Diversifying the Collections at the Museum of European Cultures

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In June 2019, the Museum of European Cultures (Museum Europäischer Kulturen, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, or "MEK") hosted a conference titled What's Missing? Collecting and Exhibiting Europe. The conference discussions explored how historical collections could tell more diverse stories (Edenheiser 2020: 15), and participants called for the inclusion of a greater variety of objects, people and narratives. Amid heated public debates about diversity, the What's Missing? proceedings laid out a path for museums like the MEK to rebuild their collections and change their public perception.

This chapter examines the ways in which the MEK has diversified its collections. It is based on archival and ethnographic research I conducted at the MEK between 2019 and 2020, which includes grey literature, archival material, semi-structured interviews with the curatorial and education team, as well as notes taken during the regular curatorial meetings. Rather than focusing on participatory or project-based collecting (Tietmeyer & Meijer-van Mensch 2013), I consider the everyday acquisition activities of the curatorial team, and identify how the diversity of the collections have been shaped over time. Against the historical morphology of the collection, I discuss how diversity is understood by members of the MEK's curatorial team. I go on to explore the MEK's new collection policy and recent object acquisitions as attempts to diversify. I argue that collection diversification initiatives are rooted in the past, in curatorial practices and in anticipated potential futures.

Describing diversity

> The MEK differs from other ethnological museums and museums of everyday life due to its European perspective and its thematic focus on diverse cultural identities and cultural contacts (Collection Concept 2019, 7).

> The goal of the MEK collection is to preserve contemporary and historic manifestations of cultural identities in Europe, to allow comparisons to be formed between them and to highlight differences and similarities. The objects in the collection

> reflect the diversity of cultural identities in Europe, reveal cultural contacts and represent the formation of groups, hybridities and boundaries (Collection Concept 2019, 8).

Diversity plays a central role in the MEK's understanding of its collections. Yet in my conversations with museum curators, I observed a range of ideas and practices. As one curator remarked, the team tends to 'think diversity *(Vielfalt)* in different directions'. One basic difference centred on its definition. Many of the curators with whom I spoke distinguished between *Vielfalt* and *Diversität* (see Macdonald in this volume). According to one senior staff member, *Diversität* describes the social aspects of diversity such as ethnicity, migration history, gender, sexuality or dis/ability. *Vielfalt* is a broader and vaguer term indicating plurality or heterogeneity in general. For her, the collection's temporal, spatial and social plurality are examples of *Vielfalt*. The temporal plurality is the period of time covered by the collections, that is, from the 18th to 21st centuries. The social plurality of the collections refers to the classes from which the objects are drawn. Most of the collections stem from lower- and middle-class material culture, because historically, upper-class material culture was the exclusive domain of art and design museums, and the Museum of European Cultures features objects from everyday life. Spatial plurality refers to the geographical scope of the collections. Though the museum is devoted to 'European cultures', the majority of its objects are from German-speaking regions.

In my conversations with museum staff, diversity in the sense of *Vielfalt* was both an attribute and a benchmark. Some stressed the collection's variety. As one curator remarked:

> I think that it is really hard to find a similar collection of such great diversity. We really have everything from a spoon to a bridal gown, and everything in between.

But despite the MEK's vast and heterogeneous collections of objects and images, others pointed out signs of bias. One curator discussed how difficult it was to find non-Christian objects in the historical collections while preparing an exhibition on life rituals. She complained that the collections were uneven, 'in some areas already diverse (vielfältig), in others not at all'. Depending on the topic, the collections could yield a diversity of examples or it could be spotty and uninspiring.

One curator, who had worked for decades at the museum, pointed to the recent shifts in curatorial practices:

> I would say that diversity (*Diversität*) is much more important to us today than it was in the past, when we might have chosen a particular population group [or] social class as our research topic. We don't really work that way anymore.

The curator suggested that there was a significant shift away from specialist topic areas to *Diversität*. Rather than documenting the material culture of a group, such as working-class women, museum acquisitions now focus on capturing topics from different perspectives.

During a discussion on *Diversität* with a senior curator, she initially questioned the usefulness of the idea for the museum:

> With an object, I do not ask myself, 'Is that diverse?' That's not a question I'm posing. Instead, I ask myself: 'Does this represent an interesting perspective, which so far has not been present in the collection?'

