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The Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg: The Cultural Memory of a Nation without National Borders

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Germanisches Nationalmuseum

Abstract

The Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg showcases and researches German-speaking culture. Its foundation in 1852 was based on the conscience of unity of a nation that was characterised by a common language and culture, but lived in numerous separate states. It is thus a Germanic and not a German museum, since it concerned and still concerns itself with German culture beyond political boundaries. The task of the institution was therefore not to present the political or even military history of a state-nation. Instead, its aim was to relate vividly and communicate visually the social and cultural life of the German population in middle and middle-eastern Europe in the past. This aim has not changed until today, but it remains a major challenge to the visualization of cultural history and the idea of nation at the museum.

In the first half of the 19th century, an epoch of growing national statehood, the aspiring German bourgeoisie began to dream of a German nation-state, the model for which was provided by Britain, France, Spain and other European states. The revolution of 1848/49 was supposed to achieve democratic unification of Germany's many small particular states. Although that unification effort failed, involvement with the idea of the nation as a whole was kept alive within the cultural and historical domains. One of the intellectual protagonists of this movement was the Franconian nobleman Hans von und zu Aufseß (1801--1872). He repeatedly undertook efforts in this direction (fig. 1). In 1852 he was finally successful in having a motion passed in the Congress of German Historians and Antiquarians to establish a Germanic Museum. Just a year later the new establishment was recognized as a "national undertaking" by the German Federal Assembly in Frankfurt. From this time it was referred to as the Germanisches Nationalmuseum.



Figure 1: Hans von und zu Aufseß, the founder and first director of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in armor (second half 16th c.) and with crossbow (ca 1650). Photo by Johann Jacob Eberhardt in 1864 (© Germanisches Nationalmuseum).

Its foundation was grounded in the consciousness of unity provided by the idea of a nation characterised by a common language and culture but as yet distributed in numerous separate states: the different German states, in the Habsburg Empire, Switzerland, in Alsace, the eastern parts of the French Empire, in the Baltic States parts of the Russian Empire, in Romania and so on. So it came to be as a 'Germanic' and not a 'German' museum, in as much as it concerned – and still concerns – itself with German culture beyond national boundaries, from Schleswig to South Tyrol and from Alsace to Transylvania. Its aim was to collect and make accessible comprehensive knowledge about history, literature and art of the German speaking regions in Middle Europe. The purpose of such a "German national museum" was to document the German-speaking world, which though in a state of extreme territorial fragmentation, was recognised as possessing a unified cultural heritage. The task of the young institution was not therefore to present the political or even military history of a non-existent nation-state, nor was it to form a splendid collection of fine arts. Instead, its aim was to relate vividly and communicate visually the social and cultural life of the German people in the past. This concept led the burgeoning institution to seek out relics of the past providing cultural-historical testimonies to the cultural conditions of life, in order to consider the question of what united the Germans as Germans.

From the beginning Nuremberg was favoured to become the future museum's setting. The city had stood in the centre of the German Empire for more than five hundred years. And from Romantic period onwards it was praised as the typical German medieval town. So in 1857 the museum moved into the former Carthusian Monastery in the old town of Nuremberg. The basis for the museum was provided by Aufseß' private collection. However, many other private individuals, communities, regional aristocrats and governments from the Netherlands to Austria and from Switzerland to the German speaking enclaves in Eastern Europe also responded to calls for support contributing with financial support and in other cases historical objects.

Aufseß' priorities were, on the one hand, a well stocked library and a comprehensive collection of archival records and, on the other, such articles of daily use as were generally neglected in most contemporary museums.

The historical connection of the museum's assignment corresponded to the collection's presentation in a medieval monastery. In 1859 Aufseß commissioned, the then highly reputed artist, Wilhelm von Kaulbach, to paint a monumental fresco for the former Carthusian church. This commission was a reflection of the agenda pursued by the museum's founders. It portrayed Emperor Otto III opening Charlemagne's crypt in Aachen cathedral. It can be seen as an allegory of the museum's objective, to descend into the depths of history, shining the "torchlight of science" onto the splendour of the old empire. They intended to use the collection as testimonials to German culture in order to help compile a clear picture of the great age of the German nation; the later being principally recognised as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

There were specific criteria outlining how cultural history was to be presented in the museum. For example, a "weapons hall" was not only intended to house collections of weapons and armour, but also contained altar figures of aristocratic and knightly saints, which were to epitomise the figure of the knight. The "women's hall" featured all kinds of elements connected with domestic life. For indeed as one member of the museum's staff, August von Eye, stated in 1855 the reason behind this was that when it comes to illustrating history, "old pots and pans

[are] just as eloquent as are much admired masterpieces of art.” (quotation source). In a “picture hall”, works of fine art were presented not as art, but as reproductions of past reality. For instance, a fountain figure served to document farmers’ customs and rural life.

