



Europeana: Exhibition ‘Art Nouveau’

(<http://www.europeana.eu/>)

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1. The *Europeana* database

The database *Europeana* was established in 2008 to make ‘cultural material’ accessible in the EU member states in a digital way. Apart from museums, especially libraries and archives are involved and publish data. Thereby, not only museum objects but also books, newspapers, photos, films, audios, etc. are collected via this portal. The number of digital documents available on *Europeana* has been constantly rising since 2008 from initially 2 million items to about 19 million today. The database is mainly used for object research and for the creation of a digital archive for Europe’s cultural heritage.¹

The main difficulty of the project is the uniform upload of the objects; because only if all participating institutions work on the same level with similar keywords, search options and categories, you can actually make good use of the complete pool of information. Also the quality of the uploaded material is still very heterogenic; objects can often only be viewed – if at all – in the size of a postage stamp or black and white and are therefore useless for a more detailed analysis. Overall, the use of the database shows that probably only a fraction of the objects can easily be found with the search function. For the EMEE project, which

¹ See the chapter ‘Digitalisierung: Das Versprechen Europeana’, 108-15, in Kaiser, W., Krankenhagen, S., Poehls, K. (2012), *Europa ausstellen. Das Museum als Praxisfeld der Europäisierung*, Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau.

seeks to find European objects particularly in a comparative perspective, it was in fact possible to combine two or more keywords; however, sample searches often had negative results – despite the available 19 million objects – so the search was not successful. Furthermore referring to the EMEE project, it has to be mentioned that the institutions, which upload data, obviously do not have the job to point out ‘European’ aspects of the object via keywords. Therefore, *Europeana* is merely a database of European objects which does not provide any additional help for the comparative analysis of objects with a European perspective.

Regardless of the database and the available search options, in the context of the EMEE project, a special subsection of the page has to be highlighted as a best practice example. Using the button ‘exhibitions’, the user can view digital exhibitions, which have been compiled for *Europeana* out of digital material and which claim to have a European dimension.²

The objects of the exhibition are announced to be ‘provided with extensive curatorial information, they allow you to learn and discover even more about the displayed items.’³ As an example, the following will briefly present the exhibition *Art Nouveau*.⁴

² <http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/> (06.08.2013).

³ <http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/about-exhibitions> (06.08.2013).

⁴ <http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/exhibits/show/art-nouveau-en> (06.08.2013).

2. Exhibition concept *Art Nouveau*



1: Screenshot from the opening webpage of the exhibition *Art Nouveau*
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The exhibition starts with an introductory text and then provides a deeper insight into single subthemes – divided into eight thematic blocks (Mastercrafts, Influences & Inspirations, World of New Interiors, Muses & Mysticism, In Print, Commerce & Collectives, Architectures & Cityscapes, Context). Along with each subtheme, there is again an introductory text ('Introduction'). This is followed by three to five sub-chapters, which in turn are illustrated by up to three objects. Thus, the exhibitions are clearly structured and make it easy to find one's way.

2.1 The European dimension of the exhibition

The curators of the exhibition stress that Art Nouveau as an art style was a Europe-wide phenomenon: ‘Across Europe, the new style was seen in the Netherlands (Brantjes and Rozenburg), Germany (Meisenthal and Koepping), Hungary (Zsolnay), Bohemia (Harrach, Loetz), and Scandinavia.’⁵ They also specify the main stylistic features, influences from outside of Europe (Japan) and the main protagonists in different European countries. At the same time, however, the curators point out that – even though it was an art style popular all over Europe – there were also different forms from country to country, for example in interior furnishings: ‘In Belgium, Germany and France, the emphasis was on curvilinear forms, with differing approaches to decorative and functional restraint. Wood was twisted into new shapes, with entomological additions, but could also be sleek and functional. Glasgow and Vienna tended to the geometric. In other parts of Europe, nationalistic and vernacular influences were prevalent including Nordic Viking and dragon styles (dragestil).’⁶

Moreover, they name the different terms for the same phenomenon in the different countries: ‘As the new style of Art Nouveau emerged, the movement became known by different names across Europe: Art Nouveau or Jugendstil, Modernista, Secession, Glasgow Style, stile Liberty, Szeccesszió, and stile Floreale.’⁷ Thereby, the exhibition realises an aspect important for the EMEE project: it makes clear that it is about a Europe-wide art style at a certain time, however, it also makes visible that there are different national/ regional characteristics and forms of that style. Thus, an object can be interpreted as an object representing national/ regional characteristics and at the same time as part of a European phenomenon. Thereby, multiple levels of meaning are revealed in one object, which could be illustrated in an interesting way not only as a virtual exhibition (COP 1: Toolkit 1 and 4).

