

## 8 Museums: Places of Encounter

*Auf der Suche, atemlos, durstig, stückweise begreifend.  
Inseln der Ruhe, Orientierung, Sehnsucht,  
bis alles sich fügt zum Einen, zum Du.  
Beziehung, Augenblick, zeitlos, bedingungslos,  
schwimmen, verschwimmen, hineinsinken, Eins werden.  
Und weiter, wieder auf der Suche.<sup>1</sup>*

The multireligious architecture we explored in the previous chapter provided contemporary examples of shared places where diverse personal and communal worldviews, practices, and transmission processes are fostered and interact with one another. Museums are equally important urban institutions where negotiations with diversity take place. They demonstrate the presence, the manifold forms and diverse roles of religious worldviews, beliefs and practices, displaying religion as a human phenomenon that shapes societies in the past and present. While multireligious rooms enable religious practices and foster communities, museums are dedicated to collecting, preserving, researching, and displaying material objects for the purposes of education, enjoyment and sensory experiences. In the last stop on our imaginary journey, we discuss a selection of exhibitions and approach museums and art galleries as places where religious plurality is negotiated, involving audiences in specific spatial performances.

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1 Anne Sachs in Auf der Suche... 2022, 47. »Searching, breathless, thirsty, understanding piece by piece / Islands of rest, orientation, longing, until everything connects together as one, as you / Relationship, instant, timeless, unconditioned, swimming, blurring, sinking in, becoming one. / And forwards, searching again.« Translation by the author.

## 8.1 Walking a labyrinth in a white cube: *Signs of Life*

In a white room within a museum, visitors are invited to take off their shoes and walk on a labyrinth designed to imitate a well-known medieval pattern. In contrast to the cold stone pavement of a Gothic cathedral, however, visitors walking on Su-Mei Tse's *Proposition de détour* in the Art Museum Lucerne in the summer of 2010 could feel a soft wool carpet under their feet, depicting a Persian Paradise garden (fig. 84).

The artwork combines motifs from different religious traditions. Its layout reproduces the first eight circuits of the famous labyrinth in Chartres cathedral (which has eleven circuits), in the same scale as the original.

The labyrinth was originally a common motif in Greco-Roman culture but appeared with increasing frequency in Christian churches from the 4th century onwards. In medieval Christianity, the labyrinth was used as a visual metaphor for human life: the path meanders in different directions and, finally, leads to the centre, which stands symbolically for the hope of salvation and eternal life. The orientation of the labyrinth follows the overall orientation of the cathedral in Chartres from the entrance on the west side to the altar in the east, which symbolically refers to the rising of the sun and the resurrection from the dead.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, the artwork's materiality points to a different religious tradition. The carpet the labyrinth is made of reproduces in enlarged scale a fragment of the *Coronation Carpet*, a Safavid knotted pile carpet dating from ca. 1520–1530 and measuring 701 × 366 cm. It belongs to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art collection. This carpet's name denotes its use in the coronation of Edward VII as king of the United Kingdom, which took place at Westminster Abbey in 1902.<sup>3</sup> Art dealers provided this carpet along with other tapestries and rugs to decorate the cathedral.<sup>4</sup> The carpet depicts a Paradise garden with floral motifs, cypresses, flowering trees, and flowing water. Real and imagined animals, birds and water creatures inhabit the luxury gar-

2 For an introduction to labyrinths and their cultural history see e.g. Santarcangeli 1984; Kern 1999.

3 The presence of this large piece in the royal ceremony is documented in a painting by Edwin Austin Abbey, oil on canvas, ca. 1902–1907, 109.2 × 458 cm, Royal Collection.

4 <https://collections.lacma.org/node/229589> (accessed on 06 August 2025).



Fig. 84: Su-Mei Tse, *Proposition de détour*, printed wool carpet, 2008, diameter 900 cm, here in the exhibition *Signs of Life*, Museum of Art Lucerne, 2010.

den. Winged dragons and phoenixes suggest that this garden belongs to a transcendent, otherworldly place.<sup>5</sup>

The combination of the labyrinth with a Safavid Paradise carpet can be interpreted in various ways. Significantly, both the labyrinth and the carpet convey an idea of otherworldly dimensions of salvation that lead believers on the path of their earthly existence. Su-Mei Tse's artwork plays with diverse religious traditions that stand in a line of cultural continuity. Inviting the visitor to engage in a direct haptic, corporeal contact, the labyrinth offers a detour during the museum visit. This artwork offers the visitor an experience of walking along a long path that is not straightforward, transforming a bodily activity into a symbolic representation of human life.<sup>6</sup>

*Proposition de détour* was part of a larger exhibition reflecting on the role and meaning of ancient symbols in contemporary art. *Signs of Life. Ancient Knowledge in Contemporary Art*, curated by Peter Fischer and Brigitt Bürgi,

<sup>5</sup> Komaroff 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Fischer 2010b.

displayed a broad selection of works of art by influential artists such as Nancy Spero, Louise Bourgeois, Ana Mendieta, Kiki Smith, Marina Abramović, Peter Buggenhout, Sigalit Landau, Abdel Abdessemed, Philipp Taafée, Mariella Moster, Amar Kanwar, Bharti Kher, Tea Makipää, and Sandford Biggers.<sup>7</sup> According to the curators, the exhibition had two main aims:

With specifically chosen works it firstly seeks to enable an impressive experience of art in the sense that the immediate force of the works can be witnessed. Secondly, it aims to initiate a reflection on the origins and development of art and on the artworks' potentiality for placing something meaningful into the world. The exhibition *Signs of Life* derives its distinct appeal from how, in their works, contemporary artists quote old, artistically recorded religious knowledge and thereby offer a perspective on the twenty-first century.<sup>8</sup>

Both objectives are relevant for our exploration of museums as places dealing with religious plurality. First, the idea of the museum as a secluded place where audiences can experience art as a force that involves people in meaning-making processes of the world resonates with diverse concepts of religion. Second, equally relevant is a sensitivity to art's ability to quote »old knowledge« as a repertoire of references that are significant for meaning making. Approaching artworks in this way, as attempts to express layers of significance in the contemporary world, overlaps with the relevance of religious symbol systems.<sup>9</sup>

Art is a sign of life, while these works are also signs for life. They represent immaterial goods such as principles, values, and ideas. With no immediate counterpart in the material world, they are either images, chiefly through personification; or they are abbreviated to their essence as abstract signs; or, finally, they are reenacted in narratives that mostly consist of performative acts. All these artistic principles are based on cultural and social conventions and are expressed in

7 See Fischer / Bürgi 2010.

8 Fischer 2010a, 9.

9 For more in-depth study of this aspect of religion, see Woodhead 2011; Fritz / Höpflinger / Knauss / Mäder / Pezzoli-Olgati 2018; Pezzoli-Olgati 2024c.



clearly defined iconographies, symbols, myths, and rituals. Considering how these cultural codes contain, if only latently, the entire history of their usage, their semantic potential increases the longer they have been in circulation.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, from the perspective of the study of religion, the artworks displayed in *Signs of Life* adapt and reframe a rich collection of symbols, narrations, and practices well rooted in religious traditions from all over the world, alluding to diverse cultures and times. The exhibited objects offered a rich repertoire of clearly recognisable references to prehistoric objects, ancient religions from the Levant and the Mediterranean, spanning South- and Mesoamerican, South Asian and Indian, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and Buddhist traditions sometimes combined with natural elements or patterns. Certainly, *Signs of Life* emphasised the presence and the role of references to religious symbols, narratives and practices because of this explicit focus and the specific selection of artists and works. Nonetheless, the exhibition with its dense and detailed overview of contemporary global art production, also pointed to the significance of the interaction between art, museums and religion more broadly.<sup>11</sup>

In the following pages, multilayered aspects of the mutual interdependencies of (art) museums and religion are highlighted, considering first the origins of the museum as a public place and, second, contemporary museum practices dealing with religion as an interconnected and multilayered cultural phenomenon. Subsequently, selected exhibitions are analysed with a specific focus on different ways of exhibiting religious plurality as being historically, politically and aesthetically relevant.

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<sup>10</sup> Fischer 2010a, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Pezzoli-Olgiaiti 2015a.

## 8.2 The museum as a liminal place in the modern era



Fig. 85: A painting representing a 17th century gallery in which works of art are exhibited. Left, on the table, precious objects and artefacts are on display. These collections were precursors of the museum of the long Nineteenth Century. Cornelis I. de Baellieur, *Gallery of a Collector*, oil on panel, ca. 1640, 116 × 148 cm, The Princely Collection, Vaduz.

Museums as places accessible to the public, showing collections to broader audiences and not limited to the private sphere, arose in the modern era. They were first conceived of as places that display art.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the first public art museums combined collections of artwork with objects from earlier cabinets of curiosity. The displays mirrored modern categories of knowledge and presented curated arrangements of artworks with selected natural items and artefacts, such as archaeological objects, scientific instruments, and other objects of curiosity deriving from older royal, monastic and ecclesial, or scholarly collections (fig. 85).<sup>13</sup>

12 The term »exhibition« arises in this context. See Bättschmann 1997, 12–57.

13 On the origin of museums see e.g. Impey / Macgregor 1985; Bennett 1995 and Schade / Wenk 2011, 148–153.

The natural and hand-made things displayed in museums were separated from the context in which they were originally embedded; in their new location in a museum exhibition, they assumed a new significance as autonomous artworks, as objects of curiosity and public attention.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, the museum transformed the objects, attributing to them new functions and meanings. The displaced artefacts addressed visitors who saw the exhibits in a new arrangement in purpose-built locations, focused on a direct encounter between things and visitors. Addressing a public audience, the modern museum offered a specific way of seeing the displayed artworks and objects in new spatial practices, enacted in secluded places, detached from everyday life. The museum was consciously designed and built as a liminal place specifically meant for perceiving artworks and selected objects.<sup>15</sup>

From the outset, the museum was conceived as a place for cultural improvement. Intensively observing the exhibits, the audiences were to be involved in an aesthetic experience that would transform them in a positive way. In the museum's arrangement, the objects as independent actors divorced from their original context and alienated from the functions they were produced for, would affect the viewers on many levels.

