

## Introduction

### European Museums: Mapping an Ongoing Change

The MeLa Project, funded in march 2011 by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme (Social Science and Humanities) is a four years long reserch project, which aims to investigate the effects of contemporary phenomena such as globalisation, demographic movement, transformation of migration patterns, increased mobility of people, as well as of objects, ideas and knowledge on the form, organisation, mission and status of museums, and to explore the likely potential role of museums in the construction of an inclusive European identity by facilitating mutual understanding and social cohesion.

Adopting the notion of “migration” as a paradigm of the contemporary global and multicultural world, MeLa reflects on the role of museums and heritage in Europe in the 21st century. The project aims to investigate how, and to what extent, changes in population flows and demography, the impact of new media, the consequent layerisation, complexification and fragmentation of societies and identities and, perhaps more importantly, the recognition of the central focus of such changes to the human experience of life and society in modernity, do, could and should, affect European museums. Focusing on the transformation of museums, seen as cultural spaces and processes as well as physical places, the main objective of the MeLa project is to identify innovative museum practices that reflect the challenges posed by what the project defines as “an age of migrations”—an age characterised by intensive migration flows; accelerated mobility and fluid circulation of information, cultures, ideas and goods; the political, economic and cultural process of creation and consolidation of the European Union, and the consequent high degree of cultural encounters and cross-fertilisation.

The project's Research Field 6, *Envisioning 21st Century Museums*—which is developed in parallel to and in consultation with the other five project research areas—is aimed at pinpointing innovative models, practices and tools to further the role of European museums in promoting new democratic and inclusive forms of citizenship, contributing to foster dialogue between the different ethnic, religious, social and generational groups which characterise our societies, and furthering awareness and education among new citizens and young generations.

While the investigation and the consideration of the role of contemporary museums and heritage has nowadays become a relevant component of the European agenda and lively debate on the subject is gaining prominence, nurtured also by several research projects and academic studies, museums themselves are questioning their *raison d'être* and roles, and undergoing a process of deep transformation of their missions, strategies, practices, spaces and exhibitions.

The present books collect the work of MeLa Research Field 6, *Envisioning 21st Century Museums*, and are meant to illustrate the preliminary results of its earlier investigations aimed at mapping and exploring such a transformation process and its features, particularly in terms of architecture renewal, museography and exhibition settings. The first phase of this research field thus focused on the possibility of mapping current trends in contemporary European museums in order to set up an overall picture of the state of the art of museum development in relation with the above-mentioned issues and questions. Its activity has been aimed at defining a general framework for the development of subsequent research phases, that are the identification of strategies and practices to support a renewed and increased role for museums, and the revision of their contribution in building a democratic inclusive European citizenship through practicable and effective intervention by EU policy-makers and the institutions working in cultural and educational fields. This research has been investigating different categories of museums, individuated as those which better represent the current status of European museums, including: national history museums, ethnographic museums and museums of cultures, migration museums, city museums, local museums, and war museums. Because of the relevance of some museographical practices in the representation of the evolution of contemporary museums, the research activity has been extended to the transversal topic of temporary exhibition design.

Due to the large quantity of gathered materials, the publication has been divided into three volumes, each of which is organised into sections curated by a MeLa researcher including a piece by the MeLa researchers involved in the investigation, contributions from scholars and museum practitioners, interviews and the presentation of significant examples of museums which are new, have been renewed or are under renovation. Particular attention has been paid to their architectural and exhibition design, which is intended as concretisation of innovative and sometimes highly experimental ideas of what we define as “new museography,” new models of representation and communication of knowledge.

The first volume opens with an overview on the evolution of contemporary national history museums, analysing how globalisation, migration phenomena and their effects have challenged these places of stabilisation, where identities are formed and displayed, and their transformation fostered into inclusive arenas of multiculturalism. By considering the representation of national identity as a political act in the sense outlined by political theorist Chantal Mouffe—acknowledging the aim of democracy in a pluralistic condition as the possibility of transforming antagonism into agonism, and creating unity in a context of conflict and diversity, as explained in the complementary text—Clelia Pozzi assumes the so-called “agonistic pluralism model,” which Mouffe had previously coupled with art museums, and applies it to national history museums. Her investigation of these institutions as “Agonistic Spaces” explores and exemplifies the museological, museographical and architectural translation of this model, illustrating the modalities in which migration and its agonistic effects may enter the rationale of these museums, a category which, more than others, seems to have been subjugated by coercive interpretations of states and regimes and, moreover, she redefines their role, strategies and spaces from within.

