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What's Missing?
Collecting and Exhibiting Europe

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Museum Europäischer Kulturen
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Reimer

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Setting the Scene

Elisabeth Tietmeyer

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"Europe, stitched and crocheted: The Museum of German Folklore has been made over according to EU norms" – that was the title of an article in a Berlin newspaper (Jähner 1999, 9) following the inauguration of the Museum Europäischer Kulturen of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (MEK)[1] in June 1999. The MEK was founded through the merging of the Museum für (Deutsche) Volkskunde (Museum of [German] Folklore) with the Europe Department of the Museum für Völkerkunde (Museum of Ethnology), both of which were part of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin network (Karasek and Tietmeyer 1999).

The founding of the MEK provoked ambivalent responses in the media, among academic and non-academic colleagues, and among visitors. Many of the latter lamented the lack of exhibitions on so-called German culture; while some of our non-academic and academic colleagues criticised our perceived failure to address *European* topics within the context of our more or less *German* cultural-historical collection. Others accused us of opportunism, seeking to politically and financially benefit from the European Union. On the other side, we were congratulated because of our courage to have left behind a national perspective on culture and positivistic descriptions. We received special approval from representatives of our academic discipline, which had likewise changed its field of study from German Folklore to European Ethnology. Of course, we realised that there would be a change in the makeup of our visitors, but at the same time, that there would be visitors who accepted and supported the new direction.

The foundation of what we now simply call the MEK, which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2019, was the last stage for the time being in a long-standing history of reinventing, renaming and relocating the museum.

It all began 130 years ago, in 1889, four years after the Museum für Völkerkunde moved into a new building where only non-European collections were presented. Criticised by many influential Berlin citizens, the physical anthropologist, prehistorian and politician Rudolf Virchow privately founded what was then known as the Museum für deutsche Volkstrachten und Erzeugnisse des Hausgewerbes (Museum of German Traditional Costumes and Handicrafts). The aim of the initiators was to save the memory of the lifeworlds of the lower and middle classes in Germany and neighbouring European regions, which were seen to be vanishing as a result of the course of industrialisation. This approach was very common in many European countries at the end of the nineteenth century, as part of broader efforts to strengthen national identification, leading to the foundation of national ethnographic museums.

Figure I View of one of the collection depots, 2019. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum Europäischer Kulturen/Christian Krug

In 1904, this private museum became part of the Sammlung für deutsche Volkskunde (Collection of German Folklore), which in turn was part of the Pre-historical Department of the Museum für Völkerkunde. Finally, in 1934 it was made into an autonomous institution within the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin called the Staatliches Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde (National Museum of German Folklore). At the same time, a Eurasia Department featuring ethno-graphic objects from Europe and Northern Asia was established in the Museum für Völkerkunde All this occurred against the backdrop of the political situation of the time and was guided by National Socialist ideology. Both institutions sought to curry favour with the political leadership, at least in the early stages of the Nazi era. The Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde was particularly pervaded by National Socialist thought, since its work focused on the supposedly idyllic rural world of the German past (Tietmeyer and Vanja 2013). Later, its director and curators withdrew from the political scene after their plans for a new museum were not realised (Steinmann 1964, 41). The Eurasia Department of the Museum für Völker-kunde received little attention from political forces. But the strict separation of so-called German culture from the rest of Europe remained institutionalised more or less until 1999.

After the Second World War, most of the museums in the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin network were divided up, leading to the creation of similar institu-tions on either side of the wall, such as the Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde in West Berlin and the Museum für Volkskunde in the East. In 1950, the Eurasia

Department of the undivided Museum für Völkerkunde in West Berlin (today the Ethnologisches Museum) was reorganised and renamed the European Department, though it remained largely insignificant within the context of the museum. Independently of each other, these three institutions followed their own agendas based on a purely cultural-historical approach. A general loosening of this strict situation arose in the early 1980s, when curators from the two institutions in West Berlin began to collaborate every now and then. But the most significant change, of course, happened in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of the two German states, followed by the reunification of what is now known as the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in 1992. Thus, the Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde in West Berlin was reunited with the Museum für Volkskunde in East Berlin. The name of the latter became the title of the reunited museum so as to remove the national connotation

But in the mid-1980s there had already been plans to merge the European Department with the Museum für Deutsche Volkskunde in West Berlin. These plans were followed up after the reunification of the two folklore collections. Thus, our discussions about a Europe-oriented anthropological museum were initially based on the ethnographic and cultural-historical collections which had a focus on Germany, East-Central and Southeast Europe.