The aesthetic experience was meant to be the promotor of cultural, educational and moral refinement.<sup>16</sup> Over time, the museum became an important public place where natural and hand-made things were collected, preserved and displayed. The British Museum, the Louvre in Paris, the Altes Museum in Berlin, the National Gallery in London, the Alte Pinakothek in Munich are a few examples of major museums opened to the public in the 18th and 19th century.<sup>17</sup> While the Louvre was established within an existing royal residence, other collections were housed in buildings purpose-built as museums, very often in a classical revivalist style.

14 Bräunlein 2011, 3: »Museums are an intrinsic component of European history and culture, closely linked to the revolution of modernity and to the desires of a new class, the emerging bourgeoisie. The experience of mobility and acceleration of life, fear of loss, belief in progress and education, imperial appropriation of the world, rapid advancement of the sciences – all this gave birth to the spirit and purpose of a new institution, the museum.«

15 On the emphasis of the sense of sight and museum practices see e.g. Bräunlein 2011, 3; Bättschmann 1997, 12–57.

16 Duncan 1995, 16; Kugele / Wilkens 2011.

17 Schade / Wenk 2011, 149.

The references to ancient Greek and Roman architecture, and particularly to temples, amplified what the very name »museum« already suggested: the reference to the Muses, the ancient goddesses of the arts.<sup>18</sup> Imitating the architectural features of an ancient temple, the museum as a public building presented itself as a place transcending everyday life which sought to create an enlightening aesthetic and educational improvement. Thus, in the context of the long 19th century, in modern, expanding urban formations the museum as a public institution was established as a liminal place dedicated to transforming visitors by means of the contemplation of the displayed objects.<sup>19</sup>

The development of museums as institutions collecting, preserving, and displaying objects related to an ideal of European universal knowledge was entangled with the formation of the nations.<sup>20</sup> As a publicly accessible place fostering processes of human improvement, the museum contributed to forming the identity of citizens in the modern state. The relationship between the idea of the museum as a liminal place and its educational and political significance in the modern era is entangled with colonialism. Many natural and hand-made objects collected in the cabinets of curiosity in the

18 The ancient Greek and Latin terms *μουσεῖον* and *musaeum* had two meanings: on the one hand, it was the place consecrated to the Muses inhabited by the nine goddesses of poetry, music, and the liberal arts and, on the other hand, it referred to the library at Alexandria, a centre of research and knowledge in the classical world. In the Renaissance, *musaeum* was referred to as a concept, the activity of collecting, and a place where the scholar dedicates himself to studying. Paula Findlen (1989, 61) explains the complexity of the term as follows: »[...] in its crystallisation as a category which incorporated and ultimately unified a variety of – from our own perspective – seemingly disparate activities, the museum was indeed a central organizing principle for cultural activity by the late sixteenth century. It was a conceptual system through which collectors interpreted and explored the world they inhabited. [...] In reviving liberal arts, the humanists self-consciously placed themselves in the grove of the Muses, creating ›museums‹ as they did so, to stress their direct tie with ancient wisdom.« The author describes the transition from the renaissance concept of museum to the development of museum as a public institution in the late 18th century as follows: »The museum, as mosaic, brought together the pieces of a cosmology that had all but fallen apart in the course of several centuries. Organising all known ideas and artefacts under the rubric of museum, the collectors of the period imagined that they had indeed come to terms with the crisis of knowledge that the fabrication of the museum was designed to solve« (73).

19 Duncan 1995, 7–20 and Engert 2002.

20 Schade / Wenk 2011, 149; Duncan 1995, 3.

early modern period and, later, in museums, were brought to Europe from other continents in colonial practices including robbery, questionable deals and as gifts.<sup>21</sup> The museum displayed items from other times and places that, on the one hand, illustrated the variety of human cultures and of natural environments, and, on the other hand, the (alleged) superiority of European colonial countries expanding their economic, political, cultural and religious power all over the world. An encompassing, generic idea of »European« culture was promoted in othering processes by outlining a common identity in opposition to the stranger other. In shaping this shared sense of belonging to the »West« and of delimitation from the »Rest«, <sup>22</sup> museums played a paramount role.<sup>23</sup> In Peter Bräunlein's words:

The museum offered housing space for science and art, for knowledge seeking and emotion, for representation and colonial ambitions, for the politics of memory and a sense of security. The museum as a public realm of »civilising rituals« is an active constituent of Western culture, invented at a particular historical moment.<sup>24</sup>

Overall, the birth of the museum as a liminal place was strongly connected to coeval ideas of religion. Many artworks and things displayed in the museums referred to their previous location in religious buildings and practices. Precious liturgical objects and paintings from Christian traditions well rooted in Europe were exhibited beside items from antiquity and other parts of

21 The ethnological museum in Munich, the Museum Fünf Kontinente, presented the exhibition *Kolonialismus in den Dingen. Das Museum Fünf Kontinente und seine Bestände aus der Kolonialzeit* in 2024/2025, a project in which the museum reflected on the history and the contested role of the museum in colonial times (Hölzl / Museum Fünf Kontinente 2024).

22 The terms are from Hall 2019b, 144: »The so called uniqueness of the West was, in part, produced by Europe's contact and self-comparison with other, non-Western societies (the Rest), very different in their histories, ecologies, patterns of development, and cultures from the West was the standard against which the West's achievement was measured. It is within the context of these relationships that the idea of ›the West‹ took on shape and meaning.«

23 Schade / Wenk 2011, 152 and 158–166; Lidchi 2013.

24 Bräunlein 2011, 4.

the words that inspired both a sense of wonder and admiration as well as an attitude of superiority.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the entanglement of religion and the museum was not only linked to the collected and displayed objects. Museums were also places of religious performance according to a romanticist concept of aesthetics as a sublime experience transcending human life. In her influential book *Civilising rituals. Inside Public Art Museums*, the art historian Carol Duncan summarises all those aspects in describing the 19th century museum as a ritual place. The museum's architectural design, inspired by ancient temples, provided a space for the ritual of seeing and contemplating the displayed artefacts:

Like most ritual space, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention – in this case, for contemplation and learning.<sup>26</sup>

Adapting Victor Turner's approach to ritual, Duncan defines museum as a temporary, liminal experience detached from everyday life and taking place in this new public place of the modern era.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, every time they visited a museum, audiences were invited to experience a liminal place with a different quality of space and time. In the museum, the visitors performed the ritual of contemplating artefacts that would allow an intense aesthetic experience, enhancing them. The purpose of a museum visit understood as performing a ritual is, consequently, transformative:

Through most of the nineteenth century, an international museum culture remained firmly committed to the idea that the first responsibility of a public art museum is to enlighten and improve its visitors morally, socially, and politically.<sup>28</sup>

An approach that interprets a museum visit as a »civilising ritual«, enhancing the audiences by means of contemplation, also encompasses the repetitive

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25 Lidchi 2013; Sommer 2025.

26 Duncan 1995, 10.

27 For first-hand engagement with Turner's approach to ritual see Turner 1969 and 1982.

28 Duncan 1995, 16.

dimension of visiting exhibitions. In modern urban society, going to a museum becomes part of public life and its educational effects rely on reiteration.

This brief outline of some aspects of the birth of the museum as a public institution allows us to grasp its spatial features. The museum arose as a place built to mould a specific way of seeing things, with the purpose of inspiring a sense of wonder and enlightenment, which was emphasised also by the architecture, designed in the reception of classical antiquity. The museum formed specific spatial practices promoting liminal experiences beyond everyday life based primarily on visual, sensory experiences. Overall, the museum stood as a specific place negotiating the space between modernity and history, between being in a European urban place and experiencing other countries and cultures through contemplation, admiration and educational improvement which conveyed political and normative ideals of that time, including colonialist and orientalist attitudes. Moving through the rooms of a museum, visitors could mould identity processes as citizens in the era in which modern European states were founded.

In the establishing phase of museums, religious objects, along with related practices and traditions, played a substantial and variegated role. Christian art was an integral part of the collections that covered diverse phases of European art history. Furthermore, as we have seen, ancient and, specifically, Greek and Roman religions were mirrored not only in the material heritage but were received as a frame for idealised practices to engage with the artefacts, with explicit references to ancient sacred architecture and the inspiring force of the Muses.

The variety of artworks and objects in nineteenth-century museum collections testified to the variety of religious traditions from different times and places. These collections stimulated a growing interest in the diversity of religious forms in academia, which contributed to the introduction of the comparative study of religion into the canon of academic disciplines at universities.<sup>29</sup> References to religion could also be found, first, in the museum's objects and collections, second, in the performance of seeing improved by those new public places and framed by a specific architecture, and, eventually, in the scholarly approaches promoted by the museums as educational institutions.

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29 Kippenberg 1997; Bräunlein 2004 and Stroumsa 2010.

Looking at museums today, some lines of continuity with this heritage emerge; whereas colonial aspects of modern museum practices are being addressed and practices of repatriation of collections, that often includes human remains, are beginning to be implemented,<sup>30</sup> new museum practices have also arisen.

### 8.3 The museum as contemporary public place

The idea of the modern museum has creatively adapted to the needs and imaginations of today's societies. Museums have become an essential aspect of the cultural life of contemporary cities. Stunning museum buildings shape urban skylines with innovative architecture and are substantial tourist hubs attracting millions of visitors per year.<sup>31</sup> In many cases, a museum visit requires careful planning, purchasing tickets and reserving time slots in advance, in order to avoid queuing at the entrance of overcrowded exhibitions.<sup>32</sup>

There are museums of all sizes, dedicated to a variety of topics and practices with variegated collections and displays.<sup>33</sup> Despite the differences, there is a common trait which characterises the museum as a contemporary institution: by means of spatial, visual, and sensory experiences, museums shape a particular relationship between the viewer and the exhibits.<sup>34</sup> The International Council of Museums, a worldwide non-governmental organisation and membership association comprising representatives from all over the world, proposed the following definition in 2022:

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. O'Neil 2017; Heuser / Appl 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Buggeln 2017 proposes a classification of diverse types of museum architecture highlighting different entanglements with religion.

