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Online resources for the history of religion: a look at  
national history museums and at the House of  
European History

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## Special Issue

# Religious culture and education in 20th and 21st century Europe

Maria Giuseppina Meloni and Anna Maria Oliva (eds.)



## RiMe 5/I n.s. (December 2019)

### Special Issue

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## Online resources for the history of religion: a look at national history museums and at the House of European History<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

History museums have been influenced by developments in contemporary museology, opening up to new forms of interaction with their local communities. This is true also in the case of European national history museums, with their growing focus on communicating with the public both through the social media and through their own websites.

Images, texts and virtual exhibitions are as many ways of depicting and of narrating a nation's history with the aim of attracting new visitors in what, for many of them, will be their very first contact with an institute of education tasked with building knowledge and identity. People often decide to organise a visit to a museum after viewing its website.

Analysing a selection of national museums and the House of European History, we will be asking ourselves questions regarding the presence of the history of religion in these narratives on the web.

### *Keywords*

National History Museums; House of European History; ReIReS Project; History of Religion..

### *Riassunto*

I musei di storia hanno risentito degli sviluppi nella museologia contemporanea, aprendosi a forme nuove di comunicazione con le comunità di riferimento. È ciò che si registra anche nel caso dei musei nazionali di storia europei, sempre più attenti alla comunicazione con il pubblico sia attraverso i social, sia attraverso il loro sito web.

Immagini, testi, mostre virtuali costituiscono pratiche di rappresentazione e di narrazione della storia della nazione che hanno lo scopo di attrarre nuovi visitatori, costituendo per moltissimi di loro il primo contatto con una istituzione educativa, agente di costruzione di conoscenza e di elementi identitari. Spesso è dopo aver visitato il sito che si decide di organizzare una visita.

Attraverso l'analisi di alcuni casi di musei nazionali, e dell'House of European History, ci interrogheremo sulla presenza della storia religiosa in queste narrazioni attraverso il web.

### *Parole chiave*

Musei di Storia Nazionale; Casa della Storia europea; Progetto ReIReS; Storia della religione.

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<sup>1</sup> All the sites mentioned were visited in December 2018.



1. Introduction. - 2. A look at the national history museums (through their websites). - 2.1. The National Museum of Denmark (Copenhagen). - 2.2. The Swedish History Museum (Stockholm). - 2.3. The German Historical Museum (Berlin). - 3. The House of European History (Brussels). - 4. Conclusions. - 5. References. - 6. Curriculum vitae.

## 1. Introduction

As is well known, the Faro Convention<sup>2</sup>, signed by ten countries in 2011, has represented a fundamental juncture in museological reflection, welcoming a shift of attention already underway for some time from the object 'cultural heritage' to the subject, that is, to citizens and communities.

It is worth mentioning here, for the issues that will be developed in this text, Article 12 of the Convention: *Access to cultural heritage and democratic participation*. Subscribers undertake to:

a) encourage everyone to participate in: - the process of identification, study, interpretation, protection, conservation and presentation of the cultural heritage; - public reflection and debate on the opportunities and challenges which the cultural heritage represents; b) take into consideration the value attached by each heritage community to the cultural heritage with which it identifies; c) recognise the role of voluntary organisations both as partners in activities and as constructive critics of cultural heritage policies; d) take steps to improve access to the heritage, especially among young people and the disadvantaged, in order to raise awareness about its value, the need to maintain and preserve it, and the benefits which may be derived from it.

The Convention therefore involves the participation of citizens and communities as the key to increasing awareness in Europe of the value of cultural heritage and its contribution to well-being and quality of life, as well as to social inclusion and stability. The debate on a new museology and in particular on ecomuseums goes in this direction<sup>3</sup>.

Cultural institutions are called upon to accept a complex challenge, which is no longer limited to the ordering, conservation, enhancement and facilitation of the enjoyment of a cultural product: there is increasing agreement with the idea that they must take charge of an activity directed towards the construction of

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<sup>2</sup> Faro, 27/10/2005, *Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society*: <<https://www.coe.int/it/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/199>>.

<sup>3</sup> <[http://archives.icom.museum/ecomuseums\\_links.html](http://archives.icom.museum/ecomuseums_links.html)>.

active citizenship, taking on an educational dimension and – a challenge that seems even more difficult – acting against social exclusion and marginalization<sup>4</sup>. The website of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has an extensive bibliography on these issues, to which reference should be made for further information<sup>5</sup>.

As far as museums in particular are concerned, it is not only a question of eliminating all access barriers, of developing new communication strategies to try to attract non-traditional publics as well, of improving reception policies, but also of undertaking as a mission the development of participatory planning, a principle that is now also recognised in the official documents of international trade associations<sup>6</sup>.

Even the ‘classic’ definition of the museum is now outdated. According to the ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly in Vienna on 24 August 2007, a museum “is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment”. In the aftermath of the 2016 ICOM General Conference in Milan, a new Standing Committee has been appointed to study the current definition, because it “does not reflect and express adequately the complexities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the current responsibilities and commitments of museums, nor their challenges and visions for the future”<sup>7</sup>.