But then, paradoxically, she described strategies for making the museum more diverse:

> I strongly believe that from the gender perspective, I'm more interested in feminist objects per se. And of course a perspective that is beyond 'majority German'. I think that's very important. No matter what that is. Is that POC (people of colour) or is this Turkish community, or are they the children of Vietnamese contract workers from East Germany? And otherwise, I'm looking at many things—that's where the question of class comes into the equation.

The curator restated the importance of diversity as a matter of representation and a commitment to bringing in new perspectives. Here, the emphasis was on the targeted inclusion of missing protagonists within the collections (Aksoy 2020). Another member of the museum indicated that the work of *Diversität* required ongoing attention to the ways in which different perspectives are tied with power relations:

> Diversity is always about keeping an eye on what is the 'majority society' and what are 'minorities'. What is considered 'normal' and what is not seen as normal. And what are the positions of social power, what are the positions from which one makes oneself very difficult to hear, or that usually do not appear.

In her view, the task of shaping the collection was to determine the missing perspectives and critically examine the normative frameworks that reproduce majority positions and unequal structures.

During the conversations, the members of the curatorial team pointed to some of the challenges related to collection diversification. They noted that diversity could be mobilised to different ends and might risk becoming an institutional exercise in ticking boxes. Moreover, instrumental attempts at collection diversification might reproduce privilege rather than challenge it. Another curator raised concerns that *Diversität* was an empty slogan that concealed wider challenges in curatorial practice:

> Diversity is a worn-out term that is often used in such a political field. I have the feeling that it is also often used as a fig leaf. My colleague…talks about a feel-good museology. That's where this term would actually fall in for me, when you talk about diversity in the museum. Nevertheless, I don't want to completely rule out the possibility that I might use it in some public circumstances, because I can't handle it any other way.

For her, diversity is both a hollow phrase and a cover for other issues. Practice centred on diversity, she argued, ends up being about the museum rather than the underlying issues that led to the problem of diversity. A member of the educational team shared with me another challenge to diversity-oriented practice in the museum. She found that diversity was perplexing and obstructive for educational work. Tackling many different and complex topics within one exhibition space might risk making museum displays illegible and confusing for visitors.

While the idea of diversity is a key part of the museum's mission, it seems to escape definition. The MEK curatorial team not only conceptualised diversity 'in different directions' but also emphasised divergent practices of collection diversification. Given the fuzzy boundary between *Vielfalt* and *Diversität*, it is impossible to determine a single institutional model for collection diversity. What the narratives seemed to agree on was that diversification was an evolving idea that reflected changing institutional practices. Indeed, the different priorities of collection diversity, the commitments of the curatorial team, the ways of doing diversity and their effects have been shaped over time. The next section looks at the historical origins of the collections and focuses on the processes that led to the current the composition of the collections and how they affect curatorial work today.

Reshaping diversity

The MEK collection is the outcome of historically contingent ideas of diversity and difference. The main portion of the collection originated in the Museum of German Costume and Household Products, which was initiated by fears that industrial culture would erase the regional diversity of the countryside (Virchow 1890, Hartung 2010, Tietmeyer 2013). Vernacular objects such as clothing or crafts were classified as indicators of distinct regional, cultural landscapes (*Kulturlandschaften*). The aim was to collect the 'tangible folklore' of German peoples ranging 'from Tyrol to Schleswig-Holstein, from the Lithuanian border to the Flemings, from the Transylvanian Saxons to the Vasken Forest' (Jahn 1889: 336). This acquisition practice was embedded in the tradition of language island research (Sprachinselforschung), which explores how 'Germanic Sprachinseln (islands of German speakers), have clung tenaciously to the soil of their forebears even as the tides of German borders have ebbed and flowed around them' (O'Donnell et al. 2010: 1). Within this cultural island imaginary, the collection worked to showcase 'the various regions of Germany in the characteristic features of the population, in their clothing and in household products' (Jahn 1889: 337). Ideas of territorialised difference and regional diversity informed collection practices in the early stages museum and, as I show below, its successor institutions.

