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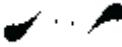


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## Learning to be Austrian: A Meso-ethnographic Museum and National Identity Analysis

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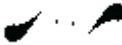
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### Abstract

Historically, the question of Austrian identity has been a tricky one. The elements of national cultures displayed in museums as cultural artifacts can influence collective memory and result in a particular sense of national identity. That is, visitors make value judgments about the selection, interpretation, and representation of the past based on what they encounter in a museum. However, there is a lack of scholarly research on the role of Austrian museums in the formation and representation of national identity despite the long complex history and commonly appraised rich culture of the now small country. This void may be attributed to the rather difficult relationship that today's Austrians have with that history, whether the multinational history of the Habsburg monarchy or the 1938–1945 occupation by and complicity with Hitler's Third Reich. By using a meso-ethnographic research methodology, this study aims to demonstrate and deconstruct the role of the Austrian Gallery Belvedere in the social processes of citizenship and the construction and representation of Austria's national identity.

**Keywords:** Austrian identity, Austrian Gallery Belvedere, collective memory, museum learning, meso-ethnographic research, national identity



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## Introduction

It is no secret that, historically, the question of Austrian identity has been a tricky one (Menasse, 1993; Pollak, 1992). Indeed, Austrians, probably more than other Europeans, continually question the sources of their national identity in newspapers, films, literature, and other cultural media. Especially, in both past discussions of Austria's role as a bridge between Eastern and Western Europe and renewed discussions about the strategies of the European Union are greatly influenced by the issue of local diversity and the promise of *heimat*. This latter, which in its simplest sense means home or homeland, has long been at the center of German discourse about place, belonging, and identity.

Over the course of the fieldwork for my study which seeks to examine identity construction and representation using the case of Vienna's Österreichische Galerie Belvedere (Austrian Gallery Belvedere), this theme of *heimat* emerged repeatedly. In particular, it emerged in conversations about the premises on which the Second Republic was founded: Austria's splendid natural beauty, rich history, wealth of cultural traditions, the Baroque period and its Catholic art and architecture, and the establishment of Austria's "everlasting neutrality" linked in popular opinion to a sense of security (see e.g., Riedl, 1995). The literal question "What is *heimat*?" elicited a variety of answers: *Heimat* is where the individual is born, receives an education, comes to consciousness of selfhood, and/or adjusts to family and society. In general, this term brings to mind the secure and yet restricted (i.e., conservative) society of a childhood memory. Thus, *heimat* can also be described as a concept to which people are bound by birth, childhood and family rituals, language, and earliest experiences.

Study participants also referred to *heimat* as something lost and only available to the memory or to familiar places, resulting in a pride of place and an Austrian self-confidence that had to be reclaimed after World War II. On the level of engrained popular culture, *heimat* is particularly apparent in the *heimatfilme* of 1946–1965, which placed a profound emphasis on nature—forests, mountains, landscapes, and rural areas—and the provincial homeliness with which the Austrian people readily identify. Such images also helped promote a tourist-friendly image of Alpine and baroque Austria. As one traveler on the train mentioned, "many of the colorful brochures for promoting each region look too much alike;" each conjures up an idyll of untouched scenery through illustrations of "its particular ski slopes, picturesque views of churches, waterfalls or lakes." Indeed, "*heimat* has been the theme of so many films, novels, and sentimental songs that it would be impossible to imagine postwar culture without it" (Applegate, 1990, p. 4).

In the post-World War II era, however, as Austria began reinventing itself as a democratic nation with a different national identity from Germany, *heimat* also meant forgetting. At this time, Austria denounced the March 1938 annexation as a military occupation imposed on the country by Nazi Germany. From this perspective of Austria as Hitler's first victim, the country's involvement in World War II was seemingly about "doing one's duty by obeying orders" (Beller, 2006, p. 259). Such consensual repression of history was especially evident during Kurt Waldheim's presidential election campaign in 1986. When suspicion was raised about his World War II involvement, a defiant Waldheim asked, "Why should I apologize? ... what could I do? I had either to continue to serve or be executed" (as cited in Serrill, McWhirter, & Svoboda, 1986, ¶ 6). Despite the international agitation caused by his concealed past, Austrians could identify with their future president: Waldheim was not a Nazi just as Austrians were not Nazis.

This myth of Austria's (putative) victimhood "and the myth of its liberation from an aggressive regime that it finally learned to hate is vital to the creation of a national identity" and thus helped Austrians free themselves from the past (Lamb-Faffelberger, 2003, p. 289). Even today, *heimat* focuses public attention on the meaning of tradition (with a conservative connotation) and locality (which can also be interpreted as the provincial) for the nation itself. Thus, the survival and transformation of *heimat* reveal "the struggle to create a national identity out of the diverse materials of a provincially rooted society" rather than out of a more progressive cosmopolitan culture (Applegate, 1990, p. 19). Based on these introductory thoughts, this paper explores the most celebrated and perpetuated myths of national belonging that have become part of Austria's collective memory by using a meso-ethnographic research methodology.

### **Locating the Research in a Meso-ethnographic Process**

Much research in the field of museum studies employs one-dimensional methods of data collection and analysis that focus either on macroanalyzing the impact of institutional and structural discourses and historical narratives about museums, or microanalyzing how individuals (e.g., visitors, museum staff, or directors) produce and reproduce institutional discourses to shape the museum's narrative. However, working in the Belvedere Museum Vienna for 8 months to generate data helped me realize that neither approach can genuinely produce a thick description of the museum's role in shaping Austrian identity. Therefore, in this study, I aimed to reconcile the two approaches using a transactional mesoethnographic data analysis, which recognizes that structure (the macrolevel; particular embodied dispositions, institutional discourses) and agency (the microlevel; the human subjects' capacity to engage in institutional discourse) cannot exist independently but rather are inextricably linked. That is, because individuals exist within institutional structures and vice versa, they are intrinsically involved with institutional discourse and structures and actively enter into their constitution.

