



Europeana and the Curation of European Identity

Europeana's Curated Exhibitions and the Limits of Digital Heritage Inclusion

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1. Abstract

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This thesis examines Europeana, the European Union's digital cultural heritage platform. The thesis evaluates whether and how Europeana's editorial choices produce particular constructions of European identity, and what patterns of inclusion and absence emerge from those findings. Through qualitative content analysis of a sample of ten exhibitions, the research maps the themes and framing strategies present in Europeana's editorial output, thus contributing to a growing body of critical scholarship on digital heritage governance in Europe. The analysis draws on Smith's (2006) account of authorized heritage discourse for a deeper understanding of how institutions naturalise particular social positions as universal ones, supplemented by Billig's (1995) concept of banal nationalism, Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural legitimacy, and Gillespie's (2014) work on platform politics. Together these frameworks structure the analysis of a purposive sample of ten exhibitions drawn from Europeana's Stories section, organised across five analytical dimensions. The universal European subject implied across multiple exhibitions reflects, on closer examination, the experience of those for whom European institutions have historically worked. The gap between Europeana's stated commitment to diversity and what its curated output actually does is not a matter of individual curatorial decisions. It reflects the institutional position from which European cultural heritage continues to be defined.

Keywords: Europeana, digital heritage, authorized heritage discourse, European identity, cultural memory, curatorial voice

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2. Introduction

Over time, Europeana's role has evolved to become part of a large transformation. What initially started out as a digital collection of Europe's shared cultural heritage, has over time grown into a platform that now helps other cultural institutions go digital. Its development depended not only on support from the European Commission and Member States, but also in involving cultural institutions and growing its digital collection. Europeana is now being developed as the EU's *Common European Data Space for Cultural Heritage*, thereby deepening its governance role far beyond a simple digital library. This means a broader role in supporting the digital transformation of the European cultural sector, through supporting collaboration among cultural institutions, and by making cultural data more accessible and reusable (European Data Space for Cultural Heritage, n/d). Yet despite its scale and its explicit mandate to promote a sense of shared European identity, Europeana remains relatively understudied as a cultural and political object. The aim is to produce a critical analysis of Europeana's editorial content using the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) as the main analytical framework, connecting the platform's curation logic to questions about who defines European cultural heritage in the digital age.

The analysis being carried out will examine questions of curational logic, framing, and the absence or marginalisation of narratives. The research questions will be the following: *How do Europeana's editorial choices in curated online exhibitions construct a particular narrative of European cultural identity, and which communities, geographies, and memory traditions are structurally absent from that narrative?* It will also ask *through what curatorial and framing strategies does this inclusion/exclusion operate?*

By analysing exhibitions through textual analysis, with the aim to identify patterns of inclusion and identity construction, it also becomes necessary to distinguish between what is represented but also what remains absent or "missing". Establishing absence, however, presents its own methodological challenges, since absence is often more difficult to define or identify than visible representation.

3. Background

The shift from digitization to full digital transformation raises new questions about who controls heritage narratives online. Most existing research on Europeana comes from fields such as archival science, information studies, and digital humanities (Capurro & Plets, 2020; Capurro, Plets & Verheul, 2023). This means that the focus has been primarily on digitalisation, metadata, and the curatorial aspects of cultural collections. In turn, Europeana has been examined as a transnational digital heritage initiative, rather than as a EU cultural project that shapes ideas about European identity and heritage. By contrast, critical heritage studies have mainly focused on physical sites and national institutions (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). One exception is Gómez (2023), who examined Europeana as a cultural policy tool with the ability to shape the meanings of a European citizenship, even though her work looks more into the institutional design than forms of content. This thesis aims to address that gap by analyzing Europeana's exhibitions. It will do so by looking at the narratives they present and the oversights they contain. The aim is therefore to make a contribution, by conducting a qualitative analysis that treats Europeana's curatorial logic as itself a form of heritage authorization, connecting platform studies to critical heritage discourse in a way that neither field has undertaken for this object.

2.2 European Cultural Policy and European Awareness

The institutional project of defining European identity predates the EU itself. *The 1973 Copenhagen Declaration on European Identity*, adopted by the nine member states of the European Community, represents the first collective attempt to articulate what Europe held in common, framing shared heritage, rule of law, and democracy as the foundations of a European identity distinct from both the Soviet East and the wider world. This early formulation already shows the tension that would persist into Europeana's mandate: the simultaneous assertion of unity and the management of internal diversity. The Declaration opens by stating that the nine member states 'have overcome their past enmities' and 'decided that unity is a basic European necessity to ensure the survival of the civilization which they have in common' (Declaration on European Identity, 1973, §1). The Declaration also contains, in §3, the central tension that structures Europeana's representational logic: "the diversity of cultures within the framework of a common European civilization." The cultural turn in EU integration was formalized with *the 1983 Solemn Declaration on European Union*¹, which commits the Union to supporting the cultures of its Member States while respecting their diversity. This cultural strategy also functions as a form of institutional power and self-representation, using symbols and shared identity to strengthen citizens' identification with Europe (Capurro & Plets, 2020). *The 1999 Lund Principles* and the subsequent *i2010*

¹ *Solemn Declaration on European Union, Stuttgart, 19 June 1983, Bulletin of the European Communities, No. 6, 1983.*

digital agenda established digitization of cultural heritage as a strategic EU priority, leading to the launch of Europeana in 2008 as the institutional realization of that ambition (Capurro & Plets, 2020).

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Politics of Digital Inclusion

As Terras (2011) argues, the labor of digital heritage infrastructure is irreducibly human and therefore irreducibly political. It is shaped at every stage by the priorities, assumptions, and resource constraints of the institutions involved. According to Capurro et al., the Europeana aggregation² model has a tendency of favoring well-resourced Western European institutions, such as national libraries, major museums, and established archives, because they have the technical capacity to meet metadata and licensing requirements. This, however, can be explained by the indirect effects of technical and institutional barriers, rather than intended exclusion (Capurro, Plets & Verheul, 2023). These barriers are important to identify, because of their influence on the content being delivered, and the content that remains absent. It should be noted however, that the Stories sector and exhibitions operate with some independence from the EDM compliance requirements that govern the broader portal. As Škrinjar (personal communication, April 2026) clarifies, Stories can reference material that has not been remapped to EDM. The operative requirement for exhibition content is open licensing rather than metadata format compliance. The EDM's structural constraints therefore shape the broader collection from which exhibitions typically draw, but do not directly determine what can appear in a curated exhibition. This section maps the layers of that infrastructure as they operate in Europeana's case, from the technical standards governing data submission to the editorial conventions that shape the exhibitions this thesis analyzes.

3.2 On Digital Curation and Digitalization

Digital curation, in cultural heritage platforms, refers to the decisions that shape how content is selected, described, made searchable, and presented to the public. These decisions include technical, institutional, and editorial choices, which in turn mean an ongoing process of selection, classification, and framing. These are all choices that in one way or the other reflect priorities and assumptions of the institutions involved (Terras, 2011; Jaillant, 2022). This is significant for understanding how the content we as readers are presented with first, and how our searches for content adheres to existing algorithms that have been created for us. This does not mean that the content is not relevant or good, but that it comes with certain biases. These in turn obscure or downright exclude other content deemed less legitimate.

