

2023

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Recommended Citation

Spyrou, Lefteris. "Europe as a Celebrated Community of Culture. The Council of Europe's Art Exhibitions in the 1950s." *Artl@s Bulletin* 12, no. 1 (2023): Article 8.

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Europe as a Celebrated Community of Culture. The Council of Europe's Art Exhibitions in the 1950s

Lefteris Spyrou

Abstract

Born as part of a Europe-building process in the aftermath of WWII, the Council of Europe emerged, during the 1950s, as the leading intergovernmental organisation for cultural co-operation in Europe. This paper examines the Art Exhibitions held under its auspices in different western-European cities between 1954 and 1961. Presenting in chronological order the major artistic movements in Europe from the Renaissance to 1914, the exhibitions were quite successful in terms of public attendance, and became the most important institutional initiative in visualising the idea of European unity based on a shared cultural heritage.

Résumé

Né dans le cadre du processus de construction européenne au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, le Conseil de l'Europe s'est imposé, au cours des années 1950, comme la principale organisation intergouvernementale de coopération culturelle en Europe. Cet article examine les expositions d'art organisées sous ses auspices dans différentes villes d'Europe occidentale entre 1954 et 1961. Présentant dans l'ordre chronologique les principaux mouvements artistiques en Europe de la Renaissance à 1914, ces expositions connurent un grand succès en termes de fréquentation et sont devenues l'initiative institutionnelle la plus importante pour visualiser l'idée d'une unité européenne fondée sur un patrimoine culturel commun.

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Introduction

On the 16th of December 1954, the exhibition *Humanist Europe* was inaugurated at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. More than 350 exhibits, which included not only paintings, sculptures, engravings, and drawings but also printed books and manuscripts, tapestries, ancient instruments, ceramics etc., were presented in order to “illustrate” a vital moment in the history of the European civilisation.¹ The Brussels exhibition was organised under the auspices of the Council of Europe (CoE), and it was part of a broader project that aimed at promoting the notion of a common European culture. Since 1954, thirty art exhibitions have been organised in different European cities,² which were quite successful in terms of public attendance and stimulated an extensive collaboration between scholars and museums throughout Europe.³ Moreover, by assembling art objects never before placed alongside one another and by publishing catalogues with original texts by prominent art historians, the exhibitions greatly contributed to research in the history of European art.

Despite their importance, the series of the CoE’s art exhibitions remains a largely under-researched area, and a critical and in-depth analysis of the exhibitions and their reception, as well as their systematic documentation, are absent in the literature.⁴ In this paper, I will focus on the first six art exhibitions, which were organised between 1954-1961 and presented

in strict chronological order the major artistic periods in Europe from the Renaissance to the avant-garde movements of the first two decades of the 20th century.

Art exhibitions have been recently considered as a complex cultural field where different actors participate (curators, art historians, museums and other cultural officials, politicians, etc.), and, therefore, research in exhibition histories not only enriches art historical narratives but also provides critical tools to approach history in itself, and highlights the connection between art and other fields, such as institutions’ policies, national cultural policies etc.⁵ From this perspective, this paper does not examine the art historical discourse produced through these exhibitions but their role in the broader process of European integration in the 1950s. Based upon primary source materials held in the CoE archives, I investigate the process of the initial conception of the exhibitions, as well as the main narratives their organisers presented. Moreover, I explore their role in the broader framework of the CoE’s educational and cultural initiatives, as well as the obstacles that hindered these efforts to promote Europe’s cultural unity.

These art exhibitions demonstrate the CoE’s systematic efforts to promote the awareness of a common European cultural heritage and, as a result, to propagate unity on the European peninsula. These institutional attempts preceded initiatives by other European intergovernmental bodies, and therefore, the CoE emerged as the leading international organisation for cultural cooperation in Europe until the late 1970s. Culture was not only neglected but intentionally excluded in the policies of the first European Communities (such as the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Community of Atomic Energy) – in fact, it was after the “Declaration of European Identity” of 1973, signed in Copenhagen, that European Union’s activities in the field of culture started to evolve, in many cases,

¹ *L’Europe Humaniste*, Catalogue d’exposition organisée par le Ministère de l’Instruction Publique de Belgique sous les auspices du Conseil de l’Europe, Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 15 Décembre 1954 – 28 Février 1955 (Brussels: Éditions de la Connaissance, 1954), 14.

² For a list of all the CoE’s art exhibitions see [https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/past-exhibitions#\(%2219677990%22:\[0\]\)](https://www.coe.int/en/web/culture-and-heritage/past-exhibitions#(%2219677990%22:[0])) (Accessed February 20, 2023). See also the brochure *50 years of Council of Europe Art Exhibitions*, foreword by David Mardell (Strasbourg: CoE, 2015), <https://edoc.coe.int/en/an-overview/6744-50-years-of-council-of-europe-art-exhibitions.html#> (Accessed February 20, 2023).

³ This cultural cooperation also concerns certain countries of Central and Eastern Europe, such as Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia, which occasionally participated in exhibitions by lending works from their museums (from the exhibition *The Romantic Movement* in 1959), as well as the USSR (after 1965 and the exhibition *Charlemagne – His life and work* in Aachen).

⁴ For some useful insights for the organisational structure of the exhibitions based on archival material see Haruka Koike, *How Art Has Been Presented as Common Culture for Europe. The Case Study on the Art Exhibitions of the Council of Europe since 1954*, Master Thesis at ME Programme Euroculture (Università degli studi di Udine and Université de Strasbourg, 2018). For an analysis of the Brussels exhibition see Cecilia Prete, “L’Europe Humaniste all’Esposizione di Bruxelles (1954-55)”, *Studi Umanistici Piaceni*, no. XXXVI (2016): 213-226. See also Sandra Persuy, “Les sources du XXe siècle: Une vision européenne et pluridisciplinaire de l’art moderne”, *Les Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne*, no. 67 (Spring 1999): 31-63.

⁵ Stefano Collicelli Cagol, “Exhibition History and the Institution as a Medium”, *Stedelijk Studies Journal* 2 (Spring 2015). <https://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/exhibition-history-and-the-institution-as-a-medium/> (Accessed February 20, 2023). Bruce Altshuler, “A Canon of Exhibitions”, *Manifesta Journal*, no. 11 (2010/2012): 5-12.

practices used by the CoE in the previous decades were adopted.⁶ Literature, however, has overlooked the CoE's activity in the cultural sphere,⁷ while the use of culture in the EU arena for the promotion of a shared European identity has been critically explored, mainly by sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists, who highlighted the exclusionary dimension and use of European culture, as well as the vacuity of the discourse of 'unity in diversity'.⁸ By exploring the art exhibitions organised under the auspices of the CoE between 1954-1961, the aim of this paper is to shed light on the initiatives taken by this intergovernmental institution to construct a unified and culturally homogeneous community of Europeans; and at the same time to instigate further research on this overlooked field.