Most particularly, this mesoethnographic approach bridges the ethnomethodologists' concern with the reflexive individual construction of social realities in institutions with Foucault's interest in institutional history, power relations, and social practices. Hence, the analysis emphasizes the common ground shared by these two perspectives while still recognizing their differences. Moreover, despite a focus on the Foucauldian top-down (macro) historical analysis, it is still informed by ethnomethodologists' bottom-up (micro) conversation analysis, particularly concern for the ways in which institutionalized conversation practices are locally organized and accomplished (Foucault, 1980; Garfinkel, 1967; Holland, 1998).

One distinctive aspect of Foucault's approach to analyzing institutions is his emphasis on productive aspects and on the way power is embedded in social relations and activities (Foucault, 1980). That is, power operates through the micropolitical processes of social interactions, in which subjects that are socioculturally similar produce distinctive social realities. Hence, knowledge is implicated in power relations because professional knowledge is applied in social interactions to assume individuals and groups are appropriate objects of institutional interest and action (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Specifically, Foucault focused on how general and formalized discourses emerge in particular historical periods and then permeate concrete social settings, thereby rearranging their discursive possibilities. Not only did he argue that institutionalized discourses are sites of power and discipline (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998), but from his perspective, power is more than a simple hierarchical structure: it is an aspect of the social processes through

which embodied actors act in and shape their social worlds.

Nonetheless, Foucault's model has been criticized for overtotalizing: nothing outside a discourse that constitutes objects and subjects is included. He talks of people (subjects) not so much authoring their words, but as their words authoring (subjecting) them (Miller, 1997). Accordingly, by employing the Foucauldian top-down historical analysis in this study, I aimed to deconstruct the ways in which the historical and institutionalized discourse of the Belvedere contributed to the construction of Austrian identity.

The ethnomethodologists' bottom-up model of conversation analysis, on the other hand, has developed much of its approach to social interaction by explicating the distinctive aspects of *ordinary conversations*, the otherwise unremarkable interactions predominate in everyday life (Garfinkel, 1967). Such conversations are highly informal compared to interactions in institutional settings; for example, dialogues are not preallocated by formal rules, such as those that organize courtroom interrogations. Nor are participants in ordinary discourse bound to a limited number of topics, as often happens in institutional settings. Indeed, as long as speakers adequately orient their utterances to prior talk and other salient aspects of social settings, they may pursue a variety of goals and issues (Hall, 1996; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998).

This ethnomethodological approach begins with conversation in social interactions and then explores how the conversation is related to general cultural practices. It further argues that power is not imposed from above but rather is built up through interactants' improvisations within concrete social settings. Hence, the use of ethnomethodological conversation analysis in this study is intended to produce a better understanding of (a) the ways in which visitors, the director, curators, museum staff, and other members of the museum community redefine, reproduce, and reconstruct professional knowledge, and (b) new ways to transform the Belvedere Museum into a space endowed with the cultural and social discourses and practices of the museum community members.

Hence, I argue that, rather than blending two perspectives, Foucauldian top-down and ethnomethodologists' bottom-up, the transactional mesoethnographic approach to data collection and analysis should constitute a mutual relationship, an interplay capable of deconstructing both the institutional and identity relations in a museum. As a result, a transactional analysis of discourses facilitates examination of the ways in which historical and structural relations are both embedded in institutional discourses and constructed within social interactions in the museum. Thus, my analysis in this study does not resolve or transcend the tensions between these two approaches but rather offers a practical approach to managing them: in transactional mesoethnographic analysis, meaning and context and structure and agency are mutually constitutive of each other.

### **Establishing a New Austria in Fitting Style**

Upon entering the Belvedere's foyer, with its uniformly white interior, the visitor encounters four awe-inspiring, mighty atlantes holding up the arched vaulting and peering down at the crowds pouring into the museum. Whereas some visitors walk deferentially around these heroic sculptures scanning every inch of their muscle-bound bodies, young boys strike masculine poses and shoot pictures with cellphone cameras. Others are honestly forward and like thousands of visitors over past decades cannot resist running their fingers over the atlantes' feet and lower legs, continual touching that over the years has left their toes smooth. Rarely, and

usually only if heading directly for the museum's shop, do visitors ignore this impressive sight. To augment this display of superhuman strength, various war trophies and regalia (also white) like helmets, shields, draped standards, and bugles are arranged above the atlantes' capitals, reminiscent of the "most famous commanders of the imperial armies" (Johnson, 1987, p. 48).

Nor is it only the dramatic style and grandeur of the Baroque that visually mesmerizes the onlooker and conveys a feeling of immersion into a different time period. The all-white grand staircase, light-suffused by its huge windows, emulates travertine marble and creates an effect of soft resplendence. As visitors step upon it, the spatial order of the architecture itself takes physical control and slows them down; that is, the steps are too shallow for hasty ascent and too far apart for taking two steps at once. Thus, whether consciously or unconsciously, visitors adapt their movements to the graceful environment.