A key development took place in the 1930s, when the institution was relocated to the Bellevue Palace in central Berlin. Additional room in the palatial museum allowed the reorganisation of the collections and the introduction of modern conservation and storage practices. To improve collection documentation and care, the new thematic groups indicated the make and function of objects (Tietmeyer and Vanja 2013). Rather than cultural landscapes, the artefacts became grouped into subsections such as 'household and living', 'work and profession' and 'religion and cult'. Additionally, labels indicated the materials of the objects. New categories such as "Textiles and Jewellery" became divided into functional subsections such as domestic textiles, patterns and children's clothes. It was also during this period that the institution renamed itself the Museum of German Folklore and began to focus on nationalist themes. In 1935, the exhibition of German Peasant Art linked the collections to 'race and space, folk art and people's morals' and displayed archaeological records demonstrating two thousand years of ongoing German settlement

in Europe (Ausstellung Deutsche Bauernkunst 1935: 9). In line with the notions of folklore in Nazi Germany, particular interest was paid to expatriate Germans (*Auslandsdeutsche*) and ethnic German material culture (Tietmeyer and Vanja 2013: 389). Within the nationalist paradigm, the collection showcased the Germanness of the objects, highlighting their rural origins and their membership in the ethnic nationhood.

The museum's work was interrupted by the outbreak of Second World War. Despite various attempts to protect the objects, the museum lost up to 80% of its collection (Pretzell 1962: 108). After the war, the what remained ended up in separate museums in East and West Berlin. Both tried to make up for the war losses by soliciting public and private donations and finding objects equivalent to the lost artefacts, even if it meant shopping at flea markets. (Not surprisingly, many of the objects lacked proper documentation.) Post-war acquisitions reinforced the material-functional classification of objects, and focused on German-speaking territories and German language islands.

9.1 The Scottish section of the museum store retains some of the classifications used in the Ethnological Museum's European Department. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum of European Cultures, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
9.2 The museum library catalogue bears the material traces of the divided and ever-changing history of the institution. The catalogue still distinguishes between 'Island', 'Dahlem' and 'Europe' collections and retains the distinct numbering systems of the predecessor institutions. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum of European Cultures, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

The emphasis on retrieving lost collections became less pronounced in the 1980s. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, the museums refocused on collections representing life in the city and acquired several industrially-produced objects (Neuland-Kitzerow 2005: 156). (In East Berlin, this acquisition focus was part of the GDR's aim to create a record of working-class material culture (Hauptaufgaben 1978).) One example of the new focus was the shift in textile acquisitions. Prewar curators were interested in 'Sunday best' clothing rather than worn-out, everyday garments. By contrast, the post-war curators in the folklore museums in East and West Berlin were the first to collect day-to-day urban attire. The new object groups included pieces made with recycled fabrics and working-class fashions.

The acquisitions were accompanied by new levels of documentation that included descriptions of textile techniques and object biographies. For the first time, records also documented reasons for damage or repurposing. On both sides of the Berlin Wall, mu-

seums opened their collections to everyday visual culture with new acquisitions of non-professional photography, vernacular design, advertising and personal archives. This led to the creation of a more diverse record of urban material culture and new kinds of object data. At the same time, the reshaping of priorities brought about new distinctions within the collection. For instance, curators in the GDR lacked interest in 'bourgeois' material culture, resulting in a bias towards working-class artefacts in their urban collections.

In 1992, just a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the East and West Berlin museums reunited. In 1999, their collections became merged with of the European section of the Ethnological Museum (EM), which was located in Dahlem in what used to be West Berlin. The EM regarded Europe as composed of distinct ethnic, national and regional entities. The objects indicated the cultures of the 'Scots', the 'Italians' or the 'Sami'. The commercial collectors and traders of so-called ethnographica who had acquired many objects for the museum had recorded little information regarding provenance. What is more, because EM curators acquired objects based on their own geographical area of specialisation, large parts of the collection documented incremental changes in material culture within narrow areas of expertise (such as a series of Slovakian shirts showing local textile techniques).

Along with undocumented records of territory, community and culture (De Cesari 2017), the reunification brought to the new museum some of the missing, pre-war objects. As the boxes arrived from across the former Iron Curtain, many objects came without records. Some of those artefacts have been yet to be identified and continue to occupy the mysterious 'X' shelf in MEK storage. To find a coherent narrative for the partially unidentified and overlapping collection objects, museum curators opted for a thematic and comparative approach that reimagined the historical collection through a new, Europeanised lens (Früh 2014).

