

# making: heimat

THE  
MUSEUM OF FOLK LIFE AND FOLK ART  
IN VIENNA BETWEEN  
THE EVERYDAY AND THE POLITICAL

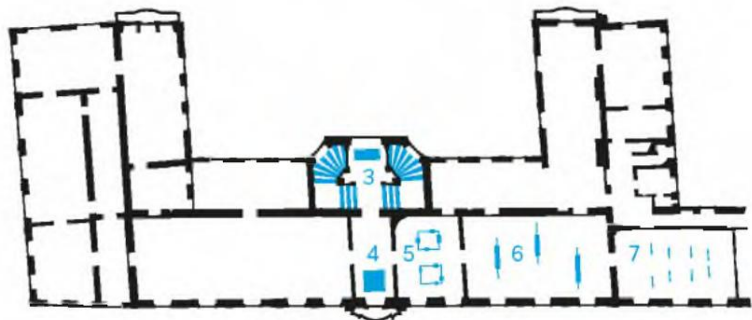
18.10.2017

TILL

11.03.2018

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The Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art in Vienna  
between the Everyday and the Political

Museums are public institutions with a specific history of knowledge and practice. Museum collections bear witness not only to times gone by but point first and foremost to the institution itself and to the people involved in it, be they directors and staff members or external collectors and researchers. But an analysis of the actual place, of how spaces and objects are used by staff, or by visitors and other interested parties, and a museum's location within a particular milieu can also reveal a lot about the function and meaning assigned to a museum at different times.

The Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art in Vienna was founded in 1895 and has been housed in the former Palais Schönborn since 1917. The 100th anniversary of the building's use as a museum presents an opportunity to reflect on its own history and on the standpoints and actions taken in the name of Volkstum (folklore) and Heimat (homeland). The starting point for this is the 1930s, a decade little explored until now but one in the history of Austria and Vienna with long aftereffects. For 'folk culture' this was a dynamic time, during which developments solidified and networks and practices were established that were to play a significant role in the creation and figuration of Heimat – in particular in the city.

The present day is the outcome of history and history is told from today's perspective. making : heimat is shown over two

floors and in several rooms. It gives an overview of the developments, structures, actors and actions that have determined the history of this particular museum space.

## 1 | The Discourse of Heimat

Heimat – meaning homeland – as a term and a concept is never out of fashion for long. Heimat was and is used to justify claims made in political, social and cultural contexts. A recurring vocabulary can be seen that centres around the 'self' – both personal and collective – and connects different spatial and emotional levels.

At the latest during the most recent presidential election campaign in Austria, Heimat has re-emerged as a topic with widespread as well as political resonance. It touches on issues of familiarity and security, values and traditions, and questions of the homegrown versus a sense of vanishing homeland. Heimat is used flexibly and expanded according to the objectives at hand.

### The Discourse of Heimat

In the early years of the First Austrian Republic, Heimat became a popular term with many different facets. Socialist 'Red' Vienna understood Heimat as the most immediate social context, something to be recognised and shaped. In the unusual situation presented by the heterogeneous capital city of Vienna, this socialist-proletarian discourse came up

against the ideas of conservative 'Black' Vienna. With their focus on homeland protection and popular education, bourgeois-conservative and nationalist-leaning groups tried to put their mark on what Heimat and Volkstum (folklore) meant in the city.

During this period, groups with different ideological and practical interests in Heimat came together at the Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art. The museum and the Österreichische Heimatgesellschaft (Austrian Heimat Society), which was active at the museum, were important producers and mediators of urban 'Heimat culture'.

## 2 | On the Baroque and the Palais

## 3 | Practices of Memory

Memory is the result of processes, meaning that how the past is dealt with is dependent on a range of factors. The forms taken by remembrance and the history of how these came about also need to be looked at within the context of their own time.

Due to their collecting activities, museums are assigned a responsibility to remember. They are places of memory for a society's collective memory and – willingly or unwillingly – also represent their own institutional history. Above all, the

Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art consistently bore the memory of those who had been responsible for founding and running the museum. Others were forgotten for a certain time. Sometimes these were external actors who had instigated disagreements with those at the museum, and the museum had reacted accordingly.

