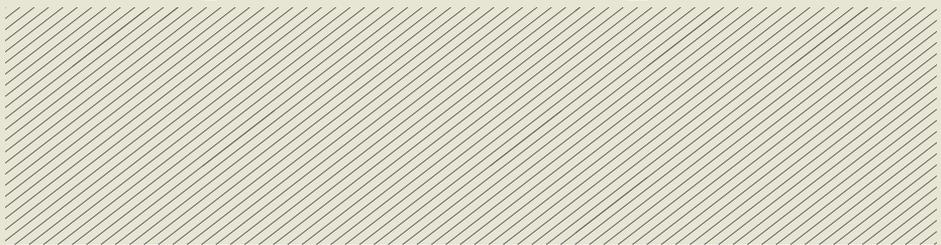


Mela*

European Museums
in an age of migrations



RF01 – Museums & Identity in History and Contemporaneity



MeLa* Project

European Museums in an age of migrations

www.mela-project.eu

European Commission

European Research Area, 7th Framework Programme

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Acronym	MeLa*
Title	European Museums in an age of migrations
Short Description	Adopting the notion of migration ¹ as a paradigm of the contemporary global and multicultural world, MeLa investigates the role of museums in the twenty-first century Europe. Through a focus on the transformation of museums, meant as cultural spaces, processes as well as physical places, MeLa aims at identifying innovative museum practices which respond to the challenges posed by an age characterised by intensive migration flows; fluid circulation of information, cultures and ideas, and by the political, economic and cultural process of creation and consolidation of the European Union. As people, objects, knowledge and information move at increasingly high rates, a sharper awareness of an inclusive European identity is necessary to facilitate mutual understanding and social cohesion: MeLa investigates museums and their role in building this identity. The expected outcomes of MeLa include a critic overview and a reflection on the role, mission, strategies, spaces and exhibition design for contemporary European museums. The findings of the research will coalesce into scientific publications and policies for the use of the European Union and the museum community.
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Coordinator	Politecnico di Milano
Person Responsible	Prof. Luca Basso Peressut
EU Officer	Mr. Zoltán Krasznai

* *Mela* is a Sanskrit word meaning “gathering” or “to meet.” Today is used for intercultural gatherings, intended as opportunities for community building that can perform a strong socially cohesive function.

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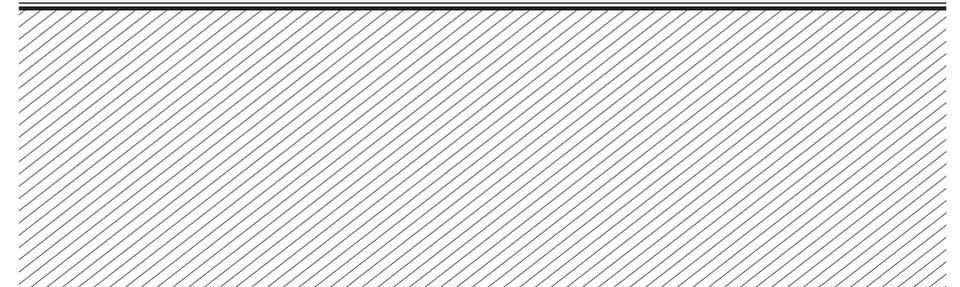
Silesian Museum in Görlitz, Germany. Photo by Susannah Eckersley.

Executive Summary: RF 01 – Museums and Identity in History and Today

The objective of the first MeLa research field is to explore the importance of place in European museums for the construction of identities. Researchers analysed key displays in museums that focus on historical and contemporary issues around place, identity and belonging with specific reference to the migration and movement of people. Additionally, researchers interviewed staff and visitors in order to understand how and why museums develop such displays and how visitors, including those with migrant backgrounds, respond to them. Migration has inevitable connections with some of the most pressing issues in European societies, such as the mobility of people, multiculturalism, diversity,

equality of opportunity and social cohesion or division. Museums have the potential to play an important role in exploring these issues, and some do so in responsible and thought-provoking ways. However, this research has produced a number of suggestions for practice that can facilitate the constructive contribution that museums can make to social, political and cultural relations and debates.

<http://wp1.mela-project.eu>



European Museums in an Age of Migration

Museums across Europe, of all sizes, scales and types are faced with the reality of representing and responding to an increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual society. Migration is an issue which cannot be seen in isolation—it pervades all aspects of social, political, and cultural life within contemporary Europe, whether or not this is always acknowledged.

