

Reframing Heimat museums: A museum analysis of local communities' participation and belonging

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Reformulando os museus Heimat: uma análise museológica da participação e pertença das comunidades locais

Introduction

In this article, we explore a distinctive type of German institution known as *Heimatismuseen*, which we will refer to as “*Heimat* museums” to preserve the cultural essence of the German term *Heimat* (pronounced *HY-maht*). While there is no perfect equivalent in English – common translations like “local history museums” or “museums of local history” capture the focus on regional heritage but miss deeper emotional and identity-driven connotations: *Heimat* evokes a profound sense of belonging, homeland and rootedness in a specific place, often tied to personal or familial ties that transcend mere geography. The term *Heimat* is rooted in German Romanticism and gained particular momentum as a cultural response to industrialization and the social upheavals that followed. It embodies an idyllic, nostalgic connection to one’s origins, traditions and local environment, sometimes idealized as a safeguard against modernity. In Anglo-American contexts, concepts like “homeland” or “motherland” may overlap but lack *Heimat*’s intimate, non-nationalistic warmth and its role in fostering everyday cultural identity (Applegate, 1990). *Heimat* museums, therefore, are small, community-driven spaces – usually volunteer-run – that collect and preserve artifacts of local life, crafts and stories, not just as historical records but, as we would like to argue, as living extensions of how residents understand and situate themselves within their community.

This article was inspired by a research seminar held in the summer semester of 2025 at the Ludwig Uhland Institute of Historical and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Tübingen. The seminar focused on the social dimension of *Heimat* museums, a dimension that is often overlooked in both scholarship and practice. Students contrasted their field visits with readings on Sociomuseology, a school of thought that found little resonance in Germany but has become central to international debates on museums and society (Neu, 2024). At the same time, when examining the roots of alternative museologies in the 1970s, evidence suggests that *Heimat* museums influenced the emergence of the French écomusées (Gorgus, 2002). This prompted us to ask whether *Heimat* museums today operate largely within a framework of traditional museology that dominates the German *Museumslandschaft* (“museum landscape”)³, or whether some of them may also align with alternative approaches. As Bortz (2004, p. 9) has noted in his dissertation devoted to the *Heimat* museums around Berlin,

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³ The German term “*Museumslandschaft*” refers to the overall landscape of museums in a given region – the network of institutions and cultural actors that together shape the museum field

parts of the work of those museums in the 21st century can be associated with a philosophical-critical conception of *New Museology*. This level of social relevance – both in how *Heimat* museums serve their communities and how they reflect broader museological debates – was what we aimed to explore in the course of our seminar meetings.

One of the aims of this article is thus to place *Heimat* museums in dialogue with broader international debates. On the one hand, it will highlight their specificities, especially their community-driven practices and their capacity to anchor identity in times of change. On the other, it will introduce approaches and concepts, such as *Museumsanalyse* (“museum analysis”) and *Wilde Museen* (“wild museums”), that have circulated mainly in German-speaking scholarship but remain largely unknown internationally. By doing so, the article seeks to broaden current conversations around the social dimension of museums, showing how *Heimat* museums can contribute to and complicate the debates that have gained new momentum with the approval of the 2022 ICOM definition and the ongoing revision of the Code of Ethics.

Heimat museums in Germany today

The concept of the *Heimat* museum grew out of the *Heimat movement* in the late 19th century, which sought to preserve local history, folklore and natural heritage in the face of rapid industrialization and social change. Early *Heimat* museums were often founded by schoolteachers, local historians or enthusiasts who collected artifacts of everyday life, regional crafts, and natural specimens to celebrate the uniqueness of their town or region. Martin Roth (1990) famously described the *Heimat* museum as a distinctly German type of institution. By the early 20th century, many towns in Germany (and the broader German-speaking world) had established such small museums, sometimes called *Heimatstuben* (cozy “home rooms”) when they were essentially one-room local collections. These museums embodied local pride and identity, and in some cases were linked to movements of regional self-assertion or even, later, appropriated for nationalist narratives during the 1930s.

After World War II, the notion of *Heimat* took on new resonances. In West Germany, *Heimat* museums helped communities reconnect with their local heritage in an era of rebuilding. Notably, German expellees from former eastern territories set up *Heimatstuben* to preserve the memory and culture of their lost homes (Reinsch et al., 2023). Meanwhile, in regions like Baden-Württemberg, where we did our field trips, local heritage societies (*Heimatvereine*) and municipalities continued to establish and maintain museums dedicated to town history, often in historical buildings (an old schoolhouse, town hall, or farmhouse) reused as museum space. Over time, city museums and county museums emerged as more professionalized versions, but the classic volunteer-run village *Heimat* museums persisted. Thus, by the late 20th century, *Heimat* museums had become a ubiquitous element of Germany’s museum landscape – small in scale, community-rooted, and focused on preserving the tangible and often intangible heritage of place.