It is important here to remember the point of view of a feminist museology that instead emphasizes how, in many ways, and despite all the good intentions, many museums remain ‘peremptory’ places, authoritative, little or not at all attentive to the development of gender paths and policies of. A group of Canadian pedagogues developed the *Feminist Museum Hack* project, “analytical and creative processes to unmask, interrogate, deconstruct and resist patriarchy as an ‘epistemology of mastery’ concealed in museums’ practices of representation, considering images, placing and texts” (Clover - Taber - Sanford, 2018); in Spain *Museos en femenino*<sup>8</sup> involved four national art museums. These are still niche routes, which are waiting to receive the attention they deserve at a

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<sup>4</sup> From Milan, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> <<https://icom.museum/en/resources/publications/?q=&y=&type=85>>.

<sup>6</sup> International Council of Museums, *Code of Ethics for Museums*, section VI: *Museums work in close collaboration with the communities from which their collections originate as well as those they serve* (<<https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>>).

<sup>7</sup> <<https://icom.museum/en/activities/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>>.

<sup>8</sup> This is a project on museums and gender funded by the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Commission. It ended in 2013: López Fernández Cao - Fernández Valencia, 2018.

European level as well, although the *She-Culture* project financed by the Culture 2007-2013 programme and dedicated to women's museums, seemed to be an opening in this sense<sup>9</sup>.

Here it is interesting to remember this approach, however, because this line converges to indicate a necessary path of museological democratization, meaning by this word the need to put a plurality of audiences at the centre of museum cultural policies, to take into account the cultural, social and gender differences in society to develop inclusive policies and to accommodate marginal narratives and 'different' points of view. As we have seen, however, it is a public that is no longer required to be a spectator, that is, a passive recipient of cultural policies, but a participant in the cultural policies themselves. In the end, continuing along this path, we come to question, in the name of participatory planning, the concept of authorship. This is what emerges, for example, from the now extensive literature on Public History, a discipline born in the United States and rooted above all in English-speaking countries that has long focused on the forms of communication and dissemination of history, the way in which historians interact with their audiences. According to Thomas Cauvin, president of The International Federation for Public History, public history is not just about history *for* "but also *with* non-academic audiences". And he adds: "Historians should accept that they do not work for the sake of history only, to advance historical research, but also for and with others"; developing therefore, on the basis of this assumption, the concept of shared authority, that is, of an authorship that the historian shares with his public. In what way, and according to what dynamics? In this regard, Cauvin provides some examples by calling museums into question: "Sharing authority can be done, for instance, through inviting visitors attending exhibitions to share their stories and interpretations of the collections, through collaboration with narrators in creating oral history sources, or through developing on line crowd sourcing projects" (Cauvin, 2016, pp. 14, 2, 217)<sup>10</sup>. The theme of history museums recurs in the annual appointments of the National Council on Public History<sup>11</sup> as well as in those of the Italian Association of Public History<sup>12</sup>.

Unfortunately, these three levels of debate (ICOM, feminist museology and

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<sup>9</sup> *Guidelines for Women's Museums and/or gender oriented Museums by the She-Culture Project Group*, 2015: <<http://www.she-culture.com/en/outputs/guidelines-english>>.

<sup>10</sup> On the relationship between museums and public history, see also: Noiret, 2017 and Porciani, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> National Council on Public History: <<https://ncph.org/>>.

<sup>12</sup> Associazione Italiana di Public History: <<https://aiph.hypotheses.org/>>. For the Third National AIPH Conference (University of Campania, Santa Maria Capua Vetere, 24-28 June 2019) proposals have been submitted for many fields, among which "History in museums, libraries, archives, exhibitions, galleries".

Public History,) continue not to interact (Porciani 2010), but thinking about the will of the ReIReS Project to depart from the more strictly academic path, to raise debate and to reach various audiences, to become conscience and widespread knowledge<sup>13</sup>, museums are places to be taken into account as possible interlocutors. As Steven Conn reminds us, “we live in a museum age (...) more people are going to more museums than at any time in the past” (Conn, 2010, pp. 1-19) and museums are places where the common sense of history is built.

## 2. *A look at the national history museums (through their websites)*

The founding of national history museums runs from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the urgency for their establishment appeared to be a European phenomenon: collections of royal or aristocratic property were grouped together and reinterpreted in a national context (Aronsson, 2010). These museums aim to offer a ‘national story’, a master narrative that contributes to the creation of a pantheon of the nation, celebrating ages, events, characters and myths considered fundamental, and excluding, of course, others.

Not all European countries have a museum of national history: there are none, for example, in Italy<sup>14</sup>, Spain or Portugal. In France, the establishment of a national museum of history launched by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2009 was the subject of a heated debate and the project was then cancelled (Porciani, 2010, pp. 109-114; Nora 2010)<sup>15</sup>, as was the case with the Nationaal Historisch Museum in the Netherlands<sup>16</sup>.

These museums have been the subject of the European EUNAMUS project, *European national museums: Identity politics, the uses of the past and the European*

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<sup>13</sup> See, in particular, the content of Work Package 8: *Dissemination and Exploitation of Results, Communication*: <<https://reires.eu/about/work-packages/>>.