The CoE's Educational and Cultural Actions in the 1950s

The role of culture in the European integration process began to be more systematically acknowledged in the aftermath of WWII.⁹ The memory of the devastating war and its dreadful consequences, the need to avoid future totalitarianisms, and the emergence of a bipolar world (the Soviet Union and the USA) led many Western European intellectuals to turn to history in order to highlight the common cultural past of the European nations and, thereby, to reconstruct Europe on new symbolic foundations. Lucien Febvre, for example, in his series of lessons at the College de France in 1944-45,

entitled *L'Europe. Genèse d'une civilisation*, stressed that "Europe was not a political entity of which can easily and usefully write an external, methodical, and classic and unproblematic history. Europe is a civilization".¹⁰ In 1948, the British historian John Bowle, a professor at the newly grounded College of Europe in Bruges, published his book *The Unity of European History. Political and Cultural Survey*, aiming according to his own words, "to present the unity and development of the great cosmopolitan traditions of Europe, to relate economic and cultural achievement to the political background, and to set the mythologies of current nationalism in their proper place".¹¹ Europe's cultural unity was seen at that time both as a response to the political and national rivalries that led to WWII as well as a key precondition for the development of a common European consciousness that would facilitate Europe's unification. The Congress of Europe held in the Hague from 7 to 10 May 1948, summarised these trends in its Cultural Resolution by stating that this "true unity even in the midst of our national, ideological and religious differences, is to be found in the common heritage of Christian and other spiritual and cultural values".¹² A year later, on the 5th May 1949, the establishment of the CoE marked the beginning of a more systematic implementation of various institutional initiatives aiming to establish the concept of a common European culture as a legitimised principle for a unified Europe.

According to the 1st article of its Statute (1949), the CoE aspired to achieve "a greater unity between its members [. . .] through common actions and activities in economic, social, cultural, scientific, legal, and administrative matters".¹³ Its major sphere of interest was, from the very beginning, the

⁶ Kiran Kalus Patel and Oriane Calligaro, "The true 'EURESCO'? The Council of Europe, transnational networking and the emergence of European Community cultural policies, 1970-90", *European Review of History* 24, no. 3 (2017): 399-422.

⁷ See Oriane Calligaro, "Which culture(s) for Europe? The contrasting conceptions of the Council of Europe and the European Union from 1949 to the present day", *Cambio. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali* 7, no. 13 (June 2017): 67-83. Joséphine Brunner, "Le Conseil de l'Europe à la recherche d'une politique culturelle européenne, 1949-1968", in *Les lucarnes de l'Europe. Télévisions, cultures, identités, 1945-2005*, ed. Marie-Françoise Lévy and Marie-Noëlle Sicard, (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2008), 29-46.

⁸ Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995). Cris Shore, *Building Europe. The Cultural Politics of European Integration* (London: Routledge, 2000). Cris Shore, "'In uno plures' (?) EU Cultural Policy and the Governance of Europe. Cultural Policy and European Integration", *Anthropological Perspective' in Cultural Analysis*, n° 5, 2006, p. 7-26. Monica Sassatelli, *Becoming Europeans: Cultural Identity and Cultural Policies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Oriane Calligaro, *Negotiating Europe. EU Promotion of Europeaness since the 1950s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Patel Kiran (ed.), *The Cultural Politics of Europe. European Capitals of Culture and European Union since the 1980s* (London, Routledge: 2014).

⁹ For the emergence of the Idea of Europe in the Inter War period see Mark Hewitson and Matthew D' Auria, ed., *Europe in Crisis: Intellectuals and the European Idea, 1917-1957* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2012).

¹⁰ Quoted in Vittorio Dini, "Lucien Febvre and the Idea of Europe", in Hewitson and D' Auria, *Europe in Crisis*, 271.

¹¹ John Bowle, *The Unity of European History. Political and Cultural Survey* (London: Cape, 1948), 7.

¹² Cultural Resolution of the Hague Congress (7-10 May 1948) https://www.cvce.eu/obj/cultural_resolution_of_the_hague_congress_7_10_may_1948-en-f9f06696-a4b2-43fd-9e85-86dee9fb57a5.html (Accessed February 20, 2023).

¹³ *Statute of the Council of Europe*, London, 5 May 1949, <https://rm.coe.int/1680306052> (Accessed February 20, 2023). The Council of Europe was founded by Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Greece and Turkey were subsequently admitted as members in August 1949, Iceland in March 1950, and the German Federal Republic in May 1951. For a history of the CoE, see Birte Wassenberg, *History of the Council of Europe* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2013).

furtherance of human rights¹⁴, but actions in the fields of culture and education were also prioritised. In 1950, a Committee of Cultural Experts was established, comprising senior officials from the member states' Ministries of Education, a body whose role was to present proposals relating to cultural and educational matters. For example, several meetings and conferences were organised about the revision of national history textbooks and the introduction of the "European Idea" in history teaching in the educational system of the member countries, ranging from primary schools to Teachers' Training Colleges.¹⁵ The aim was to enhance the awareness of European unity and diffuse this idea to the whole society. In a 1953 report, for example, it was underlined that the feeling of unity had "indeed existed, but only in the minds of a cultured few" and that "the eighteenth century ideal of Europe as a second fatherland, a super-State, came to nothing because it was the product of an intellectual elite, and had no popular roots". For that reason, it was concluded that Europe would never be created except by the "will of the common people inspired by community of interests, by a feeling of solidarity and by a common faith".¹⁶

Other initiatives taken by the Committee of Cultural Experts aimed at encouraging cooperation between European intellectuals, scholars, students etc., and rebuilding the broken cultural ties between the European countries. For example, a series of scholarships and grants for European students were introduced, as well as a "cultural identity card" that provided easier access to libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions across Western Europe. At the same time, the members of the Committee started to work on the text of a European Cultural Convention, which would strengthen the cooperation in the area of culture and education and would

oblige the signatory countries to undertake common actions designed to safeguard and encourage the development of European culture.¹⁷