<sup>32</sup> Among the most visited museums in the world are the Louvre (ca. 8.7 million visitors in 2024), the Vatican Museums (ca. 6.7 million in 2023), and the British Museums (ca. 6.5 million in 2024). Figures from <https://presse.louvre.fr/8-7-million-visitors-to-the-louvre-in-2024/>, [https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/07\\_Cultura\\_Anuario\\_2024.pdf](https://www.comune.roma.it/web-resources/cms/documents/07_Cultura_Anuario_2024.pdf), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c39v2ddn4p4o> and <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c39v2ddn4p4o> (accessed on 06 August 2025).

<sup>33</sup> Paine 2017 offers a systematic typology with a focus on the role religion plays in the different museum types.

<sup>34</sup> Bräunlein 2008, 169–170, and Mohr 2011, 21.



A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.<sup>35</sup>

This definition clearly contains lines of continuity with the idea of the 19th century museum we have addressed above, yet it also elaborates new roles for museums in contemporary plural societies, emphasising their role as public institutions and inclusive places that foster diversity and sustainability. Accordingly, museum practices are increasingly transformed in experimental places where ideas about the public sphere are forged.<sup>36</sup> As the Italian philosopher of dwelling Carla Danani points out, museums offer the possibility for visitors to imagine what the community they inhabit should be, figuring out its past and ideas about its future:

In the democratic regimes of the 21st century, museums are public spaces *par excellence* due to both their functions and the practices they host. Museums invite people to journey beyond their own private selves by calling their attention to a common heritage, constructing narratives to share, and offering a stage on which debates and negotiation can take place. These and other cultural experiences cultivated in and by museums are addressed – potentially – to everybody.<sup>37</sup>

Museums involve audiences in a process of reflection within the museum by moulding spatial practices, such as by designing itineraries, which facilitate an exchange with the displayed objects. The spatial organisation offers a range of possible narratives depending on the movement of the visitors around the objects staged in an exhibition. The museum is »a spatial medi-

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35 <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> (accessed 06 August 2025).

36 Mohr 2011, 17.

37 In Danani / Pezzoli-Olgati 2023, 255. Danani develops her argument in critical dialogue with Barrett 2012.

um for a public sphere». <sup>38</sup> The museum as a place and an institution moulds social practices. By entering this place, secluded from the routines of everyday life, visitors are expected to engage with the displayed artefact in a sensory, aesthetic experience often centred on visual reception. <sup>39</sup> The movement of individuals within the museum is strongly regulated. Access is possible only at fixed times and with an entrance fee; there are rules regarding clothing, and the type and size of items that can be carried. Security and custodians watch the visitors, ensuring that they keep the established distance from the artefacts and behave according to agreed expectations. <sup>40</sup>

As already mentioned above, objects collected and displayed in museums and exhibitions have been subjected to a process of museumification: they have been displaced, often many times, from other places in which they were used and handled in different ways. <sup>41</sup> The museum transforms the objects in manifold ways. First, they become part of an archive in which cultural memory is materialised, where they are classified, preserved, and restored. <sup>42</sup> Whenever they are taken from the storehouse and placed into a specific exhibition, they assume new meanings. <sup>43</sup> The exhibited thing always stands for something else; in the interaction with other objects, new layers of symbolic meaning are added. Travelling from one display to another, the exhibited object appears and represents at the same time, inviting the visitors to share sensory, aesthetic experiences. <sup>44</sup> The meaning-making process that arises by means of an object in a museal practice depends on the general idea of an exhibition and the location within the specific layout, the relationship to the other displayed objects, and the individual reception through a visitor moving through the museum rooms. Visitors also interact with each other. In the silent atmosphere of the museum, they perceive other people engaging with the displayed objects. <sup>45</sup>

38 Danani / Pezzoli-Olgiati 2023, 255.

39 Grieser / Hermann / Triplett 2011.

40 See e.g. Reitstätter 2015, particularly 181–183.

41 On this term and for further analyses of the transformation of objects in museums see Bräunlein 2011; Paine 2013; O'Neil 2017; Franke / Jelineck-Menke 2022.

42 On the role of materialisation in constructing memory see e.g. Assmann 2010.

43 See e.g. Kugele / Wilkens 2011, particularly 11.

44 Thiemeyer 2014, 230.

45 Psarra 2005.

The spatial practices of museums resonate with those experienced in sacred places. As already discussed, the reference to ancient religious architecture increased the ritual character of visiting museums.

This heritage from the 19th century is also inscribed in contemporary museum architecture.<sup>46</sup> In many urban formations, museum buildings assume a similar role to monumental religious buildings in the past, having an analogous role, for example, to a Gothic cathedral in medieval times, functioning as the marker of a city.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, the regulation of the visitor's movement within the building, recall attitudes that are typical for visiting a sacred building. The bodily presence of audiences is regulated: people are expected to keep quiet and to stand, since sitting is allowed only in specific places and under specific conditions; the objects can usually not be touched, a certain distance from the displayed objects is required.<sup>48</sup> There is also a resonance between religious and museal ways of looking: things are exhibited so as to involve the visitors in a sensory experience. Furthermore, religious aspects of contemporary museums are also linked to the role that religious motifs, narratives and constellations, or practices play within the stored items and the displays.<sup>49</sup>

Museums, being material archives, are crucial for preserving cultural heritage. Often, in a project aimed at presenting the complexity and plurality of cultural transmission processes, religious objects play a central role.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the significance of religious worldviews and practices in cultural transmission processes is also mirrored in their increasing relevance in contemporary art exhibitions.<sup>51</sup> The exhibition *Signs of Life* that introduced this chapter is an illuminating example of this trend.

Accordingly, in the following pages we focus on two different types of museums and exhibitions dealing explicitly with religion as a cultural phenomenon. First, selected exhibitions focusing on religion as an integral part of both cultural heritage and contemporary society are presented; second, a multisite exhibition exploring the power of religious symbols in contem-

46 Wuthnow 2009.

47 Buggeln 2017, 11.

48 On regulation guidelines in museums see Reitstätter 2015, especially 166–206.

49 Paine 2013 offers an analysis of the diverse facets of communicating with objects in museum's practices.

50 Meanwhile, there is a copious bibliography on museums and exhibition dedicated to highlighting religion as cultural heritage. See e.g. Buggeln / Franco 2018 and Runge 2022.

51 As introductions see Clifton 2014 and Mickan / Klie / Berger 2019.

porary art is analysed. Despite being realised in different decades and places and with diverse purposes, the selected examples focus on religious topics as essential aspects to understand historical and contemporary cultures. Furthermore, these projects reaffirm the museum's function in preserving material and immaterial dimensions of religion and in transmitting knowledge about this multilayered phenomenon. Presenting religious traditions and communities by means of selected objects, museums highlight the plurality of perspectives that characterises religion in the past and present.

Diverse strategies for displaying religion in museums are explored in the selected case studies. First, we discuss *Maria Magdalena Mauritius*, a project by the Swiss National Museum in which medieval Christian devotion is presented as a fundamental aspect of a common heritage. The second case study, again a Swiss example, is *Glaubenssache*, an exhibition dealing with religious plurality as a complex dimension of plurality in democracy. The third selected exhibition deals with the interaction between identity and politics. It scrutinises the permanent exhibition of the House of European History in Brussels, which highlights the contested role of religion in fostering a shared identity for the continent. The exhibits display religion in diverse times and places with artwork and multimedial installations. They invite the audience to reflect on the role of religion in history and the present by communicating knowledge and by means of interactive elements, enhancing the sensory perception of the objects and the museum's place.

The last case study, *Auf der Suche...*, is a multisite exhibition of contemporary art exploring the human quest for existential orientation in the post-pandemic era.

#### 8.4 The role of medieval saints for Swiss heritage: *Maria Magdalena Mauritius*

From All Saint's Day (1 November) 2007 to Easter (24 March) 2008, the Swiss National Museum in Zurich displayed the temporary exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen* (*Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Dealing with Saints*). The exhibition presented the museum's collection of medieval wooden sculptures, which encompasses around 400 statues and 20 altarpieces. Most of these were purchased by the museum about thirty years after its



Fig. 86: The Virgin Mary in diverse iconographic types. Exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen*, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum Zürich 2007/2008.

foundation in 1889, mainly to avoid them being sold abroad. The purchase of these medieval sculptures was part of an initiative to strengthen the cohesion of the modern Swiss state in the second half of the 19th century as the national museum was still building up a representative collection to establish itself for preserving and restoring Swiss heritage. In a multicultural and multilingual country, the construction of a national identity was a paramount challenge to consolidate such a diverse nation.<sup>52</sup>

The exhibition of the restored medieval wooden sculptures aimed at presenting the pivotal role saints played in Christianity and society. The exhibition sought to articulate iconographic motifs, attributes and meanings, as well as explain the different constellations, relationships and hierarchies among the saints. Information about collective rituals and individual ways of relating to these transcendent figures were included in short text panels next to the objects.

Three rooms were dedicated to prominent figures such as St. Maurice, the Virgin Mary (fig. 86) and Maria Magdalena. Another room presented sculptures according to the liturgical calendar (which was echoed in the dates of the exhibition indicated on flyers, mentioned above, which specified feast days). Other rooms (e.g. fig. 87) displayed altarpieces as complex media that made the saints' presence and protective function tangible. The exhibition showed how altarpieces and compositions could be transformed and integrated into religious festivities by means of movable elements (fig. 87).

<sup>52</sup> De Capitani 2022.



Fig. 87: Room with statues with movable elements like the cart-wheels under the donkey that Jesus is riding. The composition refers to the Gospel episode and the iconographic motifs of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem which is celebrated the Sunday before Easter. The wheeled-donkey enables the processional movement of this statue of Jesus, re-enacting his entry into Jerusalem, which liturgically concludes the last week of Lent, in which the Passion of Christ begins.<sup>53</sup> Exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen*, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum Zürich 2007/2008.