Museums & Identity in History and Today

Historical and contemporary migrations form part of the “back-story” which enables individuals, communities, regions, cities, nations, and Europe as a whole, to develop and express a sense of identity. Place—the places in which we live, which we call home, migrate from or to—are highly significant for identity formation. Museums provide a space for expressions of attachment to place, to cultural objects or rituals and to people(s), through their collections, exhibitions and events.

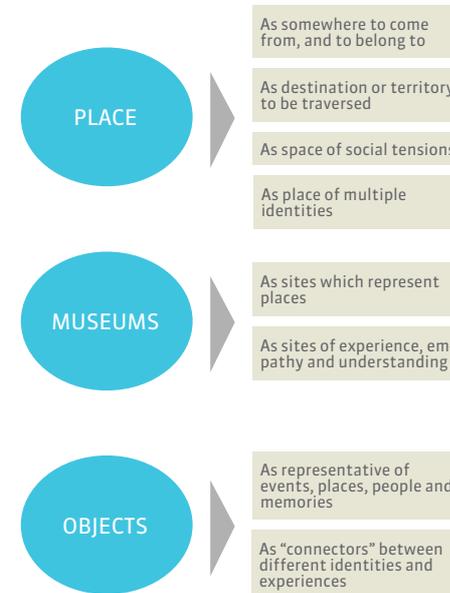
Who Belongs where?

This research has examined the historical and contemporary relationships between European museum representations and identity, using the dual focus of “people(s)” and “place” to analyse how change, fluidity, fragmentation, dislocation and mobility impact on individual and museum constructions of identity and belonging.

Museums from around Europe, which represent varied types of migration and migrant communities (either explicitly or implicitly) were identified, visited and analysed. A small number of these were selected as case studies for more detailed investigation, using a range of methods including: exhibition evaluation; focus groups with migrants and non-migrants; interviews with museum staff; and bibliographic research.



The approach taken for this research has enabled a new, interdisciplinary understanding of the significance, to both migrants and non-migrants, of:



The overall goals and objectives were:

- To examine the historical and contemporary relationships between European museum representations and identity within the contextual structure of place.
- To challenge the representational dynamic of place, belonging and otherness in European museums.
- To ask what happens or what can happen when knowledge, peoples and places are dislocated by new sensibilities towards population flows, shifting demographics, multiple heritages, ethnic diversification and the shifting territories of geopolitical places and knowledge.
- To question whether museums’ representational practices should change, and if so how.
- To determine what the new dimensions of identity construction and production are in museums whose physical place is fixed, but whose audiences, with their changing heritages and cultures, are not.

Approaches and Results

Three clusters of case studies were chosen that grouped the museums into themes based on their content, geography, remit and scale. A number of museums in a range of European countries were studied under each cluster, and in each case one museum was selected as a primary case study for extended research. All of the case study museums have a remit and an audience which stretches beyond the geographic boundaries of their physical locations into the wider world.

Cluster 1 – Placing the nation

This cluster concentrates on museums in locations where the political conception of the nation and its identity has recently (from the twentieth century onwards) become more strongly articulated based on a political imperative. This includes locations where there has been political transformation at the state level and the subsequent re-articulation of national identity (including that expressed within museums) combines geographic, historical and cultural sense of place and individual identity within the nation. The primary case study was the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh.

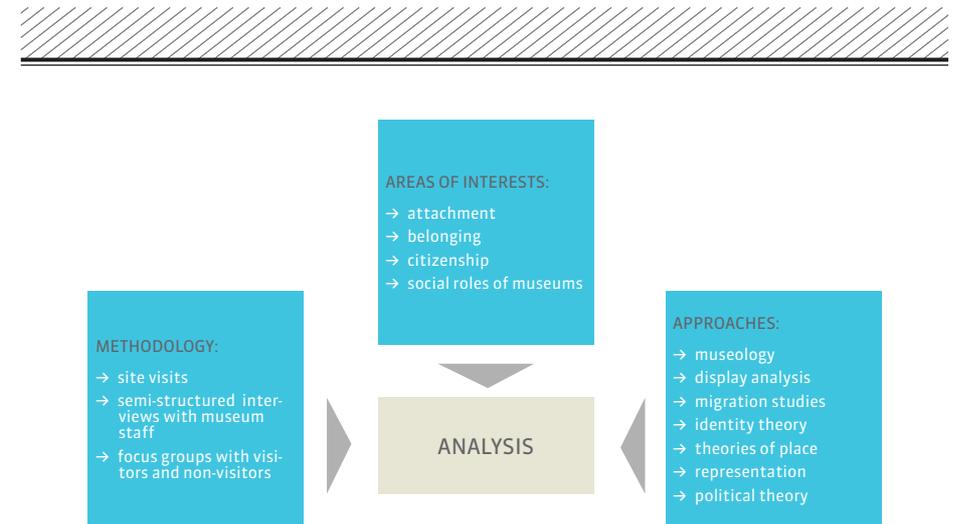
Cluster 2 – Peoples, borders, movement

This cluster concentrates on museums in locations and about peoples that have been subject to significant change and movement in terms of population shift, political border change and mobilities within groups of people as well as individuals. The time span includes recent representations of major historical twentieth-century impulses for such change as well as more fluid contemporary mobilities. The primary case study was the Silesian Museum in Görlitz, Germany.

