

# The Emerging Museums of Europe

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Museums of cultural history have been regarded as effective instruments of national identity-building, as well as powerful symbols of nationhood. Nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe abounded with examples of museums that fulfilled this function.

At the turn of the millenium, however, we are seeing the beginnings of a new trend in European museology: the creation of transnational, pan-European cultural history museums. *Museum Europäischer Kulturen* (MEK) was established in Berlin in 1999, and *le Musée de l'Europe* (MDE) in Brussels opened a prefigurative exhibition in 2001. *Le Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée* (MCEM) has a pilot team in place in Marseille and plans to open its doors in 2008. Further, Torino has for some time been planning to establish a similar institution.

This phenomenon raises some questions. What are the motives behind these new cultural constructions? Do they spring from the same needs and do they have similar aims? As they are all situated in EU countries, one might ask: Are there political motives? Do they aim to break down national identities and to support trans- and post-national identity-building? If so, will a breaking-down of national identities necessarily mean a European identity, or will they perhaps support regional movements and regional identities? Or are the new museums mainly a corollary of an intrascientific development, of new trends in ethnology and adjacent fields?

A closer look at these institutions – real or planned – reveals both similarities and differences in background, in ideologies, and in museological programmes.

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The turn of the millenium has seen a new development in European museology: the creation of transnational, pan-European cultural history museums. *Museum Europäischer Kulturen* (MEK) was established in Berlin in 1999, and *le Musée de l'Europe* (MDE) in Brussels opened a prefigurative exhibition in 2001. *Le Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée* (MCEM) has a pilot team in place in Marseille and plans to open its doors in 2008. There has been discussion, also, about the establishment of a similar institution in Torino.

## Three New Constructions

Of the four abovementioned institutions, the Torino museum is lagging behind the others; plans for a museum with only temporary exhibitions and no permanent collections – showing “l’inevitabilità dell’Europa tra identità e diversità” – have been suspended. The recent election of Mr Berlusconi has given these plans a more uncertain future, since his regime is not especially sympathetically disposed toward European integration, nor to public cultural institutions. I shall therefore concentrate on the new museum in Berlin and the coming ones in Brussels and Marseille.

The idea that led to the present museum of

European culture in Berlin was conceived in 1988. The ongoing economic and political unification process in Western Europe and the striving for a European Union certainly served as a backdrop, but another event gave a strong impetus to the development, notably the tearing down of the Wall in 1989 and the fall of the communist empire. In the 1930s the national German collections had been separated from European and extra-European collections, in accordance with Nazi ideology, and the post-war division of Germany resulted in two Berlin museums for *Volkskunde*. The 1989 events made it possible to bring together – temporarily in Dahlem in Berlin – the national collections from West and East Berlin. Also, close co-operation between the *Volkskunde* and the *Völkerkunde* museums resulted in the transfer of the European (non-German) collections to the *Museum für Volkskunde*, which was transformed into *Museum Europäischer Kulturen* in 1999 (MEK, Dahlem). The European collections are still kept separate from the national German collections in the reserves, in anticipation of a new museum building in a more central place in Berlin. The aim, however, is the full integration of the collections.

The important steps, then, towards MEK have been the fusion of the East and West German ethnological collections in 1992, the addition of the European anthropological collections, the congress *Wege nach Europa. Ansätze und Problemfelder in den Museen* arranged by the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde* in 1994, and the great exhibition opened in 2000, *Kulturkontakte in Europa: Faszination Bild*. The topic of the present, opening exhibition is popular imagery through the centuries, based on the idea that “Bilder kennen keine Grenzen”.<sup>1</sup>

In Brussels, the genesis of the new museum has been much shorter. An association was founded in 1997, on the initiative of the European Parliament, with the sole aim of planning the *Le Musée de l'Europe* (MDE). Contrary to what is the case for the Berlin and the Marseille museums, the Brussels museum will not establish any collections of its own and all exhibitions will be temporary, based on loans and relying heavily upon new technology and multimedia displays. The first step was an

international congress in 1999 treating the topic of borders of and in Europe, and the second a prefigurative exhibition that opened in the fall of 2001, the subject of which was *La Belle Epoque* and the World Fairs from 1851 to 1913 – i. e. Europe’s short century of progress and optimism. The idea is to show European civilisation at its height, when the unifying forces seemed stronger than the differentiating and centrifugal forces – an illusion that was broken in 1914, when the ‘European civil war’ began. The message is clear: the new Europe now under construction has come further than at that time, because one new, paramount unifying force has been introduced: the political will to create a European union.