Ten years after the fall of the Wall, the institution was renamed the Museum of European Cultures, becoming part of the reunited State Museums of Berlin (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) and the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation (Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz). The MEK set out on a course that diverged from its preceding institutions:

> The name of the new museum may suggest that it will exhibit all of Europe's national cultures or even show all of Europe in its facets. Besides that claim being presumptuous, it is downright impossible to address all European cultural forms in their temporal, spatial and social dimensions. Rather, it will comparatively explore the commonalities and the differences in the diversity [*Vielfalt*] of European cultures (Karasek and Tietmeyer 1999: 19).[1]

As the statement suggests, museum made diversity (*Vielfalt*) and difference (*Unterschied*) as key concepts in the construction of a new institution. In its quest to understand European cultures, the museum did not want to represent all of Europe (De Cesari 2017) but to showcase a cross-section of topics:

> Tracing the diversity [*Vielfalt*] of these cultural phenomena across national borders, researching them in a comparative manner and documenting them through additional collections is one of the fundamental tasks of the Museum of European Cultures and will be the basis for future events and exhibitions. Particular emphasis

> is placed on the study of cultural contacts and the presentation of their effects and consequences, since it is the voluntary or forced encounters between people of different [*verschiedene*] cultures that have made Europe what it is today: Europe's shape is the result of different cultural contacts (Karasek and Tietmeyer 1999: 19).[2]

For the MEK, Europe was a sum of intertwined local and national cultures (Kaiser, Krankenhagen and Poelhs 2014: 30) linked by 'cultural contacts' through migration, trade, travel or media. The contacts were envisioned as building blocks of shared cultural affinities within Europe as a wider 'cultural whole'. Implicit in this new narrative of a Europe made from 'different cultural contacts' is its separation from 'non-European cultures' (außereuropäische Kulturen) (1999: 31):

> Despite its cultural diversity, [Europe] is characterised by an equal unity, which is decisively based on the Judeo-Christian religion. Through religious, social, economic and political relations, cultural contacts have been established in which the media—a means of transferring information—occupy a special position. Because of these interconnections, Europeans of different nations share common cultural traits (Karasek and Tietmeyer 1999: 13).[3]

In this formulation of difference, Europe is a 'community united by a common fate' (*Schicksalgemeinschaft*) in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Here, religious-cultural boundaries delineated what was held in common and what appeared as different. As de Cesari observes:

> This kind of strategic Europeanization did not fully purge the collection of its built-in biases—in particular, the enduring legacy of nineteenth-century academic and museum practices. Such a legacy is exemplified by the emphasis on Christianity, reflected in the large number of nativities that fill two exhibition rooms, as well as by the distinct cultural-geographic understanding of "Europe" embedded in the collection itself (de Cesari 2017: 28).

Much of these implicit categories were, as de Cesari notes, built into the historical collection.

The 2011 collection exhibition highlighted this new model of diversity and difference. The display used themes of travel, trade, media, fashion and food to illustrate points of cultural contact across Europe. One room used textiles to highlight identities and their geographical boundaries. A display case presented mannequins in various clothing styles— professional attire, uniforms, festive costumes—from a myriad of regions across Europe. At the back of the room, an art installation titled *The Europeans* presented an outfit stitched from fragments of maps, regional craft patterns and pop culture themes. Although the installation was meant to show that European identity was a construct, the majority of the objects perpetuated the idea of spatialised diversity and regionalism. Indeed, the exhibition's comparative cross-section of localised sartorial identity echoed the territorial taxonomies typical of the 19th-century *cultural landscape* (de Cesari 2017: 29). In 2019, the curators decided that the exhibition was no longer in line with current museum practice. They wanted to reimagine the museum's collections and address some of the inherent problems of comparing historical objects.

My interlocutors often stressed that the collections left them ambivalent, as the following statement from the What's Missing? conference shows:

> The historical collections are both a blessing and a curse: they form the basis of a museum's very existence, but they were originally collected under the paradigm of 'salvage anthropology', often according to national, regional and/or ethnic categories. Their historical narratives do not sufficiently represent current social developments or even complex, diverse pasts (Edenheiser 2020: 15).

For example, one MEK team member felt that diversity is a matter of perspective and that the collections still have an untapped potential for novel inquisitive approaches:

> We bring in diversity through our questions. And the collections themselves, as they were created at that time, are of course also diverse in themselves. But it also depends above all on the questions we ask. If I make an exhibition on the subject of sustainability…then I look at the objects that we have collected from people who made objects out of necessity, as in the postwar period, when goods were scarce. This famous steel helmet, which was then converted into a sieve, we have multiple objects like this. Or how clothes were mended because one had nothing else. So the variety depends on our questions and there are actually no limits. Because everyday life, culture, is already very diverse [*vielfältig*] in itself.

