

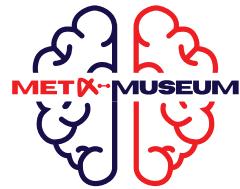


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META-MUSEUM UNPACKED #01

Confidence, Empathy, Resilience through Cultural Heritage



The **META-MUSEUM project** is a major research initiative, funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe programme, dedicated to *transforming* how we connect with cultural heritage. Moving beyond the traditional view of museums, the project explores how active engaging with cultural heritage can equip citizens with essential tools for modern life: confidence, resilience, and empathy. META-MUSEUM employs a **multi-disciplinary expertise**, and works to provide evidence-based ways for cultural experiences to address current societal challenges, making heritage not just something to observe, but a powerful, dynamic force for personal and community well-being.

To share these discoveries and behind-the-scenes insights with everyone and to bridge the gap between academic research and broad public understanding, the META-MUSEUM publishes **META-MUSEUM UNPACKED**, an open-access short article series. Published every three months on the project website, *META-MUSEUM UNPACKED* offers an easy-to-read window into how cultural heritage is being redefined for a more confident and resilient future.

Enjoy it!

UNPACKING CULTURAL HERITAGE: EXPERIENCES THAT SHAPE CONFIDENCE, EMPATHY, AND RESILIENCE

In what ways do cultural heritage experiences resonate with the various visitors so uniquely and powerfully?

If you have ever been to a museum, you may have felt this effect—an exhibition that changes the way you see the world around you, an ancient artefact that recalls something in your own life, or learning about an event from the past that makes you reflect on contemporary concerns. Clearly, museums touch us and our communities, but how exactly? Why do certain encounters with cultural heritage feel so moving and transformative, while others pass unnoticed? How do our bodies react when we experience cultural heritage? Can cultural heritage support us in navigating a complex reality or even give confidence for the future?

These are precisely the questions that META-MUSEUM seeks to explore. This European project brings together museographers, architects, heritage experts, psychologists, neuroscientists, sociologists, designers, and museum curators and mediators from all over Europe

to investigate the transformative nature of cultural heritage. Central to this investigation is the idea that cultural heritage experiences can actively transform people by engaging them emotionally, cognitively, and socially. This hypothesis suggests that when citizens encounter cultural heritage in ways that are participatory, empathic, and personally meaningful, they are not only informed or entertained, but they can intimately connect to it, regaining a sense of control, confidence, and self-esteem, which equips them to face our dynamically changing modern world.

By measuring both emotional and cognitive responses to cultural encounters, the META-MUSEUM project aims to identify how design narrative, and interaction within museums and beyond can maximize these transformative experiences.

You might think this is a rather ambitious goal, and in fact it is. To start to address these questions first we needed to understand how people connect with





THE META-MUSEUM CONSORTIUM DURING THE THIRD GENERAL ASSEMBLY,
HELD IN OCTOBER 2025 AT VU AMSTERDAM.



cultural heritage, starting by working with three associated partner museums: the Museo Egizio in Turin, Italy, the MuséoParc Alésia in Alise-Sainte-Reine, France, and the Museu d'Arqueologia de Catalunya (MAC) in Barcelona, Spain. Cognitive and emotional responses through neurophysiological signals, questionnaires, gaze movement and indoor positioning systems came together to provide information on how individuals react and behave when visiting a museum.

It turns out, most people are curious to learn and engage with museums, and they interact with the cultural content they encounter, but they rarely reflect on values cultural heritage represents.

However, visitors are often hungry to be engaged, and it may be the museums themselves that are coming up short! Elements of the museum exhibit that curators intend to highlight are sometimes overlooked, even though they represent incredible stories from our shared past. This is a sign that there is indeed room for further development through meaningful encounters between visitors and cultural heritage, inside and outside museums. Now that the baseline measurements are finished, the META-MUSEUM team is raising new questions to advance the investigation, and reflecting upon profound questions such as: the why of the cultural heritage hold—and what

potential museums—when they truly engage different people. As the Project has just closed its first year, META-MUSEUM is beginning to plan phase two of experimental campaigns to carry out its three Pilots. We are indeed planning interventions within META-MUSEUM's associated partner museums to enhance the presence (and their stories) of interesting—yet often difficult to understand—components aren't missed by visitors. It is important that our museums are more than deposits for cultural heritage objects but that they actually speak to us and make us reflect! That is why we protect cultural heritage after all, so we are working to start to tease out the transformative potential cultural heritage can have, to try to understand it and employ it intentionally in a way that would be truly meaningful and impactful.