In a further, dark room the practice of burying damaged statues in ossuaries – usually a small building next to the parish church, where human remains were collected – was recreated (fig. 88).

By walking through the different parts of the exhibition, visitors could immerse themselves in the historical context by hearing medieval music through their headphones. The religious-historical part of the exhibition concluded with the rejection of pious devotion to saints in the Reformation, with explicit references to the polemical attitudes towards images and statues by John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli. Accordingly, many statues in the reformed territories were destroyed or hidden and smuggled to other places. In the last room, visitors were confronted with the transience of religious objects and practices as well as their transformations and reinterpretation. In doing so, the display addressed the long-standing denominational conflicts that had enduring influence on Switzerland. Religious plurality and the

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed description of the composition see Flühler-Kreis / Wyer 2007, 173–179.



Fig. 88: Damaged statues were buried in ossuaries like human remains. In the museum, a burial site is reenacted. Exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen*, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum Zürich 2007/2008.

conflict arising from the coexistence of the two denominations were therefore presented as a key historical issue characterising the nation.

The last room displayed the role of the museum in preserving the medieval statues that survived until the early 20th century, showing techniques of storage that ensure the professional conservation of the wooden statues for future generations (figs. 89 and 90).

The exhibition was accompanied by a new publication catalogue of the complete collection containing high-quality photographs.<sup>54</sup> The exhibition and the publication demonstrate in different ways and with diverse media the crucial function of the national museum in documenting and preserving Swiss religious-cultural heritage. The exhibition was particularly promoted for schools, with special guided tours and detailed documentation for teachers from elementary to high schools.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Flühler-Kreis / Wyr 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Senn / Maurer 2007.





Fig. 89: A variegated selection of wooden sculptures. The golden background suggests the preciousness of the objects and the relevance of staging the museum collection which provides a direct insight into medieval Christian piety. The installation can be interpreted as a self-reflexive composition elaborating on the role of the exhibition and the national museum. Exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen*, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum Zürich 2007/2008.



Fig. 90: The professional storage of sculptures is shown in an installation in the last room of the exhibition *Maria Magdalena Mauritius. Umgang mit Heiligen*, Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum Zürich 2007/2008.



## 8.5 Negotiating plural beliefs in the museum: *Glaubenssache*

In October 2006 Stapferhaus in Lenzburg, a town in the Swiss canton of Argovia, opened an exhibition focusing on religion as a societal phenomenon, which attracted wide interest in Switzerland and beyond and ran for a year. Stapferhaus is a museum committed to debating contested contemporary questions:

At the Stapferhaus, right next to Lenzburg railway station, the big questions of the present stand at the forefront: what impacts our lives, what triggers the country's interest and what moves the world. In interactive, sensory exhibition worlds, we invite you – in an entertaining way – to take a critical look at the central issues of our time.<sup>56</sup>

The exhibition dedicated to religion was entitled *Glaubenssache. Eine Ausstellung für Gläubige und Ungläubige* (*Matter of Belief. An Exhibition for Believers and Non-believers*). The project aimed at stimulating reflection on plural religious beliefs in their interaction with religious freedom as a crucial dimension of a constitutional democracy. It sought to articulate the tension between religion as a private matter and the presence of diverse religious orientations and communities in the public sphere. The exhibition's profile is described on its website as follows:

With the project »Matter of belief«, the Stapferhaus Lenzburg stimulates a debate about questions of belief and invites people to search for answers. Our society needs to learn how religious freedom may be implemented in times of religious plurality. Overall, everyone can only believe what they want if they grant the same right to their neighbours. The project questions people's own beliefs. It confronts you with other people's opinions about faith and looks for a dialogue in a playful way.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> <https://stapferhaus.ch/en> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

<sup>57</sup> »Das Stamperhaus in Lenzburg fördert mit dem Projekt ›Glaubenssache‹ dazu auf, Glaubensfragen zu debattieren und Antworten zu suchen. Unsere Gesellschaft muss üben, wie sich die Religionsfreiheit in Zeiten der Religionsvielfalt umsetzen lässt. Denn es kann nur dann jeder glauben, was er will, wenn er dieses Recht auch seinen Nachbarn zugesteht.



Fig. 91: The doors to enter *Glaubenssache. Eine Ausstellung für Gläubige und Ungläubige*, Stapferhaus, Lenzburg, 2006/2007, which expected the visitors to take a position before visiting the exhibition.

The active role the audience were expected to take was communicated unmistakably at the entrance: to buy a ticket, the visitors had to choose between two doors, »ENTRANCE: BELIEVERS« or »ENTRANCE: NON-BELIEVERS« (fig. 91).

Along with the ticket to the exhibition, the visitors were also given a data stick. In each room, they could plug it into a computer station and answer questions about their religion, beliefs and opinions about plurality. At the end of the itinerary, the anonymous data saved on the sticks were collected and analysed once the exhibition closed.

This large project presented diverse aspects of religion in Switzerland, exploring the diversity of religious traditions and communities, institutional and individual worldviews, contested religious practices in the public sphere, and politically sensitive questions of religion and religious plurality in democracy. These topics were linked to objects and audiovisual installa-

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Das Projekt fragt nach der eigenen Glaubensposition. Es konfrontiert mit anderen Glaubensansichten und sucht spielerisch den Dialog.« in: Stapferhaus Lenzburg 2006, 7. Translation by the author.



Fig. 92: A nun takes a picture of items collected by the museum for this exhibition, representing individual beliefs. Exhibition *Glaubenssache. Eine Ausstellung für Gläubige und Ungläubige*, Stapferhaus, Lenzburg, 2006/2007.

tions, with a specific focus on individuals and their attitudes towards their own religious beliefs and those of others. The range of opinions explicitly encompassed sceptical, agnostic or atheistic worldviews. Individual religious orientations played a central role: the diversity and variety of perspectives was materialised with an impressive installation made of 100 personal objects, collected for this purpose by the curators (fig. 92).

Conceived in the aftermath of 9/11 with growing public pressure on Muslim communities and other religious minorities, the exhibition relied upon academic research on the development and transformation of religion and beliefs in Switzerland and particularly focused on the tension between privatisation of religion, secularisation and post-secularisation. The catalogue, *Glaubenssache. Ein Buch für Gläubige und Ungläubige* (*Matter of Belief. A Book for Believers and Nonbelievers*) is a collection of essays by well known scholars from a broad range of academic disciplines related to religion, among them the study of religion, theology, history and sociology of religion.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Stapferhaus 2006.

Fig. 93: The exhibition catalogue *Glaubenssache. Ein Buch für Gläubige und Ungläubige*, a collection of scholarly essays on the role of religion and religious plurality in today's Swiss society. The cover mimics a card for a Roman-Catholic first communion.



In the first decade of the 21st century, religious plurality, a constitutive aspect of Swiss democracy, was a dominant topic in political debate.<sup>59</sup> The concept of the exhibition made controversial questions about the role of religion in the public sphere appealing, by means of two main strategies. First, it involved the visitors by asking them to take a position and to actively express an opinion. Second, it presented the topic in a playful, enjoyable way.

The catalogue lay-out emphasized this playfulness. On the cover the title is written in golden letters on a white background with a circle in its centre, which – playfully or ironically? – imitates a Roman-Catholic First Communion card. The circle is a hole piercing the volume (fig. 93). Is it a reference to a (missing) host? Or a graphic suggestion that the readers should fill-in the missing part with his or her own experiences and ideas or even leave it empty? Overall, individual beliefs may not be a matter of printed words.

After the closure of the exhibition, the museum published the results of the survey. From the 40,213 visitors, 63.5 % chose the door for believers, while 36.5 % entered the museum as »non-believers«.<sup>60</sup>

The exhibition *Glaubenssache* displayed religious plurality by means of objects and interactive, audiovisual installations. Moreover, it demanded the visitors to assume an active part in staging the plurality of positions by

59 On the role of religion in democracies in Switzerland and in Europe see e. g. Heit / Pfeleiderer 2012 and 2013; Liedhegener / Köhrsen 2024.

60 A short summary of the results of the survey can be downloaded here: [https://backend.stapferhaus.ch/assets/uploads/Schlussdokumentation\\_kurz\\_03.pdf](https://backend.stapferhaus.ch/assets/uploads/Schlussdokumentation_kurz_03.pdf) (accessed on 6 August 2025).

interacting in various ways, connecting the data stick to the computer stations and taking an explicit position – even just for fun. As a result, the audience became a performative representation of the diverse attitudes towards matters of faith, belief, and religion. In this regard, the exhibition offered a shared space focused on a multilayered reflection on the role of religion within democracy and the possibility to foster a dialogue and an exchange between the discrepant views and expectations. The educational role of the museum consisted in presenting diverse religious as well as non-religious worldviews, in stimulating self-reflexion, and raising awareness of the individual contribution and the political efforts needed for negotiating plurality within the constitutional frame of the federal state.

*Maria Magdalena Mauritius* represents an exhibition type which aims to value the role of religious traditions and their transformations within the cultural heritage,<sup>61</sup> and which emphasises the museum's function as a material archive of memory fostering a shared national identity. Conversely, *Glaubenssache* proposes another way of displaying religion in museums, since this exhibition's goal is to question religious transformation and diversity from a different angle. Its focus is on the tension between religion as a private and a public matter. It deals with religion as a fundamental aspect of society: religious plurality is displayed in the tension between private choices and negotiation processes in the public sphere.