A display of what was considered to be the apogee of German cultural history, primarily in the form of sculptures, paintings and plaster casts was established in the former Carthusian church (fig. 2). It included copies of the tombs of Henry the Lion and his wife from Brunswick and casts of busts found in St Vitus’ Cathedral in Prague that had been purchased in 1857, depicting members of the family and royal household of Emperor Charles IV. Shortly afterwards, King George V of Hanover donated the casts of the “Brunswick Lion” and the Pillar of Christ from Hildesheim Cathedral to the cause, thus using important sculptural monuments to document the Guelphs’ powerful position in the medieval empire. Accordingly, the Carthusian church took on the character of a hall of fame of German history. It was of course impossible to portray the cultural history of a nation without that nation's important dynasties.



Figure 2: Germanisches Nationalmuseum. Display in the former Carthusian church. Photo ca 1879 (© Germanisches Nationalmuseum).

Although Aufseß's successor August Essenwein (1831--1892) made some modifications to the museum concept, he did not change this core aspect. Indeed, as of 1866 he gradually started to extend the Carthusian monastery in Nuremberg to create an extensive neo-medieval museum complex. Donations from the kings of Bavaria and Prussia, from the Emperor of Austria and other German princes, the establishment of the German Empire in 1871 and grants from the new national government as of 1874 provided a good financial basis for this expansion. Over the next decade, the renovated cloisters received some 250 casts from the tombs of German rulers, generals and clerics, academics and artists from medieval times and Renaissance, some of them were even embellished in colour in imitation of the originals (fig. 3). Gravestones, such as that of King Günther von Schwarzburg in Frankfurt Cathedral and those of archbishops and arch-chancellors Peter von Aspelt and Siegfried von Eppstein in Mainz Cathedral, were used to present historic personalities, further examples being the grave of the poet Conrad Celtis in Vienna and the gravestone of the jester Til Eulenspiegel in Mölln. The concept behind this was one of a Valhalla, a temple for the cult of great men. Moreover, the collection thus represented a unique, three-dimensional compendium of the greatest artistic achievements in German sepulchral sculpture.



Figure 3: Germanisches Nationalmuseum. Cloisters of the former Carthusian monastery with plaster casts of tombs of famous Germans. Photo by Carl Leidig in 1895 (© Germanisches Nationalmuseum)

Additionally, a building inaugurated in 1880 was also dedicated to exhibiting the cultural history of a nation as a display of artistic achievements, presenting plaster casts of Romanesque and Gothic sculptures and reliefs. The building itself had also been constructed in the Romanesque and Gothic styles, while a number of its halls were decorated with copies of medieval mural paintings. Everything of distinction from the history of German Medieval and Renaissance sculpture was represented in this building. The external emblem of this sculptural encyclopaedia of plaster copies was a concrete cast of the Bremen Roland (fig. 4). As was the case of the other plaster casts, this was also a gift; a sculptural symbol of civic pride and freedom, the

cast was financed by the citizens and captains of Bremen in the years 1879-80. The Prussian and Bavarian railways agreed to transport the statue to Nuremberg free of charge.



Figure 4: Germanisches Nationalmuseum. So called Reichshof-Building with the concrete cast of the Bremen Roland (destroyed in 1968). Photo ca. 1890 (© Germanisches Nationalmuseum).

In order to achieve a fitting representation of the nation's history as a linguistic and cultural community, it was necessary to provide the visitor with the following elements set in an appropriate architectural setting (fig. 5): a) references to the names of historic personalities, b) top-class works of fine arts.



Figure 5: Germanisches Nationalmuseum. The new buildings from time around 1880. Photo taken in 1902 (© Germanisches Nationalmuseum).

However, to complete the narrative of this panorama of cultural history, the decision was taken to also include the visual depiction of significant historical events. The stained glass windows, which formed a key architectural component of the new museum's building, offered a particularly good frame for this. Glass paintings from a 17-part cycle illustrating the “most important moments from the history and cultural life of the cities” were designed to this end. These historical images display, for instance, important battles and the coronations of rulers as well as the laying of the foundation stone for Cologne Cathedral and scenes from the Nuremberg merchants' spice trade.

Around 1900, another extremely important element was added to the items on display at the museum: rural life. Even though the museum had taken the view that artisan craftsmanship was the basis of cultural development and had illustrated its significance using pertinent testimonials before this time. Rural culture had come to be recognised as independent and representative of its own values. Rapid changes in society due to industrialisation and nascent urbanisation aroused interest in what was known as “popular culture”. The museum looked to the rural past for models of how people used to live and work in bygone times. Taking impetus from the presentation of traditional, regional households at the world fairs of the late 19th century, the museum established a collection dedicated to rural dwellings. Entire interiors were bought up to present country life – from the North Sea islands to Lower Saxony, the Lower Rhine region to the Tyrol, including Switzerland and western Bohemia – thus offering typical examples of the

traditional lifestyle of the Germans including the Germans in Austria, Bohemia, Switzerland and the eastern enclaves in Hungary, Romania and Russia.