## 4 | The Museum as USEum

Cultural and historical museums collect material evidence of the past and present, research, categorise, store and present it and utilise it in different formats for particular purposes. Museums are also in continuous dialogue with their environment and are located within a field marked by academic, cultural and social, as well as political and economic interests. With their collections and their status as public institutions, museums represent an attractive 'resource' for society and politicians. In turn, this attention is vital and museums have frequently and still do seek to work together with these groups.

The history of the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art and its collections provides an example of both this interplay and these dependencies. It reveals how particular objects come into fashion or how their public 'value' shifts during different political periods.

## Research, Use, Networks

Museums are social spaces where people and groups with differing interests and needs encounter one another. The Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art has also always been a place of work and somewhere where administrative procedures, expert discussions and cultural practices are carried out.

This installation brings together the key actors, who had a variety of relationships to the museum and to each other. They all feature in the exhibition.

## 5 | Objects: Use & Meaning

### Trester Mania

Among the first objects to arrive at the Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art were costumes worn by the Tresterer dancers. The costume from the Pinzgau region, acquired by one of the museum's two founders, the orientalist Wilhelm Hein, in 1895 is still considered one of the highlights of the collection.

In 1893, Hein set off on a commission for the Anthropological Society in Vienna to research the masks used in folk pageantry. However, his actual findings soon became integrated into the contemporary narrative that linked masks to primitivism and folk-cultural nativeness. Over the course of the twentieth century this meaning changed, altering too the 'value' attributed to these kinds of masks and costumes by the museum and by society.

## Nostalgia for the East

Since first being established, museums of folk culture have been intensive collectors of diverse instances of what is known as 'folk art'. On the basis of their form, colour, ornament and pattern, these 'anonymous' artistic productions have been categorised as 'regional' or 'national'. Ceramics as objects of 'folk art' have long been 'staples' in the work of collecting and exhibiting, often with a new or different meanings attached to them. In the context of changing political times, it was above all objects from east and southeast Europe, collected by the Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art for the most part before 1918, that represented valuable material for academic, social and political purposes. These holdings allowed the museum to stake out its remit not only in terms of content, but also in terms of its geographical and geopolitical competence.

## 6 | Objects: Research & Collecting

### Cultural Work

In the 1930s, the museum acquired objects obtained by members of the youth and Heimat movements. Shaped by their experiences in organised, collective groups, which were often conservative to German-nationalist in orientation, a younger generation of ethnologists dedicated themselves to gathering and researching 'folk heritage'. It was thought to be found in its especially original and 'authentic' form in remote Alpine valleys, in the German-speaking enclaves of southeast Europe, in the 'Germanic' north and in children's

games. In cooperation with cultural and political institutions and associations, these researchers used their objects and findings as the foundations for renewing 'folk culture'. Active 'cultural work' or 'folklore work' was an integral part of the 'folklore studies of the present' they were promoting.

### Döllersheim 1938/1939

The National Socialists' seizure of power opened up attractive options for those working in academic ethnology – or German Volkskunde – and for the museum. The 'evacuation' of communities that began in 1938 to create the Döllersheim military training ground also brought the 'Waldviertel Committee' into being. Its director, Adolfine Niehsner, worked closely with the director of the museum, Arthur Haberlandt, and the in-house researcher Adalbert Klaar.

Gathering these tangible and intangible collections was intended not only to 'rescue' the folk traditions of the region but also to provide evidence of the 'German foundation' of Hitler's ancestral homeland. The way the research was organised and the methods used exemplified ethnological studies carried out under the Nazis in Austria. At least 90 objects entered the collections of the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art.

### Nazi Plunder and Looting

From the beginning, museums profited from the ideologically motivated and systematic persecution and looting raids carried out by the National Socialists. Aided by the Nazi Party and its paramilitary organisations, objects that had belonged to Jewish owners found their way into museum collections.

In 1939, the war and expansionist policies opened up new opportunities not just for collecting but for career advancement. Arthur Haberlandt, for example, worked as an 'expert' in the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR) task force, where he was responsible for assessing and valuing objects stolen from museums. At the same time, strengthened by his position in the ERR, he sought to acquire objects he considered attractive for his own museum collections in Vienna. Even after war had ended, the museum was still able to obtain objects previously in Jewish ownership.