In the foyer, a tour guide awaited her group, introduced herself, and welcomed a group of high school students to the Belvedere. Walking up the grand staircase, she pointed to the reliefs on the left and right: "Thematically, this staircase is dedicated to the life of the eminent Alexander the Great, who in fact was famous for showing generosity after his military victories." In commissioning these scenes, Prince Eugene (1663-1736) drew a connection between Alexander, a strategist of antiquity, and his own virtuous record as a victorious military leader. At that time, the magnificent baroque grand staircase provided an impressive setting for the reception of Eugene's guests. When the master of the house appeared at the top of the staircase to greet his visitors, he was symbolically accompanied by Alexander the Great depicted next to him. The visitor, on the other hand, was most probably at the foot of the staircase during this dramatic moment. Ascending the staircase, the tour guide stresses Prince Eugene's fame as commander of the Habsburg forces in the Turkish wars and invited her group to move upstairs to the marble hall, "the most magnificent room in the palace."

Today, visitors are still overwhelmed by the sheer size of the marble hall, its polished marble surfaces, wealth of shining gilt, elaborate illusionist architecture, pilasters, and panoramic view. "In baroque architecture," the tour guide explained, "one of the most important position an image could be given was the ceiling." Likewise, the fresco shows "the apotheosis of the owner and builder [of this palace] Prince Eugene, who is being received by the gods of Olympus" (Krapf, 2005, p. 118). During the tour guide's rather lengthy explanation of the gods depicted and the fresco painting technique, the students' attention seemed to drift away. Some looked out the window, enjoying the panoramic view of the city of Vienna and trying to detect a few more landmarks, while two or three hustled around whispering to each other.

Just as the tour was about to move on to the next room, the teacher raised his voice: "Besides the heroic deeds of Prince Eugene, what other important act of Austria's recent history do you remember? And did you notice the small metal panel on the floor, in front of the balcony door?" One student read its text out loud: "the Austrian State Treaty granting independency and neutrality was signed by the ...". He was interrupted by another student's eager question: "You mean—this is *the* balcony?"

Immediately, the tour guide and the teacher regained the group's full attention. "That's right! The Austrian State Treaty, enshrining the country's full independence and sovereignty, was signed here ... out there Figl said the famous three words ...". The group whole heartedly completed his sentence: "Austria is free!" Expressions of awe and astonishment filled the marble hall; some students pulled out their cell phones and shot

pictures. “In fact,” the tour guide corrected the teacher, “Minister Figl never said these words *outside* on the balcony.” “Really?! But doesn’t everyone assume that?” the teacher was caught in surprise. “Reporting the event later in the day on television, the pictures of Figl displaying the treaty to the crowd were voiced over with the words he pronounced in here.” Hence, this scene, broadcast on TV all over Austria, became part of Austria’s collective memory and added to the Belvedere’s status as a powerful site of memory for Austria’s Second Republic.

This important ceremony was held on May 15, 1955, in the marble hall of the Upper Belvedere palace where the glorious Prince Eugene of Savoy had once given receptions and the hope of the Habsburg empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand (1863–1914), had lived for years before being assassinated at Sarajevo. Leopold Figl, former government chief and by then foreign minister, added his name to the document after the representatives of the occupying allied powers had signed it. U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and the foreign ministers of the Soviet Union, Britain, and France—Vyacheslav Molotov, Harold Macmillan, and Antoine Pinay—gave speeches, and at the end Figl declared that “with our thanks to the Almighty, we have signed the treaty, and we joyfully announce today: Austria is free!” (as cited in Hofmann, 1988, p. 30).

Subsequently, in perhaps the most famous scene of Austria’s recent history, the five government representatives stepped out onto the balcony to greet a cheering crowd of several thousand Viennese gathered in the Belvedere garden. Figl, with tears in his eyes, seized the great bound volume containing the treaty, pulled it open, and brandished it high above his head. Many people among the cheering crowd below also wept. During another tour, a visitor summarized this emblematic event’s common significance: “Austria was free at last and neutral forever.” As a result of this treaty, “the Austrians, still somewhat dazed by the feel of their freedom, had now actually glimpsed the evidence for themselves” (Brook-Shepherd, 1996, p. 413). Further, Austria as an independent nation-state, would have a second chance, not only to become a functioning polity but also to create a cogent identity (Bruckmüller, 1993).

Yet, given Vienna’s numerous representative buildings (in particular, the Hofburg, the most important imperial palace, which since 1946 has housed the presidential offices), the important question remains of why the Belvedere was the site of this important occasion (Breuss, Liebhart, & Pribertsky, 1997). As one curator explained it, “following the annexation, Hitler gave a triumphal speech at the balcony of the Hofburg ... to a cheering crowd of thousands of people gathered at the Heldenplatz (heroes square). Obviously, the new Austria had to be proclaimed somewhere else.” “Also,” he added, “during the early days of Austria’s Second Republic [in 1946] ... immediately after the war, the Ostarriichi myth was evoked,” utilizing the benefits of the ancient past by planting the roots of the Austrian nation in the Middle Ages. Likewise, when the restored building was reopened in 1955, the collections of the Austrian Gallery Belvedere focused on medieval (casting Austrians’ memory back to the Babenberg times) and baroque catholic art, as well as the 19th-century nostalgic and moralizing Biedermeier art. In this manner, Austria’s unique historical roots were used for identity formation, and allowed Austria, a republic founded in 1945, to boast a thousand-year history.

