

## **FASCINATION WITH THE INDIVIDUAL. BIOGRAPHICAL MUSEUMS AT AUTHENTIC PLACES**

People like to know that »history was made« at the very place where they are standing and enjoy looking at a famous person's house. As it is an excellent tourism opportunity to be the hometown of a well-known person, city leaders are eager to satisfy this longing, either setting up memorial plaques on the front walls of these houses (fig. 1) or even turning them into museums. But what kind of museum are they? What do they have in common with, and how do they differ from, other kinds of museums? How important is the fact that they are set up at places with an immediate reference to a famous individual?

### **DEFINITION OF A BIOGRAPHICAL MUSEUM**

The names for museums located at the sites where famous people once lived or worked, such as »biographical museum«, »single-person museum« or »home museum«, already give some idea of what kind of museum is meant.

1. First of all, home museums are mostly located in the former home of a well-known person of (supposed) historical relevance. In contrast to other museums, home or biographical museums are not founded on the basis of a collection, but because a specific place refers directly to a certain individual. The focus lies on the particular connection between an assumed authentic place and its former inhabitant<sup>1</sup>.
2. Biographical museums are not the only exhibitions located at authentic sites. Historical places like battlefields, castles, monasteries and memorial sites dedicated to the victims of the Nazi or communist dictatorships are all tied to authentic places as well. But the former inhabitants of what are now biographical museums were not representatives of the gentry or the clergy; they were neither offenders nor victims of a cruel ideology. Instead, home museums concentrate on a single individual, usually a bourgeois man (rarely a woman) commemorated for his (or her) personal achievements. The museum exists because of the individuality, not because of the representativeness of its former inhabitant. Visitors of single-person museums will even see general historical events from the point of view of the museum's protagonist.
3. Three different types of biographical museums can be identified<sup>2</sup>:
  - A living space looking as if the person who once resided there has just left the room.
  - A biographical exhibition in the authentic dwelling without the intention of giving the visitor an impression of the previous atmosphere of the rooms.
  - A combination of the two.

While in other countries historians began looking more closely at historic locations and their contribution to national history a long time ago<sup>3</sup>, German interest in the subject arose only recently and focused on writers'



**Fig. 1** Memorial plaque for Anna Seghers, Anna-Seghers-Straße 81, Berlin. – (Photo OTFW Berlin, 02.07.2010, Wikimedia commons).