After long, intensive, and sometimes controversial discussions about what Europe meant to us and how we should present it, we decided not to define Europe for our purposes, since there are many definitions, and none of them would have fit completely. Foremost in our minds was an awareness of the fact that the cultural borders of Europe could not be localised because of its complex history.[2]

We developed the MEK's basic philosophy, which was to focus on cultural similarities and differences in Europe, by explaining the intermingling of cultural patterns on the one hand, and looking into group identities on the other. The theoretical basis for this approach was – especially while the museum's profile was being established – founded in a desire to break down the term "culture". We related it to the varied expressions of culture, such as cultural domains, symbolic cultures, subcultures, ethnic cultures, regional cultures, national cultures and supra-national cultures. In a rather abstract way, this approach referenced contacts between cultures within Europe, as well as relations between Europeans and non-Europeans, and interpretations of European cultural phenomena by non-Europeans. This profile is reflected in the name Museum Europäischer Kulturen (Museum of European Cultures) (Karasek and Tietmeyer 1999).

As time went by, the anthropological discourse about the term "culture" shifted because of its ethnic and ahistorical connotations. But we at the MEK have never looked upon culture as a static entity; we have always seen it as a process. Nowadays, though, we seldom use the term "culture", instead operating with terms like lifeworlds, everyday life or living environments, and are increasingly concerned with questions of the diversity of society at large. That is why we co-initiated and participate in local, national and international networks and develop bilateral and multilateral collaborations on different scales dealing with a range of topics.

One of the fundamental principles of our work is the focus on the present, as well as a commitment to participatory work, which is key to ensuring multi-perspectivity on certain issues. To this end, we follow the ICOM Code of Ethics, especially Article 6, which states: "museums work in close collaboration with the communities from which their collections originate as well as those they serve"

Figure II
Event in the MEK garden, 2019.
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Christian Krug

(ICOM 2017, 31). The participatory approach generally leads to the involvement of people on the local level. One of the highlights of our event formats is our annual "European Cultural Days" programme. In this project, a city, region, country, heritage group etc. in Europe is presented through the frame of a specific theme, involving an extensive event programme and a small exhibition, and realised in collaboration with representatives of the relevant institutions, communities and associations in Berlin and elsewhere. With network-building and collaborations, we try to express and manifest our transnational European orientation.[3]

But what about the MEK collection? Drawing on more than 285,000 objects and artefacts from all over Europe and beyond (with a focus on German-speaking regions), we have developed several exhibitions focusing on cultural entanglements in Europe and beyond. By putting "new questions to old objects", as we like to call it, we have re-interpreted the exhibits and told stories that differ from former, positivistic presentations of past living environments. This is presented in the exhibition *Cultural Contacts: Living in Europe.* Opened at the end of 2011, this display features a cross-section of all the museum's diverse collections, addressing issues that are still highly topical today, such as forced migration (Tietmeyer and Ziehe 2011).[4]

On top of this, we pick up current cultural and socio-political topics that are relevant to European society, like migration, identity, gender issues, and ecological sustainability, while at the same time trying to serve the interests of local groups and individuals by involving them in the organisation of exhibitions and events that explore issues that bear connections with their lives, experiences and ideas. During this work, we often collect contemporary objects and the stories behind them, thus continually developing sections of our collection.

This paradigm shift at the MEK led to dynamic changes in the collection – but not in a structured way. That is why we are currently re-discussing our former collection strategies and explicitly ask ourselves: "What is missing from our collection?" This question takes me back to the title of my talk: Have we reached our goals? That is difficult to answer. What I know for sure is the fact that every change in society implies new goals for museums that seek to be socially relevant – and reaching these goals is the greatest challenge there is.

Endnotes

1 The MEK is located in the southwest of Berlin, in the suburb of Dahlem. Along with 14 other museums and 4 research institutes, it forms part of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation); see detailed information at: https://www.smb.museum/en/. (Last accessed: 15.03.2020)

2 As I was head of the European Department of the Museum für Völkerkunde I was deeply involved in the development of the new Europe-oriented museum. This information is based primarily on my personal experience.