Cluster 3 – European cities and “other” places

This cluster includes museums which are located within major European cities that have a historical connection to and contemporary legacy of colonialism, or state-sponsored programmes of immigration (in particular from outside of the Judeo-Christian world), in terms of populations, museum collections, representations and audiences, and articulations of “otherness.” The primary case study was the Amsterdam Museum in the Netherlands.

The research was structured as follows:



This has created a rich body of data, allowing us to understand whether producers intended to communicate the “messages” perceptible in display and if and how visitors received and identified with such messages.

In each primary case study museum we identified key displays relating to place and migration. We used display analysis methods in order to understand the ways in which museums construct ideas and narratives of migration in relation to related issues such as multiculturalism, identities, intercultural exchange and citizenship.

We also interviewed between three and seven staff members at each museum, including directors or heads of department, curators and officers of education, learning and public programmes. The purpose of this was to understand institutional approaches to questions of place, identity and belonging with specific reference to migration.

For each research cluster we recruited two groups of research participants. We conducted an initial focus group with each one about place, belonging and identity. We then visited key areas of the museum with the participants

before conducting a second focus group exploring their responses to and opinions about the displays. The purpose of this was to understand relationships and mismatches between museum representations of place and people's identities and experiences of being in place.

→ **PLACING THE NATION**

Key findings:

- Museums in nations where the political conception of the nation has undergone significant changes may highlight the fluid and changing nature of national identity;
- Curators discussed the difficulties of operating within a context of political change and stressed the importance of representing a broad range of political views in order to maintain professional objectivity and integrity;
- Professionals see museums as an important resource for debates on national identity and actively encouraged visitors to use the museum collections in this way;

In 2013 the National Museum of Scotland hosted an event for 16–18-year-old Scottish school pupils to explore and debate the future of Scotland, which included discussions of the Independence Referendum and subsequent issues of citizenship, identity and belonging.

- Museums that represent the nation may utilise their collections in order to facilitate an understanding of the interconnected relationship between the nation and the wider world;
- European national museums can recognise the impact that European trade, colonial expansion and emigration had on other cultures, but also the changes experienced in European nations as a result of these cultural exchanges;

Staff at the National Museum of Scotland involved in community engagement have worked with individuals from migrant backgrounds in Scotland to reinterpret existing collections through drawing on their own experiences of objects in their country of origin.

- Attention to new migrant communities in displays and collections can be limited because of lack of funding and staff time that prevents curators from undertaking targeted work in these areas;
- Themes of migration, movement and diaspora are threaded through the displays of some national museums, but overlooked in others;
- Although national identities are plural, national museum representations of national histories have the capacity to provoke strong feelings of pride and attachment among visitors, including those with migrant backgrounds.

→ **PEOPLES, BORDERS, MOVEMENTS**

Key findings:

- The notion of the border as a changing phenomenon, rather than a fixed point within space and time, is intrinsic to some museums (of all types), but less so in others. Museums in countries where borders have been important in twentieth- and twenty-first century history have a greater reflection of this than others (e.g. in Germany and Hungary);
- Ongoing local, and sometimes national-level or cross-border political and social sensitivities relating to population and border change profoundly condition the ways in which museums approach these topics;
- These very sensitivities as well as the contemporary resonance of historical topics make the theme of peoples, borders, movements very relevant to a wide range of museums today, beyond the immediately obvious (for example migration museums);
- Museums focussing on specific population and border change histories highlight the wider contemporary resonance



"Amsterdam DNA" in the Amsterdam Museum, the Netherlands.
Photo by Christopher Whitehead.



- of this history, in a world which is shaped by diversity;
- Many museums act on the imperative not to "pigeon-hole" the past, but rather to maximise its potential transferability in addressing contemporary social concerns;
- Museum discussions and representations of the difficult history of border change, population movements and migrations may arouse tensions, but are more likely to challenge preconceived prejudices or generate respect among visitors for responding to that history with care;

The Jewish Museum Berlin is located in what is now an area with a predominantly Turkish-Muslim population. It is an example of a museum extending its remit beyond that of a historical presentation of a single group, to one with a social role in a contemporary multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society by developing an academy with a programme on migration and diversity.