The prefigurative exhibition was inaugurated under the patronage of the Belgian Presidency of the European Union, just as the forthcoming permanent museum is a product of the new EU policy in the field of culture. The funding is European, and the museum itself is defined as a tool for European integration. As such, it is a product of the EU change of policy in the 1990s,

“a shift in emphasis from integration, perceived as a rational by-product of economic prosperity and legal harmonisation, to more recent concerns with integration as a cultural process, and ‘culture’ as a political instrument for furthering that construction process ... [to] foster a ‘European identity’ that will extend integration into the more ‘cultural’ and psychological domains of everyday life” (Shore 2000:1).

The museum will focus on the concept of Europe and its history, the message being that the present European Union is less a recent political idea than the result of a long maturation process that has been developing over many centuries since the days of early Christianity.

In Paris, *le Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires* will soon close its doors, after 70 years of existence. The museum was created in 1937, when the French collections were separated from the other European collections of the anthropological museum at Trocadéro, *le Musée de l'Homme*. There is every reason to ask why the national objects were detached from the rest of the world’s cultural

heritage, in order to create a new, specialized museum for French popular culture – in a country where culture used to be synonymous with highbrow art and urban culture. There is no space here to enter into this discussion,<sup>2</sup> but one important factor should be mentioned, notably the political context – le Front Populaire – that made this operation possible. Paradoxically, in the 1930s both the Nazi ideology in Germany and the socialist movement in France were disposed to emphasize the national culture, and to separate it from non-national and non-European culture.

Since 1967 the museum has been situated in the Bois de Boulogne on the western outskirts of Paris. To make a long history short: after a considerable success until around 1980, a decline set in. The number of visitors shrank to around one-third of their former numbers, research tended to dry up, and in general the popularity of the museum fell dramatically. The reasons for this crisis are numerous and complex, but a few factors should be mentioned. France is a strongly centralized society, where the regional popular culture has never been really accepted; French popular culture was never deployed as an instrument in the nation-building process, as was the case in several other nation states. Also, France is a nation of immigrants, for whom the culture of the countryside has never meant much. Furthermore, national ethnology (including folklore) had to struggle for acceptance as a scientific discipline, until eventually it found its place as a special branch of anthropology. Finally, there is in France an organisational and almost watertight division between curators and researchers, a division that has allowed museum researchers to follow their own interests rather than those of the museums which employ them.

The combination of all these factors has left the national museum of French popular culture in deep crisis. The museum will close its gates in Paris to be reconstituted in 2008 in Marseille, as a museum not of French national culture, but of European civilisations – in the plural. And there is one very important addition: it will also cover Mediterranean civilisations, i. e. North African and Middle East cultures. The full name of the museum is *Le Musée des Civilisations de*

*l'Europe et de la Méditerranée* (MCEM).<sup>3</sup>

The debate about the destiny and future of the French national museum of popular culture has been going on since the early 1980s, parallel to the deepening of the crisis. An important step was the 1993 congress in Paris entitled *Rencontres européennes des musées d'ethnographie*, another was the 1997 congress *Réinventer un musée*, when the idea of a European museum was launched. In the spring of 2000, the French government accepted plans for closing down the national museum in Paris and the revival – or creation – in Marseille of a new museum of Europe and the Mediterranean area.

We may distinguish two main causes, or rather two complexes of explanations, for the establishment of these three new museums. One set of causes points towards the object in question – i. e. Europe itself and new ways of conceiving European culture. The other must be looked for in recent changes within the sciences of culture. We shall look at the new museums (and mainly the French and German ones) in relation to these two sets of explanations.