By contrast, historical collections can pose a curatorial stumbling block that forecloses on diversity. The curators frequently noted the challenge of providing insights into Europe's complex past from biased collections such as traditional folk costumes or Christian wax votive offerings. For example, the museum's pre-war collections mostly cover rural, German-speaking regions. What is more, provenance in the original 19th-century collection is patchy and the objects acquired from 'flea markets' after the war are undocumented. As one curator noted, 'What we are missing are the stories. We find them important now. A hundred years ago no one would have thought so'. Although the curator was aware of the historical reasons for the lack of documentary information, she still found it paralysing. Moreover, the separation of the museum into two institutions during the Cold War resulted in duplicates and gaps; many objects from East and West Berlin have gone unused. Quite a few objects were relegated to storage as obscure remnants of earlier curatorial preoccupations.

The MEK collections are, in other words, a veritable curate's egg. Their historical legacy brought specific epistemic categories framing the ways in which the objects have been understood and displayed (Bowker and Star 1999). These categories developed over time, ranging from cultural landscapes to ethnic, material and functional ideas of diversity and difference. Some of the collection's *Vielfalt* might feel outdated for contemporary curators. Some curators wanted to include queer diversity and other marginalised perspectives such as refugee and decolonial vantage points in the museum's social mission. But the legacy of the collections continues to shape museum practice as curators contend with unknown provenance, a sense that the objects have become irrelevant and worries that they will unintentionally reinforce old categories. As the 2011 show demonstrated, although work with the historical collection can go beyond established categories, it can also perpetuate the very framework that it wants to challenge (von Oswald 2019). The next

section explores the ways in which the curatorial team works to implement diversity at the institutional level and to address the problems of past collections. What can curators do to overcome outmoded categories and biases? Instead of provisional initiatives such as research projects and temporary exhibitions, which are often regarded as tokenistic (Aksoy 2020: 20), I focus on the museum's new Collection Concept.

Enabling diversity

Starting in 1999, the MEK began to introduce new approaches to acquisitions based on modern, participative principles (e.g. Karasek and Tietmeyer 1999, Tietmeyer, E., & Meijer-van Mensch 2013). Recently, those new approaches were enshrined in the MEK's Collection Concept, part of an institution-wide reckoning with the collections' gaps, biases and future possibilities. The Concept describes the MEK collections as a 'memory in which the diversity [*Vielfalt*] of European cultures and ways of life in the past and the present can be preserved for posterity' (Collection Concept 2019: 6). The museum is a depository of material and immaterial culture that makes visible past and present diversity. But as the Concept stipulates, the MEK collections must also be a driver of social change through participation, inclusion and stakeholder dialogue. They must initiate debates and provide insights into questions of European identity, now and in the future. As one curator emphatically put it:

> No longer do we want to collect and show how people used to live. That was a mistake in the past, it remains a mistake today and it will continue to be a mistake tomorrow. We are no longer positivistic. Those times are over. We are not encyclopaedic.

To meet the museum's new objectives, curators must perform regular reviews of the collections and determine what is missing in key areas. For example, the museum intends to supplement the craft objects in the historical collection with more artefacts documenting intangible cultural heritage. It also wants to fill gaps in the collections by introducing participatory acquisition and exhibition projects (Puzon 2019). Participation is at the heart of the museum's efforts to incorporate outside perspectives from external experts, community members and other stakeholders.

The Concept also calls for a 'significant leap' in efforts to document social developments and material culture over time amid a profusion of mass-produced artefacts (Macdonald and Morgan 2018). The museum wants to stop collecting entire series of objects and minimise incremental acquisitions. For example, the museum will no longer collect every type of mug for its collection of drinking vessels. Instead, it has decided to acquire the first recyclable coffee cup, which indicates a new practice. Other core elements of the Concept include deaccession, digitisation, more precise categorisation and a greater emphasis on intangible material culture.

The Concept lays out a list of specific criteria for proposed acquisitions. The first set of criteria concerns the acquisition's fit with the overall vision of the museum. The second defines benchmarks for the condition of new objects and the resulting conservation and institutional costs. The third set of criteria requires sufficient provenance data

and supplementary biographical information for any object it acquires. Finally, and most importantly, the criteria stipulate that communities and other stakeholders be actively engaged in the collecting process. The aim here is to foster a participatory model of acquisitions and prevent the creation of 'pet collections', that is, collections that are likely to be of more interest to the curator than anybody else.