This essential role of culture in European integration in the 1950s is best exemplified in the words of the Swiss historian and intellectual Denis de Rougemont. In his introduction to Max Beloff's book *Europe and the Europeans*, which was the outcome of a round table held in Rome in October 1953 and a study group meeting in Strasbourg in March 1956, both organised under the auspices of the CoE, Rougemont underlined that the reality of our cultural unity was to be felt only when we go away from Europe: "in the United States already, in the Soviet Union without hesitation, and in Asia beyond all possible doubt, Frenchmen and Greeks, Englishmen and Swiss, Swedes and Castilians are seen as Europeans". The reason for this was, according to the author, the "celebrated community of culture which so easily escapes our definitions but is so difficult to conceal from other peoples".¹⁸

The Council of Europe's Art Exhibitions as a Means of Spiritual Propaganda

The definition and promotion of this "celebrated community of culture" also inspired the Committee of Cultural Experts to organise large-scale art exhibitions in various cities in Western Europe. At its 5th Session in October 1952, the socialist Belgian delegate and Chief of Staff of the Ministry of Public Education, Julien Kuypers, submitted his proposal for the organisation of a series of European exhibitions, which would "illustrate some of the more outstanding epochs, transcending national bounds, of European culture: Renaissance Europe, Baroque Europe, Neo-classical Europe, Romantic Europe, Realistic Europe etc." and would demonstrate "the universal character of the European spirit and the unity of its artistic heritage down the ages". As

¹⁴ *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, Rome 1950, <https://rm.coe.int/1680063765> (Accessed February 20, 2023).

¹⁵ For CoE's initiatives on history teaching, see Council for Cultural Co-operation, *Against bias and prejudice. The Council of Europe's work on history teaching and history textbooks* (Strasbourg: Council for Cultural Co-operation, 1995). Luigi Cajani, "History Teaching for the Unification of Europe: The Case of the Council of Europe", in *The Palgrave Handbook of State-Sponsored History After 1945*, eds. Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 289-305.

¹⁶ Committee of Cultural Experts, Seventh Meeting, Strasbourg, 1st-3rd December 1953, *Text of the Resolutions adopted in Nancy on the presentation of the European Idea in primary schools And Teachers' Training Colleges*, CoE's Archives, EXP/Cult (53) 24.

¹⁷ The first drafts of a European Cultural Convention were submitted in January 1953, see e.g. Committee of Cultural Experts, *Draft European Cultural Convention. Submitted by the United Kingdom Delegation*, Strasbourg, 8th January 1953, CoE's Archives, EXP/Cult B (53) 2.

¹⁸ Max Beloff, *Europe and the Europeans. An International Discussion* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), xii.

Kuypers pointed out, this would be a “spectacular display of European unity”, and it would catch the “imagination of the general educated public, if not the broad masses of people”.¹⁹ Moreover, in a Memorandum presented by the Belgian delegation in Strasbourg in the autumn of 1953, the series of art exhibitions were characterised as “a valuable source of spiritual propaganda”, which would help to “arouse the European conscience without being subjected to criticism from political or nationalist quarters”.²⁰ Thus, from the very beginning, a political conception and use of culture was prioritised, and the art exhibitions were conceived as a top-down institutional attempt to promote a European awareness within the population by constructing an imagined community represented by a supposedly homogeneous cultural heritage.

According to the project plan, the first exhibition was to be organised in Brussels in the autumn of 1953 and devoted to “Humanism in the 16th century”. The members of the Committee decided during their meeting on 26-27 January 1953 to form a small committee composed of museum directors and art historians (“one Belgian, one British, one French, one German, one Italian and one from the Netherlands”), who would organise the Brussels exhibition under the direction of Emile Langui, Adviser for the Artistic Propaganda for the Ministry of Public Education in Brussels.²¹ In the following months, the Committee of Art Specialists was established, whose members were distinguished art historians, intellectuals, and museum professionals from various European countries, such as the Dutch David Cornelis Röell (director of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam), the Belgian Paul Fierens (chief curator at the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Belgium), the Italian Enrico Castelli Gattinara (professor at the University of Rome), the British Ellis Waterhouse (professor at the Barber Institute of

Fine Arts at the Birmingham University), the French André Chastel (director of studies at the École des Hautes Etudes in Paris) and the German Eberhard Hanfstaengl (honorary general director of the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen in Munich).²²

The Brussels Exhibition titled “Humanist Europe” was inaugurated later than planned on the 16th of December 1954 at the Palais des Beaux-Arts. Three days later, the Council of Europe launched the European Cultural Convention in Paris, a treaty aimed at safeguarding Europe’s shared cultural heritage and encouraging its development.²³ It was the first official declaration on culture by a European organisation during the post-war era, as well as the first official document where the term “cultural heritage” was used.²⁴ In the text, a broad definition of European culture was adopted, including both a material (“objects of European cultural value”) and an immaterial heritage from the past (“languages, history, and civilisation”).²⁵

The Brussels exhibition should be seen under the light of this framework, as one of the first attempts to define and present to the public an important part of this common European heritage. The organisers sought to present a broad picture of the European civilisation in the 15th and 16th centuries, and therefore they exhibited not only paintings, sculptures, engravings, and drawings but also printed books and manuscripts, tapestries, ancient instruments, ceramics etc. (Fig. 1). But apart from the tangible material artefacts, the immaterial dimension of culture was also promoted and more specifically the common values, ideals, and principles. In his introduction to the richly illustrated exhibition catalogue, the socialist Belgian Minister of Public Education Léo Collard explicitly declared that the aim of the show was to create “over the

¹⁹ *Proposal concerning the organisation of a series of European Exhibitions*, submitted by the Belgian Delegation in the 5th Session of the Committee of Cultural Experts, Strasbourg, 25th October 1952, CoE’s Archives, EXP/Cult (52) 27, Appendix D.

²⁰ *Memorandum presented by the Belgian delegation in the Meeting of Art Specialists*, Strasbourg, 10th-12th September 1953, CoE’s Archives, EXP/Cult/Art (53) 1.

²¹ Committee of Cultural Experts, *Conclusions of the meeting of the Bureau*, Brussels, 26-27 January 1953. Point 5, Organisation of European exhibitions: consideration of the replies of the cultural delegations. Strasbourg, 9th February 1953, CoE’s Archives, EXP/Cult/B (53) 4.

²² For the List of Delegates see Committee of Cultural Experts. *Meeting of Art Specialists* (Strasbourg, 10th-11th September 1953), Report to the Committee of Cultural Experts, CoE’s Archives, EXP/Cult (53) 21.