The acquisition of a comprehensive collection of folkloric costumes was based on similar objectives. Opened in 1905, this section comprised 370 figurines, primarily showing garments for celebrations and weddings but also traditional mourning dress and children's clothing from the most important areas in the German-speaking countries, from the western Low Countries and Alsace to Pomerania and Transylvania (fig. 6). Each of these traditional costumes represented a particular region. The collection was thus a three-dimensional compendium of stereotypes. It was a monument to agricultural life seen through the nostalgic eyes of its time, showing a world where farmers represented the venerable providers of food and goods for the people and constituted the backbone of the nation. The traditional costumes were synecdoche of the entire nation, symbolizing the “personified nation” and all the peoples that it was made up of. And since these went far beyond the boundaries of the German Empire (Reich) at its time, it is an outstanding example of the museum’s concept, a concept of a nation that retained its essence, unbroken by any state frontiers.

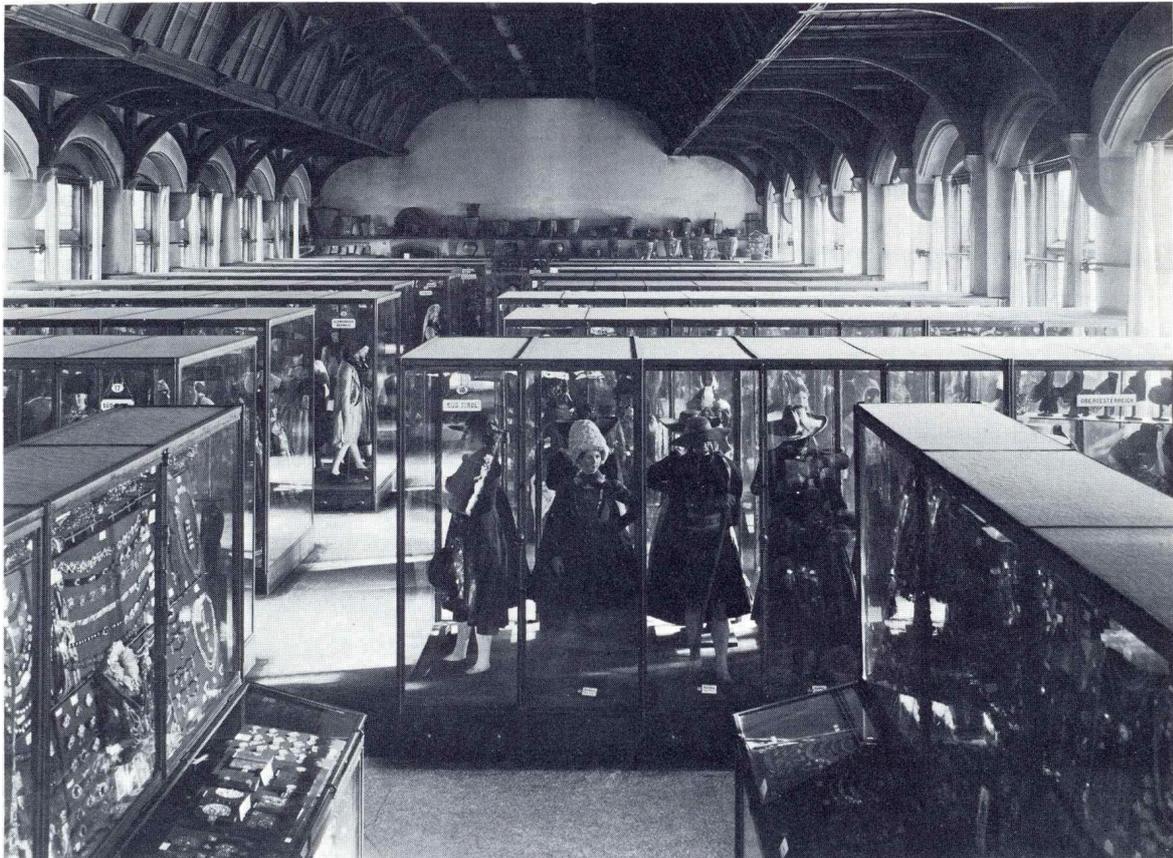


Figure 6: Germanisches Nationalmuseum. Collection of traditional folkloric costumes. Display opened in 1905 Photo ca 1933/34 (© Germanisches Nationalmuseum).