PARTICIPANT DURING THE EXPERIMENTAL MEASUREMENT CAMPAIGN AT MUSÉOPARC ALÉSIA IN JULY 2025.





EQUIPMENT SETUP FOR THE EXPERIMENTAL MEASUREMENT CAMPAIGN AT MUSÉOPARC ALÉSIA IN JULY 2025.

As we move forward with this investigation, we will engage not only museums across Europe, but also explore cultural experiences outside of museums to public places and even hospitals, meeting with all kinds of people around Europe, museum goers and non-visitors alike! By doing so we will accumulate diverse perspectives and points of view about how museums can become catalysts of

personal and social transformation through mediating discovery of cultural heritage from those who are museumgoers and others who hardly go to museums at all. As META-MUSEUM moves into designing interventions and prototypes, our aim is not simply to adjust labels or rearrange objects, but to rethink how museums can communicate new meanings and values through reflection.



What kinds of experiences allow people to slow down, to form personal connections with the past, and to walk away changed after visiting a museum, or after any cultural encounter?

To answer this, we are designing targeted interventions, small but intentional modifications introduced into existing galleries, to test how different storytelling elicit different cognitive and emotional responses.



CO-CREATION SESSION AT MUSEO EGIZIO IN APRIL 2025.

Crucially, these experiments are not created in isolation. Partners from various fields will co-produce many of these interventions, enhancing META-MUSEUM transdisciplinary approach, a key element of this research.

This collaborative dimension is central to META-MUSEUM's mission: to overcome the traditional designing of cultural experiences, involving people on an unconventional and emotional way, communicating cultural heritage that can move visitors on a collective and personal level. By inviting multiple stakeholders into the process, we aim to understand not only what engages the public, but whose stories have been missing and how they can be meaningfully integrated. In this way, the project becomes as much about co-creating as it is about testing.

Yet understanding how cultural heritage transforms people requires looking beyond museums.

For this reason, META-MUSEUM will take the museum "on the road". These encounters with citizens outside museums in different environments will give us insight into how individuals respond to heritage when it is encountered organically, outside the ritualized setting of a museum visit. Do these moments spark curiosity? Nostalgia? Empathy? Confidence? A sense of belonging? The diversity of these responses will allow us to build a more complete understanding of what makes museums potent diffusers of culture. Rather than assume that museums "work" in the same way for everyone, META-MUSEUM seeks to map out a wider spectrum of emotional,



cognitive, and social reactions that cultural heritage can stimulate. From there, we can begin to articulate a clearer theory of how museums can support citizens in various ways, boosting confidence, resilience, well-being, personal growth, participation, and social cohesion.



REAL-TIME EMOTIONAL MEASUREMENTS DURING THE
EUROPEAN RESEARCHERS' NIGHT IN SEPTEMBER 2025.

Ultimately, the META-MUSEUM project is driven by a simple but profound belief: that cultural heritage is not passive. It interacts with us. It shapes us. And if museums can harness this potential intentionally and inclusively, they can become spaces where people not only learn about the past, but discover new ways of understanding how we all relate to our shared past.

As the project progresses into its next stages, we hope to illuminate how museums —when thoughtfully designed and deeply attuned to human experience— can serve as catalysts for transformation. Not merely repositories of objects, but places where curiosity is awoken, emotions are stirred, identities are explored, and collective memory is shared. In doing so, META-MUSEUM aims to help shape the museum of the future: one that resonates, one that empowers, and one that truly belongs to everyone.

Be sure to follow the next *META-MUSEUM UNPACKED* issues to continue exploring our Project, uncovering updates and new findings, and staying informed about the progress and vision that drive it forward!





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