In line with the historical collections, the MEK's current acquisition practice takes into account areas such as work and trade, religion, belief and ritual and visual culture. At the same time, the team has identified new themes that reflect pressing social issues. The new priorities include identity formation, Europe in a global context, sustainability and the relationship between culture and nature. In other words, new objects need either to correspond with existing key categories or advance new selected areas of interest. In this way, the Concept aims to shape the history of the collections and set a new plot line going forward.

Hastrup, while discussing the ways in which past experience affects the future, has argued that plots provide frameworks for action: 'It is a profound matter of responding-, response being made within a moral horizon and within a social context that we interpret and project forward as we go along' (2005: 11). Decision-making, in other words, responds to both the past and to an anticipated future. In this regard, the Concept provides a plot for the development of the MEK collection. But it also captures the fundamental ambiguity of distancing the museum from existing narratives. On the one hand, the collection is supposed to be enriched by new perspectives from a variety of stakeholders. Objects need to be forward-facing, moving through collection groups and responding to changing social contexts, so as to build accountability and social relevance into the museum's curatorial practice. On the other hand, the Concept is embedded in the infrastructure, ordering practices, routines and internal logics of existing holdings. At the same time, the Concept significantly limits the types of artefacts that qualify for a place in the collections. Although meant to include a diversity of positions, the Concept's 'plot space' privileges certain objects while precluding those that do not confirm to existing categories. Below I consider the MEK's decision-making in a few specific instances and the ways that the new procedures both go beyond and conserve certain institutional practices.

Injecting diversity

> Now every object is presented and discussed in our advisory circle. Only then do we say, yes, okay, we can acquire this. It is important that it doesn't proceed any other way.... Even trivial criteria play a role. We need to consider whether we have space for the object.

In an April 2019 meeting, the museum's curatorial team proposed a number of objects for the collection. The discussion began with two donations—sketches made by a famous illustrator and a commemorative coffee set. These were accepted because the sketches complemented the existing graphic and advertising collection, and the coffee set was considered a developmental leap—it represented the material culture of everyday commemorative elements for the First World War. The team then discussed a T-shirt and

other Brexit-related merchandise. The objects were accepted because they captured both the mundane and the commercial aspects of the Brexit public debate. They were a good fit with a collection linked to contested ideas of Europe and supplemented the Brexit collection, which included a DIY protest sign.

The next object up for discussion was Kraftwerk's Trans-Europe Express album. The curator who proposed it argued that it bore witness to the ways in which European nations were connected through transport infrastructure, capturing an emerging idea of Europe as a space in which, through trains or cheap flights, visitors can travel the Continent as a package experience. In contrast to the Brexit object or the commemorative coffee set, the album sparked controversy. One curator suggested that it is easier to find objects reflecting wider European issues at a local level. Another maintained that it is more challenging to acquire a truly Pan-European object. As the curatorial team considered other options, the discussion grew heated. One participant argued that European objects could not simply be defined as anything made in the EU because the MEK is not a museum of the European Union.

As the discussion continued, some offered proposals for alternative objects. One curator mentioned a fur coat that was already part of the collection. It was made with transnational techniques in a diverse community in Transylvania, taken abroad by migrants and reconceptualised in a diaspora community in Germany. Another noted that objects of war such as a gas mask from the First World War could be considered quintessentially European. Unlike the Kraftwerk album, the gas mask was part of everyday wartime life across the Continent. As the discussion proceeded, more and more questions emerged—how is the construction of Europe reflected by its material culture? Should the museum be collecting Interrail tickets instead of music albums? The conversation demonstrated that the category of Europeanness, as crucial as it is for MEK's acquisition practice, remained open to interpretation.

The album did not pass the MEK admission test because the majority of the team members believed that it was neither an everyday object nor sufficiently European. It was not clear how the object would accord with the collections and how would it be used in future exhibitions. As the group debated different examples, the discussion turned to another potential acquisition: an ivory silk wedding gown in the Wedding Dreams exhibition, which ran from September 2018 to July 2019. With a large bow on the chest, a ruffled border and long train, the dress was a centrepiece of the show. The wedding gown had initially been displayed at the Kunstgewerbemuseum as part of a collaboration between a high-street fashion retailer (H&M) and an Amsterdam fashion house (Viktor & Rolf). The piece bridged the domains of mass-produced fashion and crafted designer pieces and was considered an pop-culture masterpiece.