At the same time, however, this use had a somewhat antimodern effect. That is, Austria reactivated its cultural heritage by connecting the new Austria with its greater era, the Habsburg Empire. As Lowenthal (1985) observed in analyzing historical memory, “nations and individuals habitually trace back their ancestry, institutions, culture, and ideals to validate claims of power, prestige, and property,” as well as national and

cultural identity (p. 52). The outcome of such practice is noted by Anderson (1983) in his study of nationalism: “If nation-states are widely conceded to be ‘new’ and ‘historical,’ the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future” (p. 19). Thus, as in the case of the Belvedere, the boundaries of the modern country can swell to fill the expanse of a far earlier empire through which the new Austrian republic takes credit for cultural achievements throughout the vast history of the Austrian empire: “The nation is in either instance perceived as an empty and elastic container into which can be fit[ted] any variety of art objects” (Wallis, 1994, p. 272).

By selecting Prince Eugene’s grandiose summer palace, a baroque spectacle, as a venue for an event of considerable historical significance, the government reconnected to the achievements of this national hero and to Austria’s heroic ages. Thus, the epic Eugene and his symbolic power were interpreted as a national symbol (that embodied enduring national characteristics) through numerous exhibitions (e.g., in the Belvedere itself in 1933, 1964, 1986, and again in 2010), portraits, poems, novels and biographies, essays (Hugo von Hoffmansthal, 1914), songs (“Prince Eugene, The Noble Rider”), theater pieces (e.g., by Joseph von Weilen), sculptures (one, inaugurated in 1865, prominently featured at the Heldenplatz), and other memorials. Nonetheless, just as concepts of national identity change, such interpretations of national heroes changed over time in response to political, social, religious, economic, and personal factors (Heindl, 2001; Stachel, 1998). Hence, Prince Eugene, whom many visitors, unaware of his French-Italian background, identify as “a great Austrian citizen,” mutated into a sort of secular patron saint because “whenever the political system was under threat and suffered an identity crisis, it clung to this Savoyan, with his slight physique, as if to a kindhearted and protective giant” (Trost, 1985, p. 16).

In addition, because Eugene (together with other masterminds like Jan Sobieski, King of Poland) defeated the Muslim Ottomans, he has been perceived as a savior and protector of Christianity and the (mythological) commemoration of this hostile confrontation with the Ottoman Empire established Vienna as a bulwark of Christian Europe against Islam (see e.g., Hanisch, 2001). Therefore, establishing a connection to Eugene’s glory as well as to baroque grandeur, also emphasized a primarily Catholic Austrian identity, which ignored the contributions to Austrian culture of Austria’s extinct Jewish population (Beller, 1999). Just as Eugene had liberated the Austrian empire from the Turks, in 1955, the new Austria was finally liberated by the withdrawal of the occupying powers. Yet in 1945, when the allied forces freed Austria and reinstated democracy in Austria by supporting Karl Renner and his provisional government, the new government had hailed these same powers as liberators. Until 1955, however, Austria was divided into four zones of occupation by allied troops. Therefore, the two instances of liberation—*by* the Allies in 1945 and *from* the Allies in 1955—serve as a source of the Austrians’ ambiguous relationship with their own past (Haller, 1996).

### **The Issue of Neutrality**

The signing of the Austrian State Treaty on May 15, 1955 finally produced an independent Austria and the Second Republic, which remains today. Without doubt, within Austria neutrality has become a symbol of national identity. In fact, many study participants emphasized neutrality’s important function in the construction of Austrian identity and the development of national consciousness. As one participant recalled,

“in Sunday speeches made by politicians, neutrality and Austrian identity were always tightly linked together.” Another participant explained, “I think it gives people the feeling of being special, special as a neutral nation in the middle of the cold war.”

Whereas neutrality has positive connotations for many, it is emotionally laden for all, although few participants knew what it actually means and entails (see e.g., Bischof, Pelinka, & Wodak, 2001). Thus, even though Austrian neutrality is a direct product of the 1946–1955 Allied occupation, ongoing discussions and public opinion perpetuate the myth and narrow-minded view that the Austrian government alone established neutrality policies after 1955 (see e.g., Stourzh, 1998). Neutrality policy, however, is always influenced by a framework of greater powers (e.g., neighboring countries), which contributes to the options and decision-making capabilities of the neutral state (Rathkolb, 2001). Thus, the significance of neutrality has been influenced by political changes throughout the past, specifically the cold war and the fall of the Iron Curtain, as well as Austria’s accession to the European Union. Hence, Austria’s neutrality cannot be perceived independently from major political power games. As one elderly visitor admitted in the Belvedere’s marble hall as we talked about his post-war experience, “It still gives me the creeps when I read this commemoration panel of the treaty here ... I wish *your* generation would pay more respect to this time,” he added sternly. Another visitor (in the late 30s) questioned this historical event, “this is a festive place here and everything, but its commemoration of the treaty still feels so ... [searching for a word] old world! To me the United Nations headquarters in Vienna is a lot more significant in constituting today’s Austria! I think for younger generations, the treaty has lost its awe-inspiring appeal, its energy.” Obviously, Austria’s neutrality of 1955 is not identical with Austria’s neutrality today (see e.g., Danninger, 1995).

On January 1, 1995, when Austria joined the European Union, it marked the end of a longstanding debate on whether Austria’s neutrality would allow the country to enter a supranational union (see e.g., Bächler, 1994). However, after the end of the cold war and the collapse of the former Eastern bloc, neutrality was no longer considered the international necessity it had been in the aftermath of World War II. As a participant in her early 40s put it, “I think neutrality has a different function today; we are part of a new order in Europe ... it was valuable for sure, but it has a different meaning today.” This thought, she reminded me, reflects another change in European politics, “in particular as regards negotiations within NATO.” “I am cautiously reading,” she admitted, “about the debates and how they could influence a decision about our neutrality.” “Peace and security,” another participant added, “are of utmost importance for Austrians, but I have not made up my mind about Austria joining NATO. On a European level, it is not neutrality that is called for today, but solidarity.” Therefore, as both participants agreed, “in whatever way Austria might be involved with NATO, neutrality could be replaced by active peace politics.” Moreover, since the fall of communism and the enlargement of the European Union toward the East, Austria has moved from Europe’s Eastern edge to a new place “at the heart of Europe,” as Austrians always like to say.