Decisions about what gets digitized are made at the institutional level, shaped by funding availability, conservation priorities, and institutional prestige. What is never digitized never enters

² Aggregation is defined as “the process of collecting information from several different websites, newspapers, databases (= large amounts of information stored in a computer system), etc. and combining it in one place, or the result of this process” (*Cambridge Dictionary*).

Europeana's pipeline at all. This is the most foundational layer of exclusion, and it operates invisibly: the platform's Strategy 2020–2025 acknowledges that only approximately ten percent of Europe's cultural heritage has been digitized, meaning that the vast majority of the material record is structurally absent from digital heritage platforms regardless of subsequent curatorial decisions.

3.3 The Europeana Data Model and Metadata Governance

As Capurro and Plets (2020) argue, the Europeana Data Model (EDM) is not just a technical standard but also shapes how heritage is described. By requiring shared categories and vocabularies, it influences how institutions are able to present their collections. This suggests that inclusion in Europeana involves adopting a specific way of defining and organizing heritage. The Europeana Strategy 2020–2025 describes this process as essential to making the collection searchable and interoperable, with AI-driven enrichment validated by domain experts. However, as Arantes (2025) argues, algorithmic enrichment does not eliminate curatorial bias, instead it has a tendency to inherit and amplify the biases present in its training data and the controlled vocabularies it applies. If those vocabularies reflect Western European institutional conventions, the enrichment process will systematize those conventions, and so, rendering them even less visible as cultural choices. For the Stories and exhibitions section specifically, editorial guidelines are set by Europeana to govern curatorial aspects including the style, narrative structure, and licensing. It functions as the primary framework within which external partners produce content (Europeana, n.d.).

3.4 Who Curates: the Institutional Infrastructure

The Europeana Foundation has its headquarters in The Hague and is funded primarily by the European Commission through successive framework programmes. The European Commission is therefore the legal entity responsible for the platform. Its governance structure includes a Board of Foundation and a Network Association representing contributing institutions across member states (Europeana PRO). Within this structure, a professional editorial team is responsible for the Stories section. The Foundation publishes editorial guidelines that specify tone, narrative structure, and content priorities for all exhibition content, constituting a house style that produces an institutional voice rather than individual authorial voices³. Unlike most academic or journalistic publishing, Europeana's exhibitions do not clearly credit individual authors. This choice creates an institutional voice that obscures the human decisions behind how each exhibition is framed. It also suggests a wish to present themselves

³ Europeana's editorial guidelines are published at <https://pro.europeana.eu/page/editorial-guidelines>. The guidelines specify tone, narrative structure, target audience, and content priorities, constituting a house style that produces an institutional rather than individual authorial voice across all exhibitions.

as one unified institution, with their own set of values and definitions. It is the layer of curation that becomes the most visible to the public user, and the one whose operations are most directly amenable to the kind of analysis this thesis conducts. By Škrinjar's (personal communication, April 2026) account of how Stories content is generated, it was revealed that some exhibitions are produced in response to specific external events like Women's History Month, Black History Month, et cetera, rather than as sustained editorial commitments to particular communities or traditions.

In co-produced exhibitions, the division of labor follows a consistent pattern: partners provide subject expertise, research, and an initial narrative, while Europeana provides editorial guidance and shapes the final exhibition to ensure consistency in tone and quality alignment with the platform's values and audience expectations (M. Szyndkielewska, personal communication, via W. Byrne, May 2026). This arrangement means that Europeana retains final editorial authority over all exhibition content regardless of the partner's origin or expertise, meaning the platform's institutional voice is not merely a framing layer but an active shaping force. The editorial guidelines that govern this process are publicly available and apply to all contributors, enforcing a standardized narrative and tonal register that extends the semantic normalization identified at the metadata level into the exhibition content itself.

4. Theoretical Framework

The primary theoretical lens utilized will be the Authorized Heritage Discourse, developed by Laurajane Smith (2006). Smith argues that heritage institutions do not simply preserve the past, but they authorise certain versions of it as legitimate, while marginalising other histories. Applying this framework to Europeana requires some adaptation. The authorizing voice is not a national government but a supranational institution operating across many languages and Member States, with authority expressed through technical standards and editorial practices rather than explicit curatorial statements. This makes the process of authorization less visible than in her original case. However, the AHD has previously been applied to the European Heritage Label (EHL) by Čeginskas et al. (2021), who found that EU-level heritage policy reproduces power dynamics between Western and Central and Eastern European member states. This suggests that, even within projects that are framed as promoting shared European heritage, some histories and perspectives may be more easily recognised as “European” than others. The AHD framework therefore holds relevance to this study, as it provides a way of examining how Europeana may similarly privilege certain narratives of Europe while marginalising others.

This thesis draws on three specific dimensions of Smith's argument. First, the concept of the authorizing voice. This is better described as the institutional position from which heritage is being defined and narrated, and which is then applied to Europeana's editorial practice as a form of transnational cultural authorization. Second, Smith's distinction between heritage that speaks about communities and heritage that speaks with them, meaning which structures the analysis of exhibitions engaging minority communities, particularly *Black Lives in Europe* and the *Renaissance of Romani Re-presentation*. Third, Smith's observation that AHD tends to present contested, politically produced histories as natural, progressive will be applied to the analysis of exhibitions that speak of European integration as historical destiny rather than a political achievement. Another distinction to keep in mind is that the authorized heritage discourse was developed by Smith through ethnographic fieldwork at heritage sites such as museums and world heritage sites. They are substantially concerned with the embodied, performative dimensions of heritage experience: how people feel at sites, how professional heritage discourse shapes the behavior of visitors and communities, and how heritage practice is lived rather than just read. This thesis does not conduct any ethnographic methodology and makes no claims about how Europeana's exhibitions are experienced by their audiences. The application of AHD here is purely textual and institutional. By analysing the exhibitions more as documents and asking what vision of heritage they produce, no direct attention will be given to how that vision is received or contested by readers.

Smith developed AHD primarily in relation to national heritage institutions operating within bounded territorial and linguistic contexts. Applying it to Europeana will therefore require some deliberate extensions. The first is concerning the fact that Europeana operates transnationally across twenty-seven member states and twenty-four languages, which means the authorizing voice is not a national government but a supranational institution without direct democratic accountability to the communities whose heritage it manages. The second aspect is the fact that Smith's cases are on physical sites and material objects; Europeana's exhibitions are digital texts, which therefore means authorization operates through editorial conventions, metadata standards, and through search algorithms, rather than through the built environment and curatorial arrangements of physical heritage spaces. The third aspect is the institutional. Unlike a museum or listed building, Europeana does not own or directly manage the heritage it presents: instead it aggregates, selects, and curates different material from contributing institutions, which means its authorization operates at one remove from the objects themselves, through the selection and framing of other institutions' selections and framings. What Europeana includes in an exhibition, how it frames what it includes, and what it leaves out are all forms of cultural authorization, and that is why Smith's framework provides the most developed theoretical vocabulary for analyzing that process.