<sup>14</sup> In Italy there is instead a network of Risorgimento Museums: <<http://www.museionline.info/musei/risorgimento/2>>. Also remember the exhibition “Fare gli italiani 1861-2011. 150 anni di storia nazionale” curated by Walter Barberis and Giovanni De Luna. This exhibition, open from 18 March 2012 to 4 November 2012, has a permanent virtual space <<http://faregliitaliani.archivioluca.com/FareItaliani/index.html>>.

<sup>15</sup> A review of articles in “Le Monde” can be found here: <[https://www.lemonde.fr/recherche/?keywords=Maison+de+1%27histoire+de+France&page\\_num=1&operator=and&exclude\\_keywords=&q=recherche\\_titre&author=&period=since\\_1944&start\\_day=01&start\\_month=01&start\\_year=1944&end\\_day=29&end\\_month=01&end\\_year=2019&sort=desc](https://www.lemonde.fr/recherche/?keywords=Maison+de+1%27histoire+de+France&page_num=1&operator=and&exclude_keywords=&q=recherche_titre&author=&period=since_1944&start_day=01&start_month=01&start_year=1944&end_day=29&end_month=01&end_year=2019&sort=desc)>.

<sup>16</sup> For further information we can consult the links to the entry: <[https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationaal\\_Historisch\\_Museum\\_\(Nederland\)](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nationaal_Historisch_Museum_(Nederland))>.

*citizen*, whose website can also be consulted for further bibliography<sup>17</sup>. Ilaria Porciani gives us an overview of these museums:

Like prisms with many faces, they are and have been places containing collections of heterogeneous and rich documentary materials that included manuscripts, correspondence and documents of various kinds but also commemorative postcards, photographs and objects full of meaning: increasingly valuable sources for historians attentive to the mentality and anthropological aspects of the construction of identities. They have been and still are real research laboratories. Finally, they were proposed as a breeding ground for the construction of a discourse intended to reach a very wide audience. A decisive place for the development of a complex public use of history, the museums have acted as a catalyst for the discussion of history but also of national consciousness. These are real texts that have an immediate and often disruptive effect on the public debate, often generating strong contrasts<sup>18</sup>.

A museum of national history is much more than a container of archaeological, ethnographic and artistic collections. In the cases examined – the National Museum of Denmark (Copenhagen), the Swedish History Museum (Stockholm), the German Historical Museum (Berlin) – the museums have a library and a archive, organise temporary exhibitions and plan cultural activities related to them, organise guided tours inside the museum and educational tours, produce apps and audio guides, manage social media, carrying out and promoting scientific research. Through this series of activities, the museums are proposed as a primary vehicle to reach the thousands of visitors yearly.

The world they tell about and try to identify is the nation, and they do so, first and foremost, from their websites. Images, texts, video and virtual exhibitions are the many ways of depicting and of narrating a nation's history with the aim of attracting new visitors in what, for many of them, will be their very first contact with an institute of education tasked with building knowledge and identity in a manner capable of triggering enthusiasm and emotion. People often decide to organise a visit to a museum after viewing its website, for example after considering whether the museum offers appropriate spaces and tours devised for children.

Analysing these cases and the House of European History, we will be asking ourselves questions regarding the presence of the history of religion in these narratives on the web. What themes do they develop? On what periods do they

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<sup>17</sup> <<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/94002/results/en>>. See also the project website, completed in January 2013: <<http://www.ep.liu.se/eunamus/>>.

<sup>18</sup> Porciani, 2010, p. 115; the original in Italian.

focus? How does “religion” fit into the idea of the construction of a nation, of our common European house, that we aim to convey?

In the context of the *ReIReS* Project, it appears to be of some importance that we reflect on museums of history as venues for providing and building narratives designed for ever broader audiences. Museums build knowledge and contribute to forming identities; in other words, their practices of representation are central to how they present, imagine and narrate the world (Clover - Taber - Sanford, 2018). In the long-term goals of the *ReIReS* Project there is not only the dissemination of knowledge, but the desire to affect social stability, encouraging interreligious dialogue: “Knowledge of religious traditions helps us to reduce fear and anger because of prejudices and unfamiliarity with ‘the other’”<sup>19</sup>. Museums are complex cultural institutions, places where it is possible to develop interactions even between very different audiences, ‘contact zones’. To what extent can they ultimately help in the direction desired by the *ReIReS* Project, at least judging from their websites?

### 2.1. *The National Museum of Denmark (Copenhagen)*<sup>20</sup>

The National Museum of Denmark has an important prehistoric collection, with well-known pieces such as *The Sun Chariot*<sup>21</sup>, placed on the ground floor. On the first floor there are objects from the 1050/1660 period, divided into sections: Middle Ages (1050-1536) and Renaissance (1536-1660). On the second floor, the exhibition continues with the period of the absolute monarchy until the most recent years.

The site does not offer information on the birth of the museum<sup>22</sup>, which opened in 1849 (Zipsane, 2011, p. 213). At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the monarchy established what would become the country’s two main national museums: The State Art Museum for art and The National Museum for archaeology, ethnology, and history.

The visit can be prepared by reading *Historical knowledge. Denmark*, which presents a very broad chronological overview, from the Mesolithic period to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For each period the chapters are usually short or very short, accompanied by a set of images. The part dedicated to the Viking Age, on the other hand, is extensive and structured, and its beginning is also significant: “Danish prehistory *culminated* in the Viking Age, the period from 800 until 1050

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<sup>19</sup> <<https://reires.eu/about/>>.