²³ According to Article 1 of the *European Cultural Convention* “each Contracting Party shall take appropriate measures to safeguard and to encourage the development of its national contribution to the common cultural heritage of Europe”. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168006457e> (Accessed February 20, 2023).

²⁴ Oriane Calligaro, “From ‘European cultural heritage’ to ‘cultural diversity’: The changing core values of European cultural policy”, *Politique européenne*, no. 45 (2014): 65.

²⁵ Calligaro, *Negotiating Europe*, 82-83.



Figure 1. Illustrations from the exhibition catalogue *L'Europe Humaniste*, 1954-1955 (photo: Lefteris Spyrou).

political debate and beyond the races, a European conscience, even better: the sense of fraternity that dismisses everything that divides us so as to know only the common human condition that unites us”.²⁶ In the aftermath of WWII, the Brussels exhibition promoted the values of humanism that could become the foundation of the new Europe, as well as what Europe could share with the rest of mankind. Marie Delcourt, professor at the University of Liège and expert in the history of Humanism, wrote in her essay that “humanist morality teaches the greatness and benevolence of peace; the danger and the error of responding, by violence to violence; and the vanity of worldly distinctions”.²⁷

The humanist values were furthermore promoted to the visitors through carefully selected and presented images. For example, the *Portrait of Federico da Montefeltro with His Son Guidobaldo*, c. 1476-77

(oil on canvas, 138,5 x 82,5 cm., Galleria nazionale delle Marche, Urbino), attributed to the Spanish painter Pedro Berruguete, was chosen as the frontispiece to the exhibition catalogue (Fig. 2). The military leader is not depicted on a battlefield, but in his studio, reading a manuscript, identified as S. Gregory the Great’s *Commentary on the Book of Job*, a clear indication to his humanist interests. Besides, his library was ranked as one of the best in Renaissance Italy, and numbered about 900 manuscripts written in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic.²⁸ Moreover, he is surrounded by the symbols of his power that reveal that Federico was respected not only in Urbino but also Europe-wide: the ermine on his shoulders and the gold chain were offered to him by the King of Naples; the pearl-studded tiara, which is on top of the lectern was a gift from the Sultan of Constantinople; the ribbon tied below the knee on

²⁶ *L'Europe Humaniste*, 14.

²⁷ *L'Europe Humaniste*, 19.

²⁸ See Marcello Simonetta (ed.), *Federico da Montefeltro and His Library*, Exhibition Catalogue, preface by Jonathan J.G. Alexander, New York, Morgan Library and Museum, June 8-Sept. 30, 2007 (Milano: Y. Press, 2007).



Figure 2. The frontispiece of the exhibition catalogue *L'Europe Humaniste*, 1954-1955 (photo: Lefteris Spyrou).

his left leg was the Order of the Garter which he received from King Edward IV of England.²⁹

Another example is the selection of the *Portrait of Erasmus of Rotterdam*, 1517 (oil on panel, transferred to canvas, 59 x 47 cm., Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome, cat. Nr. 47) by Quinten Massys for the exhibition's poster (Fig. 3). The figure of Erasmus could be seen both as a person with humanistic interests, as well as a representative of the cultural cosmopolitanism of that era. Born in Rotterdam, studied in Paris, lectured at the University of Leuven in Belgium, and lived in England and Italy, Erasmus was a vivid and prominent example of a truly European intellectual of that time.

Through these images, the Brussels exhibition's aim is clearly exemplified: to illustrate the reciprocal influences between the European countries and to

²⁹ *L'Europe Humaniste*, 64 (cat. Nr. 7).

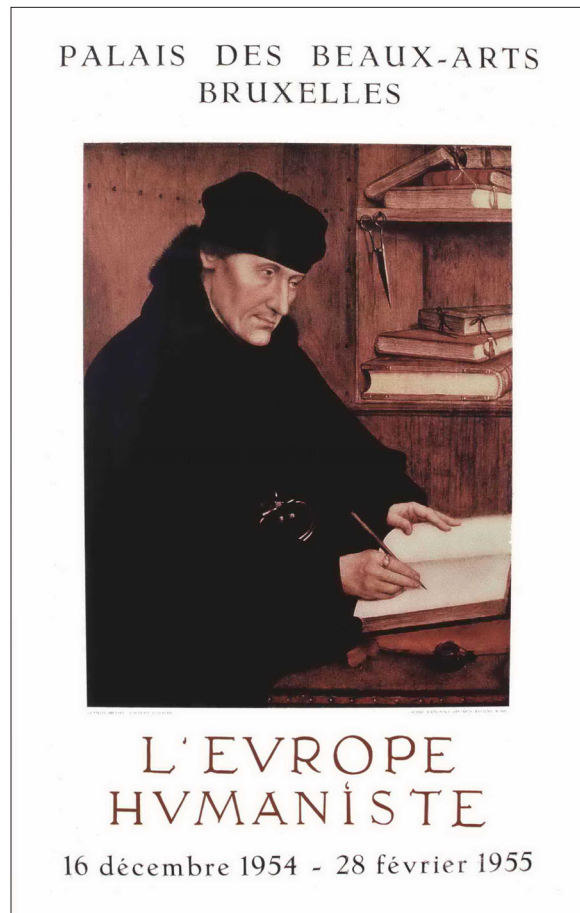


Figure 3. The official poster for the exhibition *L'Europe Humaniste*, 1954-1955 (photo: CoE's official website)

demonstrate the cultural exchanges that took place in Europe during that time; or as the art historian of the Italian Renaissance era, Edward Hutton wrote in a short piece in *Burlington Magazine* "emphasis has been laid on the international character of a movement which knew no frontiers and furthered a free exchange of ideas and discoveries".³⁰

Similar principles were also applied in the following art exhibitions that presented in chronological order the dominant artistic movements in Europe until WWI:

- *The Triumph of Mannerism from Michelangelo to El Greco* (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 1 July–2 October 1955).

³⁰ Edward Hutton, "Current and forthcoming exhibitions", *Burlington Magazine* 97, no. 622 (January 1955): 31.

- *The 17th Century in Europe – Realism, Classicism and Baroque* (Rome, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, 1 December 1956–31 January 1957).
- *The European Rococo. Art and Culture in the 18th Century* (Munich, Residenz, 15 June–15 September 1958).
- *The Romantic Movement* (London, Tate Gallery and The Arts Council Gallery, 10 July–27 September 1959).
- *Sources of the 20th Century: The Arts in Europe 1884-1914* (Paris, Musée national d'art moderne, 4 November 1960–23 January 1961).