Another framework that will be used throughout the analysis is Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism* (1995). In this concept of the banal, he makes a counterintuitive argument: the most powerful form of national identity is not the flag-waving, anthem-singing nationalism that attracts political attention. It is the unremarkable, everyday reproduction of national belonging through institutional discourse and the small habits of everyday life. The flag hanging outside the post office, the weather forecast that ends at the national border, the newspaper's use of "we" when referring to the nation are all forms of banal nationalist discourse that constantly remind citizens of their national identity without any of it being felt as ideological. Billig's argument is relevant to Europeana because the platform's construction of European identity operates predominantly in this banal register. The exhibitions rarely argue explicitly for European integration or celebrate it as a political achievement. It is already assumed, using "we" and "our" and "European" as if these categories were self-evident and shared by all readers. The framing of exhibitions as presenting "our shared European heritage" naturalizes both the sharedness and the Europeanness without subjecting either to scrutiny. The concept of banal nationalism has been extended here to what might be called *banal Europeanism* as it provides a vocabulary for analyzing the register in which Europeana's exhibitions operate. It explains why the most consequential ideological work in the exhibitions is often done not by explicit claims about Europe but by the casual use of inclusive pronouns, and by the assumption of a shared implied audience. The dimension of political

power and the EU narrative in the analytical framework draws directly on this concept. It asks not only whether European integration is presented as contested or natural, but through what linguistic and presented narrative that presentation is achieved.

Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (cited in Murdock, 2010) demonstrates that what counts as legitimate culture, such as high art, classical music, literary fiction, et cetera, is not actually determined by inherent aesthetic qualities but rather by social processes through which educated elites define their own cultural preferences as universally valid and superior. Cultural legitimacy is a form of symbolic power. It is the ability to define the terms of cultural value in ways that naturalize class hierarchies by representing them as aesthetic hierarchies. Applied to heritage, Bourdieu's framework asks whose cultural production gets designated as heritage worthy of preservation and institutional presentation. The answer, his framework predicts, will systematically favor the cultural production of educated elites, not only because that production is inherently more valuable but because the institutions making the designation share the class position and cultural formation of those who produced it. The dimension of class and elite culture in the analytical framework draws on Bourdieu's concept of legitimate culture to ask whether Europeana's exhibitions reproduce the distinction between high and popular culture in their selection of heritage objects and their implied audience. Bourdieu's framework will allow the analysis to be theorized rather than merely described. The class dimension of heritage selection is not therefore argued to not be accidental but structural, and reflecting the alignment between Europeana's institutional culture and the class position of the cultural production it most readily recognizes as heritage.

Europeana shapes European identity less through explicit statements than through its technical design. Metadata standards determine what can be included, search rankings influence what is most visible, and aggregation partnerships tend to favor well-resourced Western European institutions (Europeana PRO, 2020). This is what Gillespie (2014) refers to as the 'politics of platforms': the way technical decisions naturalize themselves as neutral infrastructure while encoding particular hierarchies of visibility. In this context, what Europeana defines as technically compliant becomes culturally legitimate, while what falls outside its standards is effectively excluded from Europe's digital heritage. The work of the authorized heritage framework and platform politics is complementary rather than simply overlapping. Throughout the analysis, AHD will work at the level of content, focusing on how exhibitions construct narratives, what they emphasize or leave out, and how a "European" voice is presented. Gillespie's framework will operate at the level of infrastructure. It will be used to analyze the technical systems that shape what can be curated before any editorial decision is made. Technical systems include metadata standards and algorithms that shape the material available, while editorial choices shape how that material

is presented. Using both frameworks together allows the thesis to account for multiple dimensions of how Europeana constructs heritage, from what is included to how it is framed.

5. Methodology

This thesis analyzes a selected sample of Europeana's online exhibitions. Through a careful selection of exhibitions, they have been chosen deliberately to represent variation, analyzed for framing, language, and narrative structure. Ten exhibitions were selected using purposive sampling to ensure variation across different dimensions. The sample includes exhibitions that emphasizes people and events linked to European integration (*The Images That Shaped Europe*, *Louise Weiss*, *Defending Citizens' Freedoms*), communities that are less often represented in mainstream heritage institutions (*Black Lives in Europe*, *The Renaissance of Romani Re-presentation*), and exhibitions that position themselves as counterhegemonic (*The Past But Not As You Know It*, *The Unexpected*). This variation makes it easier to compare Europeana's more positive and more critical ways of presenting content.

Exhibition selection proceeded in two stages. The selection of exhibitions followed a purposive sampling logic, designed to ensure variation across the analytical dimensions rather than to produce a statistically representative sample. At the time of data collection, the full list of available exhibitions in Europeana's Stories section was reviewed in its entirety. Selection proceeded on the basis of exhibition titles and brief descriptions, with the aim of identifying cases that spoke to the six analytical dimensions developed from the theoretical framework. These were the following: gender, geography and language, race and minority communities, political power and European integration narratives, and curatorial voice and community agency.

The initial selection was partly deductive. Certain titles signaled clear relevance to specific dimensions before the exhibitions were read in full. *Louise Weiss: A Committed European*, for instance, indicated relevance to both gender and European integration narratives. *Black Lives in Europe* and *The Renaissance of Romani Re-presentation* indicated relevance to race, minority communities, and curatorial voice. Others were selected to provide contrast or to cover dimensions less obviously present in the first round, such as *The Unexpected* and *The Past But Not As You Know It*, which were included because their titles suggested a self-consciously counterhegemonic framing that would be analytically interesting to test against the platform's dominant narrative. This initial review produced a list of potential exhibitions, which was finally narrowed down to ten.

I recognize that the selection of exhibitions reflects personal analytical and theoretical focus. Since the thesis is exploring inclusion and exclusion, exhibitions have been chosen where these subjects appear more clearly. This means the findings are interpretive and show patterns in the selected sample rather than all of Europeana's exhibitions.

The Stories exhibitions will be analysed through 5 different dimensions, covering themes deemed relevant for gaining a deeper understanding of Europeana's political and social narratives and representations of European heritage. Following intersectional analysis as applied to heritage contexts by Lähdesmäki et al. (2019), the analysis attends to how gender, class, race, and geography compound one another in the exhibitions' curatorial logic.

These dimensions are the following:

Dimension 1: Gender. I examine who appears as a historical agent versus an object of documentation; whether women are centered as exceptional individuals or as representatives of broader structural traditions; how gender is framed as a resolved European achievement or as an ongoing and contested political project; and whether the exhibition's framing reproduces or challenges the gendered structures of the institutions it represents.

Dimension 2: Geography and Language. What minority groups, countries and Member States are left out of the discourse? How is histories from Eastern Europe presented and what narrative is it told from?

Dimension 3: Race and Minority Communities. I ask whether Black, Roma, or other racialized communities appear as subjects with historical agency or as objects of institutional documentation; whether European colonialism is treated as part of European heritage or as something that happened elsewhere or to others; and whether the implicit definition of "European" in the exhibition's framing is racially connected.

Dimension 4: Politics of Power and European Integration Narratives. I will be mapping how the exhibitions deal with themes of "Europeaness". I ask whether European integration is presented as a contested political project or as a natural historical destination.

Dimension 5: Curatorial Voice and Community Agency. I examine whether communities are represented as subjects with their own voice or as objects described by an institutional narrator; whether the exhibition acknowledges its own constructedness or presents itself as neutral documentation; and whether exhibitions that engage with underrepresented communities will challenge the platform's broader narrative logic or reproduce it.