### **Enacting Rituals of Memory: Learning to Be Austrian**

Consciousness of national belonging is a striking, inherently complex and perhaps one of the least understood, modern phenomenon. That is, the modern nation asserts its legitimacy in many ways, but most prominently in its members’ willingness to believe in or identify with it. National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about the nation with which people can identify, meanings that are contained in the

stories passed on about the nation and images that comprise it. Thus, the iconographic balcony scene was passed on to future generations through a black and white snapshot, often reproduced in public print media and schoolbooks. No other image or symbol established neutrality as a pillar of identity in the collective memory of Austrians during the Second Republic, although various cultural practices have contributed to the generation, reinforcement, and institutionalization of this memory.

For example, as part of their compulsory education, almost every pupil in Austria pays a visit to the Austrian Gallery Belvedere, whether “because it provides a clear overview of Austrian art” (as one teacher stated) or because students are working on an interdisciplinary project about Vienna’s recent history making it “a good idea to introduce our students, in particular those with a migration background, to the cultural wealth of their home.” Or as one participant remembered during a conversation in the marble hall, “I was sick when my school went for a field trip to the capital city. Therefore my grandparents traveled with me all the way from Graz to Vienna to teach me about this historical act and ... [a moment’s pause] Oh, yes! I remember my grandfather’s fervent speech on how Prince Eugene proved his mettle during the Turkish siege in 1683, right over there... [she points toward the Vienna woods that frame the wonderful view from the Belvedere] at the Kahlenberg, right?” Likewise, as a professor from a teacher training institution explained during a professional development course for approximately 80 history teachers, “in the future, the school curriculum of history classes will shift the focus from a social study slant to an emphasis on history and political education ... I think the Belvedere provides an excellent starting point for this endeavor.” When asked to explain why the Belvedere seemed to be a good place for such an endeavor, she pointed out that “students should be encouraged to learn about the past at sites that were important during the country’s past ... in localized contexts, not just through abstract theories.” This statement confirms the assumption that historic sites provide evidence of the past through existing material artifacts and their unique locations in historic networks of power.

However, collective memory is not only influenced by institutions like governments, museums, schools, or religious bodies, it is also affected by spatial and embodied approaches to learning, by acts of coming together and commemorating the past (see e.g., Connerton, 1989; Nora, 1996). Hence, sharing of symbolic ritual or public spectacle can be seen an essential component of attempts to create a unified collective memory (Crane, 2000). Collective memory then becomes an important process for the creation of national memory and identity (Gillis, 1994). For instance, on the occasion of the anniversary celebrations in 1965, 1980, and 1985, the balcony scene was theatrically restaged at the Belvedere, and in 1980, the memorial panel was installed in the marble hall’s floor (Breuss, Liebhart, & Pribertsky, 1997, pp. 404–405).

The palace’s status as a powerful site for the nation-state’s collective memory was also reaffirmed in 2005 with an exhibition in the Upper Belvedere entitled *Das neue Österreich* (the new Austria). Recalling the past 100 years of Austria’s history, this exhibition celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the country’s sovereignty and neutral status and to some extent reminded the visitor of Austria’s 10-year membership in the European Union. The central reference for the event was the 1955 signing of the treaty in the Belvedere, and even the original document, usually kept safe in Moscow, was on display. One major proponent of this anniversary exhibition, former politician Hannes Androsch, described the “history of the Second Republic as a success story”:

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This is not about my generation. Through this exhibition, significant historical moments are enacted in

a lively manner for subsequent generations, so that the children of our time can feel pride and joy when they hear Figl's most beautiful three-word sentence in the marble hall of the Belvedere ... we want to pass on the patriotism to our offspring: You can be proud of what your parents and grandparents achieved! (Scheidl, 2005, ¶3 and ¶5)

As regards this latter, the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture initiated an essay contest for adolescents with the aim of analyzing the everyday life of their grandparents as it pertained to the *Staatsvertrag* ("Österreich-Album 1945–1955: Junge Menschen erforschen Alltags- und Zeitgeschichte," 2005). As the highlight of the award ceremony held in the Belvedere, the winners of the essay contest, youth from all over Austria, invited with their relatives, stood on the balcony of the Belvedere where the representative of the Allied Powers had once waved to the crowd.

Likewise, in discussions with local communities about large-scale buildings or projects of historical substance, the space or event derives part of its strong affective quality from intangible attributes that situate life stories and impose their own meanings, thereby acting as potent identity makers. Thus, the multifaceted layers of Austrian history frame personal experiences, which are remembered through the lenses of everyday life stories and individual narratives that produce cultural meanings and identities. Studies of such commemoration activities have demonstrated the complex relationship between official discourses on national identity, democratic values, and/or patriotism and the cultural practices aimed at mobilizing popular support for these values (see e.g., Kammen, 1991; Uhl, 2005). Thus, the continuing fascination with the national character of Austria, as well as that of other countries, does not so much attest to the national reality as to Austrians' seemingly unbreakable attachment to a national group. Nonetheless, a disjunction persists between national claims and national realities, between the sheer size of the influence of the national idea in the world today and the arbitrariness of national identities themselves.