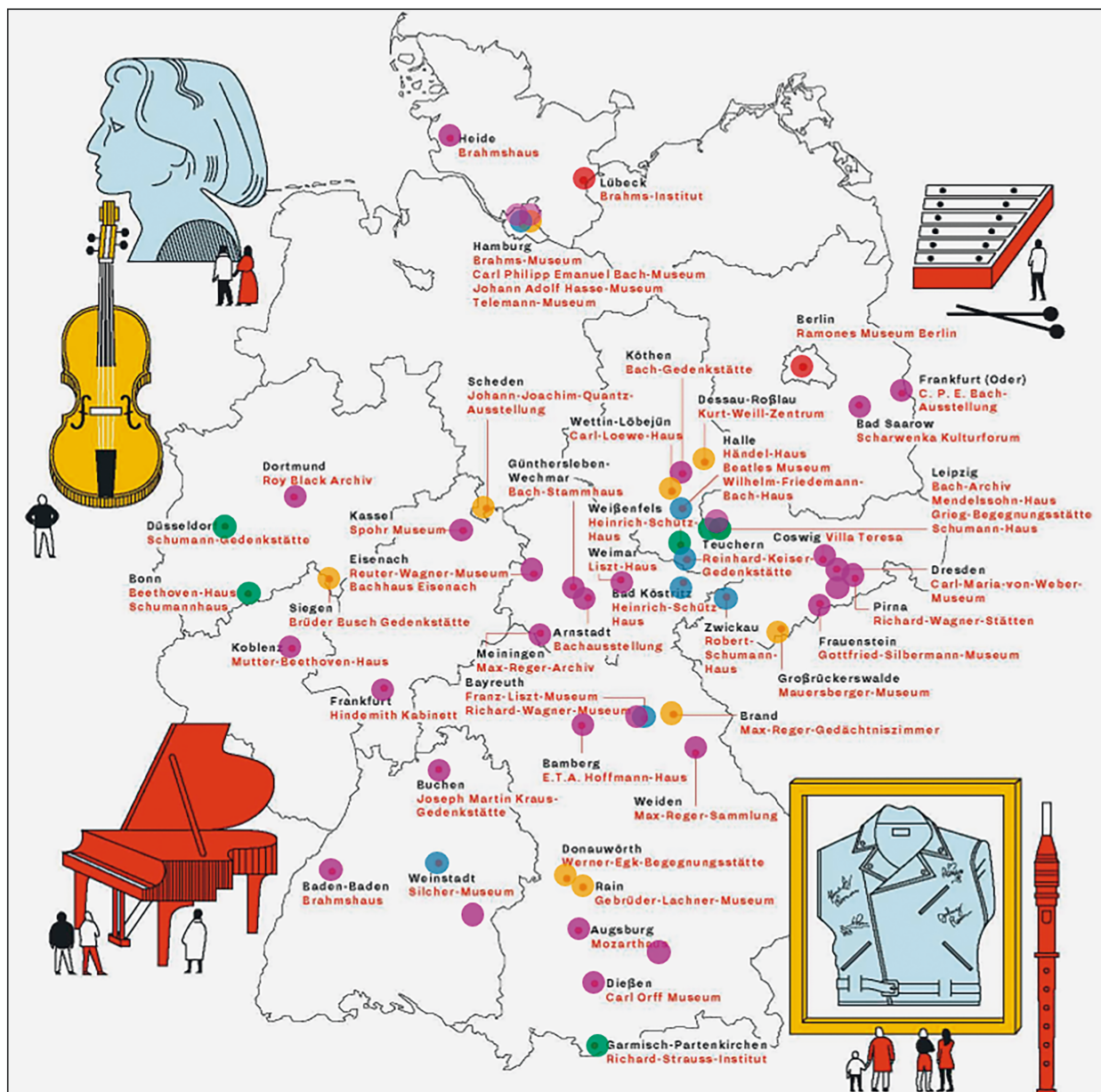
**Fig. 2** Goethe's former study in Weimar. – (Photo Hajothu, 30.09.2015, Wikimedia commons).

houses. But as there are over 400 museums of this kind in Germany alone, the question arises as to why they are so popular.

### THE BEGINNING OF BIOGRAPHICAL MUSEUMS AT AUTHENTIC PLACES

Around the 16<sup>th</sup> century it began to be the custom in Europe that the homes of some famous writers and artists could be visited shortly after their death. Yet, at least in Germany, home museums as we know them today, with regular opening hours, perhaps an entrance fee and some information about the famous personality who lived there, seem to have started with Goethe's house in Weimar around the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 2)<sup>4</sup>. In 1843, about ten years after Goethe's death, the authorities wanted to buy the house, especially in order to get hold of the rooms where the »eternal spirit« had lived. His study and bedroom in particular were seen as the locations where Goethe's genius would be most obvious to the public<sup>5</sup>. Even though Goethe's descendants did not want to sell the house, biographical museums were on their way from this time on. When Goethe's house in Weimar was finally sold and transformed into a museum in 1885, it was already the 12<sup>th</sup> single-person museum in Germany<sup>6</sup>.

Biographical museums have never been a German peculiarity, but they seem to have been more common in Germany than in other countries. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Europe was rapidly modernising. During this process, the newly emerging bourgeoisie had to find its role. In contrast to the castles of the nobility, biographical museums represented and commemorated extraordinary achievements by bourgeois people, visualising the skills and pride of this social class and its cultural contribution to the nation even though they were kept away from political power. As will be seen later, most of the single-person museums were devoted to poets and writers<sup>7</sup>, a preference that is not surprising. Historic sites usually play a role in the process of mental nation-building, and literary works of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries made an outstanding contribution to the widespread developing consciousness for the language and – the one being closely related to the other – for the nation. In Germany, the lacking political unity of the nation led to the idea of a cultural unity, which was represented best by poets, writers, artists and musicians. Consequently, the authentic homes of these people, ideally left unchanged after their death, represented not only bourgeois achievements but also the higher value of a (cultural) nation. But even when the German empire was founded in 1871, biographical museums remained among the most popular kinds of museums. Single-person museums exist to this day and new ones are regularly founded.



