

---

## NOTES AND REVIEWS

The Centenary of the Estonian National Museum, Tartu, 13 April 2009

### THE STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN'S MUSEUM OF EUROPEAN CULTURES AS A PLATFORM FOR INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

KONRAD VANJA,  
ELISABETH TIETMEYER

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you so much for your invitation to come to Tartu to congratulate you on your centennial. I am especially pleased to come to this event because we have had a lot of good and friendly exchanges in the last years: in 2008 your visit to Berlin-Dahlem to our exhibition, "Discover Europe!" (Tietmeyer 2008); and it is a long time since 1964 when your colleague Aleksei Peterson made a presentation at our own 75th birthday celebration of a report about the methods of collecting ethnographic objects in Estonia between 1958 to 1963 (Peterson 1964). In addition, we often think about our friendly collaboration with Kaalu Kirme. He worked with us very intensively on the *bijouterie* in our old Estonian collection (Kirme 2004). And one of the highlights in the last years, our annual cultural days, was dedicated to Estonian "Images – Objects – Melodies" and linked to the Estonian days at the Museum for European Cultures 2004. Organised by my colleagues Elisabeth Tietmeyer and Candy Sauer in cooperation with the Estonian Institute in Tallinn, the Embassy of Estonia in Berlin, the German-Estonian Society and last but not least your museum in Tartu (Tietmeyer 2007). It was combined with the very impressive exhibition of photographs taken by photographer Johannes Pääsuke (1892–1918)<sup>1</sup> at the beginning of the 20th century (cf. Reidla 2003).

The Museum of European Cultures was founded as a meeting point of intercultural

dialogues in 1999 under the auspices of the Foundation of Prussian Cultural Heritage at the National Museum in Berlin. It was the result of merging the former Museum of German Folklore with the European collections of the Ethnological Museum (Karasek, Tietmeyer 1999).

The general profile of the Museum of Ethnology, founded in 1873, was to concern itself with the cultures of all regions outside Europe, even though up until 1999 it also held the European collection mentioned above, which consisted of about 40,000 ethnographic objects mainly from the rural populations of different countries. However, this collection existed in the shadows; it was never shown in a permanent exhibition as other non-European collections were. The Museum of German Folklore, founded in 1889, was dedicated to the cultural history of the middle and lower classes in Germany and in other German-speaking areas. Most of the 230,000 ethnographic objects were produced and used in the 19th century.

One of the reasons for the merging of the two collections in 1999 was to abolish the Folklore Museum's self-chosen exclusive concentration on German national culture and to "Europeanise" the scientific scope. As Europe became more united, it was no longer appropriate to have two institutions, one with an almost exclusive German ethnographic collection, the other with an analogous collection from the rest of Europe, located in a museum which exclusively concentrated on non-European cultures.

The Museum of European Cultures' basic philosophy is to focus on cultural similari-

ties and differences in Europe by explaining the interweaving of cultural patterns on the one hand, and by defining group identities on the other, as well as by a tracing of the history of European cultural phenomena. The theoretical basis for this is the scientific differentiation of the term culture (*Kultur*). This is not the definition of culture as art, music or literature that is generally accepted in Germany. It refers to cultural expressions, such as cultural domains, symbolic culture, subculture, ethnic culture, regional culture, national culture and supra-national culture. Further, it refers to contacts between cultures and contacts between social strata within Europe. Moreover, relations between Europeans and non-Europeans, and the latter's interpretation of European cultural phenomena, are also issues for discussion. The Museum of European Cultures' intention is to present and communicate interpretations of these phenomena. The programmatic name of our museum obviously implies a conscious decision against using the German term European culture in the singular, because from a European viewpoint, this defies definition just as, for example, the term German culture does.

The theme of cultural contacts was almost preordained as a concept for the planned pilot exhibition, especially since Europe provides an extraordinarily good example of the various forms and consequences of centuries-long cultural contacts of varying intensity, both within the continent itself and with non-European peoples.

There are various ways in which people come into contact with other cultures. Personal contact may come through diffusion across a country's borders, through travel and cultural events, through migration and trade, through missionary work and even through military conflict. In addition, people learn about culture indirectly via a wide range of media such as exhibitions, stories, accounts of travel and research, pictures, films, photographs and the internet. These

contacts can unite different groups and help to bring about cultural change, but they can also lead to increased perceptions of difference. A discussion of cultural contacts based on different formulations of the relevant questions implies in its method a cross-cultural comparison. This offers museum visitors the opportunity to get to know unfamiliar aspects of their own (past) culture and, in addition, to recognise cultural connections within Europe. By orienting its content towards this goal, today's Museum of European Cultures has shaped its own image. It opened to the public in 1999 with an exhibition called "Cultural Contact in Europe: the Fascination of Images", which lasted some years (Karasek, Tietmeyer 1999). This exhibition was based on the view that the cultures of Europe did not develop independently from each other, exemplified by pictures and images of different kinds.