## 8.6 The role of religion in constructing European identity: House of European History

On 6 May 2017 the House of European History opened its doors as a brand-new museum in the European quarter in Brussels.<sup>62</sup> The idea was launched by Hans-Gerd Pöttering, the 12th President of the European Parliament. On 13 February 2007, in his inaugural address, he called for the establishment

61 For a possible classification of museums exhibiting religion see Paine 2017.

62 For diverse analyses of the House of European History see Fickers 2018; Kesteloot 2018; Lutz 2019; Danani / Pezzoli 2023. For a broader analysis of the influence of museums on European cultural identity see Kaiser / Krankenhagen / Poehls 2012.

of a museum to increase European identity. In the introduction to the main catalogue of the museum, he writes:

The idea behind this European project was to create a place where memories of our shared history and of the work of European unification could be nurtured. At the same time, it was to be open to the subsequent shaping of Europe's identity by all European Union citizens, present and future. It should be a place for the »European idea« to grow. The House of European History, then, is intended to convey the outlines of European history, so as to foster understanding of more recent events, and of the present. The exhibitions therefore show common values of European unification – human dignity, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, peace, and the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity – as representing the progress of peaceful coexistence, particularly since the end of the Second World War and the overcoming of divisions within our continent.<sup>63</sup>

From the very beginning, the project to present a common history had been linked to values fostering a sense of belonging to the European idea. Accordingly, the museum arises from an articulated, but contested, political and academic process of planning and realising a common »house«.<sup>64</sup>

The initiators had to build the museum from scratch, since there was neither a pre-existing collection nor a dedicated building. This makes this initiative a particularly illuminating one for reflecting upon the link between exhibiting things in a public place, spatial meaning-making processes and attempts to foster a European political and cultural identity. Being the first museum dedicated to a shared history of the continent, the construction of the museum demanded considerable work not only in designing the building but even more in developing a concept of history to be translated into a museum itinerary.

The idea of an exhibition on a collective European history resists an additive procedure: the museum was not intended to be a collection of fragments divided into national or regional historical pieces. Therefore, in order to highlight a shared narrative, the focus shifted to contemporary history, represent-

63 Pöttering 2018, 11.

64 See also Kaiser 2017.

ing Europe in the light of the creation of a political body after World War II. In this context, its perspective on ancient and modern history aimed to suggest common historical roots. Since a shared Europe is a contested issue, the main attention was directed rather to asking questions about what European identity may become, rather than proposing an answer to be agreed upon. Consequently, the museum developed a programme aimed at involving the visitors in thinking about what Europe is, may or should be.

The itinerary of the permanent exhibition assigns a very active role to individual visitors. The museum promotes a historical knowledge generated in the interaction between individual, familial or social memories encountered in the displayed objects and the audiovisual installations.<sup>65</sup>

The name of the museum, »house«, emphasises this goal. Visitors can enter the building free of charge in order to feel »at home« in a place that represents their shared history.<sup>66</sup> The museum is located in the Eastman Building, a former dental clinic from 1935 that has been transformed and considerably enlarged to host the project's impressive size: the permanent exhibition is spread over six floors.

The concept of representing a sharable history was developed in the interaction between EU politicians and academics with an expertise in history and museology. Accordingly, the boards in charge of constructing the museum had to negotiate between those diverse positions. On the one hand, the politically motivated intention of stimulating participation and identification with the EU and, on the other hand, a historical narrative based on scientific rigour understood as being independent and rather objective.<sup>67</sup> To achieve this ideal, a committee comprised of nine people from different European countries and universities was charged with the task of choosing the topics to be translated into galleries and distributed across the exhibition itinerary. The diverse boards worked in close cooperation with interior designers and curators.<sup>68</sup>

65 For a detailed description of the whole process of planning and realising the House of European History see Mork / Christodoulou 2018. For further information see Vovk van Gaal / Dupont 2012; Building a House of European History 2013; Mork 2016; Conceptual Basis for a House of European History 2018; Augstein 2011; Grau i Segú 2016.

66 See Danani / Pezzoli-Olgati 2023, 251 for a reconstruction of the boards involved and their specific competences.

67 Hütter 2018.

68 Danani / Pezzoli-Olgati 2023.



The permanent exhibition offers a panorama on contemporary European history by combining six narrative units that follow a chronological order.<sup>69</sup> In the first section, *Shaping Europe*, the mythological and historical origins of Europe are presented, while the second, *Europe as a global power (1789–1914)*, discusses the Enlightenment as the basis for a contemporary European identity. The subsequent galleries are dedicated to the 20th century: the third unit, *Europe in ruins*, presents World War I and II, the fourth section, *Rebuilding a divided continent (1945–1970)*, thematises the reconstruction of Europe, the Cold War, the construction of social security, the beginning of European integration, and the memory of the Shoa. While the fifth unit, *Shattering certainties (1970–today)*, deals with the challenges after the post-war economic boom came to an end. The sixth and final part, *Europe now*, is a section focusing on urgent questions of our time, among others the role of the European Union, climate change, colonial heritage, the pandemic, digital revolution, terrorism, and Brexit.<sup>70</sup> This last gallery was redesigned in 2021.

Given the vast size of each storey and, correspondingly, of the galleries, the link with the overall concept of the exhibition may sometimes become lost during the visit. A huge sculpture suspended in the stairwell in the middle of the building takes on the role of keeping all the pieces together. The idea of Europe as united in diversity is suggested by *The Vortex of History*, a massive work of art by Boris Micka and Todomuta Studio in Sevilla, measuring 25 m in height, made of steel and an aluminium-magnesium alloy. Evoking a kind of organism, the metal sculpture is composed of text quotations in diverse languages and scriptures cut out in banners snaking from a central corpus through the floors of the exhibition. While at the centre of the staircase the banners are so dense that they are illegible, following the meandering parts as they reach the individual galleries, letters and words can begin to be deciphered (fig. 94). *The Vortex of History* is a representation of the dynamism of European history and its ever-changing interpretations. It contrasts with the neat architectural lines of the building, but some affinities are hinted at through the use of some common materials and the metallic elements, all vibrate together as a result of the effect of the light coming from above. The letters merge into quotations from significant moments

69 <https://historia.europa.eu/en/exhibitions-events/permanent-exhibition> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

70 <https://historia.europa.eu/en/digital-offer/audio-guides>.



Fig. 94: The *Vortex of History*, a monumental sculpture merging 27 quotations in different languages.

in European history, as they burst into the exhibition spaces. In total 27 quotes are incorporated in the sculpture.<sup>71</sup>

The itinerary leads the visitor through the six museum floors. Objects and multimedia installations are presented with little written information, since the visitors are provided with audioguides in the 24 languages of the EU at the entrance. Visiting the whole exhibition demands a considerable physical effort, since the galleries are wide and the information provided extensive.

The interplay between the diverse topic units and the *Vortex of History* represents the leitmotif of the exhibition and the House of European History. Europe is diverse and, at the same time, a common ground for its citizens. Accordingly, European identity arises from active participation in the political process of the EU. Fostering a shared memory means thinking about common aspects of the European heritage, asking questions about the past, the present and the future of the continent, as well as sharing a constructive approach to present challenges. Cultural diversity is highlighted as a positive characteristic of Europe and language translation as a concrete and a metaphorical procedure that bridges the diverse identities on the continent.<sup>72</sup>

71 <https://historia.europa.eu/en/our-work/news/vortex-history> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

72 Schmidt 2018, 83.

Against this background, the exhibition's approach to religious plurality is striking. Religion is addressed mainly in the section dedicated to the origins of Europe, as a religious-historical aspect associated with the ancient myth of Europe and Christianity, with a few hints to Judaism and Islam.

The Greek myth of Europe is addressed in the first section, *Shaping Europe*, and linked to open questions about a European memory (fig. 95).

What is Europe? Geography shows us that Europe has never been a clearly defined space. The continent's name comes from the ancient Greek myth of Europa, a story that has been re-interpreted, like history itself, from various points of view over time. Europe is described through its achievements and traditions, but what distinguishes it from other continents? Can we say that we have a shared European past, when history has affected people differently? Can we find any commonality – a reservoir of European memory?<sup>73</sup>

In the context of this first gallery, the myth is interpreted as a narrative highlighting the fact that Europe has always been the result of negotiations between diverse lands and cultures. Europa, a Phoenician princess, is abducted to Crete by Zeus appearing in the guise of a white bull. It follows that the very name of »Europe« itself, in fact comes from »abroad«:

Europa, a mythical princess from Phoenicia – today's Lebanon – is abducted by the Greek god Zeus, who appears to her in the form of a white bull. Having fallen in love with her beauty, he takes her to the island of Crete. Europe's name has been associated with this myth from antiquity to the present. It appears in art, literature, religion and politics, where the story and imagery are often reinterpreted to reflect the issues of the day.

At the core of the myth of Europa is the reality of ancient interconnections – both good and bad – between the peoples of Europe and

73 Transcription of the audioguide *Shaping Europe*, [https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829649845%3Fsecret\\_token%3Ds-w6y2Rs-jFv63&color=%23ff5500&auto\\_play=true&hide\\_related=false&show\\_comments=false&show\\_user=false&show\\_reposts=false&show\\_teaser=true&visual=true](https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829649845%3Fsecret_token%3Ds-w6y2Rs-jFv63&color=%23ff5500&auto_play=true&hide_related=false&show_comments=false&show_user=false&show_reposts=false&show_teaser=true&visual=true) (accessed December 20, 2021).

those from distant lands. That Europe actually took its name from a mythological princess from western Asia is a testament to such contacts. As is the fact that the myth gives us glimpses into the historical development of the Greek alphabet, a development triggered by contact with the Phoenicians in antiquity.<sup>74</sup>

The role and variety of the various receptions and adaptations of the myth is illustrated by selected archaeological objects and contemporary works of art depicting different adaptations of the myth of Europa and the bull.