<sup>20</sup> <<https://natmus.dk>>.

<sup>21</sup> <<https://en.natmus.dk/museums-and-palaces/the-national-museum-of-denmark/information-for-tourists/>>.

<sup>22</sup> <<https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/historical-themes/the-history-of-the-national-museum/>>.

AD". It contains a graphically effective time line (reproduced on a Viking boat) that cites the most relevant events in order to create a chronological reference framework and a video lasting about three minutes is also available. During the Viking Age there was the transition to Christianity and the religious aspect is treated in several passages, especially in the chapter on *Religion, magic, death and rituals*. A number of points in this text should be taken up and considered:

The relationship between the belief in the Norse gods and Christianity during the Viking period has been the subject of much discussion.

The Viking transition to Christianity did not just involve religion; politics also played a significant role. In the larger kingdoms south of Denmark, Christian rulers and the Church were powerful forces in Viking Age and medieval Europe. The conquering of countries was praiseworthy if the objective was to Christianize their inhabitants. (*The transition to Christianity*)

The baptism of King Harald around 965 marks a decisive step, taking the form of "tactical manoeuvre to hold the German emperor and the archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen at bay"<sup>23</sup>. The vision of a *religio instrumentum regni* is underlined in several passages while, on the other hand, the persistence of a "Nordic religion" well beyond the threshold of the tenth century is outlined<sup>24</sup>: Christianity, encountering a different mentality in Scandinavia from that found "in Southern Europe"<sup>25</sup>, would win without "the old belief" being completely abandoned. The approximately 500-1000 people who in today's Denmark "believe in the old Nordic religion and worship its ancient gods", with an accurate description and images of their main practices and festivities, also conquer an important space in the economy of narration. Of course, the text specifies that it is not a direct continuation of the religiosity of the Vikings, but the phenomenon - although very limited in terms of adherence - is configured as something more than a revival and a contemporary reinterpretation ("The modern belief in the Norse gods is not a direct continuation of the beliefs of the Vikings. It is more of a revival and reinterpretation of the old religion..."). If it is

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<sup>23</sup> <<https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/religion-magic-death-and-rituals/the-transition-to-christianity/>>.

<sup>24</sup> "Many think that the old Nordic religion – the belief in the Norse gods – disappeared with the introduction of Christianity. However, it did not, but was instead practiced secretly or under a Christian cloak": *The old Nordic religion (asatro) today*, <<https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/religion-magic-death-and-rituals/the-old-nordic-religion-today/>>.

<sup>25</sup> *The transition to Christianity. The victorious Christ*: <<https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/religion-magic-death-and-rituals/the-transition-to-christianity/>>.

not a contemporary revival and reinterpretation, how to define these practices? The text is deliberately suspended, leaving the reader to take the next step: the vitality of a primordial North that echoes from generation to generation and with which the imaginary nation, the folk community, is merged (Bäckström, 2010). And it is this cultural heritage, imagined and celebrated, which is also used to explain certain dynamics of the present, as is clear from the part reserved for Viking women<sup>26</sup>:

Just like today, women in the Viking period sought a suitable partner. The sagas are filled with stories of women competing over who has the best man. However, love did not always last. So it was good that Scandinavia was a pioneering region when it came to equal opportunities. The Viking woman could choose a husband and later decide not to marry him after all, if she so wished.

With Christianisation begins the long Middle Ages, which, in the chronological sequence proposed by the Museum website, continues until the introduction of Lutheranism in 1536. ("when the Lutheran Reformation defeated and replaced the Roman Catholic Church controlled by the Pope"<sup>27</sup>). A very short part has been reserved for this passage:

The Reformation meant that the Danish Church became Protestant, with the king as its supreme protector, who also had the responsibility of choosing Denmark's seven bishops. However, there was no violent destruction of altars, figures and paintings, but rather a gradual removal of the numerous images of saints and side altars from the Catholic period. The main elements in the new church organisation were that Danish became the language for church services instead of Latin, including sermons and hymns, the giving of both wine and bread at the Eucharist and that there was finally a church discipline that made sure all knew their Christianity from an early age.

As Zipsane observes (2011, p. 211), "no doubt the archaeology museum was, from the very beginning, significant in creating a historically founded Danish nationalism that can be detected in the composition and priorities of the national museums".

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<sup>26</sup> *Women in the Viking Age*: <https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/the-people/women/>.

<sup>27</sup> <<https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/middle-ages-1000-1536/>>.



## 2.2. *The Swedish History Museum (Stockholm)*<sup>28</sup>

Founded in 1866, The Swedish History Museum operates as a government agency. The permanent displays are arranged in chronological order: the pre-Christian collections are on the ground floor and the collections from around 800 onwards upstairs. It has an impressive Viking collection, which includes objects from the 800-1050 period. In 1994 the *Gold Room* was opened<sup>29</sup>, with a large number of gold and silver objects on display.

