Every text has its own story – longer or shorter depending on circumstances. ‘The Spirit of Europe’ is an article I wrote for the first issue of the Comparative European History Review Comparare, which was published in 2001 in the context of a European Union Culture 2000 project carried out by the European Council of History Museums. The Comparare article was in its turn based on a text generated by the European Museum Forum (EMF) Workshop held in 2000 at the University Centre of Bertinoro, Italy.

The EMF workshops programme began in 1996. A typical workshop gathers about 40-50 museum professionals from all over Europe (generally not less than 18-20 countries are represented) to discuss a topic intensively for three days. The topic has a European dimension and the aim is to produce a final document in the form of ‘Conclusions’, which are presented to the Committee on Culture and Education of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and disseminated to museums all over Europe. The methodology of the workshop is based on free discussions coordinated by experienced discussion leaders who are able to stimulate a fruitful exchange of views using different methods: brainstorming, in-depth analysis of case studies, interviews with experts, comments on selected readings, open question discussions etc.
The ‘Conclusions’ report reflects this approach. It is an open document which raises questions, offers food – sometimes controversial – for thought, and produces statements and guidelines for further action. It can be fruitfully used for other seminars and training programmes as well as a platform for discussions with academics, experts, politicians and decision-makers interested or involved at any level of the subject. (It is also published on the Council of Europe and the European Museum Forum websites:
http://assembly.coe.int/Museum/e\index.htm
www.europeanmuseumforum.org.)

The subject of the EMF workshops in 2000 seemed to me particularly appropriate for *Comparare*: it focused on the crucial question of the features of so-called European cultural identity and on the role played by museums in its definition and development. It raises more questions than answers and now, almost four years later, some of the answers offered should be expressed in different language and in a different way. But this is not important; what is important are the problem areas identified and the attempt to place museums in the changing European cultural scene.

The political and cultural geography of Europe is changing rapidly, as is the European museum landscape. This process of change is brought home to us every year through running the European Museum of the Year Award scheme which is still (thanks also to the support of the Council of Europe and the patronage of Queen Fabiola of Belgium) the most successful part of the Europen Museum Forum activity. It involves scrutinising some 1,500 museums in an area that covers the whole of Europe, from Portugal to Russia, from Turkey to Iceland. In such a changing arena, some of the statements produced for ‘The Spirit of Europe’ have become obsolete; others are still valid and useful. But what is important is the ‘spirit’ of this document, which in some European circles has already been defined as the ‘Spirit of Bertinoro’: a sense of belonging, a sense of mutual understanding, a deep interest in new trends and old traditions that sometimes conflict and sometimes integrate fruitfully. I hope that this article and the document from which it originated could be of some use to others when approaching the preliminary questions about the meaning of a European cultural action and the role of museums in it.

**Europe as a dynamic concept**

‘In the last decades the term “Europe” has been adapted to different changing realities. The usual geographical borders have been crossed and a multiplicity of organisations has grown up defining different kinds of “Europe”.

‘The oldest European organisation – the Council of Europe, founded in 1949 – now comprises 41 member states (about 25 before 1989), which are still only a part of the continental area. With the enlargement of the Council of Europe membership at the beginning of the new millennium, Europe stretches from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the Arctic to the Mediterranean.'
‘In the meantime, other European organisations have grouped together various states from the geographical area of Europe into different forms of mutual cooperation. The European Union for example gathers together 15 countries, while the Euro or Schengen communities include only a part of them. Another group of countries are involved in UEO (Western European Union).

‘Some states belong at the same time to all of these, others only to some. Others again are still waiting to be part of some form of more structured cooperation scheme.

‘In conclusion we all belong to Europe, and the idea of Europe has become a “dynamic concept” with the status of European citizenship having to be adapted continuously.’