This approach to religious-historical elements is reiterated in addressing Christianity as a crucial aspect of European heritage along with other characteristic elements of European history such as democracy, philosophy, the Rule of Law, Humanism, the Enlightenment or the slave trade and Colonialism. The chapter dedicated to European heritage is introduced as follows:

What binds the continent together. What could be regarded as European heritage? Europe is more than the addition of national histories. But is it a civilization and culture characterized by particular traditions and values developed through history? There are basic elements which were originally European and have spread all over the continent. Can these be considered distinct hallmarks of European culture? If so, which parts of this European heritage should we preserve; what do we want to change, what should we contest?<sup>75</sup>

74 Transcription of the audioguide *Reception of the myth* [https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829653289%3Fsecret\\_token%3Ds-9b4DmVfpUGi&color=%23ff5500&auto\\_play=true&hide\\_related=false&show\\_comments=false&show\\_user=false&show\\_reposts=false&show\\_teaser=true&visual=true](https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829653289%3Fsecret_token%3Ds-9b4DmVfpUGi&color=%23ff5500&auto_play=true&hide_related=false&show_comments=false&show_user=false&show_reposts=false&show_teaser=true&visual=true) (accessed on 6 August 2025)

75 Transcription of the audioguide, [https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829656526%3Fsecret\\_token%3Ds-kX7E9EeN9Fm&color=%23ff5500&auto\\_play=true&hide\\_related=false&show\\_comments=false&show\\_user=false&show\\_reposts=false&show\\_teaser=true&visual=true](https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829656526%3Fsecret_token%3Ds-kX7E9EeN9Fm&color=%23ff5500&auto_play=true&hide_related=false&show_comments=false&show_user=false&show_reposts=false&show_teaser=true&visual=true) (accessed on 6 August 2025).

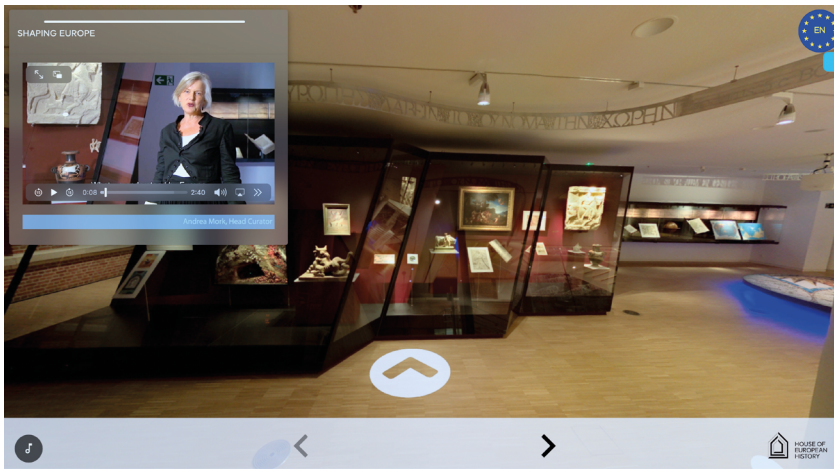


Fig. 95: A video still of the virtual tour of the gallery *Shaping Europe*. In the upper corner on the left side, Andrea Mork, the Head Curator of the House of European History presents the section. On the ceiling hangs a branch of the *Vortex of History*.

A medieval wooden statue of a pope materialises the exhibition's concept of Christianity, which is addressed in the audioguide *Omnipresence of Christianity*:

From its origins in the Middle East, Christianity extended its influence across the whole of Europe to become a defining feature of western civilisation. For thousands of years the power of Christianity in Europe centred on Rome and the pope was immense and extended far beyond mere spiritual concerns. It permeated every aspect of life, influencing politics, culture, commerce, and law. Yet Europe's relationship with Christianity has always been diverse and complex. Christianity has frequently been deeply divided within itself, significantly in the division between Eastern and Western Churches and through the Reformation. Also Islam and Judaism have co-existed for centuries in Europe helping to define European life and culture. Today, despite falling church attendance and increasing secularism, Christianity remains embedded in daily European life with values, traditions, and cultures

all reflecting Europe's Christian heritage. In an increasingly multi-religious Europe will Christianity remain in its dominant position?<sup>76</sup>

The exhibition expects the visitors to be basically familiar with Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, since there is no information about the characteristic symbols, practices or worldviews of those traditions. The audioguide begins with a parallel between Europe's myth and Christianity, since both originated in the Middle East, which is echoed also by means of an oriental melody in the background. The presentation emphasises the power of the church and the pope during millennia and the broad influence of Christianity on all social spheres. This omnipresence is countered by the divisive character of Christianity and today's decline of membership and attendance in religious rituals. After a short reference to Judaism and Islam as being part of European history, the text ends with a dilemma the audience may think about: even though Christianity still permeates daily life, will its dominant position be compatible with the multireligious character of Europe?

Overall, the permanent exhibition avoids the topic of religion and particularly Christianity as being too controversial. Rather, the museum endorses a secular reading of history, which is rooted in the assumption that the development of scientific approaches since the Renaissance overcame misleading religious interpretations of the world. Dealing with crucial chapters of contemporary European history, in the subsequent floors of the exhibitions, only a few references to religious elements can be found. They are mainly linked to individuals.<sup>77</sup>

Overall, the House of European History offers a long, articulated itinerary where visitors are asked to participate in a search for common elements fostering a shared public memory of Europe.<sup>78</sup> Sharing memory is conceived as a spatial practice individuals perform by walking through the permanent exhibition and observing the displayed objects, receiving multimedia installations and the information and questions in the audioguide.

<sup>76</sup> Transcription of the audioguide, [https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829659844%3Fsecret\\_token%3Ds-g42w94EdUUA&color=%23ff5500&auto\\_play=true&hide\\_related=false&show\\_comments=false&show\\_user=false&show\\_reposts=false&show\\_teaser=true&visual=true](https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/829659844%3Fsecret_token%3Ds-g42w94EdUUA&color=%23ff5500&auto_play=true&hide_related=false&show_comments=false&show_user=false&show_reposts=false&show_teaser=true&visual=true) (accessed on 6 August 2025).

<sup>77</sup> Danani / Pezzoli 2023, 270–277.

<sup>78</sup> Winter 2010; Danani / Pezzoli-Olgiati 2023, 252–262.





Fig. 96: The House of European History located in the Eastman Building in Brussel's European Quarter. On the right and the left sides of the entrance the name of the museum is presented in the 24 languages of the EU.

The museum's itinerary displays plurality of cultures and nations as a basis that allows European citizens to share a reflection on a common historical narrative. Accordingly, cultural diversity is associated with the plurality of languages and interpreted as a valuable aspect of Europe: the possibility of reciprocal understanding despite 24 languages is highlighted by means of banners at the entrance (fig. 96), through the multilingual audioguide and the stunning *Vortex of History*.

Religion, by contrast, is not presented as a constructive dimension of European history but rather as being essentially divisive. The museum aims at implementing a sense of belonging to Europe by means of a symbolic representation of the tension between plurality and diversity encouraging shared memories. Hence, despite being integral to the ancient and medieval roots of Europe, according to the exhibition's conception, religion belongs in the private sphere since the Renaissance. Even if it is recognised as a crucial dimension of societal plurality, religion is neglected and relegated to the background of history. This position, based on a neat opposition between



secular and religious worldviews, mirrors a more general attitude toward religion in political debates about Europe, which is received controversially.<sup>79</sup>

In the context of our exploration of museums as places negotiating religious plurality, the House of European History is an illuminating case study, because of its hesitation in addressing religion, displaying it as a contested dimension of modern European society. In its search for a common ground to foster civil endorsement of Europe as both united and diverse, religion is elaborated on as a crucial part of a shared cultural heritage and a divisive force in the present. This interpretation, in my opinion, does not consider the complexity of religious worldviews and practices and relies on a superficial approach to the European history of religion and the present, mirroring a political agenda based on a secularised view of society.

The House of European History demonstrates an important aspect of contemporary museum practices: by means of a specifically designed place the museum becomes a public space to foster political engagement by constructing a shared historical memory. Walking through the galleries, following the inscribed branches of the *Vortex of History* – which brings one back to the core of the exhibition – climbing up the six floors, listening to the audioguide and looking at the objects and installations, visitors are expected to broaden their knowledge about Europe and immerse themselves in a critical reflection on their relationship with it. The museum design, which demands significant endurance due to the size of the exhibition, invites the audience to perform a journey through time, starting in antiquity, passing through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, the modern Era, World War I and II, the post-war era with the creation of Europe as a political entity and finally reaching the present day. Notwithstanding the attempt to root the itinerary in an independent academic discourse, the political impetus of the exhibition shines through, as we have seen with the exhibition's interpretation of religion. Nonetheless, the House of European History allows the visitor to take a position and to develop a personal view on Europe as a political and cultural common ground.

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79 On the role of religion in implementing European cultural and political integration see e.g. Nexon 2006 and Bottici / Challand 2013, particularly 163–165. See also Casanova 2006.

## 8.7 The human quest for orientation in contemporary art: *Auf der Suche...*

The House of European History highlights the educational impetus of a contemporary museum. The last example we will discuss returns us to the beginning of the chapter as it concerns another contemporary art exhibition that was on display in Munich from 12 May to 22 July 2022. *Auf der Suche... Ein Ausstellungsprojekt im Dialog von Kunst, Kirche und Wissenschaft* – in English *In Search of... An Exhibition Project in Dialogue with Art, Church and Science* – is a project involving diverse institutions and public places. Like the House of European History, *Auf der Suche...* also relied on an intense interaction between the exhibited artworks and the visitors, who were expected to follow a long itinerary across the historic centre of the city. Rather than stimulating a reflection based on historical knowledge, this project invited the audience to directly interact with the works of art, in many cases to construct them in collaborative processes.

DG Kunstraum is an art gallery and not a museum in a strict sense. Nevertheless, being a not-for-profit institution with an exhibition profile fostering diversity and sustainability, its goals resonate with the definition of a contemporary (art) museum discussed above.