## Homogeneity or Differences? A Fresh Look at Europe

In an important paper at the Paris congress in 1993, Krzysztof Pomian – who was later appointed scientific director of the Brussels museum – gave a broad overview of European cultural history. He argued that Europe throughout its history has been torn between diversity and uniformity, an argument that was picked up by the architects of the new museums of Europe.

Europe is synonymous with diversity – in matters of language, audibly as well as visibly. In addition to the audible landscape of around fifty languages, there is a visual linguistic landscape, where signposts and posters in Latin letters, in Cyrillic, Slavic, Hebrew, Arabic, and other even more exotic alphabets, remind us of this diversity. Then comes the diversity of confessions and religions; of vernacular architecture, of architectural styles and building materials, of urban and rural settlement patterns, of agricultural landscapes; of the uniforms of soldiers, policemen and postmen and railway employees; the diversity of food and

local dishes, of meal systems; of daily life habits and customs; of home interiors, of window curtains; of churchyards and funeral habits; of behaviour in public and rules for politeness, and so on.

Everyone who has crossed Europe will nod in recognition: Europe *is* diversity, Europe *is* marked by numerous cultural frontiers, some of which coincide, whereas others cross each other; some are easily discernible, while others are more difficult to grasp; and, finally: some play a major role in the definition of local or national identity, while others pass by unnoticed. And some are pan-national, like several trait complexes separating Central Europe from Eastern or Western Europe.

But the separating forces have not been allowed to work undisturbed. Other forces work towards the uniformity of Europe, permitting the introduction of elements that have contributed towards the homogenisation of material and spiritual life, of usage and habits. The spread of technology has been one such factor; if we stick to recent times only, it should be sufficient to mention the role of innovations like the steam engine, of electricity, of electronics and the revolution in communication technologies. Other important unifying forces through history have been the spread of Christianity, the use of Latin and the institution of universities, and the interdependence and solidarity of the national elites – intellectual and social – since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Today, the liberal European market guarantees a more or less free flow of people, of goods and of ideas, and the standardisation of products. And even if restrictions still exist, migration is probably more important than ever.

These forces of uniformity, whether they are called globalisation or something else, have certainly led to the breaking down of frontiers, but *not* necessarily to full homogenisation and the disappearance of cultural differences. It is easy to show that all these major centrifugal forces have led to the creation of new differences. Christianity was cleft many times through history, to end up in several major branches and a great variety of confessions and denominations. In spite of the homogenisation of the European elites from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the following century

produced more cultural differences than resemblances, ending in the 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalisation of politics and economics, and the extolling of national independence and self-sufficiency. And the free flow of goods today has had as one of its results local specialisation and revitalisation of traditional products. On every level, probably, it is possible to show that the forces of uniformity have resulted in the creation or reintroduction of new cultural differences – within and across national borders. Or as stated by Pomian: the cultural reproduction of differences takes place all the time, thus guaranteeing that the gloomy vision of one grey, uniform future – often predicted and warned against – is clearly unjustified (1996: 48). The fear of a loss of cultural identity in a changing Europe seems totally unfounded and is due to a defective understanding of what culture is and how it works.

## Recurrent Problems of European Ethnology and Museology

Similar trains of thought have been picked up and further developed by spokesmen for the new European museums, like Korff, Karasek and Tietmeyer in Germany and Lévi-Strauss, Colardelle, Chiva, Guibal and others in France. But what are the consequences of these insights for cultural history museums?

In short, that contemporary culture – just as much as historical processes – should be the object of study and the responsibility of the museum. Furthermore, a reappraisal of comparison as the obvious methodological tool, and finally that neither national collections in ethnological museums nor European collections in ethnographic or anthropological museums are in themselves sufficient bases for research and exhibitions.

Let us start with the latter part of this problem. There are many national museums which keep rich historical collections of national or regional objects. But in a Europe where culture contacts have been so rich during at least two millennia, where cross-fertilization is a central principle, the cultural history of a given nation cannot be adequately studied and presented only in a national perspective. Or as stated by Karazek and Tietmeyer (1999: 14):

“... it is a fundamental insight that cultural expressions, and above all the cultural history of a state, cannot be seen detached from the common development in Europe. A [German] museum of cultural history with only a national orientation can understand neither the history, nor [contemporary] reality, nor the future of Germany.”