### **A Palace with a View**

Although the general visitor does not enjoy the privilege of stepping out onto the balcony, even without such notable events like the endorsement of the state treaty, "the view from the marble hall over the city of Vienna," as one visitor stated, "is compelling and *always* conveys a tremendous feeling." As she spoke these words, her eyes wandered over the strictly symmetric baroque garden with stereometrically arranged trees and hedges, sculptures, and fountains and cascades down to the Lower Belvedere, which according to Rotenberg (1995, p. 4) is "an icon of the class of ornamental gardens [in Vienna] associated with the noble garden palaces of the Absolutist Era (1638–1848)." Another visitor added that he usually visits the Belvedere with travelers from abroad:

For those guests that I have frequently from out of town ... the architecture of the Belvedere palace with its beautiful baroque chapel, its slightly elevated setting making it an *excellent* viewpoint over the city, the gardens, fountains, and the ornamental pond ... the whole scenery is so nice that one might just forget the Klimts.

The wider panoramic view encompasses the towers of the city of Vienna, framed by the hills of the

Vienna woods. As one guide from the Belvedere pointed out while introducing his group to the history of the site: “I think Prince Eugene chose an excellent spot for his summer palace ... After all, this palace boasts a view over Vienna, while the Habsburg’s summer palace Schönbrunn simply overlooked the suburbs.”

Various tourist guides, with large groups of 35 to 100 people who mostly remain in the gardens only and do not enter the museum, elucidated dramatically how Prince Eugene surprised the Turkish forces—practically in their sleep and thus leaving many treasures behind, among them the now notable coffee beans—right on the hill where he later built the Belvedere. Thus, the city is viewed from a historic vantage point of utmost significance, which charges the beautiful panorama with historical meaning. Others refer to one of Eugene’s important battles on the Kahlenberg, the hills of the Vienna woods, and therefore suggest that “the prominent view toward the Vienna woods should always remind the visitor of Eugene’s success.” As Muir (1999) argued, “the association between landscape and history converts landscape into heritage” (p. 42). Hence the significance of this often-reproduced and now standardized view, although stemming from historical factors, has also derived from its prominent subject: Austria’s capital city center. To many visitors, the view not only reflects the territory itself but also implies an association between the land and the history that has taken place there. Either way, the accompanying idealized myths and legends lend this view enchantment and an aura of mystery and power.

When the locals talk about the Belvedere, they also refer to its magnificent gardens. Most particularly, the ornamental main garden with its flowerbeds and waterworks sloping down towards the city provides the architectural link between the Upper and the Lower Belvedere. Early in the morning, before the tourist crowds arrive, fashionable joggers do their laps in the park. On warm days, old Viennese ladies sit in pairs on benches in the shadow along the hedges and sometimes marvel at young students and elderly men alike “who cannot keep their paws off the sphinxes’ naked breasts.” Some children run circles around guidebook-toting tourists, who populate the gardens and munch on sandwiches while getting ready for their next cultural adventure. Others seek romantic privacy in the maze-like hedges or indulge in daydreams to the gentle plashing sounds of the fountains.

### **Landscapes with History**

After multiple visits to the museum, several key visitors noted that “the marketing and outreach strategies of this museum seem to depend on an internationally recognized artistic quality. Why does none of the posters or newspaper advertisements display art from the Baroque or the Biedermeier period, for example?” Asked about the reason for this concern, 2 visitors responded as follows:

Art from Vienna 1900 is appealing, but it’s a Viennese phenomena. After all, this is not the Museum of the City of Vienna; this museum claims to encompass Austrian art from all epochs. However, if you travel through Austria, what you encounter is Baroque, both in rural and urban settings: you stumble on baroque houses, churches, and parks essentially everywhere ... Also, we noticed that many paintings here, from the Baroque era to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Biedermeier, reflect the beauty of Austrian scenery and its historical value ... something that we *all* relate to in various ways and that should not be ignored.

Indeed, when I encouraged the participants to select artwork that they would consider significant for or representative of Austria, they mostly referred to landscape paintings from the 19<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. In particular, they selected rather romantic yet realistic depictions of sites associated with local narratives or historic memories and attached to a specific place, like their province of origin. One genre especially anchored in a certain place or significantly linked to one is the landscape, such as the painting of *Bergisel* (by Gottfried Seelos, 1829–1900), which represents a particular battle site of the 1809–1810 war between Austria and Napoleon and his allies during the Napoleonic Wars. Because these confrontations are distilled into a very distinct geographical area and resulted in the Tyrolean insurrection (*Tiroler Freiheitskampf*), the depiction is sure to surprise and touch the heart of any visitor with Tyrolean roots.

As one visitor described this uprising, “Napoleons’ army of approximately 16,000 war-wise and highly equipped men confronted about 15,000 Tyroleans, mostly farmers, without special armament or battle experience ... however, under the command of the legendary Andreas Hofer, these Tyrolean rebels were highly motivated and had the advantage of knowing the place.” Thus, the territory depicted also symbolizes the *heimat* that the brave Tyrolean ancestors defended with remarkable success against overwhelming odds. “The events around Bergisel play an important role in Tyrolean self-conception and provide us with a sense of tradition,” the visitor explained nostalgically to others unfamiliar with the details. This sentiment echoes Apel’s (1998) argument that the depiction of landscape is an act in which “man represents the fact that he is part of this world but, at the same time, becomes conscious of himself” (p. 43).