*Auf der Suche...* was initiated by DG Kunstraum Diskurs Gegenwart, a gallery for contemporary art that belongs to the Kunstverein Deutsche Gesellschaft für Christliche Kunst, a non-profit and independent association founded in 1893 to sustain Christian art production and the exchange between artists and churches as patrons. Today, the association promotes contemporary art as a practice addressing existential questions and particularly the relationship between the human being and the whole of society. The gallery fosters dialogue between visual arts, architecture, music, theology, and the humanities and opens up a space for debates about spirituality and transcendence.<sup>80</sup>

*Auf der Suche...* was conceived during the Covid-19 pandemic as a cooperation between Ulrich Schäfert, the head of the Department of Pastoral Theology and Art in the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising<sup>81</sup> and Benita Meißner,

80 <https://www.dg-kunstraum.de/verein/ueber-uns/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

81 <https://www.erzbistum-muenchen.de/ordinariat/ressort-4-seelsorge-und-kirchliches-leben/kunstpastoral> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

the director of the DG Kunstraum. Representatives of Roman-Catholic and Lutheran parishes in the centre of Munich, that logistically and financially contributed to the realisation of the exhibition, were also involved as well as the artist and art professor Shirin Kretschmann from the Academy of Fine Arts Munich and me as a scholar of the study of religion. While the art students contributed with works specifically designed for this exhibition, the students in the study of religion attended classes on contemporary art in the diverse sites of the exhibition and wrote short texts for the catalogue.<sup>82</sup> The project was centred on the question of people in search of orientation in the aftermath of a period of isolation, which, particularly for artists, proved particularly challenging:

»In search of ...« – What are people searching for? Today, this question seems more relevant than ever: despite major technical and medical achievements, uncertainty dominates people's lives around the world. The ongoing climate crisis, the war in the middle of Europe and the Covid pandemic have shattered the sense of ›normality‹. These are events that polarise people, shake fundamental democratic values and question societal cohesion in the most serious way. The longing for love, security, peace, health, and a constructive future seems almost impossible to fulfill.<sup>83</sup>

The multisite exhibition presented an international selection of artworks displayed in the art gallery DG Kunstraum, in an art space in a tube station and in different Roman-Catholic and Lutheran churches.<sup>84</sup> Unlike the oth-

82 Auf de Suche... 2022.

83 »Auf der Suche ...« – Was sucht der Mensch? Diese Frage erscheint uns heute aktueller denn je: Trotz großer technischer und medizinischer Errungenschaften bestimmt Verunsicherung das Leben der Menschen weltweit. Die anhaltende Klimakrise, der Krieg mitten in Europa und die Corona-Pandemie haben das Gefühl von ›Normalität‹ zerrissen. Es sind Ereignisse, die die Öffentlichkeit polarisieren, grundlegende, demokratische Werte erschüttern und den sozialen Zusammenhalt auf gravierende Weise in Frage stellen. Die Sehnsucht nach Liebe, Geborgenheit, Frieden, Gesundheit und einer konstruktiven Zukunft erscheint kaum erfüllbar.« <https://www.dg-kunstraum.de/auf-der-suche/> (accessed on 6 August 2025). Translation by the author.

84 For the complete list of the artists and locations involved see <https://www.dg-kunstraum.de/auf-der-suche/> (accessed on 6 August 2025) and Auf der Suche... 2022.



Fig. 97: Charwei Tsai, *Feather Project*, Installation, 2022, St. Paul, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

er projects discussed so far, *Auf der Suche...* created a temporary exhibition space encompassing various locations, among them churches that regularly display artworks. The exhibition's topic – being in search of – was thus echoed in the transient network structure of places involved. We will discuss this exhibition by focusing on two selected artworks that articulate in different ways the complex entanglement between spatial practices, artworks and religious plurality.

In the Roman-Catholic church of St. Paul, the Taiwanese artist Charwei Tsai presented *Feather Project* (fig. 97), an installation to be completed by the visitors.

The installation was located in the northern side aisle of the church, to the left of the main altar, and consisted of a large round mirror placed on a white, wooden octagonal platform, white goose feathers and markers. Visitors were invited to write texts on the feathers and to pile them up on the mirror according to the following instruction sheet:

#### INSTRUCTION

1) Choose a feather. Give thanks to the feather for being the messenger of your prayers.

Set your aspiration for participating in this project. For example, to pray or to aspire to transcend oneself and others through connecting with spirituality.

2) Inscribe your aspiration on the feather in one phrase.

3) Dedicate this merit: May everyone who comes across this work be free from suffering and the causes of suffering and rest in joy and love.

Making an aspiration is to set an intention for one's mind, speech, and action to synchronize as one with the aspiration. The motivation for *Feather Project*, created for the St. Paul's Church in Munich, is to encourage visitors to express their aspirations with consideration of the great calamities such as wars, pandemic, and climate crisis of current times that we are facing all around the world. Through the act of writing on a feather, this intention is set and manifests from an invisible force to the physical world. The project is, therefore, enacted and completed with the participation of the visitors.

Charwei Tsai<sup>85</sup>

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85 The instruction sheet is published in *Auf der Suche...* 2022, 91.



Fig. 98: The mirror optically magnifies the vertical axis. Charwei Tsai, *Feather Project*, Installation, 2022, St. Paul, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

The artwork's four elements have diverse proprieties. The large, white feathers are of natural origins and refer to the bird's ability to fly. In many cultures and religious traditions, transcendent beings have feathered wings allowing them to travel between worldly and otherworldly domains. Also in this work the feathers serve as messengers: they carry the sentences written by the visitors to other dimensions or simply to other people observing Charwei Tsai's installation. Those writings are the second, crucial element of the composition: the visitor embodies an invisible thought on a feather – according to the instruction it may be a prayer or an aspiration – making it tangible. The third element, the flat mirror, is a human industrial artefact from the early modern era, with a dense history that merges the history of religion with the development of the natural sciences.<sup>86</sup> The mirror reflects the place and, depending on the position of the viewer, visualises different points of the neo-Gothic architecture. Its optical property amplifies the space of the church and accentuates the height of the nave (fig. 98).

<sup>86</sup> On the fascinating history of flat mirrors see e.g. Edgerton 2009.





Fig. 99: Angel's wings and feather interact in the mirror. Charwei Tsai, *Feather Project*, Installation, 2022, St. Paul, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

The mirror lies in the centre of an octagonal white, wooden construction that reproduces the shape and colour of a floor slab under the baptismal font, located in the southern aisle, on the right of the main altar, in a symmetrical position to *Feather Project* (fig. 97). Charwei Tsai's artwork interacts with the church space in various ways: its shape and colour harmonise with the church fittings and design; the mirror, emphasising the vertical axis, retrieves the architectural reference to heaven; the natural feathers interact visually with the angel's wings of the northern aisle main altar (fig. 99).<sup>87</sup>

The work of art in St. Paul's does not display clear religious symbols, constellations or practices. However, combining feathers, a mirror, and an octagon, *Feather Project* opens up a space of multiple interpretations, echoing the diverse recurrences and the multilayered symbolic meanings those

<sup>87</sup> For further descriptions and photographs of the project see the description of the curator Ulrich Schäfert in *Auf der Suche...* 2022, 93–95 and <https://charwei.com/projects/feather-project-installation-st-paul-church/> (accessed on 6 August 2025). *Feather Project* has been adapted to diverse contexts. In a version from 2011 exhibited in Taipei, Sufi poetry was written on the feathers. <https://charwei.com/projects/feather-project-2011/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).





Fig. 100: The artist, holding a small model, explains to passersby how to fold milk carton to form a rose. Frank Bölter, *Weißer Rose (XXL)*, 18 May 2022, Viktualienmarkt, a transitory site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

elements carry in various religious traditions and cultures. Located in a Roman-Catholic sacred building, it stimulates individual reflection, resonates with the architecture, the liturgical fittings and the other artworks in St. Paul's, where the presence of contemporary art is prominent. In this station of *Auf der Suche...*, the exhibition's and religious practices are deliberately blurred by fostering interactions between the audience that lives in the post-pandemic society and worldviews and/or religious practices the visitor may refer to by following the artist's instructions and collaborating in completing the installation.

The participative role of the audience in creating the displayed artwork was even stronger in the performance and temporary installation *Weißer Rose (XXL)* by the German artist Frank Bölter. On 18 May 2022, on a marketplace in the historic centre of Munich, the Viktualienmarkt, he made a public folding activity using white milk carton sheets – Tetra Pack coated paper – in a collaborative one-day performance with passersby. Using an origami technique, he involved people in this busy pedestrian area in fold-



Fig. 101: The collaborative performance begins. Frank Bölter, *Weißer Rose (XXL)*, 18 May 2022, Viktualienmarkt, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich 2022.



Fig. 102: The blossom is completed. Frank Bölter, *Weißer Rose (XXL)*, 18 May 2022, Viktualienmarkt, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

ing the large sheets to form a giant rose (figs. 100–102).<sup>88</sup> The completed flower measured 5 metres in length, while the blossom had a diameter of 2 metres.

Frank Bölter's contribution to *Auf der Suche...* was inspired by the 80th anniversary of the foundation of the White Rose, a student resistance group

<sup>88</sup> A video of the performance by the filmmaker Lion Bischof can be seen here: <https://www.dg-kunstraum.de/frank-boelter-weiße-rose-xxl-viktualienmarkt/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).

Fig. 103: White roses at the memorial for the resistance group, a bas relief by Lothar Dietz from 1958, in the inner courtyard of Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich.



against the Nazi regime, formed in 1942. *White Rose (XXL)* refers to the fresh white roses that are offered daily in memory of the group on the monument in the inner courtyard in the historic building of Ludwig Maximilian University Munich (fig. 103.) Laying a white rose is a gesture that recalls the courageous action against the regime by the group's leaders executed in 1943: the students Alexander Schmorell, Hans and Sophie Scholl, Christoph Probst, Willi Graf and the professor Kurt Huber.

Bölter's action magnified the rose in a public place to emphasise, through an artistic collaborative performance, the crucial significance of recalling the White Rose, their ideas, courage and sacrifice. Building a giant rose was meant as a memorial to increase awareness for democracy as a practice that is not self-evident but fragile. Shaping a giant rose on a marketplace in Munich is an unmistakable symbolic action. It is not only about the urgency to resist totalitarianism but even more a plea to preserve the historical memory and to actively participate in the democratic process.

The choice to build a rose out of paper also refers to the relevance of paper sheets as media of resistance and memory. The origami sculpture can be interpreted as a reference to the leaflets that the members of the White





Fig. 104: Robert Schmitt-Matt, *Memorial Collage*, ceramics, 1987, outside the main entrance of the historic building of Ludwig Maximilian University at Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1 in Munich.