The main idea was not to juxtapose a series of “national pavilions” but to display the interrelationship of the artistic movements and, thereby, to place them in a broader European setting and trajectory. As the British art historian Kenneth Clark pointed out in his foreword to the catalogue of *The Romantic Movement*, these exhibitions demonstrated the interdependency of the great European artistic movements “in spite of national and religious differences and have helped to form the single culture we now know”.³¹

For that reason, the words “Europe” and “European” were deliberately used in the titles and subtitles of the exhibitions. Furthermore, in numerous reports published by the Council of Europe, both the “European character” of Western artistic production, as well as the exchanges of artistic ideas between the European countries, were stressed. In a 1955 report on the second exhibition, for example, Mannerism was described as a “European phenomenon”, while it was stressed that in this “truly international period”, the exchange of artistic ideas was so extensive that it was often difficult to recognise at first sight the national trends of artists of that epoch.³² In another report on the third art exhibition, dated in 1956, we read that “this exceptional collection of masterpieces underlines clearly a period of European art when exchanges and influences between one country and the other were

particularly intense; many European artists in fact spent much of their time outside the geographical boundaries of their respective countries”.³³ Similarly, Jean Cassou, organiser of the exhibition *The Sources of Modern Art* held in Paris in 1960-61, urged his readers not to consider the great aesthetic and intellectual creations of this period from a “strictly national angle”, as they contributed to the formation of a general spirit.³⁴

The exhibitions encouraged, therefore, the study of the cultural movements in a European context and not merely in connection to the history of individual countries. Thereby, culture could pave the way for the writing of an alternative European history, where a prominent place was given to the common intellectual and artistic trends and not to the destructive antagonisms. As the art historian Benedict Nicolson emphasised in his editorial in *Burlington Magazine* in January 1961: “the main purpose of this series – to demonstrate that the term “Europe” has a real meaning – is a fine one, and there can be no question that it has gone a long way towards breaking down narrow national prejudices, and towards popularizing the conception of European unity in the arts”.³⁵

Popularising the Conception of European Unity in the Arts in Europe and Beyond

As mentioned previously, the CoE intended to target not only the educated elite but also the public and the schoolchildren, and thus to diffuse the sense of European belonging throughout the whole society. An example of these initiatives is the illustrated book *Notre Europe*, which was published in 1958 under the auspices of the CoE’s Cultural Commission,³⁶ and was mainly addressed to young people (“destiné à la jeunesse”) aiming at presenting several aspects of Europe, such as the continent’s

³¹ Kenneth Clark, “Introduction”, in *The Romantic Movement, Fifth Exhibition to Celebrate the Tenth Anniversary of the Council of Europe*, Exh. Cat. (London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1959), 10.

³² Council of Europe, Directorate of Information, *Second European Exhibition: Triumph of Mannerism from Michelangelo to El Greco*, CoE’s Archives, IP/859 CCM/NF, 24.6.55.

³³ Council of Europe, Directorate of Information, *Third European Art Exhibition opens in Rome*, CoE’s Archives, IP/1028 CCM/NF 5.12.56.

³⁴ *Les Sources du XXe Siècle. Les Arts en Europe de 1884 à 1914*, Exhibition Catalogue (Paris: Musée national d’art moderne, 1960-1961), xiii.

³⁵ Benedict Nicolson, “Editorial”, *Burlington Magazine* 103, no. 694 (January 1961): 3.

³⁶ *Notre Europe*, préface de Fernand Dehousse (Paris : Éditions Odé, 1958).



Figure 4. *Europe culturelle*, map from the book *Notre Europe*, which was published in 1958 under the auspices of the CoE (photo: Lefteris Spyrou)

geography, landscapes and cities, history, and culture. A map titled “Europe Culturelle” is the first thing the reader sees when opening the book (Fig. 4). This is the picture that best illustrates the CoE’s dominant ideas in the 1950s: that the political frontiers have been highly permeable to aesthetic ideas and cultural movements, and therefore, the common cultural values had been in the past and still were, a powerful force towards linking the nations of Europe together.

The designers of the CoE’s art exhibitions also shared the same perspective, as well as the idea that this narrative should not be addressed only to an educated audience. Therefore, it was decided that each exhibition should be followed by an itinerant exhibition of high-quality reproductions of the exhibits, designed to “acquaint the general public and schoolchildren with the themes of the exhibition”. These “travelling documentary exhibitions” were intended for small or medium-sized towns (a room in a town hall, a school, or a museum should, in most cases, be adequate) and, therefore, would be in the form of mobile panels (mounted on square bases), which could be easily packed in cases and could be set up by two persons in less than an hour. The reproductions (both in black and white and in

colour) would be accompanied by a text explaining the theme.³⁷

Another CoE initiative to diffuse this idea of a common European cultural heritage to the society was the publication of art books in grand format (folio), which were related to the series of art exhibitions and were published in different European languages by prominent publishers as part of the series “Epochs of European art”. The texts in those richly illustrated books were written by well-known art historians who had participated in the organisation of the exhibitions, such as André Chastel, Marcel Brion, Arno Schönberger, Halldor Soehner, Jean Cassou, Nikolaus Pevsner etc. (Fig. 5).³⁸

³⁷ Memorandum by the Cultural Affairs Division, *Itineraries for travelling documentary exhibitions based on European exhibitions*, submitted to the Standing Committee of the European Conference of Local Authorities, Strasbourg, 6 February 1963, CoE’s Archives, Restricted, CPL/P (4) 16. The first travelling exhibition was held in London (Europe House) based on the 6th Art Exhibition “The Sources of the XXth Century - the Arts in Europe from 1884 to 1914”.

