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META-MUSEUM UNPACKED #02

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!

WHAT IF A MUSEUM VISIT COULD CHANGE YOU?

Scientists and museum professionals across Europe are working together on an intriguing premise: that walking through a museum is not just something you do — it is something that does something to you.

Think of the last time something in a museum stopped you. Maybe it was a photograph. A uniform. A child's shoe behind glass. For a moment, you weren't just looking at the past — you felt it.

That feeling has a name, and guess what, science can measure it. Heart rate. Skin response. Subtle shifts in the nervous system. Researchers can now track what happens in our bodies when culture moves us — and META-MUSEUM project is using that knowledge to change how museums think about their visitors.

We spoke with two experts from the European Museum Academy (EMA) — one of the project's core partners — about the educational modules they're developing, the ethical considerations involved, and what this project means for museums, educators, and anyone who has ever left an exhibition feeling slightly different from when they walked in.

A Collaboration Nobody Expected

Brain science and museum studies don't

usually share a table. That, both experts say, is exactly the point.

HENRIK ZIPSANE

"Collaboration between natural sciences and the humanities is not seen every day. To be quite honest, I really believe that the involvement and direct inspiration from neuroscience on museum-related practice is the main reason this project was funded. I think the evaluators understood that it is here the possible game-changing potential lies."

Elia frames it more simply: the project gives the museum world something it has rarely had before — hard evidence.

ELIA VLACHOU

"The project introduces a scientific approach that offers evidence-based insight into how visitors experience museums. That matters for the way museums are designed, and for how we train the people who work in them."

"It is here the possible game-changing potential lies."

Henrik Zipsane





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



Teaching Museum Staff to Tune In

One of the project's main outputs is a set of educational modules for museum professionals, students — practical courses built on the TransforMEANS Theory developed within the project. The goal is straightforward: help the people who design and run museums understand the emotional impact their work has on visitors and give them tools to develop it thoughtfully.

ELIA VLACHOU

“EMA has long experience from workshops and seminars addressed to museum professionals and students, which helped significantly in shaping these materials to what museums need. The modules aspire to give museum professionals practical tools — helping them measure their emotional impact on visitors, as well as inspiring museums to further personalise visitor experiences, supporting mental wellbeing and social inclusion.”

Henrik describes the skills in more concrete terms, particularly useful for anyone wondering what ‘emotional intelligence in a museum’ looks like in practice:



META-MUSEUM WORKSHOP AT THE EMA ANNUAL MEETING IN BUDAPEST, HUNGARY IN SEPTEMBER 2025

HENRIK ZIPSANE

“Participants will get an understanding of how you can facilitate a wanted impact on a visitor through a museum exhibition. They will learn about the transformative nature of heritage, about emotional intelligence, about empathy, confidence and resilience — and they will develop skills to analyse the relationship between storytelling and exhibition techniques.”

What Happened When They Tested It

Early versions of the modules have already been run with museum professionals and students across Europe. Both experts noticed something similar: people were interested — and a little unsettled.

ELIA VLACHOU

“Participants generally reacted positively to the idea that cultural heritage can boost empathy, resilience and confidence. Museum professionals are aware of the power of authentic experiences and captivating storytelling.”

But enthusiasm came with questions. Should museums be trying to shape how people feel? Where does inspiration end and manipulation begin? Henrik did not shy away from the tension:

HENRIK ZIPSANE

“There clearly is an interest in knowing more about what we can do in museums to enhance the impact of visits. But we need to respect that there are also some concerns — valid questions about how new methods may be used for potential manipulation of visitors, and thereby undermine the public confidence in museums.”

One Framework, Thirty-Nine Countries

EMA operates across 39 countries in Europe. That reach is one of its greatest assets in a project trying to build something universal — and one of its greatest complications.

Henrik shares a memory from the 2025 summer school where he introduced the educational module to students from various countries around the world:

HENRIK ZIPSANE

“For one student, the ideas in the module were completely realistic to integrate in her country. For another, it would be completely unrealistic — as she said herself. Such an experience is an eye-opener even after almost 40 years in the heritage sector.”