Rose distributed among the population inviting people to resist the regime. On 18 February 1943, they threw a stack of leaflets down from the upper gallery in the university hall, their last action before being arrested and executed by the Gestapo.

Paper also refers to the memorial by Robert Schmitt-Matt from 1987/88, a collage of the White Rose leaflets made of ceramic slabs on the ground in front of the university main entrance (fig. 104).

After completion, the extra-large white rose was transported to the nearby Church Heilig Geist, where it was on display for a few weeks (fig. 105). The oversized flower made out of milk cartons lying on the floor, with the blossom toward the altar, formed a strong contrast with the delicate Baroque interior of the church. In this sacred place, the bulky rose resonated with further religious symbols that, depending on the visitors, could assume diverse meaning. References to sacrifice as a central theological Christian



Fig. 105: Frank Bölter, *Weiße Rose (XXL)*, milk carton, temporary exhibition in the Church Heilig Geist, 2022, Munich, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

category and/or to white roses as a symbol of purity in Marian devotional practices may have played a role.<sup>89</sup>

Overall, the exhibition *Auf der Suche...* involved the visitors in a museal spatial practice on many levels. The itinerary transformed the city into a place for experiencing and participating in the creation of artworks in the aftermath of lockdowns and isolation. To explore possible answers to the exhibition's question – what human beings are looking for in an uncertain time – the visitors were sent on a spatial quest in the city, visiting churches and galleries scattered across the historic centre. Together, the diverse sites built a multisite, temporary exhibition network in which artists and audience could explore possible answers.

89 For reviews of the performance and the temporary exhibition see Benita Meißner and Ulrich Schäfert in *Auf der Suche 2022*, 10–17 and <https://frankboelter.com/weisse-rose-xxl/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).



Fig. 106: Empfangshalle, *Woher Kollege Wohin Kollege*, art project in the public sphere, 2022, St. Markus, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...* Munich. The orange garbage truck transformed into a camper van is visible on the portraits of the »homeland« by employees from all over the world.

The two actions discussed above are only a small part of this large project encompassing a broad range of artistic expressions and elaborated multimedia works such as *Woher Kollege Wohin Kollege* by Empfangshalle, the artists duo Corbinian Böhm and Michael Gruber, presented in the Lutheran church St. Markus (fig. 106)<sup>90</sup> or the installation with tape *I'll be a Good Mom* by Paula Niño in the DG Kunstraum (fig. 107).<sup>91</sup> *Woher Kollege Wohin Kollege* consists of a photographic exhibition and a film documenting a mobile art project displayed in the city of Munich from 2002 to 2006. The project explores the question of homeland (»Heimat«). The duo transformed a garbage truck of the city's waste management into a comfortable camper van. Employees were invited to travel for holidays to a place they considered to

90 [http://www.empfangshalle.net/sites/projekte/proj\\_woher.html](http://www.empfangshalle.net/sites/projekte/proj_woher.html) (accessed on 6 August 2025).

91 <https://paulanino.net/I-ll-be-a-good-mom-1> (accessed on 6 August 2025).



Fig. 107: Paula Niño, *I'll be a Good Mom*, in situ installation with tape, 2022, ca. 530 × 800 cm. In the middle: *Twin Flame*, an interactive installation by Cheng-Hsin. DG Kunstraum, a site of the exhibition *Auf der Suche...*, Munich.

be their homeland and to take a picture of it. Subsequently, the photographs were displayed on the garbage trucks collecting the rubbish in the city, making the homeland of the employees and the international composition of the team visible in a public place. The mobile artwork contributed to highlighting individual biographies, diversity of culture, sometimes of religion, and spectacular travel experiences by people contributing essentially to the quality of life in Munich.<sup>92</sup>

With *I'll be a Good Mom* the Columbian artist Paula Niño materialises reflections she developed during the pandemic, as she was far away from home and secluded in her studio. Facing so many deaths, she began to think about birth as a process that in a few hours brings a new human being to life. In this in situ installation, the tension between life and death and the flow of time

92 Auf der Suche 2022, 40–45; [http://www.empfangshalle.net/sites/projekte/proj\\_woher.html](http://www.empfangshalle.net/sites/projekte/proj_woher.html) (accessed on 6 August 2025).



are explored. Sticking small pieces of paper tape on the gallery wall in a regular pattern, the artist materialised the feelings of patience and concentration.

The two exhibitions of contemporary art that frame this chapter, *Signs of Life* in Lucerne in 2010 and *Auf der Suche...* twelve years later, explicitly interact with religious symbols, iconographic and narrative constellation practices in very different ways. *Signs of Life* focuses on the adaption of religious elements from various religious traditions in contemporary artworks in a museum's white cube atmosphere, whereas *Auf der Suche...* establishes the quest for existential orientation at the core of the project, integrating churches as exhibition spaces but with works that do not forcibly adapt elements from religious traditions. The visitors are challenged to figure out possible answers to fundamental anthropological questions, interacting with the artworks and following an urban itinerary on the search for the next site.

## 8.8 Museum practices for exploring religion as a multifaceted phenomenon

Even though the exhibition projects discussed in this chapter were planned in different contexts and pursue different aims, they all deal in an explicit way with religion as an influential aspect of cultural heritage, a contested matter in political debates, a dimension of processes of belonging and exclusion, or as a repertoire of symbols linked to existential questions of human life. The variegated ways of displaying religion mirror the entanglement between museums and the European history of religion as an intertwining of traditions and practices. The museum as an institution and the selected exhibitions are places of negotiation of religious plurality as an intrinsic element of transmission processes and cultural exchanges in the past and present.

To conclude, we highlight some common aspects arising from comparative perspectives that are particularly significant to grasp contemporary strategies of representing religion in the public sphere. The museum moulds social practices which, as we have seen, are rooted in the modern era. In museums, visitors enter a place that is specifically dedicated to conveying a sensory, aesthetic experience based on the interaction with the building itself and the displayed artefacts.

Exhibitions function as media generating meaning-making processes by arranging objects according to a defined concept, topic and purpose. Exhibitions unfold following an itinerary that puts the artefacts into a relationship with each other. The objects, displaced from their production and storage contexts, are arranged along the itinerary by means of frames, showcases, pedestals, dividing walls, lights, captions, explanatory texts, audioguides, music, and audiovisual media. Moreover, catalogues, posters, websites, and maps complete the exhibition.<sup>93</sup>

In this complex multimodal and multimedial spatial arrangement, religion can be evoked by diverse strategies. A religious tradition, a specific community in a given time and place, or a ritual can be represented by the displayed object. For instance, a wooden statue of a saint may refer to a general idea of medieval Christianity or a female deity riding a bull carved on an ancient *metope* to the myth of Europa. An artwork can adapt and transform symbols, constellations, narratives, or practices and rituals from a specific tradition and combine them in a new arrangement. The printed wool carpet *Proposition de détour* by Su-Mei Tse, which introduced this chapter, or *Feather Project* well illustrate this strategy for evoking religion. In other cases, the references to religion are not conveyed by the artefacts, but rather they are enshrined in the exhibition's arrangement, in the interaction between the displayed objects and/or in a specific place.

*Auf der Suche...* represented the human quest for orientation by transforming diverse places into exhibition sites and extending the display itinerary through the historic centre of Munich. This long path was designed to enact the topic of being in search of meaning as a bodily performance. Depending on the visitor's worldview, the itinerary may resonate with undertaking a pilgrimage as a religious practice.

In an exhibition, the relationship between artefacts and visitors is paramount. As a medium, it offers possibilities, that may be realised or not. In the case studies we have considered the gaze remains the dominant mode of engaging with the exhibits. By the sensory experience of looking closely at an object, mental images, remembrances, associations are evoked. Depending on one's knowledge, experience or affinity with the objects, diverse meaning-making processes take place. Within the multimodal and multimedia

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93 Locher 2000.

context the object is embedded in, references to religious traditions, communities or practices may play a more or less predominant role.

In those cases, in which the visitors are directly addressed and expected to answer questions, to take sides, or even to be part of the artistic performance, linking material objects with mental imaginations becomes part of a shared practice between individuals. This is particularly striking, since religion in media, politics and in general, in the public sphere, is often discussed as a contested topic, associated with conflict and exclusivism. This attitude is crystallised in the House of European history, but even there, the visitors are asked to react and reflect on the meaning of possible developments in a multicultural Europe, where a broad range of religious beliefs and other worldviews are intertwined. The interactive actions stimulate a reflection on personal opinions making the role of other visitors visible. The sentences written on feathers in the church of St. Paul materialises the presence of other visitors, or the construction of a giant rose on the historic marketplace involves a coordination between strangers that have met by chance. The presence and the interaction between visitors are further essential dimensions of museum practices: walking along an exhibition itinerary in the strictly regulated rooms of a museum is a shared practice. Visitors interact with the same objects, go along the same route experiencing individual meaning-making processes in a sensory, aesthetic experience perceiving the presence and the interactions that others are performing in this very place.

The communication between artefacts and audiences is the catalyst. Objects, being material thing, do not represent the abstract concept of »religion«. They have individual stories of production, restoration, origins, and travels. They ended up in the museum's storage in different ways, having been given as a gift, or lent, purchased, or often stolen. Religious objects are unique specimens that illustrate the diversity of religious practices and beliefs, even within the same tradition. Paradoxically, this is even more evident, when, in the exhibition's itinerary, a religious object – or as often the case in contemporary art, a reference to a religious symbol – stands for whole communities or encompassing worldviews. In this case, the artefacts stimulate meaning-making processes from an ambivalent position: being very specific and embedded in a particular socio-historical context, they are used to produce a generalisation.

The museum as a public place, collects, preserves and exhibits religious objects as material and immaterial dimensions of cultures and transmission processes to increase knowledge, enforce identity processes, or stimulate reflection in an atmosphere of contemplative enjoyment. Embedded in specific exhibition itineraries, artefacts often stand for abstract concepts of religious communities or symbol systems and embody ideas of religion as an ancient, persisting, disrupting, contested or challenging phenomenon inspiring imaginations of human expectations and coexistence.