This parallels the debate in the 1970s and 1980s that led to a name change in many university institutions, from *Volkskunde* to European Ethnology or corresponding terms. For the museums, it took another couple of decades before we began to see the consequences.

Because the museums are restricted to national or regional objects, meaningful research and successful exhibitions require cooperation on bilateral or multilateral level. However, bringing relevant objects together from separate collections in different countries is always a cumbersome, time-consuming and expensive operation.

On the other hand, the European collections that exist in quite a few cities (Berlin, Paris, London, Basle, etc.) contain items from several European nations or ethnic or cultural groups, but as a rule they are severed from the national collections of their own countries.<sup>4</sup> Comparison and contextualisation are performed in other ways and in other perspectives than when different national museums collaborate. A lack of deeper knowledge of one's own culture is a hindrance to a more thorough contextualisation and a better understanding of phenomena and processes that may appear both at home and in other cultures. Part of the solution in Berlin as well as in Marseille has been to merge the national and the European collections in the same museum. This operation does of course not exclude the other remedy, that is, cooperation between museums in different countries.

The debate has been especially intense in France lately, because of the abovementioned crisis concerning the *Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires* (as well as concerning the anthropological *Musée de l'Homme*, for the same reasons). As pointed out by many French ethnologists, the problem is twofold: the public has turned its back on the museum, and a

majority of the professionals – i. e. ethnologists and anthropologists – are looking in other directions. The reformation of the museum is trying to deal with these two major problems. An ethnological museum for France, like that for any other modern European country, cannot restrict itself to studying and presenting the rural and artisanal heritage of prewar France. A museum for the French society that neglects urban France, industrialized France, multicultural France, xenophobic France, France as a modern society of consumption, of immigration, of unemployment, of new leisure habits, of modern technology – has failed its mission – or, at least, that is the verdict today, by most French ethnologists and anthropologists.

Furthermore, if one acknowledges that Europe has a tangled history, there is little logic in the self-imposed limitations – in space as well as in time – of a traditional ethnological museum. When a new Europe is being constructed, at least partly as a repudiation of a history full of violence, and when nostalgic and extremist attitudes find their justification in misunderstood national identities, it is imperative to situate French popular culture in its European context. To do this, one has to look both further back in time as well as to contemporary society. To mention only one of several strong influences on French society, the Muslim one: the cultural history of France cannot be appreciated without taking into account the Muslim impact since the late Middle Ages, just as Muslim immigration – legal and welcomed, as well as illicit – has profoundly influenced France in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and still does.

Because France has profited from extensive contacts with the regions around the Mediterranean – North Africa and the Middle East – Europe is an artificial unity, if a cultural sphere to which France belongs is to be defined. For France, with its long Mediterranean coast, the ocean has not defined the limit of the known world but, on the contrary, has served as a means of contact over thousands of years. The most important harbour, Marseille, has been and still is a cultural melting pot. Hence the decision to situate the new museum in Marseille and to define its mission as covering European and Mediterranean civilisations, under the

provisional name of *le Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée* (MCEM) The term *civilisation* has been explicitly chosen to escape from connotations that cling – at least in French – to terms like *culture* (*populaire*) and *tradition*. The term is supposed to imply a multidisciplinary approach to aspects of the societies in question that are simultaneously social, religious, moral, aesthetic, scientific and technological.

To sum up: what we can observe in the case of some of the most important ethnological museums is partly a parallel to what has happened to European ethnology at large over the past two decades: a change in thematic foci and methodological approaches. In the museums, there is – partly as a consequence of the opening up and the unification of Europe – a growing awareness of the fact that national borders are very arbitrary delimitations of the object of study. To grasp cultural diversity and similarities, contacts, traditions and change, the museum must widen the scope geographically. Furthermore, that the other self-imposed limitation, the temporal span – beginning and ending with early modern (rural) society – has been a hindrance to the understanding of both historical processes and present day society. Both Berlin and Marseille want to transcend the traditional threshold of the Reformation and cover the Middle Ages, as well as the present, globalized society.