The table below maps the analytical contributions, mapping where each exhibition makes its primary (●) contribution, and secondary (○) dimension. This mapping has been guiding the selection of the sample across themes.

Exhibition	Gender	Geography / Language	Race / Colonial History	Political Power / EU Narrative	Curatorial Voice / Community Agency
1. Louise Weiss: A Committed European	● Primary	● Primary	○ Secondary	● Primary	○ Secondary
2. The First World War: Places of Transit	○ Secondary	● Primary	○ Secondary	● Primary	○ Secondary
3. Solidarity: A Peaceful Revolution	○ Secondary	● Primary	○ Secondary	● Primary	○ Secondary
4. Celebrations in Europe	○ Secondary	● Primary	○ Secondary	○ Secondary	○ Secondary
5. Defending Citizens' Freedoms	○ Secondary	○ Secondary	○ Secondary	● Primary	○ Secondary
6. Black Lives in Europe	○ Secondary	○ Secondary	● Primary	○ Secondary	● Primary
7. The Renaissance of Romani Re-presentation	○ Secondary	○ Secondary	● Primary	○ Secondary	● Primary
8. The Unexpected	○ Secondary	○ Secondary	○ Secondary	○ Secondary	● Primary
9. The Past But Not As You Know It	○ Secondary	○ Secondary	○ Secondary	○ Secondary	● Primary
10. The Images That Shaped Europe	● Primary	● Primary	● Primary	○ Secondary	● Primary

● Primary — main analytical contribution of this exhibition for this dimension.

○ Secondary — present and noted but not the analytical focus.

5.2 A Note on Primary Sources and Institutional Correspondences

On another note, I also contacted the members of Europeana's Editorial Team for clarification and further information on the editorial and curational processes that the exhibitions go through before

publishing. I have through email correspondences been able to fill in some gaps and thereby been able to have a more meaningful analysis of the exhibitions above. Where applicable, the correspondences have been named as a personal communication with the responsible person in questions. In April 2026 I contacted Maša Škrinjar, Senior Metadata Coordinator in Data Publishing Services at the Europeana Foundation, to request information about the relationship between metadata governance and curatorial practice in the Stories exhibitions. I subsequently contacted the Europeana editorial team directly, and received a response from Małgorzata Szyndkielewska, Content and Exhibitions Coordinator, forwarded via Wendy Byrne of Europeana's Marketing, Communications and Analytics team (M. Szyndkielewska, personal communication, via W. Byrne, May 2026). Szyndkielewska's response provided information about the commissioning process, co-production arrangements, and editorial guidelines for the Stories exhibitions (M. Szyndkielewska, personal communication, via W. Byrne, May 2026). Together these exchanges form a supplementary empirical layer alongside the textual analysis of exhibition content, and are cited where relevant..

5.3 Researcher Positionality

I approach this material from a position that is itself implicated in the structures this thesis examines. My familiarity with Western European cultural and political history is greater than my familiarity with Central and Eastern European traditions, which might make me better equipped to identify absences that matter from a Western perspective than those that matter from a CEE one. Where my interpretative access is most constrained, I have tried to rely on secondary scholarship and literature that draws on community-knowledge and to flag interpretive uncertainties where they may arise.

5.4 Methodological Challenges

Demonstrating structural absence presents a particular methodological challenge. Therefore each exhibition must be read against an explicit reference point. This will be Europeana's own stated commitment as that baseline – its 2020-2025 strategy and the EU's broader "Unity in Diversity" mandate. This means asking whether the diversity Europeana formally claims is legible in the heritage it curates, on the platform's own terms rather than against an externally imposed criterion. Not all analytical dimensions appeared equally across the sample. Some exhibitions foregrounded questions of race and representation, while others more strongly reflected themes of geography, institutional authority, or European integration narratives.

6. Analysis

Europeana's Strategy 2020–2025 describes the platform as committed to representing the full diversity of European cultural memory. The following analysis takes that commitment as an analytical baseline when asking what patterns of inclusion and absence emerge when ten curated exhibitions are read against it. The following analysis examines ten curated exhibitions from Europeana's Stories section, selected to represent the six dimensions selected for this sample.

Exhibition 1: Louise Weiss: a committed European.

This exhibition presents the life of Luise Weiss, an activist, feminist, journalist, and political figure. Structured chronologically, it traces her life through major episodes of twentieth-century European history, including the First World War and the later occupation of Eastern European states.

EXHIBITION

Louise Weiss: a committed European



Figure 1: Opening page of *Louise Weiss: A Committed European*. Source: Europeana Stories, n.d. In Copyright. Screenshot taken 20 May 2026. The photograph positions Weiss in front of the European Parliament stars.

One opening statement shapes the understanding of the exhibition as a whole – “As both a determined intellectual and a tireless activist, she was a pioneer of the European ideal”. It is a powerful statement, yet also an ambiguous one, shaped by implicit assumptions about what this “European ideal” means and how readers are expected to interpret it. Furthermore, by aligning her personal achievements with this broader ideal, it seems to blur the distinction between individual conviction and institutional history. What stands out early in the reading is the centering of the whole exhibition around one singular, educated, cosmopolitan person, reducing it to what Bourdieu (1984, cited in Murdock, 2010) identified as the structural alignment between institutional culture and the class fractions. It invites questions about what the “European ideal” signified in the 1930s, and how the EU and Europeana define it today.

The treatment of gender is where this becomes most visible. Notably, the European institutions she later represented excluded women for much of their history. Nonetheless, her feminism⁴ is framed as part of her identity as a “committed European,” rather than as a critique of the institutions she joined. Gender is central to the Lousie Weiss exhibition, yet it appears almost exclusively through the language of achievement and progress. The exhibition repeatedly foregrounds Weiss as an exceptional woman who overcame exclusion within male-dominated political and intellectual spaces. However, structural gender inequality is largely translated into the story of one extraordinary woman whose determination allowed her to transcend historical barriers. Rather than examining gender as an ongoing political structure embedded within European institutions, the exhibition frames feminist struggle primarily through Weiss’ personal achievements. This is understandable given that the exhibition is primarily intended to celebrate and raise awareness of Weiss as an individual figure rather than to provide a detailed historical analysis of every political context surrounding her life. At the same time, a more developed engagement with these histories might arguably have done greater justice to Weiss herself, since experiences such as the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the rise of fascist propaganda, and the vulnerability of Jewish communities in Central Europe were likely not insignificant to her worldview, but a large part of the political convictions she later held.

In a similar manner, her experience of the First World War is presented, above all else, as her personal moral growth. One example of this is the point made about having “turned down a lucrative career” to care for the wounded, which seems to highlight the individual virtue over the direct political causes for this act. As a result, the darkest of Europe’s histories which she herself lived through reads more as background to her own personal development, rather than a subject of critical engagement.. These histories are present, but only as background. That is significant for an institution of this kind, because what remains unexamined can appear to minimise historical responsibility or sidestep critical engagement with Europe’s own past. The exhibition rarely questions how European political memory itself has historically marginalized women, nor does it substantially reflect on why figures such as Weiss required later recovery into institutional narratives. Instead, gender inequality often appears as a historical obstacle that Europe has progressively overcome. The result is a narrative in which feminist struggle becomes integrated into a teleological story of European democratic development rather than presented as an unresolved or continuing political tension. Nevertheless, the exhibition succeeds in drawing attention to a somewhat overlooked historical figure and in encouraging broader public awareness of her life and work.