**Fig. 3** Memorial sites for musicians in Germany. – Green: places where a musician died. – Blue: location of birth. – Yellow: city of birth. – Pink: other authentic reference (place of work, place of living etc.). – Red: no authentic reference. – (After Zeit Magazin Nr. 41/2015, 16; map L. Edelbacher / F. Milbradt, colored marks G. Kruip).

### WHO GETS HONOURED – AND WHY?

To the best of my knowledge, there are 408 home museums in Germany. More than 40 % of them, 178 altogether, are dedicated to poets and authors. This huge group is followed by museums for painters and sculptors (78). Most of the remaining ones are divided among musicians (33), politicians (25), theologians (25), inventors (14), scientists (13), philosophers and businessmen (11 museums each). Hardly anyone from the working class or representing popular culture can be found, and the majority of the people honoured with a biographical museum died long before 1950. To judge by single-person museums, women play only



**Fig. 4** Goethe's house in Frankfurt/Main ca. 1944, Großer Hirschgraben. – »And the house was a hole, a basement well, a pile of dirt to mock at, and signs were saying: national property.« (Marie Luise Kaschnitz about Goethe's house in Frankfurt 1947, after Falser 2008, 82). – (Photo Freies Deutsches Hochstift/Frankfurter Goethe-Museum, Bildarchiv, GH-Strassenansicht nach 22-3-1944\_001).

a marginal role in history, as there are only 28 museums devoted to a woman. Home museums for writers (14) and artists (4) are dominant here, too, but as with the museums devoted to men, a wide variety of professions is represented<sup>8</sup>.

Home museums today still reflect their 19<sup>th</sup>-century structure, not only with respect to their preference for writers: They are devoted to the extraordinary achievements of individual men, mainly intellectuals of the middle class, who died long ago. Like other museums, biographical museums offer orientation and historical grounding in a world of globalisation, digitalisation and pluralisation, but they do so through a personalised approach that appeals to many people<sup>9</sup>. This process is supported by the aura of the real and genuine connected with an authentic place.

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HISTORICAL HOUSES AND THEIR SURROUNDINGS

Biographical museums are distributed almost evenly all over Germany (fig. 3). Birthplaces and the homes where a famous person died are the preferred houses to be turned into museums, but former dwellings or places of work are also popular<sup>10</sup>. From an urban management point of view these locations are interesting not only because of their former inhabitants, but also because they are familiar places in a rapidly changing environment<sup>11</sup>. Sometimes the houses are the only objects of the exhibition that are authentic. And even the extent to which some of the dwellings are really authentic is questionable. Occasionally the wrong place was identified as the former home of a well-known individual. Besides, the environment of the place has quite often changed dramatically. Can a visitor empathise with a famous person's childhood in a neighbourhood where streets once silent are now noisy with cars? When city leaders or museum directors promote the place as »authentic«, they deny changes in favour of the tourism potential. Even if a house was destroyed and had to be reconstructed completely, as was the case with Goethe's house in Frankfurt during the Second World War (figs 4-5)<sup>12</sup>, it is promoted as »authentic«. Authenticity obviously sells, which means visitors for the museum and tourists for the city<sup>13</sup>.

The example of Goethe's house in Frankfurt demonstrates that »authenticity« is not a given fact but an assumption. Houses generally cannot be copied, imitated or displaced. Therefore, if marked as historic, they seem to be firm proof that something worth telling has happened there – however little may have remained of their original fabric.

### THE CHARM OF A BIOGRAPHICAL MUSEUM AT AN AUTHENTIC PLACE

The sense that »something has happened here« is fostered if an exhibition inside the house documents the historical aspect of the building. The house functions like a hinge between inside and outside, the past and the present: It welcomes its visitors in their familiar surroundings and invites them into an unknown past – in the case of a biographical museum, the past of a famous individual. The aura of the authentic place and the aura of the former inhabitant's particular living conditions increase each other's credibility and enhance the emotional experience of the visitors. At its best, visiting a biographical museum becomes an emotional experience somewhere between historical re-enactment and intellectual learning. This is why it has to be a real visit to a historic site; a virtual surrogate does not work. As studies about visitor expectations demonstrate time and again, people going to see historic sites want to go back in time and get a »feeling« for past times and living conditions. Visitors do not mind reconstructions if these better enable them to immerse themselves in the past than original objects do. But in general, they value authenticity and consider reconstructions less trustworthy than originals<sup>14</sup>.