The review of the role of museums as places for the presentation, stabilisation and construction of identities is also crucial in ethnographic museums, which have been profoundly challenged by the mutation of the contemporary political, social and cultural context. The beginning of the 21st century represents a turning point for the role, objective and strategies associated with these institutions, reacting to the evolution of the colonial “west and the rest” model, as well as the effects of globalisation increasing cultural diversity and cosmopolitanism. Challenged by the claim for identity recognition and, at the same time, the demand for an egalitarian representation of cultural differences, the transformation of these institutions, aimed at displaying cultural pluralism, seems to aim at erasing colonial roots by turning the ethnographic approach into an aesthetic one, or by giving voice to minorities in the representation process. Through the comparative analysis of the different progress of new, re-established or refurbished institutions, Camilla Pagani and Mariella Brenna investigate the reasons, the nature and the extent of the current process of renovation, from institutional redefinitions to museological approaches, and categorisation of museums of world culture(s). The interpretation is also bolstered by interviews with some museum workers who are directly involved in this process. These include Maria Camilla de Palma, director of the Museo delle Culture del Mondo di Castello D’Albertis in Genoa, Klas Grinell, curator at the Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, and Vito Lattanzi, Director of the Educational Department at the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico “Luigi Pigorini”, in Rome, and by the theory contribution of Nélia Dias, Associate Professor at the Department of Anthropology at ISCTE-IUL, in Lisbon.

The evolving socio-cultural context also poses a challenge to museums of natural history. These museums have radically changed over recent decades in their relationship with what is at stake in society. Laurence Isnard,

Sarah Gamaire and Fabienne Galangau illustrate the transformations of these institutions, triggered by a powerful increase in the awareness of environmental issues along with their social consequences, the biodiversity crisis, and the development of new interdisciplinary research approaches. The piece explores how these phenomena have questioned the role of natural history museums and exhibitions as sources of knowledge and players in the conservation and validation of scientific and natural heritage, and investigates its evolution, benefiting from technological progress and communication techniques, as well as from growing knowledge on visitor expectations. By reporting the results of a recent survey developed by the authors, the text sheds light on the dynamism of these institutions and their commitment to renovation projects, especially those aimed at including diversity in cultural representations of nature. These considerations are supported by Giovanni Pinna, who questions the role of bureaucracy in the evolution of natural history museums, and of Judith Pargamin, director of the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle de Lille, who offers a highly citizen-oriented reflection on the renovation project of the museum.

In the second volume, the investigation begins by focusing on more local facts, bonded and rooted in specific communities, their stories and identities. Anna Chiara Cimoli attempts to map out and analyse the rise of a huge constellation of migration museums and temporary exhibitions that focus on the relationship between migration and identity. By investigating museological strategies, museographic tools and exhibition design trends that characterise this museum typology, the piece investigates the specificities, implications, difficulties and risks of displaying present and past mobility. By investigating how museology and museography choices can reveal, explain or, in some cases, gloss over the cultural policies and the more general local, national or international political attitudes towards migration, the piece aims to verify whether these institutions act as history museums, or whether they are evolving into vehicles to orient, educate, and participate in political debate. This exploration is complemented by the positions of Joachim Baur, highlighting the ability of migration museums in building a master narrative as a choral epic and a socially unifying experience, promoting a sense of community, representing the diversification of cultural identities, and fostering societal integration.

The rise of migration flows discloses a profound transformation of the current socio-cultural context which museums purport to represent, cooperating with other phenomena to enhance the role of certain locations, especially cities. While updated demographic forecasts envision that in the next 30 years the growth of the world's population will mostly be concentrated in urban areas, the new economic and cultural opportunities offered by globalisation, the fluid mobility occurring at the European and world-wide level, together with the ongoing political, economic and cultural processes of creation of the European Union, are deeply influencing the development of contemporary cities posing both new changes and challenges. It is widely believed that, within this complex scenario,

city museums, as institutions historically responsible for representing the city, recording its transformations and conserving its memory and history, could and should, contribute to these transformations in several ways. Francesca Lanz investigates how city museums are reacting to these stimuli, questioning themselves, rethinking their mission, acquiring new roles and experimenting with new tools and strategies. The piece aims to outline this transformation process in order to interpret it, define its features, identify commonalities, challenges and possible criticalities, and analyse the museographical aspects related to such changes. These considerations are endorsed by the contribution of Jack Lohman who, as former director of the Museum of London, argues for the role of city museums as the endogenous development of communities in their diversity and shaping of the global community. The interview with historian Marie-Paule Jungblut, former deputy-director of the Musée d'histoire de la Ville de Luxembourg, adds reflections on the crucial role of international networking projects and the web for the advanced role of contemporary city museums, while different examples of a “new generation” of city museums presented by curators and directors, supports the reflections outlined in the opening piece.