⁴ **Feminism** here refers specifically to Weiss's suffragette activism for voting rights and civil equality in the 1930s. The exhibition does not define the term, so her actions are read through the EU's contemporary gender equality framework (European Commission, 2026). It also does not ask whether her activism challenged or reinforced the institutions she later joined.

Exhibition 2: The First World War: Places of Transit.

This exhibition traces the movement of soldiers, refugees, prisoners of war, and migrant workers across Europe during the First World War, centering on the transit zones – train stations, camps, border crossings – through which millions of people passed. Its geographic scope is broad, drawing on material from archives across Western and Central Europe.

The First World War: A Place of Transit approaches the First World War less through military history and more through movement, displacement, and border crossings. Instead of focusing mainly on battles or national victories, the exhibition follows the experiences of soldiers, refugees, prisoners of war, nurses, and civilians moving across Europe during wartime. This framing is important because it shifts the story away from national memory and toward a broader European narrative built around shared experiences of mobility. At the same time, this understanding of movement is not entirely neutral. The repeated emphasis on interconnectedness and crossing borders reflects ideas that are also central to contemporary European integration narratives. Europe is often being presented as a connected space that was shaped by wartime movement. In some ways, this take challenges older nationalist interpretations of the war by showing how experiences crossed borders and how it affected multiple populations at once. However, the exhibition also seems to smooth over some of those political and regional differences that shaped those experiences. It is clear that Western and Central Europe remain the main focus, while Eastern Europe appears more often through themes of occupation or collapse. Their own historical perspectives have gotten less coverage. The version of Europe presented is also shaped by the archives and institutions contributing material to Europeana. As covered earlier, there exists a bias in which countries are most represented, which sources were digitised, and which histories were preserved. All of this affects the narrative that becomes visible. So while the exhibition presents itself as a transnational European memory project, it still reflects uneven patterns of archival visibility and institutional participation across Europe. At the same time, its framing fits quite closely with broader European integration narratives, where the violence and fragmentation of the twentieth century become part of the justification for contemporary ideas of European cooperation and unity.

Exhibition 3: Solidarity: A Peaceful Revolution.

This exhibition focuses on the Solidarity movement in Poland. It presents the trade union and civil resistance movement that played a central role in the collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe between 1980 and 1989.

EXHIBITION

Solidarity: A Peaceful Revolution

The August 1980 Phenomenon in Poland



Published 28 August 2020

Figure 2. Opening page of *Solidarity: A Peaceful Revolution*. Source: Europeana Stories, 2020. CC BY-SA 4.0. Screenshot taken 25 May 2026.

Solidarity: A Peaceful Revolution presents the Solidarity movement primarily as a democratic struggle that helped reshape both Poland and Europe more broadly. From the beginning, the exhibition frames Solidarity not only as a national labour movement, but as part of a larger European story about political transformation. The exhibition repeatedly emphasises peaceful resistance and civil society, constructing Solidarity as a moral and political turning point that contributed to the eventual collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe. In this sense, the exhibition fits quite closely within wider European memory narratives by the end of the Cold War as a movement toward democracy and European unity. Unlike some Europeana exhibitions that remain heavily centred on Western Europe, this exhibition makes an effort to place Eastern Europe much more visibly at the centre of the narrative. Poland is not presented as peripheral to Europe, but as one of the key locations shaping Europe's democratic future, and as a country of great political agency. At the same time, it still aligns closely with broader EU memory narratives in which the fall of communism becomes part of a larger story about democratic progress and European integration. The exhibition thus reflects a broader pattern in post-communist memory politics, one that contests the West-centric content of European historical memory by placing Poland at the centre, but does so while accepting there is an underlying framework of a shared, unified European story as both achievable and desirable (Mäklsoo, 2009). It becomes a story of Eastern Europe joining the European project rather than as a complex political history with its own internal tensions. The exhibition thus reflects a broader pattern in post-communist memory politics, one that contests the West-centric content of European historical memory by placing Poland at the centre, but does so while accepting the underlying framework of a shared, unified European story as both achievable and desirable (Mäklsoo, 2009). National

symbols, Catholic imagery, and so on remain highly visible throughout. This creates an interesting tension between national and transnational memory. Solidarity is presented both as a uniquely Polish movement and as something that belongs to a shared European democratic heritage. The exhibition reflects, therefore, the balance often present in EU memory politics: national histories are preserved, but also incorporated into a larger European narrative. Questions of exclusion and absence are also important here. Although the exhibition strongly foregrounds workers and collective mobilisation, certain groups remain less visible within the narrative. Gender, for example, receives relatively limited attention despite women's important role within the Solidarity movement itself. Women appear throughout the visual material, but the exhibition tends to foreground male political leaders and public figures more strongly. Similarly, ethnic and minority perspectives are not explored in much depth. The story is largely told through the framework of national democratic struggle rather than through more intersectional social histories.

At last, we have independent, self-governing trade unions! We have the right to strike! And we will establish more rights soon.

The people were overjoyed!



Figure 3. Opening page of *Celebrations in Europe*. Source: Europeana Stories, 2020. Public Domain Mark 1.0. Screenshot taken 26 May 2026.

Overall, *Solidarity: A Peaceful Revolution* is one of the stronger examples when it comes to giving Eastern Europe historical agency within a European context. It shows that political change in Europe was shaped by collective mobilisation from below, not only by Western institutions. At the same time, it still aligns closely with broader EU memory narratives in which the fall of communism becomes part of a larger story about democratic progress and European integration.

Exhibition 4: Celebrations in Europe.

This exhibition presents a collection of festive and ceremonial traditions from across Europe such as carnival, harvest festivals, religious celebrations, seasonal rituals, all drawn from Europeana's broader collection of digitized material.



Figure 4. Opening page of *Black Lives in Europe*. Source: Europeana Stories, 2021. Public Domain Mark 1.0. Screenshot accessed 23 May 2026.

What does it mean to be European? Across histories of war, political conflict, and division, what is it that continues to bring us all together? *Celebrations in Europe* suggest that part of the answer lies in the cultural practices shared across the continent. Interestingly, it seems to me that it is often in moments where countries get to express their own distinct heritage most strongly that a broader sense of European connection also becomes most visible. Sharing national traditions with others creates not only pride in cultural difference, but also a feeling of participation in something collective and a shared European identity. Through festivals, rituals, music, and celebration, the exhibition presents Europe as a space where national differences are not erased, but brought together in ways that create a broader sense of connection and shared identity. Europeanness is presented as something naturally shared and culturally cohesive, with traditions functioning as evidence of an underlying common identity. Perhaps this reflects the ideal state imagined by the European Union and everything its membership represents: that we become united not by becoming the same, but because each of us remains distinctly our own. For most of the traditions presented, there are many attempts at finding similarities and shared backgrounds. This immediately makes the case that European culture is historically interconnected. In doing so, it reflects

how Europeana constructs Europe as a cultural community built through narratives of the EU's unity in diversity motto. At the same time, the exhibition also speaks to the dimensions of inclusion and representation central to this analysis, since the idea of a shared European identity is produced through selective choices about which traditions, celebrations, and forms of heritage are presented as recognisably “European.” On another note, the exhibition also relies heavily on nostalgic visual language throughout. This visual language of black and white photography somehow helps build that sense of shared historical belonging. The exhibition does make a visible effort to include traditions from many different parts of Europe, rather than centering only a few dominant Member States. Nevertheless, it is evident that a lot of celebrations are rooted in Christian traditions such as Christmas, Easter, saints-festivals, and other customs. This contributes to an understanding of Europeaness that is culturally tied to Christianity, even though the exhibition does not state this openly. This undoubtedly limits the cultural diversity somewhat, but overall the range of celebrations, together with the geographical variety and nostalgic visualization, help support the exhibition’s broader narrative of “unity in diversity”.