With cultural contact as its main theme, one of the Museum's aims is to work closely with people whose cultures are to be presented through activities and exhibitions. Annual so-called cultural days have been initiated, each lasting about two or more weeks. Here, visitors can inform themselves about a specific cultural or historical topic concerning a cultural region or country within Europe. Each event consists of a small exhibition and a framework programme of lectures, discussions, dancing, films, music, regional dishes and arts and crafts offered for sale. So far we have organised the Sami, the Polish, the Venetian, the Tatarian, the Estonian, the Croatian, the Romanian and this year the Sardinian Cultural Days. These events are always the result of co-operation between the Museum of European Cultures and cultural associations, migrant organisations, European embassies in Berlin and/or partner museums in Europe. Most of our exhibitions are the result of bi-lateral cooperation.

The aim of all these activities is to establish the Museum of European Cultures as

an intercultural meeting place. For this reason the Museum actively participated in the EU project "Migration, Work and Identity" financed by the Culture 2000 programme. Migration is the classic form of cultural contact. Up until a few years ago this was a theme not considered important by museums, although it was already a subject for the relevant university disciplines. In particular, museums of history and cultural history concentrated on the presentation of local, regional and national aspects of their country's culture in their research, collections and exhibitions, whereas museums of ethnology dealt with the cultures of non-European or native peoples. The two Berlin state museums mentioned above are, in fact, good examples of this. Here, ethnologists were and still are concerned with the "other" or with the "stranger", but not with the "stranger in their midst". The German folklorists were not concerned in the slightest with the stranger but rather with the self, or to put it another way, with their own past culture. Thus neither of these museums considered itself to be scientifically responsible for migrant cultures.

We had this fact in mind when we developed the thematic concept of the Museum of European Cultures. The regional orientation is towards Europe, still focussing on Germany, since the museum is located there and most of the ethnographic objects are from Germans. But today we ask different questions, for example: What is German? Who belongs to German society and who does not? These are central issues for the Museum of European Cultures, which aims to examine cultural diversity in Europe and the different cultural and social worlds existing within Germany in particular.

Participation in the EU project "Migration, Work and Identity" has provided the Museum with an opportunity to closely examine the subject of Migration in Berlin for the first time. Thus in 2002 we organised a photographic exhibition posing the ques-

tion "Heimat Berlin?" (Neuland-Kitzerow, Tietmeyer 2002) We commissioned work from eight photographers from different countries, all of whom lived and worked in Berlin. They provided us with their impressions of Berlin as a multicultural city.

The follow-up exhibition in 2004 was called "Migration (Hi)Stories in Berlin", it exhibited eight objects of exemplary importance and told their stories. Most of the objects were brought to Berlin by migrants and reminded them of their home countries. Other objects were created or made popular in Berlin by migrants and their descendants. In setting up this exhibition we again worked with migrants, their descendants and their organisations.

These exhibitions have been organised in close and productive cooperation with the Neighbourhood Museum, the German Museum of Technology Berlin and Berlin Museums Services. These institutions merged into a Berlin Platform within the framework of the EU project. This platform had as its goal the long-term establishment of the EU project in Berlin. The long-term aim is to attract migrants, their descendants and organisations to visit the museums regularly and to work as active partners.

On this basis we are taking part in the EU project "Entrepreneurial Cultures in European Cities" together with the Amsterdam City Museum and some other social and political institutions in Europe. In our national project we would like to present small businesses or their owners from various cultural backgrounds as examples. The objective will be an analysis of the entire process, from the conception of a business idea right through to the current situation. What exactly is the economic and social function of district or local economies?

Businessmen and -women with migration backgrounds are conversant with at least two cultures and hence regarded as bridge builders between these, particularly owing to their transnational activities in

terms of exploring new markets and developing new marketing strategies. But this attribute can also benefit an urban district's entire community and social life.