This is the incipit of the ‘Conclusions’ of the 5th European Museum Forum (EMF) Workshop, organised as usual in Italy, in autumn 2000. The first comment deals with the fast growth of the concept of Europe in recent times. People who were ‘others’ in the accepted idea of Europe, say, ten years ago, are now part of the family, although often in the difficult position of newcomers. Siberia is politically part of Europe, as Russia is a member of the Council of Europe (from our point of view it is of particular interest, for instance, that Russia has signed the European Cultural Convention). Thus a territory which has traditionally been seen in Europe as ‘Asian’ has now become closer. Turkey was a founding member of the Council of Europe after the Second World War. This helps to put into perspective Turkey’s request to enter the EU. It is another example of a part of Asia that wants to be ‘more European’. We cannot ignore this aspiration in cultural terms. And an Italian political group has recently launched the idea of offering Israel entry into the EU in an attempt to put an end to conflict with Palestinians (and Israel has for a long time been part of ‘Europe’ within UNESCO, for political reasons). Again, culturally speaking this is a meaningful sign, apart from any political evaluation of the proposal itself.

As the borders of Europe enlarge and the concept of Europe changes, the idea of ‘others’ is being redefined. People who were ‘others’ are becoming ‘us’, although confronted with some resistance and hostility. It seems that the idea of ‘others’ is becoming subject to a continuous process of redefinition, and that this a cultural and psychological process to which modern human beings are not yet accustomed. There was something similar, perhaps, in the past, when regions or towns passed from one kingdom to another in an endless series of conflicts and diplomatic negotiations that continually reshaped European political geography.

Individual and collective reactions to this process are strictly related to cultural matters in the broadest sense of the word. If ‘we’ are the Europeans, for instance, the ‘others’ are non-Europeans.

But what this means in practical terms is more difficult to express. As Kenneth Hudson used to say: ‘When we are in the United States, we all feel European, but when we are in Europe what does this mean?’ The concept of Europe and European culture is hard to define in this context, and perhaps it
is more correct to say that there is a demarcation line defined by ‘a sense of belonging’ to a common European civilisation, with its own specific features, that has produced a vast common heritage. This sense of belonging is spreading all over the continent, often driven more by opposition than by positive acceptance, but Europe is undeniably the scenario for the cultural behaviour and cultural initiatives that a variety of actors are increasingly introducing onto the stage.

Local cultures, which can be seen as the pillars of a possible future European culture, are strictly connected with the European heritage. This heritage is made up of monuments, sites and historic objects, as well as memories, ways of living, working, eating, etc. Local and European culture can be in conflict, but they cannot ignore each other. We have spoken of a vast common heritage produced by a common European civilisation. But when we speak about cultural heritage, we inevitably enter the area of museums. European cultural heritage is reflected in the European museum landscape, a mirror of a situation in constant flux.

**Museums and the reshaping of Europe**

This is the title of the second section of the final document produced by ‘The Spirit of Europe’ EMF Workshop. I think that the introductory statement is worth considering:

‘Museums as cultural institutions with a special direct relationship with local communities and with a great variety of stakeholders must play a crucial role in the building of Europe. In an era of rapid and deep changes, museums, being the keepers of the patrimony, have to face new challenges and users’ requirements. Museums can function as crossroads or gateways, tools to cross borders and to cross cultural and political walls.’

The essence of this statement is that museums can be identified as agents of special significance in the process of reshaping Europe for two reasons:

- their mission is to preserve cultural heritage and to make it accessible to the people
- the variety of their stakeholders gives them a special role in terms of cultural and social influence.

In this context ten questions for the present and the future role of European museums were formulated, together with some possible answers.

1. **How can museums work effectively in order not to create new boundaries but to stress communication?**
   By stressing their role as meeting places and heritage conservation institutions; by also becoming welcoming places for visitors from other countries with different social and cultural backgrounds.

2. **How can museums help to alleviate the most common fears of Europeans facing the unknown?**
   By stimulating discussions; helping creativity; providing educational experience; showing different cultures. Museums can make people familiar
with other cultures.

3. How can museums help to trace the origins of European culture?
By helping people to understand the reasons for the diversity of cultures in Europe through communicating with the ‘power’ of the objects and the contents of the collections.

4. How can museums promote mutual understanding in practice between institutions and the communities to which they belong?
By finding new strategies and involving all the actors and stakeholders.

5. Which basic strategies could help practical advancement in building up a European Museum Community?
Museums have to be persuaded of their crucial role; a new kind of political marketing is needed; there should be cooperation between museums from different countries.

6. What are the basic guidelines that all museums who feel actively involved in the reshaping of Europe should follow in their future communication policy with the next generations of European visitors?
Try to meet visitors’ communication needs and be aware of the social responsibility of museums.