The MEK wanted to acquire the dress not as a designer outfit but as an example of Europeanness and the diversity of the European experience, immigration and global connectedness. The piece was bought by a French woman living in London for a wedding that took place in Las Vegas. Manufactured in Bangladesh for a Dutch designer and Swedish clothing brand, the object was a product of the global supply chain network on which Europe's fast fashion relies. The curator suggested that the dress stood out not only because of its unique story, but also because it documented how wedding rituals intersect with popular culture. As ideas of the dream wedding have evolved over time, the wedding

dress has shown the ever-changing patterns of markets and material culture, status aspirations and gender normativity. In this light, the dress represents a "leap" in the wider wedding attire category. Moreover, it speaks to the themes of global Europe, non-sustainability in the mass production of textiles and identity formation. Finally, the object met the main criteria of the Concept regarding provenance, biography and condition. As a result, the curatorial team agreed to go ahead with the acquisition.

According to the Concept, MEK collections must have the ability to address current and future questions of European identities (Concept 2019: 8). Objects such as the wedding dress and the Kraftwerk album allow us to explore how such a multiplicity of possible futures is imagined by the curators. In the case of the album, the group felt that its Europeanness was unclear. By contrast, the dress tells more than one story. It can contribute to multiple future exhibitions while creating different points of contact within the historical collections. The dress, in other words, occupies a clear place within the plot space of the Concept.

9.3 The wedding dress on display. Reproduced courtesy of the Museum of European Cultures, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

The deliberative practices on display in the above cases are meant to build consensus on new acquisitions and limit the influence of particular curatorial passions. Paradoxically, however, the MEK's consensus-driven approach might ultimately perpetuate a flattened idea of Europeanness (De Cesari 2017: 30). For objects that tick all the right boxes could end up being approximations of many things rather than strong statements about a particular issue or phenomenon. They could be the curatorial equivalent of eager-to-please diplomats that are unwilling to trouble, complain, disagree, disturb or make a stink. A practice that privileges a multiplicity of meanings and future uses could produce what Sharon Macdonald calls "diversity lite" (2018)— watered-down collections that stay

clear of more eccentric and controversial examples of material culture. (For more, see Macdonald in this volume.)

When it comes to diversifying the collections, then, the Concept might hurt as much as it helps. Requirements to fill gaps and make leaps might result in the rejection of material culture that lie outside the museum's existing holdings and categories of difference. At any rate, the criteria for new objects affords little space for radically different artefacts and experiences, potentially undercutting the museum's ambition to showcase marginalised 'lenses'. The ultimate outcome, however, will depend on the extent to which the team treats the Concept criteria as requirements or suggestions. Judging by the specific instances I discussed above, the Concept is likely to open up new avenues of diversity while foreclosing and sanitising others.

Anticipating diversity?

> By collecting objects from the present, we make the cultural history of the future. What do you call that? Anticipatory collecting.... Of course, we address present questions in the exhibitions...but the collections are for the future.

Given the uneven diversity of the collections and the long history of institutional changes and renamings, MEK curators have been careful in their decisions about what should be acquired and what should be preserved for the future. If past is prologue, then the museum for which they are collecting today might be an entirely different institution tomorrow. The subject of the museum's future triggered a host of hopes and fears among museum staff. One curator wanted to remove "European" from the museum's name and refocus on global contexts. She felt that the distinction between European and non-European cultures was artificial. Another curator told me that the MEK might be reinvented as a women's museum given the predominant role played by women in historical material culture and in the make-up of the curatorial team and museum visitors. A third curator presented me with what she believed was the worst-case scenario, namely the possibility that the MEK would become

> a museum for German folklore that is politically instrumentalised, because there are nationalist aspirations all over Europe and the basic idea of the museum is a very nationalist one. It would really be a nightmare if the political tides turned in such a way that someone would again regard the costumes and objects as a mark of German identity.

But she added that she didn't think she was ready to talk about the future. "I think that we are still at the beginning…like a butterfly that has just emerged from a cocoon." Although the metaphor seems to sound a hopeful note, the curator's worries about a nationalist future are bound up with Germany's past.