Home museums which look as if the former inhabitant has just left his or her dwelling provide an ideal emotional experience for most visitors as they invite them into the private rooms of a famous person. A visitor to the Theodor-Heuss-Haus in Stuttgart was excited that he had to ring a bell in order to enter the museum as this gave him the feeling of being a personal guest rather than a paying visitor<sup>15</sup>. If the study and the bedroom, the famous person's most intimate rooms, can be viewed, the visitor's impression of being very close to the museum's former inhabitant is further intensified. This is why most biographical museums emphasise the relevance of these rooms, as we have already seen in the discussion of Goethe's house in Weimar. Most museums are probably aware of the fact that they appeal to the visitor's voyeurism but accept this as a convenient means of getting visitors interested in the individual who is the subject of their exhibition. People indeed describe the experience of visiting a home museum as evoking a feeling between indecent voyeurism and the thrill of intimacy<sup>16</sup>. Curators of home museums therefore try to salvage as much of the original furniture as possible (fig. 6) or at least buy furnishings suitable to their historical protagonist as well as his or her social class and time in order to reinforce the impression that the former inhabitant only recently left



Fig. 5 Goethe's house in Frankfurt/Main 2009, Großer Hirschgraben. – (Photo Mylius, 10.05.2009, Wikimedia commons).



**Fig. 6** Study of Theodor Heuss, Feuerbacher Weg 46, Stuttgart. – (Photo R. Thiele 2010, Stiftung Bundespräsident-Theodor-Heuss-Haus).

the house. Very few single-person museums emphasise the fact that they do not possess the original furnishings or do not even know what they might have been like, as does the museum dedicated to the Austrian painter Egon Schiele, where all the furniture had to be bought and was painted in grey to underscore this fact (fig. 7).

All exhibitions in home museums concentrate on the visitor's fascination with the biography and the specific merits of a historical person. They thus present him or her as exemplary even if they include critical aspects in their story. For many visitors the biographical perspective facilitates an understanding of the contribution of this person to history, even if this contribution is rather complex. Visitors are often acquainted with the famous individual they are visiting. But this does not mean they understand the theories of Karl Marx, enjoy the poems of Heinrich Heine or appreciate the music of Ludwig van Beethoven. By visiting these men in their private surroundings, another, more emotional approach on an everyday basis is possible, though through this, the visitor's mind might be opened for the specific achievements of the individual whose personal rooms he or she is visiting<sup>17</sup>.



**Fig. 7** Egon Schiele's dining room, Tulln. – (Photo H. Eder, toikoi).

## BIOGRAPHICAL MUSEUMS THROUGHOUT HISTORY

No single-person museum ever seems to have been closed down in Germany, and new ones continue to be created<sup>18</sup>. Home museums located at authentic places have evidently been widely accepted as a suitable way of approaching history since they first appeared about 150 years ago. In relation to biographical museums, then, the longing for authenticity is not new<sup>19</sup>. Even in the 1970s and 1980s, when German historians were quite reserved when it came

to writing biographies, single-person museums still prospered, demonstrating a cultural and political self-conception of the middle class. But if the authentic house complete with authentic or seemingly authentic furnishings is not accompanied by an explanation based on sound scholarship, it is more or less a shell that can be filled with different contemporary content and expectations. For example, the National Socialists did not close down any biographical museums either. Even during their regime new ones were founded<sup>20</sup> and



**Fig. 8** Friedrich Schiller's study, Weimar, with death wreath loop of Hitler on his deathbed. – (Photo Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Fotothek, Bestand Museen, Bild-Nr. 100-2017-0045).

existing ones were incorporated into Nazi ideology, as can be seen in the case of Hitler's visit to Schiller's home in Weimar (**fig. 8**). Like other authentic objects, biographical museums require previous knowledge on the part of the visitor or someone to tell the story. The story depends on political and contemporary ways of thinking and can be politically abused.