Exhibition 5: Defending Citizens Freedoms.

This exhibition traces the development of civil liberties and human rights protections within European legal and political institutions, centering on the role of the European Court of Human Rights and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Defending Citizens' Freedoms frames European history around the idea that freedom has required continuous defence, and that European integration in turn, is the institutional answer to that need. The exhibition moves through different histories, but does not really present them as open to being contested. They are instead mobilised as evidence for a conclusion the exhibition seems to have already reached, that European cooperation is the legitimate outcome of conflict. Particular institutional arrangements are therefore naturalised as universal goods rather than presented as historically specific and contested achievements, which is precisely the process Smith (2006) would lead us to expect. The exhibition does not ask whose freedoms are being defended, or whose experiences of European institutions have been defined by exclusion rather than protection. This all matters because Europeana does not simply present this narrative but actively organises and legitimises it through its editorial framing. This is again an example of visibility as neutral infrastructure, and the exhibition that in turn reproduces that tendency. The political actors, movements, and moments of democratic struggle that are covered in the exhibition are overwhelmingly those whose forms of political participation were already legible within institutional frameworks. Access to the political spaces the exhibition celebrates presupposes forms of cultural and social capital that are structurally distributed rather than universally available (Bourdieu, 1984, cited in

Murdock, 2010). Political freedom is being presented here as a collective European inheritance. But importantly, it does not ask which Europeans have been most able to claim it, and on what terms they did so.

Exhibition 6: Black Lives in Europe.

This exhibition presents the lives and contributions of Black Europeans across several centuries, centering figures who have been largely absent from mainstream European heritage accounts. Published as part of Europeana's Black History Month in 2021, it covers a wide geographic and historical range, from medieval and early modern figures through to the twentieth century.

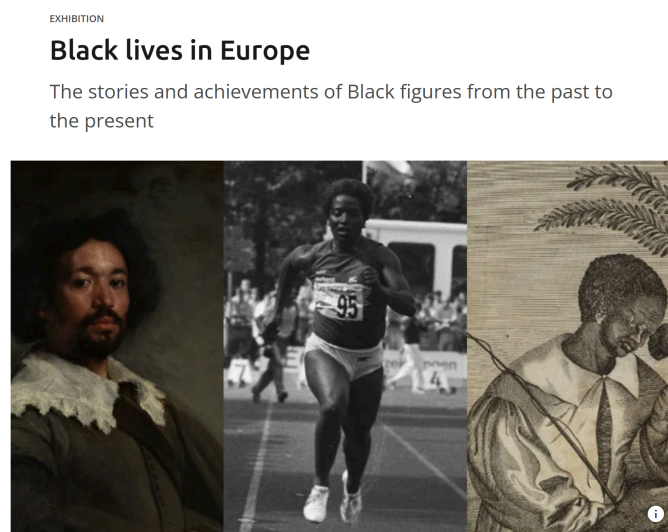


Figure 5. Opening page of *Black Lives in Europe*. Source: Europeana Stories, 2021. Public Domain Mark 1.0. Screenshot accessed 23 May 2026.

The *Black lives in Europe* exhibition shows a very candid portrayal of black history in Europe, by acknowledgement of the obscurity and lack of recognition that they have faced throughout history. Overall, it reads as a real attempt at shedding light on the forgotten figures that played a large role in shaping our understanding of European history and that deserves more attention today.

The credits page of *Black Lives in Europe* reveals several dimensions of the exhibition's production that are not visible in its content. The exhibition was created as part of Europeana's Black History Month, confirming the pattern of reactive commemoration identified in correspondence with Szyndkielewska (personal communication, via W. Byrne, May 2026), in which minority communities achieve visibility without necessarily achieving structural representation in the platform's broader editorial output. More significantly, the exhibition's four named curators are all Europeana Foundation staff, with no credited involvement from Black European cultural organizations, community historians, or

heritage institutions representation of Black European communities. A sensitivity review is credited anonymously, proving a gesture towards accountability, but without the transparency that would make it feel truly meaningful. The list of additional resources are all drawn directly from American publications and organisations, pointing to the fact Black histories are so underrepresented in European heritage, that even Europeana must find their sources outside of the European Union's own collections. Reading through Smith's (2006) AHD framework, it appears the exhibition speaks about a community rather than with it.

Exhibition 7: The Renaissance of Romani Re-Representation.



Figure 6: *Gypsyland*, Damian Le Bas. Source: Europeana Stories / ERIAC. In Copyright — Educational Use Permitted. Screenshot accessed 20 May 2026.

Smith's (2006) framework distinguishes between heritage that speaks about communities and heritage that speaks with them. This exhibition appears to be the most direct attempt in the sample to enact the latter. Already in the introduction it makes an explicit methodological commitment: rather than defining Romani and Traveller communities through external categories, the exhibition uses the terminology that communities use for themselves. It goes on to explain this decision, as one made in conversation with Roma authors and professors, encouraging the use of terms that the community uses for themselves. A strong, and optimistic indication that the exhibition aims to take the role of representation and self-definition seriously.

Another distinction made is that the exhibition is also unusually rich in video essays, animated films, and contemporary artworks compared to the rest of the sample, most of which rely primarily on archival images and editorial text. Using a range of different media to present the cultural richness and diversity of a minority community works effectively overall. It deals with misconceptions surrounding

Roma and Traveller origin, and difficult history that stretches across multiple regions and historical periods. All of this is being told by people whose lives have been directly shaped by these histories, both through family experience and later scholarly work. In contrast to other exhibitions in this sample, the knowledge is derived directly from the root, and told through mediums chosen by the community.

Exhibition 8: The Unexpected.

The Unexpected presents unusual and lesser-known stories from Europeana's archives, encouraging users to see history from new and surprising perspectives.

The exhibition's narrative logic is linear and teleological: rights expand over time, institutions develop to protect them, and Europe moves incrementally toward a more just and free society. This framing performs exactly the naturalization of contested political history that Smith's AHD framework identifies as characteristic of authorized heritage discourse. The history of European rights protection is in practice deeply contested, the relationship between national sovereignty and supranational jurisdiction has been a site of sustained political conflict, and the rights framework has been applied unevenly across member states and across different categories of rights-holder. None of this contestation is visible in the exhibition's narrative. The implied subject of the exhibition, that is the citizens whose freedoms are being defended. The exhibition does not ask whose citizenship has historically been recognized, whose freedoms have been prioritized, or which communities have found European rights institutions inaccessible or inadequate. The citizen is a universal figure, unmarked by race, class, gender, or national origin. This universalism is itself a form of the banal Europeanism identified in other exhibitions: the assumption of a shared subject position that in practice reflects the experience of those for whom European institutions have worked, rather than those for whom they have not.