3 See: https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum -europaeischer-kulturen/events/european-cultural-days.html. (Last accessed: 22.03.2020)

4 See: https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum -europaeischer-kulturen/exhibitions/detail/cultural-contacts-living-in -europe.html. (Last accessed: 22.03.2020)

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Introduction
Towards New Filters and Relations

The present publication is based on the presentations at the conference *What's Missing? Collecting and Exhibiting Europe*, held from 26 to 28 June 2019 at the Museum Europäischer Kulturen – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (MEK). The event coincided with the MEK's 20th birthday, which means that as an institution, it has just come out of puberty, which is always a time of overt self-awareness and self-criticism, and of struggling to find one's own path. Therefore, this anniversary is not only an occasion to celebrate, but also a moment for friendly but critical self-reflection. Because we certainly do not want to indulge in institutional navel-gazing, we have invited a range of colleagues and critical friends to think with us about some of the blank spots in current museum practice on a broader level: which objects, narratives, methods and actors have not received any (or enough) attention, and are missing from our museum practices and reflections on contemporary daily lives and societies in Europe?

Under this overarching question there are two main thematic strands in this publication, both of which are closely intertwined. The first one is the collections themselves. In the case of the MEK, these are the so-called folk arts and cultures collections (in German often formerly known as the *Volkskunde* collections). In recent times they have often been re-named "collections of everyday culture" (*Alltagskultur*) or "popular culture".[1] A renaming is usually either the first symptom or the last consequence of a dire need for conceptual change. Numerous European collections and museums featuring everyday objects are going through these processes of transformation – from historical folklore that is nationally and sometimes ethnically framed, to contemporary, European and transculturally conceived institutions. In this process, the historical collections are both a blessing and a curse: they form the basis of a museum's very existence, but have originally been collected under the paradigm of "salvage anthropology", and very often also according to national, regional and/or ethnic categories. Their historical narrative frames do not sufficiently represent current social developments or even complex, diverse pasts. How can these vast collections find new relevance with regard to contemporary issues and new socio-political contexts? Which new, diverse and inclusive stories can this specific type of museum tell? And how does all of this not only feed into collections and exhibitions – but also into the internal structures of museums and the methods they use?

Turning folklore (*Volkskunde*) collections into collections of everyday culture has to be framed – and even more so in the MEK's specific case – within a European context. Processes of Europeanisation and the engagement with trans-European

themes in and outside museums have to be put centre-stage – especially against the backdrop of current debates around highly contested European identity and identities. The political "European project" is being increasingly called into question, and conflicting ideas about European cultural heritage are the subject of heated debates in many arenas. What social role do folk or popular art and culture museums and collections want to play in these debates about a Europe in transition? And how can a reinterpretation and contemporisation of these types of collections and exhibitions through (post)migrant, queer, decolonial, refugee or non-ableist perspectives be established in mainstream museum work? This is to name only a few often marginalised perspectives.

With this in mind, this publication is structured into several different sections. We start with a broader, more general **Prologue**. After Elisabeth Tietmeyer's and my introductory remarks follows the keynote address of the conference, held by Suay Aksoy, former president of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), who thinks about exclusion and inequality and the role museums can play in creating inclusive societies. The conception of a museum portrayed by Aksoy as a socially responsible actor is one to which most of the contributors to this volume aspire. It sets the general tone for the following articles. Another introductory reflection comes from Wolfgang Kaschuba, a long-term "critical friend" of the MEK. He interrogates the concept of "cultural heritage" and lays out the role of the MEK in the global debates around this idea and the closely entangled discussions around looted art that have emerged in the context of the formation of the Humboldt Forum, one of Germany's biggest cultural projects in the heart of Berlin.[2]

The prologue is followed by five thematic blocks. If you want to know what's missing, the most enlightening way is to look through the eyes and listen to the voices of those who gaze and speak from very different points of view to your own. In an attempt to provincialise Europe (cf. Chakrabarty 2000), the thematic blocks open with a section on **Global Europe**. This section brings together diverse perspectives from different corners of the globe on objects, people and narratives related to European-focused collections and museums. The authors take us from Indigenous North America to the Black Atlantic in its Carribean mode, towards Japan and back to Ellis Island, New York, a historic bottleneck in the flow of European migration to the US, especially in the nineteenth century.