Although, after the end of the First World War this section remained untouched, displays in place since the 19th century and portraying various eras through a combination of all kinds of material culture, were dismantled. The most significant change was the separation of fine art from all the other artefacts. Great emphasis was placed on the tendency to see art as a valid

expression of national identity, not least by means of special exhibitions of the work of great German artists. It was not until the mid 1930s that attempts were made – in a succession of 14 rooms and by making use of all genres – to return to a chronological so called “survey of the masterpieces of art and culture from the Migration Period to the 30 Years War”. This ambitious project presented the above-mentioned period – including the Middle Ages – in accordance with the spirit of the times, in a Nazi and anticlerical perspective, as a completely secular era. Its very title was evidence to its simplification of culture, dividing it into two categories, fine arts and arts and crafts. Significantly it referred back to the principal which from the start refused to see the history of the German nation as the history of a geographical state. Therefore the fundamental aims of a museum whose focus had always transcended objective national boundaries entered into a marriage with the mindset of the time, a conviction of Germany’s potential as a superpower, in a fusion of the museum’s historic mission and Nazi ideology that was as subtle as it was sinister.

This can be demonstrated by looking at one particular display, that of the sculpture collection’s most attractive works: the larger than life-sized figure from the tomb of Count Henry III of Sayn alongside his daughter from the Monastery (Premonstratensian) Church of Sayn near Koblenz. As the largest extant wooden grave figure and the first known representation of a parent alongside its child in Germany’s sepulchral sculpture, it is one of the superlative examples of 13th century German sculpture. But in the 1937 Nuremberg exhibition, it was positioned as the centrepiece of a sequence on the culture of the German knight (fig. 7). The work was the uncontested highlight in a gallery labelled “The German Knight”. Commenting on the other exhibits, the museum guide referred to it as the “most valid and noblest formal expression of the knightly type” of men.



Figure 7: Germanisches Nationalmuseum. Look into the display of Medieval Culture in 1937 with the Tomb of Duke Heinrich III. von Sayn. Photo 1937 (© Germanisches Nationalmuseum).

After the Second World War the museum consciously distanced itself from this kind of ideological appropriation of artefacts of cultural history. The severely damaged museum was deliberately reconstructed along Modernist lines with Bauhaus architect Sep Ruf (brought in to complete the project). The public collection addressed predominantly themes of form and style in the development of art. As a natural consequence this led to a decisive move away from its reflection upon the concept of the nation. In terms of financing, contributions and general identification, connections between Germany and other German-speaking countries (nations) and regions were severed following the defeat of Hitler's Germany, even more drastically so than during the period after the First World War. The Austrians and the Swiss, for example, could not or did not wish to see themselves represented as "being German" by the Germanisches Nationalmuseum. At the same time, the political establishment of the newly formed Federal Republic still felt that the museum should be dedicated to a representation of the complete, undivided nation. Here they were of course primarily referring to those parts of eastern Germany which were now either in Russian hands, had been forcibly relinquished under the terms of the peace treaty with the Allied forces or from which the German population had been deported. This led to the installation of so-called "memorials to the home country" between 1950 and 1965, intended to create a "national archive" for the cultures of those groups of German people who had been expelled from the Eastern parts of the country (fig. 8). These halls, holding cultural artefacts from Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia, Bohemia etc., greatly enhanced the existing collection, increasing also its impact on a national-political level. Consequently, the museum was assigned the role in cultural policy of acting as a "refuge for the German soul", which it would retain for approximately the next 15 years. It seems that in this context the nation was defined through its territorial and cultural losses.



Figure 8: Germanisches Nationalmuseum. So called Memorials to the Home Countries. Look into the display for German culture in western Bohemia and Silesia. Photo 1952 (© Germanisches Nationalmuseum).

Incidentally, there have been various attempts in the institution's history to give the museum's collection a stronger nation-state orientation, though such efforts never lead to a permanent change in attitude. One example would be the museum's acquisition in 1866 of remnants from the dissolution of Germany's first parliament in St. Pauls Church in Frankfurt, i.e. historical documents of great national importance. Nevertheless, up until today, the museum's collections and research have continued to concentrate on the German nation beyond historical state borders. As has always been the case, living up to this principle can prove rather problematic. However, in past decades several temporary exhibitions focused on themes of cultural history in German-speaking regions have taken up this challenge. In addition, the permanent collection has been subject to successive alterations and changes with the intention of creating an overview of the respective eras of cultural history. And now in a period of European unification, the Germanisches Nationalmuseum is continuing in its task to clarify issues surrounding the national character. But now more than ever before cultural connections between the German culture and that of their neighbours, the interaction between these cultures and their mutual influence on each other constitutes a prominent part of the public's interest in the museum's collections and displays.

The basic aim of the museum has not changed from the beginning until today in general. That's why the Deutsches Historisches Museum was founded in Berlin in 1987: to create a national museum of history of the German states. This new institution is committed primarily to the political history of a sovereign state, the Federal Republic of Germany and their predecessors, but not to the cultural history of a nation, that defines itself by its language.

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