Exhibition 9: The Past But Not As You Know It.

This exhibition presents historical material that challenges conventional or widely held narratives about the European past, the stories that have been overlooked, suppressed, or misrepresented in mainstream heritage narratives.

The Past But Not As You Know suggests that our historical understanding has been shaped rather than simply recovered from an archive, and in doing so it partially disrupts the assumption, central to authorised heritage discourse (Smith, 2006), that heritage narratives are neutral rather than constructed. However, Europeana still controls the framing through which these alternative interpretations become visible. So what are they trying to teach? The main work that this exhibition does is to challenge

conventional understandings of history. It does so by moving away from otherwise strong, political narratives, and instead focuses on the more humorous, and unexpected details of everyday life. Rather than presenting the past as a clear story of progress, *The Past But Not As You Know It* draws attention to how sometimes absurd the past can appear from a contemporary perspective. It reads overall as playful and self-aware, by encouraging the reader to see history constructed rather than neutral or fixed.

At the same time, the exhibition does not fully challenge the institutional authority behind those constructions. Even while suggesting that history depends on curation and interpretation, the exhibition still holds control over the historical narrative through its curatorial voice. Subjects such as plague doctors, unusual occupations, and others are presented as examples of a “different” past, but they are still portrayed in a certain way that shapes how they are understood now, that is, through captions and editorial framing. The exhibition therefore becomes self-reflective without really giving up institutional authority over historical meaning. It encourages audiences to question dominant narratives of the past, but not necessarily the role of the institution in shaping those narratives. Historical meaning is shaped not only through text but through images, categorisation, and even metadata. As Gillespie (2014) argues, platforms tend to naturalise these systems of visibility as neutral infrastructure, and the exhibition thus reproduces that tendency even when it encourages challenging existing historical narratives.

Exhibition 10: The images that shaped Europe.

This exhibition is the product of the Visual Contagions project, which used computer vision algorithms to analyze millions of digitized images from European illustrated periodicals between the 1890s and 1990s.



Figure 7: Collage of advertisements found in the French press. Creator: Frederine Pradier. Source: Europeana Stories / Bibliothèque Nationale de France. CC BY 4.0. Screenshot accessed 20 May 2026.

The democratizing claim of the introduction is not supported by the exhibition's own findings, which consistently identify the audiences for the most-reproduced images as elite. It explicitly acknowledges that images can be “used politically” to “instill a sense of belonging, an awareness of a common identity.” In effect, the exhibition recognises that image curation actively produces collective identity rather than simply reflecting an already existing one. The exhibition knows what it is doing in the sense that it can describe the process, however, it does not turn that self-awareness into a reflexive examination of its own curatorial choices. The context section makes its epistemological position quite explicit: “What is a digital image? Nothing more than a series of numbers in a grid. Comparing digital images, therefore, is just comparing tables of numbers.” In this sense, the exhibition reflects what Gillespie (2014) describes as cultural interpretation translated into technical procedure, and the exhibition’s conclusions appear as though they were simply discovered rather than constructed.

The images that shaped Europe

Man at the centre of the world?

Portraits and busts, visual blockbusters of the illustrated press in the first half of the 20th century



Figure 8: Portrait busts from European illustrated periodicals. Creator: Visual Contagions project. Source: Europeana Stories. CC0 1.0 Universal. Screenshot accessed 20 May 2026.

"Man is at the centre of the European world of images, especially before the Second World War." This page opens with the direct acknowledgement that the visual culture presented as constitutively European, was actually organized around male subjects as agents and female subjects as objects. It presents, among others, findings that historically women's busts have appeared more frequently than men's. The exhibition suggests this indicates "modes of self-representation specific to an international European elite in which women played their part – patrons, salon women, muses, family mothers perhaps." The structural critique of objectification is then somewhat softened by the discovery of elite

female presence. These were women that had a place in European visual culture, but as patrons and muses defined in relation to the man. In many ways therefore, this exhibition is deeply gendered in its approach to visual European representation. When it comes to representation of a diverse geographic collection, the geographic distribution map reveals some of the structural biases that are present. The strong concentration seen in Western and Central Europe is framed as a historical finding about where images circulated, although it could just as easily reflect which archives were digitised and preserved in the first place. Similarly, the exhibition describes the period as one of “European globalisation” without really addressing the colonial dimensions of that term. This somewhat seems to illustrate how European press culture between 1890 and 1990 was deeply tied to colonial systems of representation and helped circulate ideas and imagery across Europe.

The Images That Shaped Europe is perhaps the most self-aware exhibition in this sample. It openly acknowledges male dominance, recognises the class-specific nature of European cultural unity, and also addresses the way fascism appropriated classical aesthetics for political purposes. In each case, the exhibition is more analytically direct than many of the others examined. Yet these moments of critique also remain somewhat contained. The discussion of gender inequality made up for through the addition of a small number of elite women. The issue of class is acknowledged but not explored in any sustained way, and the treatment of fascism remains firmly historical, without a true critical lens back on contemporary European cultural narratives or institutional memory.

6.2 Thematic analysis

Reading the ten exhibitions together reveals recurring structural patterns that cut across gender, race, class, geography, curatorial practice, and historical framing. The distance between Europeana's stated commitment to representing the full diversity of European cultural memory and what it actually does becomes hard to ignore.

The most persistent of these patterns is what might be called the logic of exceptionalism. Across the multiple exhibitions, figures from historically marginalized groups achieve visibility by being presented as extraordinary individuals who transcended the conditions that excluded them. *Louise Weiss: a committed European* is readable within the European heritage framework as a feminist because she ultimately succeeded within the institutions that had denied women political participation. *The Black Lives in Europe* exhibition similarly shows Black European figures primarily through their individual contributions and achievements. In both cases, inclusion is built around the exception rather than the rule. This means that the structural dimensions of exclusion are never really being examined. Gender inequality and racial exclusion are acknowledged as historical conditions, but the existence of remarkable

individuals who overcame them becomes the narrative, and the problem gets quietly embedded into a story of European democratic progress rather than treated as something ongoing or unresolved. This exceptionalism is not incidental. It can perhaps be better understood as the mechanism through which marginalised histories become legible within an authorised heritage discourse that is, as Smith (2006) argues, fundamentally oriented toward coherence and institutional legitimacy. What this ultimately means is that communities become visible within the archive, but without really gaining any say over how their histories are being framed. As previously argued – the exhibition appraisers speak about rather than with the communities.

A closely related pattern concerns the overlap between gender and class, though it takes a slightly different form. Where women appear with genuine visibility and agency in this sample, in the *Louise Weiss: a committed European* exhibition and in *The Images That Shaped Europe*, they are without exception women whose class position gave them access to the cultural and political spaces being represented. *The Images That Shaped Europe* is actually quite candid about this. The exhibition directly acknowledges that when women appear in the most widely reproduced portrait imagery, they most often do so as patrons, salon women, and muses. All of them being roles that presuppose considerable social and economic capital. But having made that observation, the exhibition then softens it by bringing these women back in as evidence that women played their part in European cultural life. What it does not ask is which women, defined by class, race, and geography together, were consistently positioned as objects rather than agents within the very visual cultures it analyses. This keeps happening across the sample. Diversity is introduced at the level of recognition, but the harder structural questions tend not to follow. It is where the analysis could have gone and did not.