Nonetheless, the triumph of the Tyroleans did not last long. In signing a peace agreement between Napoleon and Franz I (*Friede von Schönbrunn*), the Austrian emperor abandoned the province of Tyrol, which led to an immediate reoccupation by Napoleon and his allied troops (see e.g., Johnston, 1989). In the Belvedere’s painting *Das letzte Aufgebot* (The Last Assembly, 1874), the artist Franz von Defregger (1835–1921) alludes to the desperate Tyroleans’ fourth and final fight of resistance, which eventually led to their defeat and the tragic loss of their renowned leader, Andreas Hofer. In this painting, the group of departing men—dressed in Tyrolean folk costumes and equipped with various farming tools—is depicted against a traditional Tyrolean scene, farm houses against the backdrop of high mountains.

The visitor’s passionate commentary on this painting illustrates that the painting, together with the topography of Bergisel and the historical events surrounding Andreas Hofer, contributes to a seemingly inseparable unity formed in collective memory. Clearly, landscape paintings aimed at more than simple reproduction of the environment. These works of art express and kindle the relationship between a particular territory and the collective imaginings of communities. However, for others, amiable memories can also quickly become provincial constriction. As a visitor commented about Defregger’s painting, “it reminds me of the people who shaped and represented the surrounding environment of Bergisel and Tyrol at large.” Thus, when we talk about nature or landscape, we refer to all those things that surround us and are laden with human, cultural, and historical values. Because of such attribution, landscapes constantly contribute to identity formation and without “the mystique of a particular landscape tradition,” as Schama (1995) argued, “national identity ... would lose much of its ferocious enchantment” (p. 15). Likewise, Meining (1979) contended that landscapes “are part of the iconography of nationhood, part of the shared set of ideas and memories and feelings which bind together” (p. 164).

### **Land of Mountains, Land of Rivers?**

The text of Austria's national anthem also articulates the close relationship between the nation and its admired landscape and supports a constructed identity: "Land of mountains, land on the river, land of fields, land of cathedrals ... people blessed for the beautiful, much-praised Austria." Likewise, beginning with the landscape paintings of the Biedermeier period (1815–1848), artists have attempted to capture reality (the equivalent of true-to-life) and render natural light, which eventually led to a combination of reality and ideality (Traeger, 2005). As a result, the paintings are permeated with a general admiration of nature and charged with idyllic atmosphere. One such idealized and impressive painting, albeit seemingly based on reality, is Franz Steinfeld's *Der Hallstätter See* (Lake Hallstatt, painted in 1834), in which the water's surface glimmers mysteriously like a beautiful jewel hinting at hidden depths. The mountain peaks also appear impressive and hyperrealistic against a perfect blue sky. "This painting is almost better than my most treasured memories of my tours around the Dachstein [mountain besides this lake]," exclaimed one visitor, fascinated with this painting. "It's like ... [pauses to search for the right expression] ... the perfect moment, the perfect postcard!" This painting, she added in a voice full of emotion, depicts "scenery in a way you could never perceive with your own eyes ... but only preserve in your memory."

Frequently, landscapes express a particular act of reflection, setting the individual in relation to the environment. Thus, as another visitor suggested, contemplation of landscape paintings allows the viewer to discover and perceive the "enduring evidence of the ineffable beauty of forests, mountains, glaciers ... and rock formations," blending the act of vision with the act of feeling. Given that the development of society and technology, or simply the threat of globalization, which seems to destroy the purity of nature, the beauty of nature arouses the feeling of something that is forever in the past. Therefore, in public opinion, natural beauty, as part of Austria's heritage, must be safeguarded in the face of such technological and global changes.

As a result, Biedermeier landscape paintings do not simply serve to document various (sometimes heightened) realities, they contribute to the construction and definition of particular (artistic) views of the environment. Hence, landscapes, given their distinctive characteristics, are "a significant component of the overall heritage which endows communities and nations with their identity" (Muir, 1999, p. 37). This assumption is echoed by Lowenthal's (1993) view of landscape as a "compelling symbol of national identity" (p. 6).

Accordingly, a visitor, after pointing out the countless landscape paintings in the Belvedere and expressing concern about the Austrian collective consciousness of its beautiful landscape, suggested that it is "as if every single person deserved merit for the mountains, the deep green forests, or for nature from lakes to the glaciers." Yet, although this visitor, while looking at paintings by Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1793–1865, one of the greatest Biedermeier artists), admitted to admiring the artist's consummate skill in the handling of light, he also took a critical view and noted that "the depiction of small domestic, idealized events in bourgeois apartments and other homely images ... reminds me of today's cozily IKEA advertising, perpetuating a feeling that your home, no matter how small, is your castle." A second visitor agreed: "... design and the luxury of your own home—also available for the little people! Maybe our times of bigger, better, faster encourage a nostalgic retreat into a renewed version of little Biedermeier security?" "Good point!" the first visitor responded. In the displays of 19<sup>th</sup>-century art in Austria, he suggested, the extravagant still-life

paintings of fruits and flowers “reflect the rise of Austrian bourgeoisie.” “To me,” the visitor continued, “these displays hammer home another theme: the right of the powerful to accumulate wealth and property.” “I had similar thoughts in these rooms, but especially when looking at *A Girl Reading* [1850, Franz Eybl] and the painting of *A Boy Reading* [1860, Johann Baptist Reiter],” the second visitors pointed out, “I think it was toward the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that Empress Maria Theresia established the laws of compulsory school attendance.” “So, what are you trying to say?” I asked. “Look how well the two reading children are groomed and dressed,” the visitor responded, “and what about the children in this painting... collecting wood; were they also included in school reforms?!” The first visitor went even further:

What turns me off are these almost suffocating moralizing, pious, or patriotic overtones in the portraits of the growing bourgeoisie and of peasants with their good-natured simplicity ... in villages and rural traditions ... On one hand, these pictures *are* an important document of the “country and its people ... with subjects drawn from everyday life,” as the wall text indicates, and not often do you see depictions of peasants in such stately museums! On the other hand, do you really think that it was such a placid and idyllic endeavor, as it comes across in this [1855, Waldmüller] painting, to collect dry wood for survival?