The website of this museum does not offer information on the history of the institution. While I'm writing (January 2019) the home page is divided into several boxes: the top one provides information about a temporary exhibition on the Holocaust<sup>30</sup>; short notes for the presentation of the Museum follow. The middle and lower sections of the homepage are dominated by the Viking Age. A new Viking exhibition is announced in preparation for May 2020, with a short video and an explanatory text about the objectives of the exhibition, basically a better knowledge of the Viking people "through unique objects, new stories, and interactive stations"; another image introduces the best-known part of the permanent exhibition, gold and silver jewellery and objects placed in the Gold Room on the lower floor of the Museum<sup>31</sup>, with images of important pieces of the collection, such as a fifth century golden collar. Next we find a quiz, *Who are you in Norse mythology?*, a way of deepening the mysterious world of Viking sagas and legends with *The worlds and beings of Norse mythology*, and an introduction to *The mythological world of the Vikings* through Yggdrasil, the tree of life. There is also a blog, with news on an ongoing project on the Middle Neolithic pile dwelling of Alvastra in Östergötland.

If we exclude the temporary exhibition on the Holocaust, the Museum's welcome page is monothematic, aimed at attracting the public through videos and eye-catching graphics and with the celebration of the Viking Age, the founding myth of the nation.

At the top of the menu, by selecting *Exhibitions*, we can access the *History of Sweden*, but the text is really too short to allow reflections:

A thousand years of Swedish history. The "History of Sweden" exhibition is a concentration of events and personal destinies from the 11th century down to the present day. Influential men and women are highlighted, as well as class

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<sup>28</sup> <<http://historiska.se/home/>>. We also recommend the entry in Wikipedia for the rich apparatus of notes and the linkography: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swedish\\_History\\_Museum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swedish_History_Museum)>.

<sup>29</sup> <<http://historiska.se/utställningar/the-gold-room/>>.

<sup>30</sup> *Speaking Memories - The Last Witnesses of the Holocaust. An Exhibition at the Swedish History Museum*, January 25 - September 1 2019.

<sup>31</sup> <<http://historiska.se/utställningar/the-gold-room/>>.

struggles, minorities and immigrants, all of whom have made their mark on history. The History of Sweden exhibition starts in the 11th century, long before Sweden became Sweden. Each century is represented by a variety of dramatic scenes.

Unfortunately the site does not develop this part, in that it does not propose something more about minorities and immigrants. Apart from this brief quotation, we question what place they have in the Museum's overall cultural policies. With this question in mind, through *Exhibitions*, we attempt to deepen the contents of *History unfolded: A reflection*. *History unfolded* is an exhibition and a series of cultural events proposed by the Museum. In this section of the site the museum's awareness of being an important agent emerges "in providing a perspective on how history and the cultural heritage is formed and developed"<sup>32</sup>. The creation of museums and the interpretation of history are complex processes that have immense importance for society; consideration is given to the need to welcome and give the right emphasis to narratives and perspectives that have previously not been shown. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the focus always remains on the cultural heritage of the nation. Among the events we find a cultural initiative on *Spiritual cultural heritage. Religion, diversity and museums*<sup>33</sup> and its approach confirms what has just been written: the basic question which the speakers try to answer concerns the influence of the religious cultural heritage on a secularised country like Sweden today, what kind of relationship visitors establish with the church and the religious objects that are part of the museum collection. The present nation, at least for the most part secularised, discusses how to enter into a dialogue with the nation of the past.

### 2.3. *The German Historical Museum (Berlin)*<sup>34</sup>

Since 1952, the Democratic Republic has had a Museum für Deutsche Geschichte. The Federal Republic's response matured in the 1980s, after the success of several exhibitions on German history. The burgomaster of Berlin charged some historians with the feasibility project; the support of the chancellor Helmut Kohl also arrived (Porciani, 2010, pp. 125 et seq) and, after and despite a lively discussion about the legitimacy and appropriateness of establishing this museum, it was inaugurated in 1987, on the occasion of the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of Berlin<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> <<http://historiska.se/utställningar/history-unfolds-a-reflection/>>.

<sup>33</sup> <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyTtbNYfNCA&feature=youtu.be>>.

<sup>34</sup> <<https://www.dhm.de/>>.

<sup>35</sup> A list of publications on the museum is available here: <<https://www.dhm.de/sammlung->

The institution proposes and presents itself as “a place of active communication and discussion of history”<sup>36</sup>, carrying out a multifaceted and intense cultural activity: permanent and temporary exhibitions are accompanied by the *Zeughauskino* with its collection of historical film material, and a public *Reference Library* and a *Picture Archive* (with around 500,000 photos on German and European history) are active. *Living Museum Online* (LeMO) is a virtual museum developed together with other institutions. The portal covers the period from 1800 to the present day and provides the web public with texts, objects, interviews, films and other materials of historical interest in digital format.

The welcome page features a horizontal panel with sliding images at the top, offering visitors an overview of upcoming or ongoing temporary exhibitions. *About us* offers a multi-lingual introduction to the museum’s permanent collection: not only in German and English, but also in Spanish, French, Italian and Chinese<sup>37</sup>:

The Permanent Exhibition in the Zeughaus provides key insights into 1500 years of Germany’s past. A tour covering the two floors of the exhibition chronologically presents German history in its European context: the introductory section on the first floor revolves around changes in the borders of Germany and Europe, and the history of the German language. The tour then covers the Middle Ages, the Reformation, the Thirty Years’ War, on to the German Empire and end of the First World War in 1918. The ground floor explores the Weimar Republic, the National Socialist regime, and the post-war period. The exhibition also covers the history of the two German states from 1949, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and German reunification in 1990. 7000 historical exhibits show us how people lived and thought, as well as the events and historical developments they were part of. The exhibition focuses on political history shaped by rulers, politicians and communities. Furthermore, each epoch in the exhibition also contains a variety of rooms in which everyday life is explored.