The significance of the binational experience of the main protagonists will be underscored in the process. These main players include clothing, food, travel, and skilled craft retailers; and also cultural entrepreneurs, for example, in the media or music industries. Another focus of the component project will be on the new services available to migrants, such as intercultural health and geriatric care, as well as on innovative product developments and their markets. The research will also focus on any changes initiated in family businesses by subsequent generations. Of central concern in this will be an analysis of the interaction between the countries of origin and residence of migrants under a generational aspect. The project aims to inform the museum's visitors with a photo exhibition on innovation potentials within ethnic economies by showing various examples, while simultaneously engaging it in a public dialogue with the project's participants. We further hope that because of our cooperation with migrant entrepreneurs, our house will open up to a new public who will hence be put in a position to discover familiar items within its walls and perhaps even be able to identify with the museum as a location of *its very own* memories.

There have been a lot of other activities these last 10 years: the working group for European popular printing history, with its meeting in Nürnberg in 2009, previously held in Amsterdam and Ravenna and next year in Modena, in cooperation with partners all over Europe, etc. (Brückner et al. 2009); mobile exhibitions about the European Spring of Nations and their outspreading in the popular culture as a project between Poland, France and Germany (Kuśmidrowicz-Król et al. 2005); exhibitions in the so-called interethnic field in southeast

Europe, especially as an exchange between Hungarian (e.g. Balonyi et al. 2006) and Romanian Institutions.

All these projects will be exploited in cooperative partnerships with partners in Germany and other European cities and countries.

With my best wishes for your Anniversary, from Berlin to Tartu. Thank you so much for your passion!

#### NOTES

- 1 According to the Julian calendar – 1917.

#### REFERENCES

- Balonyi, Ilona; Henrike Hampe; Georg Linsenmann; Beate Wild Ulm. *Deutsche in Ungarn – Ungarn in Deutschland* 2006. Mit Stiftung Donaueschwäbisches Zentralmuseum.
- Brückner, Wolfgang; Konrad Vanja; Detlef Lorenz; Alberto Milano; Sigrid Nagy (Hrsg.) 2009. *Arbeitskreis Bild Druck Papier. Tagungsband Hagenow* 2008. Vol. 13. Münster: Waxmann.
- Karasek, Erika; Elisabeth Tietmeyer 1999. *Das Museum Europäischer Kulturen: Entstehung – Realität – Zukunft.* – Erika Karasek et al. *Faszination Bild. Kultur Kontakte Europa.* (Schriftenreihe. *Museum Europäischer Kulturen.* Bd. 1). Berlin, 13–25.
- Kirme, Kaalu 2004. *Estnischer volkstümlicher Schmuck aus dem Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Berlin.* Unpublished manuscript. Tallinn.
- Kuśmidrowicz-Król, Anna; Piotr Majewski; Konrad Vanja; Gerhard Weiduschat 2005. *Solidarność 1830. Niemcy i Polacy po Powstaniu Lisopadowym. Polenbegeisterung. Deutsche und Polen nach dem Novemberaufstand 1830.* Warschau: Zamek Krolewski, Berlin: Museum Europäischer Kulturen.
- Neuland-Kitzerow, Dagmar; Elisabeth Tietmeyer 2002. *Heimat Berlin? Fotografische Impressionen.* (Kleine Schriften der Freunde des Museums Europäischer Kulturen, Bd. 2). Berlin.
- Peterson, Aleksei 1964. *Über die Methodik der Sammeltätigkeit des Staatlichen Ethnographiemuseums der Estnischen SSR in den*

- Jahren 1958–1963. – *75 Jahre Museum für Volkskunde zu Berlin. 1889–1964. Festschrift*. Berlin/DDR, 49–64.
- Reidla, Jana (koost./comp.) 2003. *Johannes Pääsuke. Mees kahe kaamera. Man with Two Cameras*. Tartu: Eesti Rahva Muuseum.
- Tietmeyer, Elisabeth 2007. Fremd ist der Fremde nur in der Fremde. Das Museum Europäischer Kulturen als Ort interkultureller Begegnung. – *Jahrbuch Preußischer Kulturbesitz 2006*. Bd. 43. Berlin, 269–281.
- Tietmeyer, Elisabeth 2008. Schön und nützlich – Brustspangen der Seto-Frauen. Beautiful and Useful – Ladies Brooches of the Seto. – Elisabeth Tietmeyer, Irene Ziehe (Hrsg.). *Europa entdecken! Discover Europe!* Berlin, 48–54. (*Schriften der Freunde des Museums Europäischer Kulturen*. Heft 7), 105–111.