In the second section, **Transforming Collections, Reimagining Everyday Objects**, colleagues from museums in other European countries with similar collections to the MEK's reflect on their own ways of dealing with the need to adapt their historical collections to a contemporary context. These theoretical approaches and practical examples are complemented by a strong argument for the potential that these collections can hold for community collaborations.

Subsequently, and in keeping with these appeals for community engagement, this section is followed by one on **Museum Methods and Structures**. When thinking about what's missing in an institution, it is not enough to analyse the composition of collections or the narratives in exhibitions: we also have to look specifically at museum methods – especially integrating community expertise and knowledge – and structures, most importantly staffing. This wide-ranging topic, with its broadly applicable questions, concerns all museum types, and is therefore approached here from a transdisciplinary (and trans-European) perspective.

The final main section is titled **Exhibiting Europe?**, and is deliberately framed as a question. It focuses on curatorial processes of exhibition-making and the European or trans-European narratives that are employed (or not employed)

within them, especially via the display of everyday objects. This section moves from major museums in cosmopolitan urban contexts to small local museums, and looks at the different ways of communicating transregional and transnational histories and stories.

The fifth and final section, the **Epilogue** titled **From Missing to Forgetting**, focuses on the theme of forgetting[3] as a museum practice, which is closely connected to the underlying question of this publication, namely "what's missing?". Sharon Macdonald, director of the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMAH) at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and another "critical friend" of the MEK, reflects on forgetting as an inherent and necessary part of the memorialising function of museums. Having applied these theoretical considerations to the concrete museum practice of a One-Stop-Shop at the conference, members of POEM, the EU-Horizon 2020 research project on Participatory Memory Work,[4] in which the MEK is also involved, describe and analyse their growing "Archive of Forgotten Memories" as closing remarks.

Punctuating each of these thematically ordered blocks are images of objects mostly from the MEK collection, with brief accompanying essays. We've asked ourselves as well as external academics and everyday experts to critically engage with the MEK collection with the question of what's missing in mind – thus creating a plurivocal perspective on past and present collecting practices.

In putting together the conference and the ensuing publication, several points were of particular importance to us. We wanted to bring people from very diverse museological backgrounds together in manifold ways, with the authors including both museum practitioners and academics. The latter, however, have been deeply involved in hands-on projects with museums and collections, and therefore know first-hand the complex procedures of moving from theory to practice. There are also those who have long been working inside museums and those who have turned towards the institution from outside, sometimes from an explicitly critical standpoint. Furthermore, the authors also come from different national museum cultures – both across Europe and beyond. They work in museums that are major global players as well as in smaller, locally focused museums. And last but not least, it was important to us that there was a balance of contributions from colleagues working in and with folk arts and culture museums and from authors from other disciplinary backgrounds – because we believe in the productivity of the transgression of disciplinary boundaries. With this multitude of voices, we hope to foster a vibrant dialogue about identifying, challenging and incorporating blank spots in our museum practices – with the aim of developing new filters and new relations in collections of everyday cultural objects in a European – and thus always global – context.

Endnotes

1   This is a very German phenomenon. In other European countries, the folklore collections are simply called "ethnographic". However, in German academia, there has been a long-standing historical division between ethnography of "non-European cultures" and ethnography within Europe. In fact, they are two separate disciplines (nowadays often referred to as *Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie* [social and cultural anthropology] and *Europäische Ethnologie* [European Ethnology]). This is also reflected in the collection and museum landscape. Today, in the German context, the "ethnographic" seems to be reserved for the global context. See, for example, the discussion

on *Alltagskultur* in museums in Korff 1991; Lauterbach and Roth 1980; or Schöne 1998.

2   The much-debated Humboldt Forum is part of the contested rebuilt Prussian palace opposite the Museumsinsel in Berlin. It houses several cultural and academic institutions, the most prominent among them being the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst – both part of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin network. It is due to open in winter 2020. On this debate, see, for example, Bose 2016.

3   For a museum exhibition and publication focusing solely on this theme, see Alley and Wettengl 2019.

4   See: https://www.poem-horizon.eu/. (Last accessed: 13.07.2020)

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Colophon