Visitors can download the pdf file with the museum plan and see the organisation of the collection, located in the rooms on the ground floor and first floor. I would like to point out that: 1) the Museum proposes through its website a very long period, from the Middle Ages to reunification, in a European framework (“(...) German history in its European context (...)”, “(...)

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forschung/forschung/publikationen/ausstellungen-und-sammlungen/publikationen-mit-symposiumsbeitraegen.html>.

<sup>36</sup> <<https://www.dhm.de/en/about-us/about-us.html>>.

<sup>37</sup> <<https://www.dhm.de/en/ausstellungen/permanent-exhibition.html>>.

on the first floor revolves around changes in the borders of Germany and Europe (...)" ), a view also confirmed by the availability of materials in a plurality of languages; 2) the museum's focus is not only on the national community but also on the wider geographical area in which the German language is spoken; 3) together with the political-institutional data, the exhibition contemplates the narration of daily life ("7000 historical exhibits show us how people lived and thought").

By selecting *German History from the Middle Ages to the Fall of the Berlin Wall*, we can take a closer look at the various eras, for each of which short texts and a gallery of images are proposed, all with very accurate captions (unfortunately only available in German). For the 500-1500 period the 'religious', although in a few lines, is presented as being closely and complexly incorporated into society: "Surviving testimonials on everyday culture and authentic works of medieval art give us insight into the importance of religion and the imperial church and into medieval society and the class divisions of the estates"<sup>38</sup>. In the following period, *Reformation and the Thirty Years' War (1500-1650)*, we find confirmation of the interweaving between religion and politics:

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the teachings of Luther, the distribution of which was aided by early book-printing, gave the impulse for a reform of the church that resulted in profound religious and political changes in the Empire. The political powers split into followers and opponents of the Reformation. The Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555 brought decades of peace and encouraged the growth of urban culture in many places. Around 1600, increased confessional differences and political conflicts led to the Thirty Years' War, from 1618-1648. The Empire became the theatre of this war; testimony to its horrors can be found not only in drawings and reports of the time, but also in the armour and weapons in the historical collection of the Zeughaus. The battles were soon joined by other European powers that were less concerned with the religious issues than with their own interests in power politics. Not until 1648 could the Peace of Westphalia create a new European order, which was then to guarantee peace for the next half century.

In the images proposed are Luther and the other reformers, but also objects that refer to the spread of the plague (*Plague doctor mask*, 16<sup>th</sup>C), a picture of the Jesuit college in Dillingen, an allegory of peace and justice by van Thulden painted immediately after the Peace of Westphalia, objects of everyday life, like a travel sundial. The style of writing is controlled and in no way can one perceive a celebratory intent, for example, of the figure of Luther; of the period, both through the text and through the images, the objective is to communicate

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<sup>38</sup> <<https://www.dhm.de/en/ausstellungen/permanent-exhibition/epochs/500-1500.html>>.

above all the conflict, the harshness of the conditions of daily life (effectively transmitted by the painting with a scene of looting by Sebastian Vrancx, about 1600), the sense of precariousness. The peace of Westphalia creates the new European order, while in the image gallery the painting *Martin Luther in the circle of Reformers* (between 1625 and 1650) transmits - as we read in the caption - the utopia of a peaceful religious conversation. Even for later eras, up to the most difficult and controversial period, the images and their long captions weave a controlled narrative, which does not obscure or remove anything.

The German Historical Museum aims to play a social role, establishing a 'contact zone', defining itself as a place of exchange and debate and carrying out inclusive cultural policies, oriented towards the involvement of the public in its activities<sup>39</sup>. The website effectively communicates this orientation, also informing us that the collection of religious objects can be increased with pieces from immigrant families and their churches<sup>40</sup>.

It is important to remember the availability of audio guides in Chinese, English, French, Italian, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Turkish, and also in Arabic, in order to emphasise the opening of this museum. The Museum is also part of the *Multaka: Museum as Meeting Point - Refugees as Guides in Berlin Museums*, a project created in collaboration with other cultural institutions: Syrian and Iraqi refugees are being trained as museum guides so that they can then provide guided museum tours for Arabic-speaking refugees in their native language. 'Multaka' (Arabic for "meeting point") also aims to facilitate the interchange of diverse cultural and historical experiences<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> The *Democracy Lab* initiative is also very interesting: "What do a protester's placard, a bag of empty (returnable) bottles and a Mesut Özil German national team fan shirt have to do with democracy? The Democracy Laboratory is a participatory exhibition that allows visitors to actively discuss such questions. They will be encouraged to reflect on how societal / political participation and cohabitation should look in both present-day and future Germany. Seven rooms offer an introduction to topics such as voting, civil society, basic rights, social justice, the media, citizenship, and state violence. The laboratory offers not only an insight into the histories of original artifacts. It also provides a space within which to approach the subject of democracy in a participatory and hands-on way". <<https://www.dhm.de/en/bildungsvermittlung/schwerpunkt-demokratie.html>>.