7. How can we together (by means of EMF) improve the accessibility of European funds?
By small high-quality projects; by making authorities aware of what museums are doing in the social field; by making money available directly to local authorities.

8. What role can websites play in attracting virtual visitors from all over Europe?
There is a real need for European websites, ie websites designed for the European public in terms of content (language, information areas of interest, etc).

9. Is the idea of ‘European Rooms’ or ‘European Corners’ in our museums a serious and practical proposition? And in what sense could this contribute to a better understanding between Europeans and between European museums?
The debate revealed the need to create a pilot project for a network of ‘European Corners’ in museums. Some museums subscribed to this project in cooperation with the Istituto Beni Culturali in Bologna. A list of museums which have volunteered to be part of this programme has been compiled. The pilot project could well be virtual as well as physical.

10. To what extent and in what way could our presentation of objects be affected by this new European dimension?
There is a need for new communication strategies, both in terms of content and means of communication (multicultural and multilingual approaches). Clarifying unity in diversity must be seen as the (social) responsibility of museums and will determine the ‘public quality’ of a museum in the
The EUROEDULT project, of which more elsewhere in this publication, focused on the major training needs of European museum staff for an effective transnational action programme. An essential part of EUROEDULT was piloting training modules involving educators and museum staff from various countries for several months. When dealing with training at a transnational level, one of the main problems is the selection of appropriate didactic material. It has to get to the heart of the problems, be easy to communicate and, possibly, already tested. It is not easy to gather this sort of material. It is one thing to select readings for individual work or small-group analysis, or to structure a unit with a given amount of basic information, a methodological framework, tools for exploring a subject in depth, a set of study cases, etc. It is quite another to interest and motivate a group of people with extremely varied linguistic, professional, generational and cultural (in the broadest sense of the word) backgrounds. Trainers often have to build up their own material almost from scratch. This was partly the case when I was asked to contribute to the EUROEDULT pilot framework.

The first step of my strategy was to build up a truly European environment, where our ‘students’ could find themselves at ease, but at the same time to introduce a sense of challenge – that ‘drive’ which is essential in any workshop that really ‘works’. My valuable experience of coordinating EMF workshops from their inception (which involved dealing with a variety of subjects and a variety of participants year after year) prompted me to introduce in part some of the EMF themes and methods into the EUROEDULT framework. My task was to open our participants’ minds to a European perspective, to make them feel part of a dynamic scene in which museums are crucial actors and have to follow a never-ending process of adaptation. This text proved a useful starting-point for group discussions and for subsequent individual comment and analysis.

It is interesting to note that there is a constant worry about respecting diversities, which are identified as one of the main features of the European cultural context. Tolerance, acceptance and recognition were the three key words for any action in this field. But a fourth term was added – ‘reconciliation’. This term implies more than the in some sense ‘passive’ goal of accepting each other and each other’s differences. ‘Reconciliation’ is the result of an active process; it could be defined as a cornerstone in outlining an ‘assertive approach’ to the management of cultural differences.

All this gives museums new responsibilities in shaping the future forms of European citizenship. At present the general perception of European citizenship has been mostly based on economic and legal factors, and partly also on political factors. Now, freedom of travel, easier communications and the effects of globalisation are prompting the cultural aspects of the reshaping of Europe, which have so far been neglected. Museums as special places for lifelong learning could definitely be more effectively involved in establishing a common ‘organic’ European culture – a culture seen as a body made up of different, distinct and living organs in continuous evolution. This is an ambitious goal, which will demand new energy and initiatives from every museum in our continent.
References
1 The entire document, as well as the ‘Conclusions’ of the previous Workshops (‘Public Quality in Museums’, ‘Education as a Museum Tool’, etc) can be downloaded from the Council of Europe website www.coe.int under European Museum Forum. This site also includes many documents on EMF and its history, and a list of all the winners of the Council of Europe Museum Prize since its launch in 1977.

2 A great museologist and the most authoritative expert on industrial archaeology, Hudson was the founder of the European Museum of the Year Award scheme in 1977 which later developed its activities in the European Museum Forum. He died in 1999. His rich list of publications includes two books which are particularly relevant to the subject discussed here: *A Social History of Museums*, London: Macmillan, 1975; *Museums of Influence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

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