### The Anthropologisation of European Ethnological Museums?

This development raises several questions that cannot be fully answered in this brief sketch of the changing museums of Europe. For ethnology in general, as practiced in universities or other research centres, an anthropologisation of the discipline has taken place. Will the same happen in the museums? If so, what will be the status of the physical object, and of material culture, that is the foundation of museological activities? Even if material culture has lately regained a strong position in anthropology, it is mainly due to a theoretical interest in the non-material qualities of the object. In anthropological museums there has been a clear tendency in

recent years to stress the aesthetic aspects of the object, to the detriment of functional, contextual and even symbolic aspects. In western anthropological museum exhibitions, exotic objects are displayed in the same way as are works of art in art galleries. The temperature of this debate is still high in France, in the wake of the reorganisation of *Le Musée de l'Homme* into *le Musée des Arts et Civilisations*. Also, the permanent anthropological exhibition in the art museum *le Louvre* has provoked much consternation.

In the case of the Berlin museum, the relation between ethnology and anthropology has been explicitly discussed, as the cohabitation of the *Volkskunde* and the *Völkerkunde* collections and the national and the European rapprochement have been going on for some years. The policy of *Museum Europäischer Kulturen* is “to develop neither an expanded European ethnological museum nor a museum for European anthropology in its traditional meaning, but to combine ethnological and anthropological elements in a reasonable blend, within a European framework.”<sup>5</sup> The result of this plan is not clear, as the museum has not yet obtained a new building, a prerequisite for the reorganisation of the two collections. The opening exhibition, on European *Bildlore* from the Middle Ages to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is a chronological and comparative presentation of diversity, contacts, and influences in the field of (popular) iconography. Thematically, it may be regarded as a rather traditional exhibition, but the impressive geographical span and its methodological basis, comparison in space and time, makes it an interesting attempt to merge different disciplinary traditions. It certainly deserves the label ‘European culture history’.

In the case of the Marseille museum, the planning of the museological programme was one of the main tasks in 2003, taking place when this article was written. The debates so far have focussed on the contemporary multicultural, creolized, fluxional and migratory European societies, even if the historical dimension is regarded as an important axis for the forthcoming museum. The challenges, however, are largely formulated in a context of modern social anthropology, or as its director states:

[The museum] “has adopted an anthropological perspective ... The ambition is to start with social phenomena which can be identified through tangible and intangible cultural elements both present and past, using them to gain understanding of an area considered as coherent (with an economic system, historic past and religious scriptures) but which has always produced diversity” (Colardelle 2002).

It remains to be seen how the issue of the tangible culture elements – the material object – will be treated in this anthropological frame. The question of aesthetics and the object has been asked, but not yet answered.<sup>6</sup>

### Some Concluding Remarks

The three museums of Europe, as discussed above, are borne out of common needs, they are all situated at highly symbolic places in Europe, but they also demonstrate differences.

The acknowledgement of Europe as a complex and composite culture area – with a common history, formed by forces of diversity and homogenisation, and constituted by cultural elements that cannot be understood in isolation – is shared by all the three museums, as is also the comparative approach.

Situated in Berlin – once the symbol of a divided Europe, the *Museum Europäischer Kulturen* (MEK) now symbolizes the building of bridges between East and West, the contacts between Germanic and Slavonic cultures. *Le Musée de l'Europe* (MDE) occupies a correspondingly central position in the very heart of the European Union, as close as possible to the European Commission's headquarters. *Le Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée* (MCEM), on the other hand, has chosen Marseille, perhaps Europe's most important city for contacts with African and Oriental cultures, a melting pot and a doorway to other cultures.