- Museums can play a significant role in arousing empathy between populations with similar experiences, but who may have very different identities.

Focus group participants from either side of the German-Polish border in Görlitz came away from their museum visit with a new understanding and respect for each other's histories.

- Museum staff see their institutions acting as a "bridge" between people(s), but this is not always recognised by visitors and potential visitors, unless joint activities are organised;

→ EUROPEAN CITIES AND “OTHER” PLACES

Key findings:

- Civic place, usually represented in city museums, offers a particularly localised arena for identity formation that can have high stakes socially and politically;
- City space can be a locus of tensions and frustrations relating to migrant influxes, to people’s inability to integrate into the host culture or the host culture’s inflexibility, or a place where diversity is celebrated for the cultural richness it brings, presented by some as improving quality of life;
- Polyvocal representations in city museums relating to migrant identity often suggest that cities form places of identification with greater purchase than nation states on people with migrant backgrounds, for whom national symbols (flags, national football teams, monarchies etc.) may mean very little;
- Our visitor research supports this, while also suggesting that the particular neighbourhood in which people live can be yet more significant for identity formation;

- The historical treatment of other groups, such as economic migrants like guest workers, can be a source of “uncomfortable” representation;

A number of displays in the Amsterdam Museum represent the disadvantages to which immigrants were subject in the past.

- While staff at many of the museums we surveyed are often careful not to shy away from difficult histories, there is a competing pressure relating to the need to ensure that the experience of visiting the museum is generally a positive and uplifting one; that it is suitable for families and children, and that tourists are not presented with an overwhelmingly negative view of history;
- Staff tended towards an idea of the museum as a social actor with elective responsibilities not merely to “reflect” the city but to shape it and to shape the views of its inhabitants and administrators (i.e.

Implications and Recommendations

the political class), for example by making statements about the benefits of migration and diversity to civic society and culture;

While staff at the Amsterdam Museum were keen not to exaggerate the social agency of the museum, they believed that it could be a means of creating mutual awareness and understanding between minority and majority groups and sensitising politicians to key issues.

- People with migrant backgrounds at the Amsterdam Museum revealed complex forms of belonging and identity; in many cases they profoundly identified with Amsterdam as a place but felt that they were not well represented in the stories told by the museum; they also identified contemporary social tensions surrounding multicultural society that are not comprehensively or explicitly explored.

Our key recommendations are:

- Museums should acknowledge their potential to construct social values and should be clear about their institutional political positions; this may bring about the need for more organised and inclusive discussions between museum professionals within institutions about political standpoints and how to represent them to visitors;
- While acknowledging the political position taken by the museum, oppositional voices should not be ignored and the debates and antagonisms themselves can become part of the museum’s representation; at the same time, museums can prompt empathy on the part of visitors, and must negotiate the balance between affective and cognitive understandings of migration and associated issues in society;
- Museums should explore contemporary social differences and tensions by contextualising them historically within place;
- Museums should articulate their relationship to society and to particular topics (e.g. migration); is the institution considered as a forum for dialogue, a platform,

a mirror, an arena for debate, an agent of social change or a combination of these?

- Museums should not underplay problematic issues in order to appeal to tourist audiences while potentially alienating local ones;
- Engagement with migrant communities and groups is desirable, but it is not possible to be comprehensive in this regard; museums should recognise the limits of polyvocal co-production as a means of representing diversity and identities, for society is so plural that the museum can never claim to representational completeness;
- As a counter to xenophobic attitudes, museums can present migration as a constant in human history while exploring how the circumstances, legalities and cultures of migration have been subject to change;
- Museums can integrate migration into broader historical narratives or isolate it as a topic in its own right; each of these choices has political ramifications either in subsuming the importance of migration or setting it apart;

→ Investment in projects that foster collaboration between museums and communities, and between museums in different countries with connecting or comparable histories of migration is desirable as a means of constructive cultural diplomacy;

→ Research needs to be done in terms of understanding how publics (in all their diversity) respond to exhibitions about sensitive topics like migration and how they relate what they find in museums to what they encounter in the journalistic media, political discourse and social media.

Our contention in this regard is that a focus on place forms the ground for the historical contextualisation of objects and events, and this contextualisation is important in explaining past and present phenomena that may be socially divisive, such as racisms.

Through engagement with place, museums can localise social differences and tensions, allowing for the possibility to confront them constructively. While focus on place may suggest insularity, in fact the stories that can be told about museum objects often allow for understandings of relationships between

places, opening up multi-geographical perspectives that constructively open up, problematise and render the complexity of place identities and histories.