### A FEMALE PERSPECTIVE ON MEN'S BIOGRAPHIES

As has been said, single-person museums refer to the private sphere of famous men, rarely women, to get people interested in their achievements. Women are underrepresented not only among the protagonists of home museums but in the genre of academic biography as well<sup>21</sup>. Until the ascent of social and gender history and to some extent even to this day, the private sphere was closely related to women and not considered worthy of serious discussion. Nonetheless, it seems to be appealing to a broad public to approach a famous person and his work through a glimpse into the private sphere. Bluntly speaking, personal museums show male achievements from a supposedly female perspective. This perspective seems to help people to get interested in the famous person's efforts and to value them. It was not least because of biographies of women that men's biographies started to pay attention to »ordinary« aspects of life like »the private, domestic, or intimate sphere«<sup>22</sup>. But biographical museums included these aspects from the very beginning. For those already acquainted with the protagonist it is fascinating to enter his or her private sphere, especially intimate dwellings and rooms like the place of birth or death, the study, where perhaps a famous book was written, or the bedroom. People obviously feel closer to the central individual of a biographical museum when they are »invited« to enter his or her private rooms. Curiously enough, the realisation that this person, too, had to eat or sleep does not diminish admiration for the historical person. Instead, by feeling closer to the famous individual, visitors appreciate his or her work even more. As it is the aim of biographical museums to popularise their protagonist's work and help the interested public understand it, they gladly offer this very personal approach that only home museums at authentic locations can offer. They therefore stress the authenticity of the place even if its actual authenticity is highly questionable. As a part of public history, historic sites address a broader public<sup>23</sup> and try to reach a mainly non-academic community with a sometimes complex and sophisticated subject, an objective which is aided by the personal approach. The combination

of the authentic place, the individuality of the former inhabitant and his or her personal achievements in a specialised sphere distinguishes biographical museums from other museums. Many single-person museums try to embed their hero's story in a larger narrative in order to point out his or her strengths and shortcomings in reference to the time in which the person lived. Quite often, though, the higher-level narrative does not show through clearly enough in the exhibition. The fascination with the individual – a constant in biographical museums for as long as they have existed – is usually their dominant feature.

## Notes

- 1) This article will neither research biographical exhibitions of famous people that do not have a reference to their previous place of dwelling nor cover former homes of well-known individuals that are now used as museums but do not refer to the person's biography. However, the boundaries between the different ways of dealing with the former dwellings of famous people are not clear-cut.
- 2) The classification follows Wladimir Dukelski as cited in Boy 2012.
- 3) American researchers in particular studied their historic sites much earlier, concentrating especially on the colonial and Revolutionary eras, the years during and after the Civil War, and the presidential libraries. See e.g. Hosmer 1965. – Studies on spaces of memory as initiated by Pierre Nora in 1993 and widely disseminated since also belong in this context. Radical American historians question the collective memory generated by national museums and other forms of public history: Wallace 1996. – For an instructive insight on three historic sites in the USA and their combination of presented authenticity with re-enactment and teaching a special view of history, see Schindler 2003. On presidential libraries, see Hufbauer 2005.
- 4) The exact starting date of home museums is difficult to define and most likely does not exist. For instance, the Dürer House in Nuremberg and the house where Luther died in Eisleben likewise claim to be among the oldest historical sites of their kind in Germany: Schauerte 2015; Rhein 2015. – The shift from giving worshippers the opportunity of an informal glance to a more or less professional museum's service is fluid. But as the authorities specifically intended to turn Goethe's house in Weimar into a biographical museum of national character, I follow the argumentation of Paul Kahl, who researched this special house thoroughly: Kahl 2015. – On precedents of home museums, see also the articles by Hendrix on Petrarch and Rosenthal on Shakespeare in Hendrix 2012, 15-29. 31-44.
- 5) Letter from Carl-Alexander, Erbgroßherzog of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, to Goethe's grandson, 3 January 1843. Quoted in: Breuer/Kahl 2015, 200.
- 6) Most of the houses were former writer's homes: Four of them were dedicated to Friedrich Schiller, one to the writer J. W. L. Gleim, one to Goethe's »Lotte« (Charlotte Kestner) and one even to Goethe – but in Frankfurt. The remaining ones were established to commemorate Albrecht Dürer, Martin Luther, August Hermann Francke (founder of a new kind of school) and the writer Fritz Reuter, who is not so well-known today.
- 7) Consequently, writers' houses are best researched, see e.g. Hendrix 2012. – Hendrix concentrates mainly on the visitors' approach to the person and oeuvre of the visited author, but is less interested in the general impact on public memory that biographical museums might imply. See also Breuer 2015 and Booth 2012.
- 8) The figures are based on a list of 295 personal museums in Germany compiled by the Institut für Museumsforschung (Berlin) and are supplemented by research of my own. The first survey on biographical museums was conducted in 1972 by Franz Rudolf Zankl and listed 475 institutions of this kind all over Europe, but Zankl included authentic places without biographical exhibitions in his list: Zankl 1972. – It is difficult to establish definite numbers, as some of the people honoured have multiple professions or the same person is honoured with more than one museum.
- 9) Assmann 1996. – The impact of telling biographies in museums is the subject of the study by Hill 2013, especially the chapter »Musealisation: everyday life, temporality and old things« (ibidem 137-161), which, however, does not make reference to single-person museums.
- 10) Sometimes cities establish a biographical museum just because the famous person once lived in this town even though the authentic dwellings no longer exist, but this type is not very common.
- 11) Hoffmann 2000. – Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe point out the significance of historic buildings and the problem of reconstruction in relation to authenticity: Sabrow/Saupe 2016, 21-24.
- 12) On the discussion about the reconstruction of Goethe's house in Frankfurt, see Falser 2008, 82-97.
- 13) Ram/Björk/Weidenfeld 2016.
- 14) On visitors' expectations concerning historic sites and authenticity, see e.g. Christmeier 2009; Richter 2010; Authenticity at Historic Royal Palaces 2015. – Excellent approaches to the concept of authenticity include Seidenspinner 2007 and Saupe 2015.
- 15) Willem F. via Facebook, 30 June 2016.
- 16) Ann-Dorit Boy on her visits to biographical museums in Moscow: Boy 2012.
- 17) According to Hendrix, the work of writers in particular can be approached and better understood by visiting their private homes. He believes this to be the reason why most single-person museums are devoted to authors, a thesis this article does not share (Hendrix 2012, 239).