These geographical positions also imply different geo-political aims. The most restricted scope seems to be that of the MDE in Brussels, with its focus on the history of the idea of Europe and on the political construction of the European Union, thus concentrating on the

geographical area of the present member countries – i. e. on ‘Latin Christianity’, thus far to the exclusion of Orthodox and Islamic Europe.<sup>7</sup>

The MEK in Berlin, on the other hand, covers the whole of what is geographically defined as Europe.<sup>8</sup> Its first (and present) exhibition unveils a museum preoccupied with studying similarities as well as differences – ethnic, regional, national – along deep historical lines, on the basis of largely traditional ethnographic material. The geographical limits of Europe are unquestioned; national frontiers, however, are played down, and regions and culture areas are emphasized. How ‘pro-European’ is this project, in a largely ‘pro-EU’ Germany? The project is political in the sense that the old internal frontiers are subordinated, and the construction of the European Union certainly forms an important backdrop. But it is by no means a ‘pro-EU’ project in the way that MDE is.

The MCEM in Marseille follows other aims. With its additional – if not primary – focus on the Mediterranean region, it challenges the idea of the unity of Europe. The arguments are the same as we have seen above against the arbitrary delimitation represented by the national borders. But MCEM also insists upon the fact that the processes of diversity and homogenization, contacts, and influences take place across the Mediterranean region, between European, African and Middle Eastern societies. Or if one likes: MCEM combines the conception of a Europe without national frontiers, the deconstruction of Europe as a cultural unity, and a special focus on one multi-national region which far transcends Europe. In doing so, the museum denies the existence of one European identity, an idea cherished by some bureaucrats in Brussels.<sup>9</sup> The museum replaces the notion of national culture by other concepts, notably regional, supranational and transcontinental.

The three museums all acknowledge both the importance of a historical perspective and the necessity of bringing the past into dialogue with contemporary culture and society. Still, the disciplinary approaches are not identical. To put it very briefly: if the MDE in Brussels, led by eminent university historians, focusses on the political history of (a limited part of) Europe, with the clear aim of its function as a ‘history

book of Europe',<sup>10</sup> the MEK in Berlin is the exponent of a total European cultural history, based on ethnographic material in a comparative perspective. In contrast, MCEM in Marseille presents itself as a centre for Euro-Mediterranean (social) anthropology, with a historical perspective.

So much for these three new museum constructions, which – it should be stressed – all strongly advocate the deconstruction of the notion of national cultural borders. The obvious question then, in the wake of the ongoing process of expanding the European Union, is what will happen in the new East European member countries. After the upheaval of the communist empire, the homogenizing efforts of the Soviet occupation regimes have been – as far as I can see – replaced by fervent claims of diversity and national differences. We are witnessing nation-building processes more or less similar to those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Western Europe. How can we reconcile this development with the growing awareness in many present EU countries that national borders represent arbitrary and obsolete delimitations? This is one of the cultural thrillers of tomorrow that deserves to be followed closely.

## Notes

- 1 This was also the title of the contribution of Nils-Arvid Bringéus to the 1994 congress. See Neuland-Kitzerow & Ziehe (eds.) 1995.
- 2 I have dealt more thoroughly with this theme in another article in this issue (p. 37ff.).
- 3 In 2003 the museum was baptized Le Musée des Passages, with MCEM as an undertitle.
- 4 A special case is offered by the Museum of Ethnography in Budapest, where extra-European collections side with collections from Hungary and adjacent areas (Fejös 2001). The rest of Europe, however, is – as far as I know – not a responsibility of this museum.
- 5 Karasek & Tietmeyer 1999, p. 19.
- 6 Colardelle & al. 1999 pp. 232–233, and other publications.
- 7 According to Colardelle 2002. What will happen with the extension of the European Union to countries in Eastern Europe, remains to be seen.
- 8 Also European migration cultures elsewhere in the world.
- 9 It is difficult to see that the creation of MCEM can be reduced to EU motifs. The EU has never been a good project for French governments, left

nor right, and the French public opinion on EU matters is divided in two similar blocks. The situation is not so clear-cut as in Germany.

- 10 Colardelle 2002, p. 230.

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## Other sources

- MNATP's scrap archives (containing several hundred newspaper articles).
- Unpublished reports and working documents on the MCEM museum project.
- Oral information from curators and researchers of the museums.
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