As Hastrup has argued, 'actions take place within a moral horizon and within a social context that we interpret and project forward as we go along' (Hastrup 2005: 11). However the collections develop, curatorial decisions will take place within their own moral horizon as they summon a new possible future. Just as worries about a vanishing future drove

early museum curators to acquire objects of traditional regional culture amid a rapidly industrialising countryside, the MEK's staff has worked to diversify its collections in an effort to stave off certain future scenarios while encouraging others. Injecting diversity into the collections may prevent the return of nationalism, and it is likely to correct past mistakes as it builds out neglected areas and centres those once marginalised. By diversifying its collections and pulling into them into the present, as it were, the MEK could even expand beyond its current scope and focus instead on sustainability or the entanglements of a global Europe. At any rate, all diversification activities are quintessentially future-oriented—be they preventative, corrective or aspirational.

Conclusion

For museums that have come to embrace social responsibility, diversification poses a major challenge. MEK curators understand how much is at stake in *what* is missing from the collections, and *who*. But diversification does not happen all at once. I have argued in this chapter that past ways of doing and undoing diversity can encumber diversification in the present. The MEK curatorial team, guided by the new Collection Concept, has worked to jettison outmoded forms of diversity (e.g. drawing differences along *ethnic* or *regional* lines) and introduce others, though my discussion of recent acquisitions indicate that efforts to diversify may remain ultimately reinforce some pre-existing categories of difference. Indeed, while the Collection Concept may improve transparency and reduce incrementalism, it could also result in a sanitised 'diversity lite' that perpetuates longstanding practices.

This raises wider questions about how everyday museum work is shaped by the future. Some recent studies have turned their attention to worry about the future loss of diversity and its effect on heritage practice. DeSilvey and Harrison (2020) argue that collections articulate forms of managing endangerment. This can be seen in the past accumulation of heritage material (e.g. salvage collecting) as well as in current attempts to tackle the challenge of material profusion (Morgan and Macdonald 2020). However, the case of the MEK demonstrates that collection diversification is also about responding to a museum's past and enacting different approaches for its future.

What can we learn from the MEK as we begin to address the bigger issue of doing diversity in museums? My ethnographic study shows that curators continuously lay the groundwork for a future that permeates their everyday decision-making and affects their ways of doing diversity. The decisions and non-decisions about which objects to acquire plant the seeds of different museum futures. As many museums seek to diversify, understanding their work requires insight into particular museum practices and initiatives and the broader temporal frameworks of specific collections. The success of diversification hangs in the balance of confrontations with the past and aspirations for the future.

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Notes

1 "Der Name des neuen Museums mag suggerieren, alle Nationalkulturen Europas auszustellen oder gar ganz Europa in seinem Facetten zu zeigen. Abgesehen von der Vermessenheit eines solchen Anspruches ist es geradezu unmöglich, alle europäischen Kulturformen in ihrer zeitlichen, räumlichen und sozialen Dimension zu thematisieren. Vielmehr sollten durch komparistische Verfahren die Gemeinsamkeiten, aber auch Unterscheide in der Vielfalt europäischer Kulturen verdeutlicht werden. Die Erklärung von kulturellen Zusammenhängen und Prozessen in Europa sowie den Folgen des Kulturkontaktes mit Außereuropa soll zu den weiteren Aufgaben des MEK gehören."

2 "Der Vielfalt dieser Kulturphänomene über staatliche Grenzen hinweg nachzuspüren, vergleichend zu erforschen und durch ergänzende Sammlungen zu belegen, gehört zu den grundlegenden Aufgaben des Museum Europäischer Kulturen, muss die Grundlage für künftige Veranstaltungen und Ausstellungen sein. Dabei wird auf die Erforschung von Kulturkontakten und der Darstellung ihrer Auswirkungen und Folgen besonders Gewicht gelegt, haben doch freiwillige oder erzwungene Begegnungen zwischen Menschen verschiedene Kulturen Europa erst zu dem gemacht, wie es sich heute darstellt: Europas Gestalt ist das Ergebnis von unterschiedlichen Kulturkontakten."

3 "Trotz ihrer kulturellen Vielfalt wird sie durch eine ebensolche Einheit charakterisiert, die maßgeblich auf der jüdisch-christlichen Religion basiert. Durch religiöse, soziale, wirtschaftliche und politische Beziehungen kommen bis heute Kulturkontakte zustande, bei denen die Medien – Mittel des Transfers von Informationen – eine besondere Stellung einnehmen. Aufgrund dieser Verflechtungen weisen die Europäer unterschiedlichen Nationen gemeinsame Kulturzüge auf."

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