- 18) In 2018 and 2019 biographical exhibitions for the two German chancellors Ludwig Erhard in Fürth and Helmut Schmidt in Hamburg opened their doors to the public. Founders of single-person museums can be federal or local government agencies, but private initiatives are common as well.
- 19) This contrasts with the thesis of Martin Sabrow, who contends that the longing for authenticity has emerged only recently. Cf. Sabrow 2016, 35.
- 20) Between 1939 and 1945 single-person museums or memorial rooms were founded for Anette von Droste-Hülshoff (Meersburg, 1936), Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (Freyburg, 1936), Franz von Lenbach (Schrobenhausen, 1936), Ernst Moritz Arndt (Garz, 1937), Wilhelm Busch (Hanover, 1937) and Johannes Kepler (Weil der Stadt, 1938). Some of the museums, such as the one for Anette von Droste-Hülshoff, were private donations.
- 21) Schaser 2008.
- 22) Bacscheider 2001, 153.
- 23) Schindler 2003.

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## *Zusammenfassung / Summary*

### **Faszination des Individuums. Personenmuseen an authentischen Orten**

Allein in Deutschland existieren über 400 Museen, die sich ausschließlich einer historischen Persönlichkeit widmen. Diese Personenmuseen würdigen individuelle Leistungen Einzelner, zumeist bürgerlicher Männer. Durch das Eintauchen in die originale, private Sphäre einer berühmten Person soll das Interesse und Verständnis für deren historische Leistungen bei den Besuchern intensiviert werden. Auf diese Weise wird ihnen eine tendenziell als weiblich klassifizierte Perspektive – der Blick auf das persönliche Umfeld einer Person – nahegelegt, um deren Wirkungen nachvollziehen zu können. Der authentische Ort, an dem sich das biographische Museum befindet, erhöht dabei die Glaubwürdigkeit der musealen Narration. Für die Gründung einer biographischen Ausstellung ist daher im Gegensatz zu sonstigen Museen nicht eine Sammlung ausschlaggebend, sondern der Ort, an dem eine bekannte Persönlichkeit einst lebte oder wirkte.

### **Fascination with the Individual. Biographical Museums at Authentic Places**

There are over 400 single-person museums in Germany which in most cases honour the individual achievements of intellectuals from the bourgeoisie. By inviting people into the original, intimate rooms of these outstanding individuals, it is assumed that visitors' attraction to and understanding of the achievements is heightened. In this respect, a supposedly female perspective on the usually male protagonist, focusing on his ordinary everyday life, is helpful for most visitors. The authentic place strengthens the credibility of the story told at the biographical museum and allows the visitor to acquire a deeper understanding of the protagonist's life and times. Therefore, unlike other exhibitions, biographical museums are not founded on the basis of a collection, but because of the authentic location where a famous person once lived or worked.