targets of the British accreditation system and the Polish Register are slightly different – the purpose of the Register is to select a narrow and exclusive group of the best museums, which enjoy certain special privileges (such as the pre-emptive right to make purchases or special financial support, which for purely economic reasons cannot encompass a very wide group of museums), and not to be merely a system confirming the high standard of activity in such a large group of institutions.<sup>28</sup> Even a situation in which registered museums were to remain a confined group of the best does not alter the fact that in order to evaluate the outstanding or satisfactory level of the professionalism of a given museum it is necessary to define criteria eliminating the subjectivism of opinions. A preparation of a scheme defining requirements to be met by top museums can provide exactly such criteria.

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This article is merely an outline of problems resulting from the absence of designated standards of museum management – the majority of the cited examples referred only to issues associated with the management and documentation of collections, although this is but one of many aspects of the functioning of museums, which lack qualitative standards.

The accreditation system functioning in the United Kingdom is an example of a solution to a problem of this kind. Although the United Kingdom is a state in which museums function in a slightly different organisational and financial reality it seems that it would be easy to transfer such a solution to Polish conditions owing to its scalability (the attainment of accreditation does not depend on the prosperity of a given institution and whether it, for instance, purchases valuable objects or organises exhibitions brimming with impetus) and the fact that it bases assessment criteria upon the standard of managing the institution.

The intention of this article was not to doubt the correctness of listing particular Polish museums in the

Register, but merely to indicate the need for a standardisation of the requirements made of museums and the creation of a *sui generis* “classification framework” allowing an objective and tangible assessment of the level of the activity of those institutions. As has been mentioned earlier, at present the National Register of Museums includes 127 institutions from all over the country: state and self-government museums, large and small, with considerable or modest budgets at their disposal. It would be highly favourable for Polish museology if these institutions were to become actual models for others in their categories. Striving towards this goal could be indubitably facilitated by the creation of a quality standard lucid for all museums in Poland and characterising the best.

### Przypisy

- <sup>1</sup> Act on Museums of 21 November 1996 (*Dziennik Ustaw* [further as: Dz.U.] of 1997, no. 5, item 24), art. 1-2 (further as: Act on Museums).
- <sup>2</sup> Regulation of the Minister of Culture of 15 October 2003 on the protection of collections in museums against fires, robberies and other threats of damage or loss of exhibits as well as the methods of exhibits' readiness for evacuation in case of a threat (Dz.U. of 2003, no. 193, item 1892).
- <sup>3</sup> Regulation of the Minister of Culture of 30 August 2004 on the scope, forms and methods of cataloguing historical objects in museums (Dz.U. of 2004, no. 202, item 2073).
- <sup>4</sup> Regulation of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of 15 May 2008 on the conditions, method and procedures of transferring museum collection objects (Dz.U. of 2008, no. 91, item 569).
- <sup>5</sup> Regulation of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of 16 August 2017 on permissions for temporary export of museum exhibits, which are not monuments and are entered in museum inventories in museums that are cultural institutions (Dz.U. of 2017, item 1693).
- <sup>6</sup> Regulation of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of 14 October 2015 on the application for legal protection granted to a movable of historic or artistic or scientific value loaned from abroad for a temporary exhibition organised in the territory of the Republic of Poland (Dz.U. of 2015, item 1749); Regulation of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of 14 October 2015 on a notification form concerning import into the territory of the Republic of Poland and a notification form concerning export from the territory of the Republic of Poland of a movable of historic or artistic or scientific value loaned from abroad for a temporary exhibition organised in the territory of the Republic of Poland, provided legal protection (Dz.U. of 2015, item 1769); Regulation of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of 14 October 2015 on the inventory file of a movable of historic or artistic or scientific value loaned from abroad for a temporary exhibition organised in the territory of the Republic of Poland, provided legal protection (Dz.U. of 2015, item 1719).
- <sup>7</sup> Act on Museums, art. 32-34.
- <sup>8</sup> S. Łazarowicz, W. Sieroszewski, *Przepisy prawne dotyczące ochrony dóbr kultury oraz muzeów*, “Biblioteka Muzealnictwa i Ochrony Zabytków” 1967, series B, vol. 20; the publication was brought up to date by adding commentaries: S. Łazarowicz, W. Sieroszewski, *Przepisy prawne dotyczące ochrony dóbr kultury oraz muzeów*, 2 edition, revised and enlarged, “Biblioteka Muzealnictwa i Ochrony Zabytków” 1970, series B, vol. 28; a supplement was issued in 1978: W. Sieroszewski, A. Żółkiewski, *Przepisy prawne dotyczące ochrony dóbr kultury oraz muzeów. (Suplement do II wydania)*, “Biblioteka Muzealnictwa i Ochrony Zabytków” 1978, series B, vol. 50.
- <sup>9</sup> Act on Museums, art. 13, par. 1.
- <sup>10</sup> Act on Museums, art. 13, par. 3.
- <sup>11</sup> Act on Museums, art. 13, par. 5.
- <sup>12</sup> Act on Museums, art. 20, par. 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Act on Museums, art. 20, par. 2.
- <sup>14</sup> On 7 February 2018 the National Register of Museums totalled 127 institutions (129 items, of which two were deleted as a consequence of the closure of the museums).
- <sup>15</sup> Regulation of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of 13 May 2008 on the way of keeping the National Register of Museums, the Register inscription application form, the conditions and procedure for inscriptions and circumstances under which an audit can be ordered to verify whether a museum still meets conditions for being listed in the Register (Dz.U. of 2008, no. 91, item 567), (further as: Regulation).
- <sup>16</sup> Regulation, item. 3, par 2.
- <sup>17</sup> <http://www.pka.edu.pl/> [accessed on: 10 May 2018]
- <sup>18</sup> *Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom: Accreditation Scheme*, October 2011, <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Accreditationstandard.pdf> [accessed on: 3 July 2018].
- <sup>19</sup> Arts Council England is an institution acting on the part of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and supporting museums, libraries, and widely comprehended culture and art, <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk> [accessed on 3 May 2018].
- <sup>20</sup> *Accreditation guidance. An introduction*, June 2014; *Accreditation guidance. Section one: Organisational health*, June 2014; *Accreditation guidance. Section two: Collections*, June 2014; *Accreditation guidance. Section three: Users and their experience*, June 2014; on the Art Council website, <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/accreditation-scheme/about-accreditation> [accessed on: 30 April 2018].
- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/accreditation-scheme/support-and-advice#section-2> [accessed on: 30 April 2018].
- <sup>22</sup> SPECTRUM is an increasingly popular British collection management standard encompassing 21 procedures enabling a complex management of objects located in museums (both own and belonging to others), starting from their introduction into the museum to their eventual disposal or return. The standard