³⁸ Arno Schönberger and Halldor Soehner, *The Age of Rococo* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1960) / *Il Rococò: arte e civiltà del secolo 18.* (Milano: Electa, 1960) / *L’Europe du XVIIIe siècle: l’art et culture* (Paris: Éditions des Deux-mondes, [1960]) / *Die Welt des Rokoko: Kunst und Kultur des 18. Jahrh.*, (Munich: Callwey, 1963) / *El Rococó y su época* (Barcelona: Salvat, 1963). Marcel Brion, *Romantic Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1960) / *Kunst der Romantik* (Munich: Knauer, 1960) / *Arte Romantica* (Milano: Garzanti, 1960) / *L’art Romantique* (Paris: Hachette, 1960). Jean Cassou, Emile Langui and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Les Sources du Vingtième Siècle* (Paris: Éditions des Deux-Mondes, 1961) / *The Sources of Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962) / *1884-1914. Nascita dell’Arte moderna* (Milano: Electa, 1962) / *Génesis del siglo XX* (Barcelona: Salvat, 1963). André Chastel and Robert Klein, *The Age of Humanism*:



Figure 5. *The Age of Rococo* and *The Age of Humanism*, art books in folio format published by Thames & Hudson under the auspices of the CoE (photo: Lefteris Spyrou)

These efforts to promote the idea of Europe based on a common culture were not confined only to Europe. The Council of Europe participated in UNESCO's East-West Major project that was launched in 1957 and ran until the end of 1966, aiming at fostering the "mutual appreciation" of Eastern and Western cultural values through a variety of activities such as conferences, exchanges of teachers and researchers, films, radio broadcasts, TV programs, publications etc.³⁹ Already in 1958, the Committee of Cultural Experts decided to participate in the project by sending to UNESCO documentary material produced by the CoE that provided the Asian public with an overview of the principal European cultural values.⁴⁰ This included material related to the series of Art Exhi-

bitions, such as exhibition catalogues, audio-visual material (e.g. a film on the Rococo Exhibition, sets of colour slides), art albums etc. Among the recipients were art and museum associations, national museums and galleries, public libraries, universities, ministries etc., from a variety of countries, such as Japan, Pakistan, Lebanon, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq, Vietnam, Tunisia etc.⁴¹

The Defenders of the National Interests in the Cultural Affairs

However, these efforts to promote Europe's cultural unity in the 1950s were hindered by the national prejudices and antagonisms that were still playing an important role in the post-war era. After all, the CoE should not be seen as a monolithic entity but

Europe 1480-1530 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963) / *L'Europe de la Renaissance. L'Age de l'humanisme* (Paris: Éditions des Deux-Mondes, 1963).

³⁹ For UNESCO's project see Laura Elizabeth Wong, "Relocating East and West: UNESCO's Major Project on the Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values", *Journal of World History* 19, no. 3 (September 2008): 349-374. Jacques Havet, "UNESCO's East-West Major Project", *The UNESCO Courier* XI, no. 12 (December 1958): 20-21.

⁴⁰ Committee of Cultural Experts, 15th Session, Meeting of the Bureau, *Council of Europe participation in the UNESCO Major Project: "East-West"*, 3rd November 1958, CoE's Archives, Confidential, EXP/Cult/B (58) 30.

⁴¹ See for example the document *Contribution of the Council of Europe to the UNESCO Major Project on Mutual Appreciation of Eastern and Western Cultural Values. 1960 - 1961 - 1962 - 1963*, Strasbourg, 18 January 1963, CoE's Archives, CCC/Inf (62) 18.

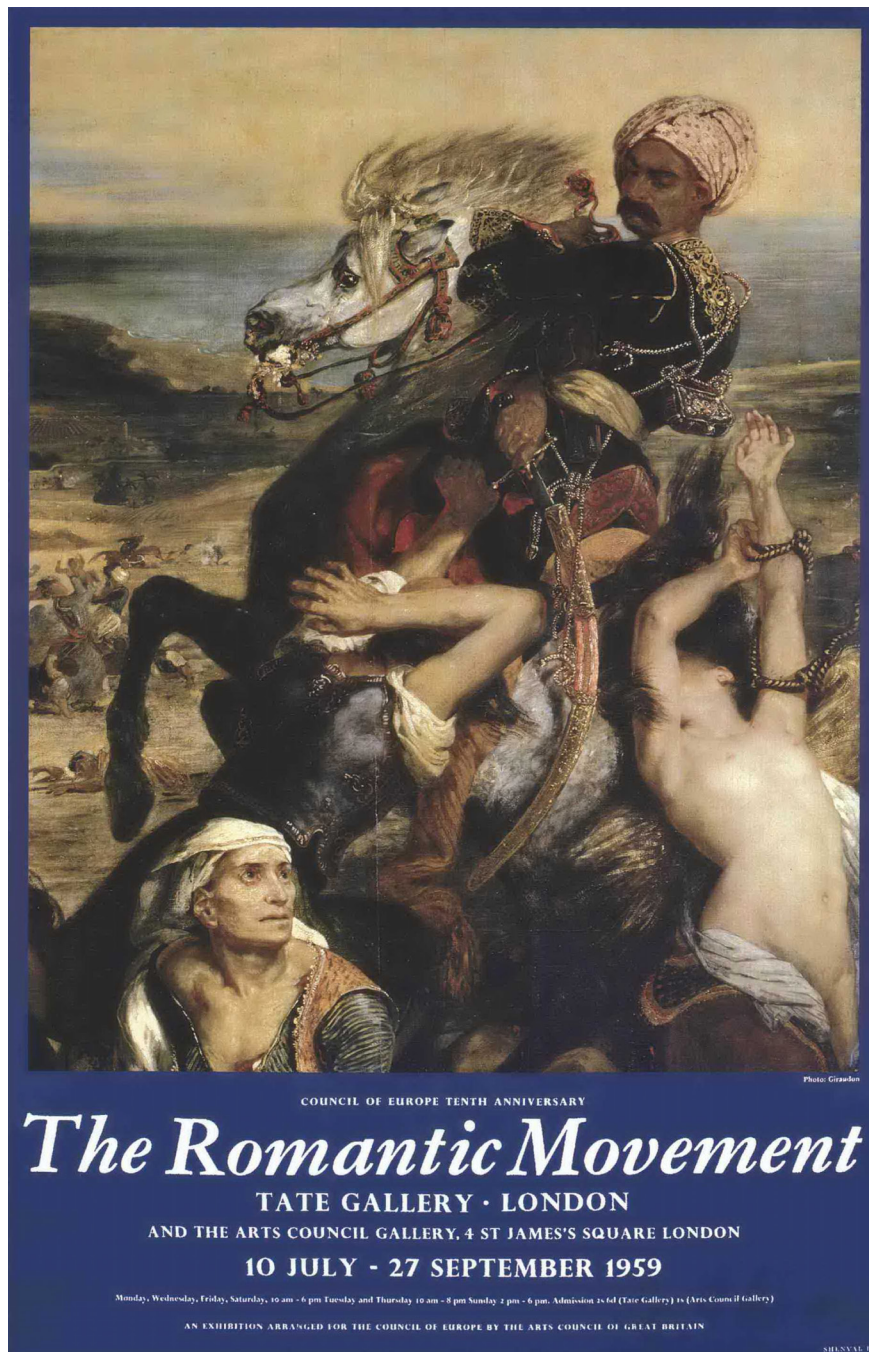


Figure 6. The official poster for the exhibition *The Romantic Movement*, 1959 (photo: CoE's official website)

as an arena in which various agents, specific groups and actors have promoted cultural initiatives, which have also been met with opposition.