EDUCATIONAL MODULE TESTING AT THE EMA SUMMER SCHOOL AT JAMTLI MUSEUM, IN ÖSTERSUND, SWEDEN, IN JULY 2025



MAC BARCELONA, META-MUSEUM PROJECT ASSOCIATED PARTNER

It is a reminder that ‘European cultural heritage’ is not one thing. A museum in Lisbon carries different histories, silences, and sensitivities than one in Tallinn or Athens. Elia sees this not as a problem to solve, but as material to work with:

ELIA VLACHOU

“Integrating regional and local examples of what we call ‘difficult heritage’ — histories that are painful or contested — and the ways they have been presented in museums and exhibitions, can help foster empathy and promote the diversity of European cultural heritage.”

‘Difficult heritage’ might mean a colonial collection, a site of wartime violence, or an object whose ownership is disputed. What the project explores is how to engage with that complexity in ways that build understanding rather than shutting it down.

The Question That Keeps Them Thinking

Every powerful new tool raises ethical questions. Both experts were asked: what is the ethical challenge ahead?



ELIA VLACHOU

“The main challenge is to avoid the emotional manipulation of visitors and to respect multiple interpretative perspectives.”

Henrik puts it in terms of a balancing act the museum world will have to perform publicly, and carefully:

HENRIK ZIPSANE

“The biggest challenge is to find a balance — recognised by both the public and museum professionals — between acknowledging the new knowledge about the potential of museums and, on the other hand, preserving the high public and academic confidence in museums as a profession.”

Both agree that the ethical guardrail is the same one that has guided the museum world for decades: the Code of Ethics of ICOM, the International Council of Museums — the global body that sets professional standards worldwide. EMA, founded under the umbrella of the Council of Europe, is equally committed to ensuring that access and democratic engagement remain at the centre of everything that follows.

“The main challenge is to avoid the emotional manipulation of visitors.”

Elia Vlachou

So — Can a Museum Visit Change You?

The honest answer, at this stage of the project, is: probably yes — more than we ever realised. The more interesting question is what we do with that knowledge.

Patients undergoing chemotherapy and dialysis will be offered virtual museum visits as part of the project’s research. Students who have never set foot in an exhibition are discovering that cultural heritage can make them feel less alone. Museum educators are learning to think of themselves not just as curators of objects, but as facilitators of human experience.

META-MUSEUM is not trying to turn museums into therapy centres or emotion machines. It is trying to understand something that visitors have always known intuitively — and give the people who design these spaces the tools to honour it.

That feels like a project worth knowing about.

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

Meet the Experts



Elia Vlachou is an archaeologist and museologist who wears several hats, currently serving as the Deputy Director and Head of Projects, Development & Networking at the Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece. As a Museum & Cultural Management Consultant, Elia has led major museological projects, including more than 100 temporary exhibitions, E.U. programs, educational activities, and outreach events. She is also the Co-founder and General Secretary of the Hellenic Steam Institute, a non-profit association dedicated to the preservation and valorisation of industrial heritage. Previously, as Head of the Museums Department of the Piraeus Cultural Foundation, she implemented and coordinated the PIOP network of nine museums. A Museum Expert of the European Museum Academy, she sits on various international juries awarding prestigious prizes to museums, such as the Luigi Micheletti, D.A.S.A. Award, Živa Award, Heritage in Motion, Museums in Short, and Children in Museums.



Henrik Zipsane, director of the European Museum Academy since 2019, served as CEO 2002-2019 at Jamtli Foundation - a heritage organization in central Sweden which runs one large and three smaller museums. Henrik Zipsane is adjunct professor in museum education at the University of Science and Technology in Meghalaya, and guest professor in heritage learning and regional development at Linköping University and associate expert of Pascal Observatory and Glasgow University as well as associate of European Expert Network on Culture and is contracted as expert on culture and adult education by the European Commission and the Swedish Government. Henrik Zipsane has been board member of Culture Action Europe and the European Commission Dialogue Platform on Access to Culture. He holds master's degree in history from the University of Copenhagen and a PhD degree in education and history from the Danish University of Education.



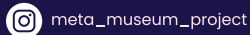
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