Place can be a starting point for questioning the cultural assumptions that come to be naturalised within them, potentialising the development of more inclusive forms of belonging and identity. It is a modality of representation of people that is an alternative to reductive and potentially divisive ethnic or sub-cultural categorisations.

The cultural specificity of places (be they nations, regions, cities or neighbourhoods) and the multiplicity of experiences of individual places means that there will always be multiple identities and attachments. Some of these will inevitably be in conflict or reveal unequal power relations, in particular in multicultural contexts where some immigrants are subject to structural disadvantages. It is not the role of museums to eradicate or harmonise these differences. However, they can contribute to greater social awareness through their power to prompt empathetic responses and historical understandings on the part of those who feel

that their lifestyle or beliefs are threatened by influxes of people. A museum focus on place is also an important tool in developing the cultural and historical understandings of people from elsewhere. Recognising and representing some of the many cultures and identities in a place, including relatively newly incorporated ones, is a useful means of creating progressive senses of belonging.



Focus group participants at the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, UK. Photo by Christopher Whitehead.

Public Awareness

Events

- Workshop: *Museums, Migrations, and Identities*, 20 April 2012.
- International conference: *“Placing” Europe in the Museum: People(s), Places, Identities*, Newcastle University, 3–4 September 2012.

Publications

- Whitehead, Christopher, Rhiannon Mason, Susannah Eckersley and Katherine Lloyd. 2013. *“Placing” Europe in the Museum: People(s), Places, Identities*. Milan: Politecnico di Milano.
- Whitehead, Christopher, Susannah Eckersley, and Rhiannon Mason. 2012. *Placing Migration in European Museums: Theoretical, Contextual and Methodological Foundations*. Milan: Politecnico di Milano DPA.
- Whitehead, C., Eckersley, S. Lloyd, K, Mason, R. (eds) (2014, forthcoming) *Museums, Migration and Identity in Europe*. Farnham UK & Burlington VT, US Ashgate.

Conferences to which RF01 Researchers Have Contributed

- *“Placing” Europe in the Museum: People(s), Places, Identities*, 3–4 September 2012 Newcastle University, UK.
- Museums Association conference, 2012, Edinburgh, UK.
- *The German Diaspora in Eastern and Central Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, 22–23 June 2012, Durham University, UK.
- *Migration, Memory and Place*, Copenhagen University, 7–9 December 2012, Copenhagen, Denmark.
- *Turkish Migration in Europe: Projecting the next 50 Years*, Regents College, 7–9 December 2012, London, UK.
- *Material Identities: Representing our National and European Selves in Museums* (Eunamus), 23–25 April 2012, Athens, Greece.
- Association of Critical Heritage Studies Inaugural Conference, 5–8 June 2012, Gothenberg, Sweden.

- *The Making of National Museums and Identity Politics*, 16–18 November 2011, National Museum of History, Taipei, Taiwan.

Other Activities

- Researchers acted as consultants for Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums in the development of the new permanent display on migration “Destination Tyneside” at the Discovery Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne.
- Researchers provided input to the Amsterdam Museum regarding decisions to retain displays about migration.

- A Twitter presence was established (@MelaNewcastle) in order to generate publicity.
- A Researcher was interviewed about her fieldwork at the Silesian Museum Görlitz in the regional newspaper, featuring as a quarter page spread in the *Sächsische Zeitung* (7 February 2014).



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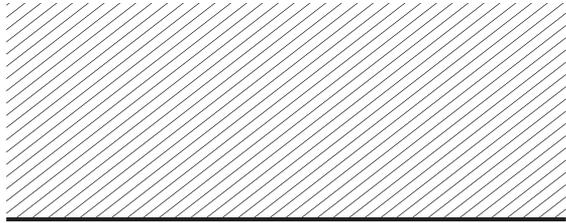
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MeLa – RF 01 Museums & Identity in History and Contemporaneity

What are the relationships between places, peoples and identities? How are these relationships represented in museums and how does this relate to the experiences of visitors? Should museums' representational practices regarding people-place relations are changing and/or should change, and if so how?

These are some of the questions that are investigated in Research Field 01: Museums and Identity in History and Contemporaneity. Researchers analysed key displays in numerous European museums as well as interviewing staff and audiences in order to understand how and why museums develop such displays and how visitors, including those with migrant backgrounds, respond to them. Migration has inevitable connections with some of the most pressing issues in European societies, such as the mobility of people, multiculturalism, diversity, equality of opportunity and social cohesion or division. Museums have the potential to play an important role in exploring these issues. This research builds on existing work in museums to develop ideas for responsible and thought-provoking practice that can have a positive impact on society.

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