This observation becomes even more telling when moving onto the exhibitions in this sample that primarily covers the dimensions of race and curatorial practices. Both the *Black Lives in Europe* and *Romani Re-Representation* exhibitions centre historically marginalised communities, but the conditions under which they do so are quite different. The *Romani Re-Representation* exhibition makes an explicit commitment to using terminology that communities use for themselves, framing this as a choice made through dialogue. The *Romani Re-Representation* exhibition represents something closer to what Mansuri and Rao (2012) would call grassroots participation. Its writers and contributors are drawn from Roma and Traveller communities themselves, many of them leading experts in the field, and the exhibition's explicit commitment to using terminology that communities use for themselves reflects this. Knowledge here is not taken from the outside, it is produced from within. The *Black Lives in Europe* exhibition, by contrast, was curated exclusively by Europeana Foundation staff, with no credited involvement from Black European cultural organisations or community historians. The additional resources it provides are drawn

largely from American rather than European sources, which is itself a sign of how structurally underrepresented Black histories remain within European archival institutions. The analytical take away from this seems to be that visibility does matter, but so does representation, agency and having your own voice speak for you. Drawing on Parfitt's (2004) distinction, developed in the context of participatory development theory, the two exhibitions sit at almost opposite ends of a spectrum. The *Romani Re-Representation* exhibition suggests that Europeana can accommodate genuine community authorship when the conditions are right. This makes the absence of that model elsewhere harder to overlook, and raises the question of why it is not more consistently applied.

Eastern Europe appears in this sample primarily through two frames, as a site of democratic transformation oriented toward Western European values, as in the *Solidarity* exhibition, or as backdrop to histories centred elsewhere. The *Solidarity* exhibition does grant Eastern Europe genuine historical agency, but the frame through which that agency becomes meaningful is still defined by Western-facing democratic norms. The fall of communism is presented as a European story because it is read as a step toward EU integration. The specifically Polish dimensions of the movement, its internal tensions, the complicated political paths of postcommunist states, become subordinated to that larger narrative. Or more precisely, they are not subordinated so much as simply not asked about. Western Europe functions, consistently, as the established norm. As Lähdesmäki (2016) observes in relation to EU heritage initiatives more broadly, platforms like Europeana organise and authorise heritage through editorial selection, institutional partnerships, and through digital infrastructure. Unequal digitisation practices shape which histories achieve visibility in the first place, and the politics of representation cannot be fully separated from the technical systems that determine what enters the platform at all.

Several exhibitions invoke a shared European identity through the frameworks of rights and freedoms, through language about common heritage, and through rhetoric around celebration and continuity. The European citizen implied by these exhibitions is not, however, marked by any particular race, gender, or even geography. It appears to reflect the experience of those for whom European institutions have historically worked; the educated, predominantly Western European, and predominantly male. This is what Smith (2006) identifies as the normalisation of particular social positions as universal ones, so that one specific historical experience comes to stand in for the collective, and a process which Billig (1995) might refer to as the exhibitions quietly assuming everyone shares the same European experience, while overlooking the people who have been historically excluded, unsupported, or harmed by European institutions.

8. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how Europeana's editorial choices in its curated online exhibitions constructs a particular narrative of European cultural identity. The ten exhibitions examined here do not answer the research questions with a single, clean finding. However, the analysis is able to distinguish a pattern across the sample that shows how Europeana's exhibitions tend to construct European identity as something already settled or shared. The tension encoded in the 1973 Copenhagen Declaration between the "diversity of cultures" and the "framework of a common European civilization" has not been resolved in the platform's editorial output. What is seen instead is how it has been managed, through a curatorial logic that acknowledges difference while consistently placing it into a larger narrative of shared belonging. That process of absorption is what the thematic analysis names as the logic of exceptionalism. The conclusion can be made that Europeana tends to authorise a version of European identity that is Western in its geographic, elitist in its cultural references, even as some of its exhibitions notably set out to challenge that logic. The findings show that marginalised communities are not absent from the exhibitions. On the contrary, several of Europeana's exhibitions demonstrate a genuine effort to spread awareness, and to promote inclusion of stories less often told in mainstream European institutions.

The takeaways that emerges from reading across all ten exhibitions is a legible model of inclusion. The effort to represent underrepresented histories is genuine, and some exhibitions, particularly *Romani Re-Representation* and, in a different way, *The Images That Shaped Europe*, both display a fairly high degree of self-awareness. The limitations of this analysis lies mainly in the method of purposively sampling, where the findings are interpretive and shows patterns in the selected material rather than in Europeana's editorial output as a whole. What the analysis does suggest is a gap between Europeana's stated commitment to "the full diversity of European cultural memory" and what is legible in its curated output is not the result of individual curatorial failures.

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Appendix A: List of Figures

Figure 1. Opening page of *Louise Weiss: A Committed European*. Europeana Stories, n.d. In Copyright. Screenshot taken 20 May 2026. Available at:

<https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/louise-weiss-a-committed-european>

Figure 2. Opening page of *Solidarity: A Peaceful Revolution*, showing a crowd photograph of the Gdańsk shipyard, August 1980. Europeana Stories, 2020. CC BY-SA 4.0. Screenshot taken 25 May 2026.

Available at: <https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/solidarity-a-peaceful-revolution>

Figure 3. *Solidarity: A Peaceful Revolution*, 'Effectively' section. Creator: Zenon Mirota. Institution: European Solidarity Centre. Europeana Stories, 2020. No license stated. Screenshot taken 25 May 2026.

Available at: <https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/solidarity-a-peaceful-revolution/effectively>

Figure 4. Opening page of *Celebrations in Europe*, showing an archival photograph of a procession. Europeana Stories, 2020. Public Domain Mark 1.0. Screenshot taken 26 May 2026. Available at:

<https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/celebrations-in-europe>

Figure 5. Opening page of *Black Lives in Europe*, showing a composite of three archival portraits. Europeana Stories, 2021. Public Domain Mark 1.0. Screenshot accessed 23 May 2026. Available at:

<https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/black-lives-in-europe>

Figure 6. *Gypsyland*, embedded artwork by Damian Le Bas (ERIAC), reproduced from *The Renaissance of Romani Re-Representation*. Europeana Stories. In Copyright — Educational Use Permitted

(<https://rightsstatements.org/vocab/InC-EDU/1.0/>). Screenshot accessed 20 May 2026. Available at:

<https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/the-renaissance-of-romani-re-presentation/description-and-self-description>

Figure 7. Collage of advertisements found in the French press. Creator: Frederine Pradier. Institution: Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Reproduced from *The Images That Shaped Europe*, 'Advertise the Belle Époque' section. Europeana Stories. CC BY 4.0. Screenshot accessed 20 May 2026. Available at:

<https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/the-images-that-shaped-europe>

Figure 8. Composite of portrait busts from European illustrated periodicals, reproduced from *The Images That Shaped Europe*, 'Man at the centre of the world?' section. Creator: Visual Contagions project.

Europeana Stories. CC0 1.0 Universal. Screenshot accessed 20 May 2026. Available at:

<https://www.europeana.eu/en/exhibitions/the-images-that-shaped-europe/advertise-the-belle-epoque>