<sup>40</sup> <<https://www.dhm.de/en/collections-research/sammlungen00/material-culture/religious-objects/the-collection.html>>.

<sup>41</sup> <<https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/museum-fuer-islamische-kunst/collection-research/research-cooperation/multaka.html>>.

### 3. *The House of European History (Brussels)*<sup>42</sup>

The House of European History opened its doors in 2017, after some failed attempts at “putting Europe in the museum”<sup>43</sup>. In 2008, the main objective of a Committee of Experts was to set up a place of “where a memory of European history and the work of European unification is jointly cultivated and which at the same time is available as a locus of the European identity to go on being shaped by present and future citizens of the European Union”<sup>44</sup>. In the following years, the members of the Academic Project Team considered the concept of identity too problematic, believing that the House of European History could not be “a stage for presentation of a pre-defined European identity”<sup>45</sup>.

It is worth proposing what two members of the team (Taja Vovk van Gaal and Christine Dupont) wrote during the project phase of the museum:

That is the reason for the choice of the more fluid notion of collective memory as a tool to support the narrative of the permanent exhibition and the various programmes. Memory is at the same time what divides and what unites Europe. This notion has a strong critical potential, which can be used to promote a dynamic dialogue with the visitors. The choice of focusing on the 20<sup>th</sup> century is of course the perfect terrain for this kind of debate, even if memory-conflicts about this century are among the hottest topics in history as well as in politics. Building the HEH as a reservoir of European memory offers the possibility to reflect on different perceptions of the past and different interpretations of history (...). The choice of a European perspective is of course restrictive (...). This choice means a focus on historical processes and events which have originated in Europe, which expanded across Europe, and which are relevant up to nowadays (Vovk van Gaal - Dupont, 2012, p. 49).

A description of the sections of the permanent exhibition is available in *Remes 2017*, and it will be appropriate to refer to this publication for a more in-depth presentation. The exhibition focuses on the European history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with particular attention to the process of European Integration from 1945.

As I write, the website advertises the discussion of a volume about the

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<sup>42</sup> <<https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en>>.

<sup>43</sup> Camille Mazé quoted in *Remes*, 2017, p. 107.

<sup>44</sup> Hans-Gert Pöttering, President of the European Parliament, quoted in Committee of Experts 2008, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Andrea Mork, *Presentation of the House of European History*, quoted in *Remes*, 2017, p. 109. See also Mork - Christodoulou, 2019 (<<https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/focus/new-publication-creating-house-european-history>>).

changes that followed 1989; it offers information about the institution's mission ("Our primary mission is to enhance understanding of European history in all its complexity, to encourage the exchange of ideas and to question assumptions"<sup>46</sup>); it provides practical information on how to plan a visit (*Visit us. General information*), or on the didactic activity at the museum (*Visit us. Families, groups and schools*).

The institution conveys through its website the image of a welcoming place, open to all, to the questions and needs of all<sup>47</sup>. The museum strongly invests in multimedia and interactivity: in the *Interactions* exhibition, dedicated to the themes of mobility and meeting, the introductory space is devoted to a collaborative digital mapping experiment. This map is still available on the site: *Tracking my Europe*<sup>48</sup>.

Through *What's on. Past events* we can take a look at the cultural activity carried out by the young institution: from a thematic guided tour on the memory of the Shoah, to a series of initiatives together with Europeans on the Great War, to a round table on *The legacy of 1968* for Europe today, to cultural initiatives of EUNIC (European Union National Institutes for Culture), to living history activities<sup>49</sup>. These events focus on the most recent history or current events, with the sole exception of a debate dedicated to ancient history<sup>50</sup>. The themes chosen for the temporary exhibitions confirm this approach: *Growing up in Europe, 1945 to now* and *Interactions*.

The page of the site *What to see. Permanent exhibition* introduces the permanent display, with the reminder that the visitor will not find there the story of each European nation. What the curators instead propose is "to explore how history has shaped a sense of European memory and continues to

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<sup>46</sup> *About us: Mission:* <<https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/mission-vision>>. On this page you can download a guide to the permanent exhibition in the twenty-four languages.

<sup>47</sup> *Discover. Overview:* "The House of European History is a place for all. It informs, it challenges, it reflects, but most of all it allows you to ask questions. Our exhibition galleries, interpretative devices, hands-on spaces, programmes and events are devised in such a way that you can delve into aspects of European history at whatever level you wish. The learning offer of the museum takes a trans-European viewpoint that explores the historical memories, diverse experiences and common ground of the peoples of Europe and how these relate to the present day. The House of European History is a museum for everyone. Working together with diverse groups and communities is a vital aspect of the museum's activities. We aim to reach out to extraordinary people both near and far through tailored visits and specific programs. Do not hesitate to send us your specific requests and we will do our utmost to make our museum accessible to you". <<https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/discover>>

<sup>48</sup> <<http://www.myinteractions.eu/apps/heh-web-portal/>>.

<sup>49</sup> *Nocturne at the Museum!* <<https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/agenda/thursday-11-october-nocturne-museum>>.

