



## **National Museums as Memorial Places The Goethehaus Weimar and the Foundation of National Museums in 19th Century Germany**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between national museums and memorial places dedicated to individuals. Taking the Goethe National Museum in Weimar as a starting point, we try to develop a new approach in understanding the type of museum designated as a “national museum”. First, we show that the name “Goethe National Museum” referred initially to Goethe’s house and in particular his study as the most important memorial site. The Goethe National Museum adopts a new type of “individual memorial place” – known in German as a “Personengedenkstätte” – that is established in a former residential dwelling. It is the only individual memorial place that was called a national museum in 19th century Europe. Drawing on this special case, it can be shown that national museums in 19th century Germany follow the model of memorial places dedicated to individuals. Neither the Germanic National Museum (1852), the Bavarian National Museum (1855), the Goethe National Museum (1885) nor the Schiller National Museum (1903) were founded with the primary aim of creating collections as it would be usually expected from other museums. Their aim was rather to appropriate or create a central place to remember the national past as a historical continuum, to represent the life and the deeds of persons connected with the national identity. The Goethehaus Weimar is a special case insofar as a real commemorative site forms the basis of this national museum. Our considerations are framed by the theory of society developed by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, who saw a correlation between the rise of the semantics of the nation and the shift to modernity occurring in most European societies during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We argue that these semantics are mapped to national museums in the form of memorial places.

## The Goethehaus Weimar – an Individual Memorial Place as National Museum

In the 18th century, the rulers of Weimar contrived to shape the town as a cultural center of international importance. They achieved their aim mainly by inviting outstanding intellectuals to live and work in the town. In 1775, Johann Wolfgang Goethe came to Weimar, after accepting an invitation by the young duke Carl August. The duke appointed him as a privy councillor and he became a member of the highest governmental authority. At that time, the town of Weimar was the capital of the small Duchy of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, which was part of the Holy Roman Empire. Later, in 1815, the dukedom was raised to the rank of a grand duchy at the Congress of Vienna. It became part of the German Confederation, a union of German states that was founded after the Napoleonic Wars.



Figure 1: Goethe's house at the Frauenplan in Weimar, © Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Photo: Jens Hauspurg.

Goethe lived in the house at the Frauenplan for about 50 years, and it was there that he died in 1832. The house is remarkable as it can be considered as an expression of Goethe's personality. He transformed the interior of the baroque building according to his taste. The front house was re-styled in a classicist manner. The staircase, the Yellow room or the Juno room were admired and described by visitors in their letters and memoirs. But during Goethe's lifetime, visitors were not allowed to see his private rooms – his study, the bedroom and the library in the rear part of the house. But it is precisely these private rooms that have been given the most importance by posterity. Immediately after Goethe's death, the Chancellor of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach, Friedrich von Müller, sealed Goethe's study so that no one – not even the family – was able to enter it without his permission.

In 1842, 10 years after Goethe's death, the writer Melchior Meyr (1810-1871), largely forgotten today, came up with the proposal to transform the house into a *Deutsches Museum*, a German Museum, in short into a national museum. The Prussian King, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, proposed the same idea to the German Confederation. The leaders of the Confederation then attempted to buy Goethe's house and found the first German national museum. Their efforts were unique in the spectrum of cultural undertakings and institutional creations across the Confederation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: although there was no united German state, this national museum was initially planned as a federal project, financed and maintained equally by all members of the German Confederation (Kahl 2011).

The attempt failed due to a very significant point. The heirs to Goethe's estate were willing to sell Goethe's extensive collections of art and natural history *but not* the house. This was, however, precisely the sticking point that was met with disapproval by the leaders of the German Confederation. They refused to buy the collections *without* the house. The 24-year-old Prince Carl Alexander, grandchild of Carl August and heir to the grand duchy, wrote a letter to Goethe's grandson in 1843, explaining the reasons behind the Confederation's refusal:

You have to admit yourself that, far more than the collections of a man, who, like your grandfather, belongs to the common good, the key point of interest for everybody is the *place* from where he gave free reign to the workings of his mind, and where his soul finally left this earth. Besides your grandfather's collections, the *place* must be taken into consideration as the most important thing. Of the whole building and the treasures therein, most sacrosanct of all is the *place* where his immortal mind reigned, the *place* where recollections of him accumulate most of all, where, more than anywhere else, the character of his mind in all its greatness emerges from the simplicity of the surroundings. By this I refer primarily to his study and the adjacent bedroom. (Baerlocher & Rudnik 2010: 447-48 emphasis added)

We see that the word "place" abounds in Carl Alexander's letter. It is clear that the house was not supposed to serve as the most suitable place to store and exhibit Goethe's collections of art and natural history, but first and foremost as a memorial site dedicated to the person of Goethe who was unanimously considered as a representative of the German "nation".

We are all familiar with commemorative sites to individuals in religious contexts, such as tombs in churches and cemeteries. This continues to be the usual way to commemorate death, even today. But by the 19th century, a new type of commemoration site came into being: the houses of great men. These individual memorial sites are always connected to a place, no longer the burial place, but a place where these persons were either born, lived, worked or died. From the middle of the 19th century, these new kinds of memorial sites began gradually fulfilling the criteria usually applied to museums, such as permanence, public access etc. But they do not necessarily rely on a collection. One thing they definitely rely on, however, is place.

The transformation of the houses of famous individuals into public and permanent memorial sites and museums was something new at the time. Since the middle of the 19th century, the homes of writers, composers, artists, scholars, politicians etc. have been opened to the public in many European countries, including Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Hungary, and Italy. These institutions were a sign of the shift to modernity that took place in Europe from the middle of the 18th century onwards. The transformation of stratified societies into functionally differentiated ones was deeply connected with the rise of the semantics of the nation (Luhmann

1997: 1045). Against this background, it is not surprising that it was mainly writers' houses that were established as memorial sites, due to the increasing significance that national speech communities placed on the most creative achievements in their respective languages.



Figure 2: Goethe's study, © Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Photo: Jens Hauspurg.

As no agreement could be reached between Goethe's family and the leaders of the German Confederation, the first German writer's house to be founded as a memorial site was not the Goethehaus. Instead, it was Schiller's house in Weimar. The house where the most famous German playwright spent the last three years of his life was transformed into a public memorial site in 1847: the first German writer's house of this kind. The difference between it and Goethe's house, however, is that Goethe's is the only writer's house in Germany that ever became a national museum. When Goethe's last grandson Walther died childless, he left the estate to the grand duchy, ruled by Carl Alexander, whom he had felt attached to since his childhood.

This meant that Grand Duke Carl Alexander could finally found the Goethe National Museum in 1885, 53 years after Goethe's death. But by that time, the German Confederation no longer existed. It was dissolved in 1866, and was followed by the foundation of the German Empire in 1871. The Grand Duchy of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach became a member of this federal empire. It may be interesting, incidentally, to note that Carl Alexander's sister, Augusta, was the wife of the German emperor, Wilhelm I. But for all that, the Goethe National Museum was not a museum supported and financed by the German Empire. The house was not officially raised to the status of a national museum by the emperor or the German state. When Grand Duke Carl Alexander decided to found a "Goethe National Museum", he acted independently, but with the certainty that no one would call that name into question. Once again, it seemed, the house was far more interesting than the collections. The original interior was reconstructed. Only the study had remained almost unchanged. What lies at the heart of the Goethe National Museum is not



the collection, but the inseparable *unity* of the collections with the house. Without this *real* place connected to a *real* person, the Goethe National Museum would have been unimaginable.



Figure 3: Goethe's bedroom, © Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Photo: Jens Hauspurg.