## 7 | Objects: In Motion

Many of the objects in museum collections are hidden from public view. The majority of the objects at the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art are stored in depots and many have never been on display. Others have been taken out of public exhibitions and stored, or even removed from the collections. This might happen for a number of reasons but often it is a new political system with new objectives that has caused or causes those working at the museum to 'move' objects in this way.

Even when objects are no longer accessible to visitors or are no longer available in the collections, the archive material that tells of their former status as museum objects and of how they were dealt with still exists. This provides evidence of museum practices and again points to the forms of relationships and connections that were significant at different points in time.

## 8 | Experience: Heimat and Society

In 1928 Robert Mucnjak, the restorer at the museum, founded the Österreichische Heimatgesellschaft (Austrian Heimat Society), an association for folk culture. The following year he launched the magazine Heimatland. Both projects were closely coordinated with the work of the museum and aimed to promote 'folk life' and 'folk art'.

From its early days, the Heimat Society worked with other Viennese associations and institutions interested in Heimat. Together they came up with popular educational formats 'suited to the city' and often made use of new forms of entertainment media. By 1934, the Heimat Society had become so firmly entrenched that it became the official umbrella organisation for the traditional clubs of the Social Democrats and the National Socialists, both of which were now banned. In 1939 it was disbanded and was willingly absorbed into the Nazi leisure organisation 'Strength Through Joy'.

### Folk Culture as Museum Practice

The Heimat Society was largely responsible for the varied programme of folk culture on offer at the museum in the 1930s. This opened the museum up to an interested urban public, attracting both socialist, working-class wearers of traditional costume and groups with a more German-nationalist, or völkisch, outlook such as the Deutscher Schulverein Südmark and groups coming out of the youth movement. Folk song and folk dance events put on by the Heimat Society

encouraged people to visit the museum and to get involved, and the nativity plays and puppet shows it organised captivated a wide audience.

### Folk Culture in the City

The Heimat Society also had a presence in the city. By drawing on the museum's expertise in folk culture, this 'event agency' was able to present itself as an important mover and shaker at the city's big folk culture events. For example, its folk dance and folk music group performed at leading Viennese dance halls and the Heimat Society's functionaries helped to organise large-scale, city-wide events. In doing so, they played a significant role in popularising politically-conformist folk culture.

## 9 | Resonance: Nativity Scenes & Parlours

From 1930 onwards, the museum and the Heimat Society organised an extremely successful annual exhibition of nativity scenes. This period saw the nativity scene in general take on a new emotional and ideological resonance, with austrofascist cultural politics turning it into a key object of Austrian Catholicism. In what was experienced as a period of crisis, nativity scenes imbued with a sense of Heimat were thought to give comfort and promote a sense of community between the city and the countryside, old and young, rich and poor.

Detailed instructions were developed about where to place the nativity scene in the home and about its new function. Atmospheric spaces were considered important to allow the nativity's emotional effect to unfold. At the museum, large-scale nativity scenes were displayed in the rooms furnished in traditional Alpine style.

*The nativity scene is the angel of the home.*

Der Krippenfreund, 1928

*Making a nativity is a religious duty.*

Österreichische Rundschau, 1937

*All who make nativities are noble.*

Der Krippenfreund, 1933

*In every house where a beautiful Christmas nativity scene stands, peace and joy are at home (...).*

*The parlour and family life are kept warm.*

Der Krippenfreund, 1928

## 10 | Expertise: Traditional Costumes at the Museum

In 1935 the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art, in collaboration with the Heimat Society, set up an information centre at the museum dealing with traditional costumes. This was in response to the needs of ideologically diverse groups who were active in folk culture as well as to political demands. This new field of activity widened the museum's public and brought in new forms of museum practice. In addition, it upgraded the museum to a quasi-national centre of expertise in what was a significant aspect of identity politics. Until the 1960s, the museum certified selected fabrics and traditional products as 'authentic' and classified others as 'kitsch' or 'fake'.





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