City museums focus their mission on the past and present history of the described urban environments. Nevertheless, a large number of other museums drawing on the distinctive nature of specific locations are likely to play a significant role in the contemporary context.

The third volume focuses, on the one hand on very local museums and, on the other hand, on war museums and temporary exhibitions in national museums and it somehow comes full circle in this publication. As explained by Elena Montanari, the different institutions who aim to conserve, validate and “matrilise” the memory, heritage and culture related to specific places, are characterised by the employment of specific tools and strategies, which may turn out as particularly effective means to foster the role of museums as inclusive social agents in this “age of migrations.” Allowing for their status, forms and means, and variation according to their diverse backgrounds, management structures and conceptions of heritage and identity across different countries and cultures, local museums seem to share a common mission in preserving, interpreting, celebrating and presenting the visible symbols produced by human history in a specific environment. In addition, they also perpetuate the origins and sources of cultural heritage, opposing resistance to the effects of globalisation and the increased migrations of people, objects and knowledge, which include impoverishment and distortion of habitats and cultures, standardisation of space, homogenisation of material culture, dispersion of collective memory, etc. as well as assert continuity and stability through secure and rooted values, contrasting the disorientation of self-awareness and enabling societies to define and anchor their identity. The potential, challenges and risks currently pertaining to these institutions are further depicted through the words of Hugues De Varine, who outlines their

specificities, raises pivotal questions and proposes paradigmatic models and practices for their future.

Among the most significant national and local museums, the institutions ensuing from war memories and places are becoming crucial elements in heritage discourse. Luca Basso Peressut considers the many European museums that focus on war and its various representations, identifying two distinct situations. On the one hand, there are still in existence representative models typical of museums of weapons, of armies, and of military history, which were set up between the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. On the other hand, he observes that in recent decades there has been an increase in museums that are committed to emphasising how Europe needs to critically reinterpret its past and the conflicts that have marked it, both in a tangible and an intangible way, overcoming the “divided memories” that have dramatically marked the populations of the European continent as an essential requirement to build the political and cultural identity of Europe. With their tools and representation devices, museums dedicated to the history of European wars are committed to the raising of such awareness through a “policy of memory” that, with no sacralisation or vulgarisation, must involve all cultural institutions, including those devoted to the education of younger generations. Thus, Basso Peressut suggests the role of war museums is crucial in the process of building and consolidating a shared European memory and identity. Moreover, war museums convey the transnational value of those events that are part of a common history that transcends any geographical border, contributing to a better understanding of the importance (and fragility) of peace and freedom, and of the establishment of the European Union based on mutual respect and on the rejection of war as a solution to controversies.

The final chapter by Marco Borsotti analyses the role of temporary exhibitions in the dynamics of approaches of museums to innovative topics. Temporary exhibitions can be identified as significant strategies in the promotion of new approaches to the portrayal of museums, as well as in the search for public interest in media, and in the possibility of generating income, image and prestige. Today, temporary exhibitions are also visible manifestations of an educational, informative or celebratory discourse, which is characteristic of the rapid changeover in the communication rhetoric of contemporary society. Furthermore, temporary exhibition models can also be expressed in dazzling experiences of cultural innovation, leaving permanent displays with the more accustomed role of keeping continuity with historical portrayals and settings. This can be considered a strategy for the renewal of the representational assets of museums.

The overall aim of this investigation was to detect how, and whether, European museums in their diverse range of interests are reacting to the topics and issues of our “age of migrations” and to the changing conditions of production and fruition of culture, memory and identity. As Appadurai already noted almost twenty years ago, it is increasingly evident

that globalisation is not the story of cultural homogenisation, and that contemporaneity is more and more characterised by a high degree of cultural encounters and cross-fertilisations. We are in agreement with the philosopher Wolfgang Welsch that the traditional description of cultures based on the ideas of “inner homogenisation” and “outer separation” is nowadays both descriptively and, in terms of legislation, inappropriate. Our analysis of new exhibition spaces and arrangements in museums of national and local relevance (a distinction which currently proves to be very blurred and perhaps to be overlooked), seems to suggest that the rise and the inclusion of new stances and approaches toward the role of museums and the narratives it puts on display are starting to foster not only a revision of the curatorial practices of museums and approaches but also of those consolidated exhibition design practices and museum organisation that reflected a premise of objectivity and reality and a traditional conception of identity as unique, homogeneous, and geo-politically defined, that is today brought into question by the shifting nature of contemporary cultural conditions in our contemporary “age of migrations.”

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