Indicative of this were the heated debates in the CoE over the choice of the poster for the exhibition *The Romantic Movement*, which depicted a detail from Eugène Delacroix's painting: the *Massacre at Chios* - a

tragic moment during the Greek War of Independence in 1822, when tens of thousands of Greeks were killed on the island of Chios by Ottoman troops (Fig. 6). In the Meeting of the Consultative Assembly on the 15th of September 1959, the Turkish Delegation expressed its dissatisfaction at the subject chosen for the poster, while the Chairman assured them that there was no intention of offending Turkey and

that he would ask for a report on how this incident had happened”.⁴² On another Note, the Head of the Cultural Division wrote that the decision had not been taken at any formal meeting of the Committee of Cultural Experts, but it was rather the organising Committee of Art Specialists convened by the Arts Council of Great Britain under the chairmanship of Sir Kenneth Clark that had decided to use the painting for the exhibition’s poster.⁴³ In a letter addressed to Robert Crivon (Cultural Advisor at the CoE), Anthony Haigh, head of the Foreign Office’s Cultural Relations Department, explained that the *Massacre at Chios* was considered to be “one of the key paintings of the period” and was “of special importance to the theme of the exhibition as exemplifying the interdependence of art at that time”, since Delacroix had repainted the background after having seen Constable’s “Hay Wain” at the Paris Salon. Therefore, the Arts Council realised that this picture “provided the most appropriate subject for a poster” due to its artistic quality and because it provided “a portion with a spirited design, which is one of the essentials of a poster”. Moreover, it was thought preferable “to use a non-British picture for the poster”. In his letter, he also stressed that political considerations did not enter into the decision to incorporate the painting in the exhibition, nor into the decision to use a detail from it as the poster.⁴⁴ In another meeting of the Committee of Cultural Experts, the UK representatives “conveyed to the Turkish Government their sincere apologies for the unfortunate reactions caused by the choice of the poster”, although it was also underlined that it was the Arts Council’s decision, while the Secretary-General also expressed his regrets for this “unfortunate incident”. The case was considered closed, but it was also decided by the Committee of Cultural Experts to “recommend to the Committee of Ministers that governments organising exhibitions

consult the Secretary-General to ensure that subjects likely to give rise to controversy were not chosen for posters”.⁴⁵

This debate revealed the gap between the intellectuals and art historians who organised the exhibitions and some of the politicians - members of the Committee of the Ministers and the Committee of the Cultural Experts, who were the most prominent defenders of national interests in cultural affairs. As Brunner has also shown, the CoE’s member states were not ready to completely give up their cultural prerogatives to a “supranational” institution and, for that reason, the members of the Committee of Ministers were often criticised for their too “national” and “diplomatic” vision of cultural co-operation.⁴⁶

These attitudes are not surprising since cultural policies had contributed historically to the rise of national identities. Both *culture* and *heritage* were mainly formed as national concepts from the 19th century onwards: a systematic nationalisation of art and monuments, as well as a systematic quest for a ‘national style’ had taken place the previous century, something that required enormous and intensive work by numerous art historians, intellectuals, politicians, museum professionals etc. As historian Matthew Rampley has pointed out, the history of art as a discipline played an essential role in the assertion and development of ethnic and national identities, and “art historians’ first duty was a patriotic promotion of their own cultural identities”.⁴⁷ Michela Passini has also clearly shown how nationalist ideologies influenced the art historical discourse in France and Germany from 1870 to 1930 and the construction of national artistic traditions.⁴⁸ Similar trends were also present in the art historical texts written after WWII, as exemplified

⁴² Bureau of the Assembly, *Minutes of the meeting held in Strasbourg on Tuesday, 15th September 1959*, CoE’s Archives, Confidential, AS/Bur (11) PV 6.

⁴³ Bureau of the Assembly, *Note from the Head of the Cultural Division to the President of the Assembly on the preparation of European Exhibitions*, Strasbourg, 15th September 1959, CoE’s Archives, Restricted AS/Bur (11) 16. Bureau of the Assembly, *Procedure followed for preparing European Exhibitions. Letter from the Secretary-General to the President of the Assembly* (1), Strasbourg, 28th September 1959, CoE’s Archives, Confidential, AS/Bur (11) 18.

⁴⁴ Bureau of the Assembly, *Procedure followed for preparing European Exhibitions. Second letter from the Secretary-General to the President of the Assembly* (1), Strasbourg, 26th October 1959, CoE’s Archives, Confidential, AS/Bur (11) 26.

⁴⁵ Committee of Cultural Experts, 16th Session, *Report of the first meeting of the Restricted Committee*, Held in Strasbourg on 1st and 2nd December 1959, Strasbourg, 7th December 1959, CoE’s Archives, Confidential, EXP/Cult (59) 38, Appendix C.

⁴⁶ Brunner, “Le Conseil de l’Europe”.

⁴⁷ Matthew Rampley, “The Construction of National Art Histories and the ‘New’ Europe,” in *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, eds. Matthew Rampley et al. (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 233.

⁴⁸ Michela Passini, *La fabrique de l’art national: Le nationalisme et les origines de l’histoire de l’art en France et en Allemagne 1870-1933* (Paris : Maisons des sciences de l’homme, 2012).

by Nikolaus Pevsner's analysis of 'Englishness' in art, which was published in 1956.⁴⁹

A thorough analysis of the texts published in the CoE's art exhibition catalogues is needed to identify some relevant tendencies. For example, Kenneth Clark wrote in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue of *The Romantic Movement* that the *Masacre of Chios* illustrates not only the "Romantic love of violence and enthusiasm for liberty" but also the actual technique used "registers the first impact of the English style on French painting", as Delacroix repainted the background after seeing the Constables in the Salon of 1824.⁵⁰ Moreover, further research on the national daily and periodical press will provide more information about the reception of these exhibitions and especially the criticism towards their main narratives. For example, the Italian art historian Roberto Longhi questioned the core narrative of the exhibition *The 17th Century in Europe – Realism, Classicism and Baroque* (Rome, 1957) by stressing that it was based on the "illusion of unity in a Europe always divided in concepts, religions, philosophy and, of course, in art".⁵¹