The second visitor considered the pictures own historicity and mentioned that it might be helpful to reflect on Viennese Biedermeier paintings in regard to the dawn of rising industrialization, which led to a new urban middle class, and thus to “the anonymous society of industrial capitalism” (Johnston, 1972, p. 20). The Biedermeier represents the waning years of unalloyed preindustrial society. At the same time, various emotions—such as enchantment with pure, clean, untouched nature—and dear memories ascribed to the countryside instead of being erased, have become even more valued. As the first visitor commented, “I am glad that the museum, *finally*, on the top floor, provides explanatory wall texts ... something I have missed throughout the museum ... there is so much to discover in these paintings, *if* you start digging!” The second visitor agreed immediately and after reading the explanations, said, “I wish these texts would go beyond the aesthetic delectation of the middle class and provide some social, historical, or political context information.”

After another visit to the museum, the 2 visitors mentioned above also realized (and criticized the fact) that the Belvedere’s displays end with the interwar period, providing only a few examples of post-World War II Austrian art. As a result, the Belvedere collection reflects the national anthem’s claim that Austria is a “land of mountains, [and] a land of rivers,” but also that it is “home to great sons” and seemingly excludes the work of women, such as the internationally acclaimed, abstract painter Maria Lassnig (born 1919). Her work and the majority of Austrian abstract painters after 1945, often marked by a dramatic use of color and gesture, currently are underrepresented, a concern repeatedly expressed by visitors and nonvisitors alike. One of the curators partly confirmed this comment, but in regard to Austrian art of the second half of the twentieth century also explained that “we cannot make everyone happy! Please note, we currently do show a retrospective of Austrian fantastic realism, one of the most successful export brands of Austrian art!” Another art historian expressed his sincere concern, “when the commercial hype around Vienna 1900 will naturally calm down,” he paused with a grin on his face, “your generation will definitely witness how the group of Vienna fantastic realists will find its

place on every coffee mug, placemat and tie.”

In similar vein, Gillis (1994), drawing on Anderson’s (1983) notion of “imagined communities,” argued that the identities of national communities are imagined and historical memories are constructed. The myths (of the beautiful landscape and the culturally rich heritage along with permanent neutrality) that the Austrians created at the end of World War II are precisely this type of fabricated artificial historical constructs. On the one hand, the Second Republic can be seen as a modern continuation of ancient Austria; on the other, the ongoing allusions to the glorious past hinders rather than fosters the formation of a strong cultural and national identity for *all* Austrians. Hence, even though the exploitation of history has helped “cement Austrian national identity,” it has unfortunately done so “at the expense of Austrian self-understanding” (Beller, 2006. p. 249).

### **Conclusion**

The concept of the national museum developed alongside that of the nation-state, a political construct that could be nearing the end of its 200-year history, according to Bobbitt (2002). He described in meticulous and plausible detail the rise and the decline of the nation-state concept, maintaining that it is on the verge of being replaced by “the market-state.” During this period of change, national culture and identity become more fluid as international and global linkages assume greater importance. The centralizing function of governments has diminished and “the market-state’s essential indifference to culture poses some difficulties for the operation of the State” (Bobbitt, 2002, p. 230), and, presumably, for national museums. At the same time, those who believe that their identities are being undermined cling to and reassert their familiar traditional cultures and identities (see e.g., Welchman, 2006) with the danger of “retreat[ing] into fortress identities” (Robins, 1999, p. 22). Therefore, not all theorists agree with Bobbitt’s view of the imminent demise of the nation-state. Smith (2000) maintained that “it is still nationalist high noon” (p. 76), and changes in international politics, will without a doubt, take much longer to be reflected in national institutions.

At the least, however, national museums will have to develop greater sensitivity to global developments, since no national culture or cultures can remain unaffected by them. Transnational forces such as migration, struggles for socioeconomic equality, environmental degradation, international media, globalization, and cultural diversity are increasingly affecting national museums’ attempts to represent the past and present of their communities. To react creatively and constructively to these changes is a formidable responsibility, but also an inspiring opportunity. In regard to their resources, authority, and popularity, few institutions are in a better position to meet this challenge than national museums.

Taylor (1996) claimed that national museums, no less than the education system and government grants for cultural projects, are instruments of what he called “cultural selection,” the mechanism through which societies manipulate memory in order to perpetuate themselves and their values. “Every identity, personal or ... national, is founded upon memory; our egos and our societies are sustained by the circulation of recollection. Societies therefore do everything they can to control the circulation of recollection” (Taylor, 1996, p. 15).

By using a meso-ethnographic research methodology, this study aimed to demonstrate and deconstruct the role of Belvedere museum in the formation and representation of Austrian national identity framed by the

long complex history and commonly appraised rich culture of the now small country. Some visitors to the Belvedere thought that the display of Austria's former glory compensates in some way for its contemporary position as a relatively small country. Besides Austria's baroque heroic past, the prestigious golden age of *fin-de-siècle* culture is what the Belvedere (willingly or unwillingly) associates with Austria itself. Though many of the special exhibitions are scrupulously researched and displayed, exhibitions about the nation's treasures are what one visitor expressed with concern "almost a blatant, self-admitted form of propaganda." The seemingly cash-strapped Belvedere, it appears, is reluctant to resist the allure of well-endowed crowd-pleasers, even when they verge on exploitation of the museum's intellectual resources and professional integrity.

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