⁵ <http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/exhibits/show/art-nouveau-en/mastercrafts/introduction> (06.08.2013).

⁶ <http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/exhibits/show/art-nouveau-en/world-of-new-interiors> (06.08.2013).

⁷ <http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/exhibits/show/art-nouveau-en/influences-and-inspirations> (06.08.2013).

To compare ‘Art Nouveau’ objects from different countries:

<http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/exhibits/show/art-nouveau-en/world-of-new-interiors/fantastical-or-functional>
(Belgium, France, Germany: curvilinear forms),

and

<http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/exhibits/show/art-nouveau-en/world-of-new-interiors/geometric-tendencies>
(Glasgow style: geometric).



2: Desk by Henry Van de Velde, showing the curvilinear forms
© Musée d'Orsay, Paris



3: Chair by Josef Hoffmann, showing the geometric style
© Musée d'Orsay, Paris

One aspect proves problematic about the exhibition working with this approach: the actual objects on display might have to be explained more clearly in terms of the differences, because only then significant national/ regional differences would be clear for the viewer. Moreover, the chosen approach showing different characteristics of the art style in different European countries is not applied throughout the whole exhibition.

2.2 Digital exhibitions

In general, with regard to the digital *Europeana* exhibitions, the question is if exhibitions make sense that present their objects ‘only’ online and if the viewer, who quickly browses through the internet, uses it comprehensively at all, as viewing the whole exhibition including reading the texts takes at least 20 to 30 minutes.

Thus, it can be assumed that the exhibition is actually only found by those who are interested in the topic anyway. To appeal to a wider audience, a much more elaborate design using more popular forms (interactive, the user of the homepage himself walks through a three-dimensional museum and ‘discovers’ objects) would be necessary for sure. Nevertheless, the exhibition on the *Europeana* website fulfils an important function as it shows that the numerous data of the database can be viewed in new, European contexts with help of curators who ask more general questions to the objects.

However, another aspect of the ‘virtual exhibition’ *Art Nouveau* must be pointed out as negative: when objects are presented, which the reader only sees as picture on a computer screen, it is important that essential information about the object is not missing in the description of the objects. It is striking, for instance, that for many objects the size is not specified, the proportions are not clear and the viewer can hardly get a real idea of the object (for example, there are no indications of size for any of the 10 objects in the section ‘World of New Interiors’). Also, objects are hardly ever shown from more perspectives, so that many objects cannot be viewed in their three-dimensionality and plasticity. Although it is of course obvious that an image of an object on a computer screen cannot substitute the real examination of an object in a museum, however, a careful labelling of objects and additional images can compensate this deficiency at least in part.

3. Conclusion

All in all, many of the digital exhibitions presented on the *Europeana* website give valuable suggestions for the EMEE project as to how and with what kind of questions objects and topics can be presented with a new trans-regional approach. Moreover, partner projects can be found via the *Europeana* exhibition website. In particular, we want to suggest the exhibitions by EUscreen, which for example deal with topics like the history of European television and in general present Europe's television heritage.⁸ Also the *European Library Exhibitions* offer interesting compilations and presentations.

Amongst others, for example the exhibition *A Roma Journey*, which shows that digital exhibitions offer different points of view regarding the selection of objects: the presented sections are the *Curator's Collection*, the *Serbia's Collection*, *Europe's Memorabilia* – which shows a European perspective – and the section *The curator explains*.⁹

Moreover, the example 'Art Nouveau' showed that objects can in fact have a regional, national or a European dimension, all at the same time (COP 1; Toolkit 1). Ultimately, for the EMEE project, the idea to use digital exhibitions to present objects from other museums for comparison – partly complementary to existing objects – can open up new perspectives of mediation; however, in this case the design should offer more possibilities of interaction.

4. Bibliography

http://www.theeuropeanlibrary.org/exhibition/roma_journey/eng/index.html

<http://exhibitions.europeana.eu/exhibits/show/art-nouveau-en>

<http://www.europeana.eu/>

<http://www.euscreen.eu/> (06/08/2013)

Kaiser, W., Krankenhagen, S., Poehls, K. (2012), *Europa ausstellen. Das Museum als Praxisfeld der Europäisierung*, Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau, chapter 'Digitalisierung: Das Versprechen Europeana', 108-15.

⁸ <http://www.euscreen.eu/> (06.08.2013).

⁹ http://www.theeuropeanlibrary.org/exhibition/roma_journey/eng/index.html (06.08.2013).