From the above, it is understood that the task undertaken by the organisers of the art exhibitions in the 1950s was extremely challenging: to demonstrate that European culture could be aligned with the national cultures; and that artworks, which were already fundamental symbols within national iconographies and narratives, could be transformed into common European heritage. Back in the 1950s, though, it was widely believed that the presence of the nation-state and its allied ideology of nationalism was the major obstacle to European integration,⁵² or as Jules Romain wrote in the book *Notre Europe*, nationalism was "le microbe antagoniste de l'unité".⁵³ Moreover, the shared suffering caused by the two World Wars in Europe was a powerful motive behind the firm principle that the dreadful history of the first half of the 20th century should never

be repeated. We also need to take into consideration that for this transnational group of passionate and educated liberal-minded intellectuals and politicians that were actively engaged in the European project, as well as in the CoE's cultural initiatives, European integration was still an ideal and not a reality, as it became some decades later. During this early formative period, as Delanty has stressed, grand narratives, such as the idea of a cultural tradition that transcends the divisions and plurality of Europe, were quite influential, as they strengthened the legitimacy of the European project.⁵⁴

Epilogue

The first six exhibitions belong to a period in the history of CoE's cultural policy, which Brunner characterised as that of "idealism" when the members of the CoE defended a European culture conscious of its "humanist" and universal values.⁵⁵ These exhibitions should be examined in the context of a broader Eurofederalist aspiration to promote the notion of essential unity in Europe based on the idea of a European civilisation⁵⁶ and, therefore, can rightly be described as a means to spread federalist propaganda.⁵⁷ By visualising the universality of the European spirit and the communality of Europe's artistic heritage through the ages and by strongly emphasising the overarching unity over national 'cultural' differences, the CoE aimed at advancing the awareness of a common European identity and at propagating Europe's unity, which would support the projects of a European political union. This came at a time when Western European states were amid a strong bipolarity (US and USSR), seeking their place in the new post-war world.

In the 1960s, the CoE decided to expand the chronological limits of the series of art exhibitions by including the art historical periods before the Renaissance, such as "Romanesque art" (Barcelona, Museum of

⁴⁹ Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (London: The Architectural Press 1956).

⁵⁰ Clark, "Introduction", 19.

⁵¹ Cited in Patricia García-Montón González, "Europa y el barroco por los viejos caminos de la unidad", *Locus amoenus*, no. 16 (2018): 279.

⁵² Shore, *Building Europe*, 16.

⁵³ Jules Romain, "L'idée européenne", in *Notre Europe*, 9.

⁵⁴ Gerard Delanty, "The European Heritage from a Critical Cosmopolitan Perspective", LEQS Paper No. 19 / 2010 (February 2010): 6.

⁵⁵ Brunner, "Le Conseil de l'Europe",

⁵⁶ Gerard Delanty and Chris Rumford, *Rethinking Europe. Social theory and the implications of Europeanization*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 57.

⁵⁷ Calligaro, "Which culture(s) for Europe?", 71.

Catalan Art / St. Jacques de Compostela, Cathedral of St. Jacques, 10 July – 10 October 1961), “European art around 1400” (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 7 May - 31 July 1962), “Byzantine art” (Athens, Zappeion Megaron, 1 April - 15 June 1964), and “Gothic art” (Paris, Louvre, 2 April – 1 July 1968); while at the same time, some exhibitions were devoted to great historical figures who influenced the cultural life of Europe, such as Charlemagne (Aachen, Rathaus, 26 June - 19 September 1965) and Queen Christina of Sweden (Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, 29 June - 16 October 1966). The fact that the CoE continued to provide the means and put effort into organising these large-scale art exhibitions demonstrates their importance in the institution’s broader cultural and educational initiatives.

These exhibitions could be seen as early examples of the instrumentalisation of culture in a top-down process initiated by elites whose goal was to inject European consciousness into the masses. It is also true that to achieve this goal, the CoE adopted mechanisms and tools that had been widely used in the past during the nation-building process - the type of art exhibition itself was among them, as well as the Flag of Europe which consists of a circle of twelve golden stars on a blue background and was designed for the CoE in 1955. Some scholars researching the EU cultural policies after 1980 underlined that they promoted a “repertoire of invented traditions and post-nationalist’ symbols that appear as pale imitations of nationalist iconography”⁵⁸, a criticism that can also be applied to the CoE’s actions in the 1950s and 1960s. However, this idea of a centralised and top-down conception of European culture rigidly imposed from above on a passive public should be complemented by

exploring the way these policies were experienced by the recipients.⁵⁹ Further research on the reception of the CoE art exhibitions at a national level could provide some useful insights on this topic.

The process of European integration is slow and difficult, and in the last decades, it has been threatened by the rise of nationalism and populism across Europe. It is important, though, to mention that the notion of culture is still playing a crucial role in these discussions and actions. Issues of a common European culture and identity have resurfaced, as exemplified by the European Council and Parliament’s decision to name 2018 as the *European Year of Cultural Heritage*, with the intention of encouraging “more people to discover and engage with Europe’s cultural heritage and to reinforce a sense of belonging to a common European space”.⁶⁰ Culture is still being put at the service of political unification by providing a symbolic foundation and bringing citizens closer to this vision.

The Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg wrote that “a long time ago I suddenly realized that the country one belongs to is not, as the usual rhetoric goes, the one you love, but the one you are ashamed of. Shame can be a stronger bond than love”.⁶¹ In the last years, many of us have been ashamed of the way the European Union has handled critical issues, such as migration or the economic crisis. Maybe this feeling is an indication that we still believe in this Idea of Europe and that it is still worth trying to reconstruct Europe through the ideas of solidarity, democracy, equality, freedom, and respect for human rights. By critically examining the European past, we can better understand our present and pave the way for a better future.

⁵⁸ Shore, *Building Europe*, 64.

⁵⁹ Calligaro, *Negotiating Europe*. Sassatelli, *Becoming Europeans*.

⁶⁰ https://europa.eu/cultural-heritage/about_en (Accessed February 20, 2023).

⁶¹ Carlo Ginzburg, “The Bond of Shame”, in Corina Caduff, Anne-Kathrin Reulecke and Ulrike Vedder (eds.), *Passionen: Objekte – Schauplätze – Denkstile* (Munich: Fink, 2017), 19.