in question contains a list of information units serving both a description of the collections as such and processes associated with managing them. The non-commercial use of the standard is free-of-charge. The accessible Polish-language version is SPECTRUM 4.0, downloadable on the National Institute for Museums and Public Collections website: <https://nimoz.pl/baza-wiedzy/zarzadzanie-zbiorami/spectrum> [accessed on: 26 June 2018].

<sup>23</sup> *Museum Standards Programme for Ireland. Standards and guidelines*, An Chomhairle Oidhreachta/The Heritage Council,

<https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/museumstandardsprogrammestandardsguidelines1mb.pdf> [accessed on: 3 July 2018].

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/accreditation-excellence-programs/> [accessed on: 2 May 2018].

<sup>25</sup> *Accreditation guidance. An introduction* contains a table differentiating demands depending on the type and scale of the museum; e.g. regional museums with a budget lower than 100 000 GBP are obligated to provide a much less expanded educational offer than university museums with a budget exceeding 250 000 GBP. In turn, national museums, funded directly by the government and holding national significance, must complete additional questions and *offer visitor facilities appropriate to a national organisation*; in addition, they *will provide expertise [...] to other museums, galleries and collections*.

<sup>26</sup> Regulation of the Minister of Culture and Art of 18 April 1964 on inventory of exhibits (Dz.U. no 17, item, 101, par. 13); S. Łazarowicz, W. Sieroszewski, *Przepisy prawne...*, 1970, p. 116.

<sup>27</sup> For years museums have been engaged in a discussion intent on resolving the following questions: which regulations are paramount, how often should collection inventorisation take place, and should both types of inventorisation be treated as identical control?

<sup>28</sup> There are 2500 museums in the United Kingdom, of which almost 1800, i.e. ca. 70%, are accredited. In Poland registered museums comprise not quite 17% of museums mentioned on the Ministry list.

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**Word count:** 4 845; **Tables:** –; **Figures:** –; **References:** 28

**Received:** 05.2018; **Reviewed:** 05.2018; **Accepted:** 06.2018; **Published:** 08.2018

**DOI:** 10.5604/01.3001.0012.2305

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**Competing interests:** Authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

**Cite this article as:** de Rosset A.; HIGH STANDARD – WHAT KIND, THEN? THE NEED TO INTRODUCE AN ACCREDITATION SCHEME FOR POLISH MUSEUMS. *Muz.*, 2018(59): 157–162

**Table of contents 2018:** <https://muzealnictworocznik.com/issue/10809>