Today, it seems almost forgotten that the name “Goethe National Museum” once referred to Goethe's house alone. In 1935, a museum building was added to the Goethe National Museum and given financial support by Adolf Hitler (Kahl 2012). Ten years later, in 1945, its denomination changed and a distinction was introduced for the first time between “Goethe's house” and the “Goethe National Museum”, the latter name referring to the adjacent building of 1935. During the Socialist era, in the GDR, the denotation changed again. The “Goethe National Museum” comprised then almost all museums of Weimar, including Schiller's house. The confusion around the name is still ongoing, since the actual denotation of the name “Goethe National Museum” is hidden by the current usage, thereby also concealing the uniqueness of that museum among European national museums of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## The Semantics of the Nation

It has been pointed out that Goethe's house was the only writer's house in 19th century Germany to be designated as a “National Museum”. In fact, we could expand that statement further. It was not just the only writer's house, but the only individual memorial place and only residential dwelling to be called a “National Museum” in the whole of Europe in the 19th century. This is all the more remarkable when we take into account the number of expensive monumental buildings typically erected to house national museums in the 19th century.

The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann has pointed out that “nation” is not to be apprehended in an ontological sense but rather as a semantic phenomenon, a „socially available

sense that is generalized on a higher level and relatively independent of specific situations“ (Moeller 2006: 51). In the middle of the 18th century, the semantics of the nation were profiled as a concept of the future. In European societies they were used to found or legitimate those societies as nations. The “nation” was one of the transitory concepts that mediated the transformation of stratified societies into functionally differentiated ones (Luhmann 1997: 1045-55). According to Luhmann, the nation takes the ancient Greek polis as its model. But since modern societies are much more complex than those towns, they must “substitute the topographical memory with a printed memory” and substitute “the personally known elite first with the court and then with an elite only known through the mass media” (Luhmann 1997: 1053). We agree with Luhmann that the printed memory is a necessary condition for modernization. However, the architecture, the interior design and the collections in national museums indicate that the topographical memory was not completely replaced by a printed memory. The thesis of the mass media seems to be correct if we consider national museums as an unusual form of mass media. In that case they indeed represent the past and present elite of a certain society. This is also supported by the boom of national monuments in public spaces during the 19th century. The breakup of old social structures called for the creation of symbolic markers of the national identity appealing to the masses. The new type of memorials to specific individuals and national museums are results of this process.

Above all, the exterior and interior design of national museums indicate their topographical and prosopographical character. This can be seen most clearly at the Goethe National Museum, as a real place and a real person are its only reference points. In the case of the Goethe National Museum, the semantics of the nation connect the national museum and the memorial in one. This finding raises the question if we can find the same connection in other German national museums as well.

### **National Museums as Memorial Places**

The Schiller National Museum in Marbach am Neckar is a castle-like building with a Pantheon cupola. The cupola is an intentional allusion to the Pantheon in Rome as well as to the famous secular national memorial site in Paris. Although the Schiller National Museum was not founded on a real site linked with the person’s past, its founder nevertheless thought of it as a “hallowed memorial site” (Güntter 1948: 49). A collection of relics was the basis of the museum, objects that once belonged to Schiller, who, in the 19th century, assumed the status of a national saint. In 1909, “Schiller’s Room” was inaugurated, presenting original furnishings and belongings of Schiller and his family. This room looked like Schiller’s living room and remained in the museum for 50 years. The museum clearly aimed to simulate the new type of memorial site. In fact, the whole museum was thought of as an “ideal dwelling for Friedrich Schiller” (Kamzelak 2009: 17).

After the foundation of the Goethe National Museum failed in 1842, the Germanic National Museum was founded in 1852 at a conference in Dresden and was, as such, the first German national museum. It moved into an abandoned Carthusian monastery at the heart of Nuremberg. According to the intentions of its founder, Baron Hans von und zu Aufseß, the museum was supposed to serve as a general register of all sources concerning German history reaching back to the Middle Ages. In a hall, many tombs and sepulchral monuments were put on display, evoking the old type of memorials. For the chapel a large wall painting was commissioned from the

painter Wilhelm von Kaulbach, who specialized in historical subjects. The fresco that no longer survives was an imaginary depiction of the crypt of Charlemagne being opened by Emperor Otto III. Aufseß stated that no more accurate and beautiful allegory could ever have been bestowed on the Germanic Museum than this (Veit 1978: 23). Could this fresco already be considered as a kind of commemorative allegory concerning German history? The person who organized the large-scale memorial designs for the museum was August von Essenwein, its first director. In 1870, referring to the Hall of Tombs, he wrote:

The tombs are at the same time historical monuments. They demonstrate the memory of the great men, in parts their outer appearance. In them we meet the names and representatives of the great and powerful families. [...]; they show us the generals, the artists and scholars who breathed greatness into the name of Germany. The centrepiece of the series is constituted by the German kings and emperors [...]. In this field, we cannot limit ourselves to trace the developments in cultural history; we have to go further. This collection has to become a Walhalla in which the history of Germany and its great men is mirrored. (Kahsnitz 1977: 163)

This last comment gives us an idea of how the relationship between a collection of cultural history and the public memorial of private individuals shifted in favour of the latter, as far as the construction of the memory of important figures was concerned. The notion of “Walhalla” refers to a mythological place, the “hall of slain warriors, who live blissfully under the leadership of the god Odin” (The New Ency. Brit. 1998: 245). But “Walhalla” also refers to the impressive memorial site in Donaustauf near Regensburg that was first planned by the Bavarian King Ludwig I in 1807 and finally erected in 1842. It contained a collection of busts of famous historical figures who were believed to have played an important role in German cultural and general history.

The Germanic National Museum, however, was not only dedicated to the memory of the dead. The living also tried to create memorials for themselves. Noble donors mostly financed the construction of new buildings and their interior designs. They could thus immortalize themselves according to the “profane memoria” (Scheller 2004: 64) of medieval times. Large parts of the museum bore their names: the Ludwig’s cloister, Wilhelm’s Hall, the Wittelsbach Court, the Hohenzollern Hall etc. Donors were represented in those halls by means of their coat of arms or were portrayed, like Bismarck, in the “Bismarck window”. The Prussian king donated a window with a glass painting whose subject was the cornerstone ceremony for the monastery, attended by one of his forefathers (Bahns 1978: 367, 376). The museum became a site in which the glorious past of the Holy Roman Empire was remembered, but also a site in which the living, mainly members of the nobility, could ensure their memory for the future generations.

By comparison, the Bavarian National Museum in Munich was founded in 1855 by King Maximilian II. It was modelled on the Musée d’histoire in Versailles and the Musée de Cluny in Paris. The museum contains an outstanding collection of historical artefacts, relics of Bavarian history. However, the core of the museum was not formed by this collection, but the *unity* of the collection with a Historical Gallery containing a series of 143 large frescoes showing scenes from Bavarian history (Glaser 1997). Ordered by the king himself, these frescoes were supposed to illustrate the great historical narrative of the Bavarian nation, constructing a memory of successful Bavarian regency over almost 1000 years. In an almost aggressive way, members of the

Bavarian dynasties were put at the center of the compositions (Glaser 1997: 43). The commemorative intention here clearly revolved around real people. This can also be seen in parts of the exterior design, in which statues of real historical figures served as allegories: Ferdinand Count Arco, for instance, stood for loyalty, and Georg Sebastian Plinganser for patriotism (Murr 2006: 20).

When the Bavarian National Museum moved to another site in 1900, the museum lost its huge commemorative narration of the national past. Of the four museums, the Bavarian National Museum is probably the one least related to the idea of a memorial dedicated to individuals. What they all have in common, though, is their role in constructing the memory of real historical figures.

## Conclusion

In the four cases presented, national museums follow the model of memorial sites while other types of museums (e.i. museums of art or natural history) do not. This is due to the need that society felt to embody the semantics of the nation in persons and places. The difference between the Goethe National Museum and the other three museums is that the first represents the new type of memorial site to a real individual (“Personengedenkstätte” in a residential dwelling), and that the three others partially simulate memorial sites, either of the old or the new kind, or both. It seems that these museums, either right at their foundation or soon afterwards, put emphasis on the preservation or creation of a memorial site that represents the nation and displays memories of the national past, while the collections are related or even adjusted to this memorial intention. If there is some truth in this argument, then the next step would be to make a comparison on an international level.

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