<sup>50</sup> <<https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/agenda/boring-old-stories-antiquity-today>>.

influence our lives today and in the future”<sup>51</sup>. The website offers limited examples of what you will find in the exhibition: the first section, *Shaping Europe*, is presented as a reflective section, through which the visitor is invited to ask himself a series of questions:

What is Europe? Geography shows us that Europe has never been a clearly defined space. The continent’s name comes from the ancient Greek myth of Europa, a story that has been re-interpreted, like history itself, from various points of view over time.

Europe is described through its achievements and traditions but what distinguishes it from other continents? Can we say that we have a shared European past when history has affected people differently? Can we find any commonality – a reservoir of European memory?

The site offers four itineraries within the section: *Mapping Europe*, *The Myth of Europa*, *European Heritage*, *Memory*. In *Mapping Europe* an image from Sebastian Münster’s *Cosmographia* (1488-1552) represents Europe as the Virgin Mary, and is accompanied by this caption: “Maps created during the Middle Ages often disregarded geographical accuracy in favour of Christian messages and symbolism. In the Renaissance, the continent of Europe was represented as the Virgin Mary: an expression of its Christian identity”. Also in *European Heritage* a sacred carved figure reminds us that Christianity spread across Europe to become immensely influential and a defining feature of Western civilisation, and that European values, traditions and culture “still reflect this long Christian heritage”.

Despite the team’s declared desire to avoid a teleological vision and to address a very problematic and elusive discourse on European identity, these two captions suggest the idea of Europe as a community of values, of a presence of Christianity as a bond and as a fundamental trait of European civilisation: a suggestion to be linked to the “commonality of roots” present, albeit in a nuanced way, in the text *Conceptual Basis of the HEH*<sup>52</sup>.

There is no doubt about the willingness of the team members to provoke debate and discussion, not to tell a story of Europe other than a success story, as is clear, for example, from how the website informs us about the Nobel Peace Prize obtained by Europe in 2012: space is left for protests, and the reasons for

<sup>51</sup> <<https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/permanent-exhibition>>.

<sup>52</sup> <[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004\\_2009/documents/dv/745/745721/745721\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/745/745721/745721_en.pdf)>: “On the basis of historical experience and effects, it should be made clear why the European Institutions were founded and built up in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The exhibition should equally illustrate both the diversity of the history of Europe and the commonality of its roots”.



protests<sup>53</sup>. But as far as religion is concerned, we can only register either an absence of the topic or a simplification. As Marcello Verga pointed out:

It may come as a surprise that on the five floors of the beautiful Eastman building there is never any mention of religion or migration. (...) Does the absence of any reference to religion mean that we intend to propose a history of Europe marked by secularisation? Or does it rather mean the renunciation of the House to confront one of the elements that most characterise the European heritage?

Carlo Spagnolo (2017), on the other hand, stressed that the deepest cultural limit is to assimilate the history of Europe to the history of European integration<sup>54</sup>, and not to recognise the dignity of representation of the divided memories of Europe.

In order to build a common European house - what the museum aspires to be - there seems to be an urgent need for a long-distance cultural project which, above all, extends to dealing with the contents, the difficulties and the problems of the historiographic subject of 'Europe'<sup>55</sup>, which only a very long-term look, not crushed by the most recent history and current events, can help to tackle through the museum's multiform activities. Without eluding themes such as religion, on which Europe, also through a project such as *REIRES*, is called to accept confrontation and challenges

#### 4. Conclusions

It is legitimate to ask ourselves a series of questions about national history museums, starting from the usefulness of their own institution: how can they manage to approach history in a correct way? How much can, "a single great coherent narrative, communicated with the penetrating force of objects and images that are not capable of suggesting nuances and questions" be capable of accepting the challenges of the present, the complex issues related to massive immigration and multi-ethnicity? (Porciani, 2010).

Some museums seem 'to expiate' the reasons for their birth, the construction of the nation, as an 'original sin', a legacy that acts as a great repository of collective mythologies from which to draw. The overall cultural activity, which the website documents and communicates, insists on the self-recognition of the

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<sup>53</sup> *Appraisal and criticism*: <<https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/permanent-exhibition/accolades-and-criticism>>.

<sup>54</sup> Verga and Spagnolo were interviewed by Fiori, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> On this subject, I shall limit myself to quoting, also for further bibliographical studies: Verga, 2004.

national community rather than on learning, speaks the language of the imaginary and shared feelings of that community without opening up to new scenarios, to the acceptance of new challenges. Religion is introduced to the extent that it becomes an element of a founding mythology, of a great coherent narrative that points to the search for unifying elements.

Yet, cultural activities, didactics, temporary exhibitions offer the museum not only the opportunity to address the topic of 'nation' in a critical and comparative way, but also to play a social educational role, to attract different audiences, really representing a place of contact and exchange. The most diverse collateral activities can develop from a collection. The collection is neither a limit nor an alibi to justify the absence of inclusive and participatory cultural policies. Above all, ideas and creativity are needed, as well as courage in dealing with controversial subjects.

In the end, it seems to be possible to say that the more a museum has adopted the principles of openness and precariousness, the more it can aspire to be an agent of intercultural understanding, helping to bridge inequalities and to create social cohesion (Sandell, p. 138; Rosati, p. 51).

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## 6. Curriculum vitae

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