Today, *Heimat* museums constitute a significant portion of Germany’s roughly 7,000 museums (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Institut für Museumsforschung [IfM], 2024). They are especially prevalent in rural areas. In 2019, of the 6,525 museums counted in Germany’s non-city federal states, about three out of five were located in communities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants, amounting to roughly 4,000 museums serving rural populations (Wemhoff, 2025). More than half of these rural museums fall into the category of local history and folklore – precisely the domain of *Heimat* museums. The federal state Baden-Württemberg, which is our main focus of research, exemplifies this landscape: as of 2022, it had 1,229 museums in total, more than any other federal state, and nearly half of them (608, or 49.5%) are devoted to local and regional history (IfM, 2024, p. 58). This makes Baden-Württemberg the state with both the largest absolute number of *Heimat* museums in Germany and the highest density of such institutions embedded in small towns and rural communities. Most of these museums are small-scale and locally oriented, with low annual attendance (up to 5,000 visitors), reflecting their orientation towards their local communities rather than mass tourism.

A defining feature of *Heimat* museums is their community-based nature. Most are operated by local authorities or, very often, by local historical associations and volunteers from the community. The founding collections often stem from private donations or the lifelong collecting passion of a single individual. Because of

this, the scope of collections is eclectic: a typical *Heimat* museum might display everything from agricultural tools, household items and traditional costumes to local geological specimens and archives of village photographs. The unifying mission is to illustrate the historical development of the locality (Henkel, Scheele & Walz, 2016) – the story of the place and its people. As Kathrin Grotz (2021) observes, a *Heimat* museum is a very specific type of museum confined to the German-speaking world – serving as a place where knowledge of local and regional history, dialect and customs is collected and preserved. In other words, these museums are loci for negotiating local identity and memory, embodying what Germans call *Heimat*, a sense of belonging to one's place. Here we would like to stress that it would be wrong, though, to assume that *Heimat* museums are unique only to the German-speaking world. There are very similar concepts of local history museums – *hembygdsmuseer* in Sweden and the so-called “*краеведческие музеи*” (*kraevedcheskie muzei*) in Russia, and very likely in other countries – but they are not part of international museological discourse. In our experience, few of the workers in those museums had heard of ICOM, and they are not, as one might expect, members of the ICOM International Committee for Regional Museums (ICR).

A further aspect that complicates understanding *Heimat* museums in Germany is the question of their statistical visibility. In the *Statistische Gesamterhebung* (*Comprehensive statistical survey*) of the Institut für Museumsforschung (IfM), *Heimat* museums are not identified as a distinct museum type but are instead grouped within the broad category of “Local and regional history museums / European ethnology”. This classification pools them together with city history museums, ethnographic institutions, open-air farm museums, mills, and other regional collections, which means that their specific weight and profile are blurred in national statistics. At the same time, the survey response rate in rural areas is considerably lower than the overall average: in 2019, only about three out of five museums in communities under 20,000 inhabitants returned the IfM questionnaire (Wemhoff, 2025). As Kathrin Grotz points out, many small institutions simply lack the staff or dedicated curators to handle reporting requirements, which means that some rural museums, often volunteer-run and resource-poor, remain invisible in the dataset even when they are formally counted (Grotz, 2021). Taken together, these factors create a paradox: *Heimat* museums are highly present in Germany's rural landscape, often forming the backbone of cultural life outside cities, yet their prevalence cannot be directly identified in official statistics. Instead, they remain hidden within broader categories, and their visibility is further reduced by uneven reporting. Recognizing this gap is essential: it underlines that *Heimat* museums are not marginal exceptions but one of the most widespread and characteristic forms of museums in the country, whose contribution must not be overlooked in cultural policy debates or in scholarly analyses of the German museum landscape.

These characteristics place *Heimat* museums close to what Angela Jannelli (2012) has described as *Wilde Museen* (“wild museums”) – amateur museums created and maintained outside professional museological structures. Drawing on Claude Lévi-Strauss' idea of “wild thought”, Jannelli argues that such institutions represent alternative, non-academic forms of knowledge production, emerging from passion, volunteerism and community engagement rather than from formal training or professional mandates. *Heimat* museums, often run by local associations or dedicated individuals, share many of these features: they are resource-poor and difficult to classify in official statistics.

Approach to analysis and research methods

To examine *Heimat* museums we adopted the perspective of *Museumsanalyse* (“museum analysis”). The term has been introduced by a publication edited by Joachim Baur (2010a) to specify a research perspective that does not aim at improving museum practice, but at analyzing museums as cultural phenomena in their own right. Unlike applied museology, which addresses professional tasks such as cataloguing or exhibition design, *Museumsanalyse* approaches museums from the outside, with the purpose of generating critical understanding of how they function, what meanings they produce, and which social and cultural roles they play. This analytical stance makes it possible to study *Heimat* museums not only as collections of objects or as expressions of local identity, but also as institutions situated within wider cultural and political contexts.

Museumsanalyse emerged as part of the broader development of critical museum studies. Positioned between professional practice and philosophical theorizing, it emphasizes case studies of actual museums.

Rather than seeking to define the essence of “the Museum”, it studies museums in the plural, in their specific historical and social contexts (Baur, 2010b, p. 8). This perspective is particularly useful for *Heimat* museums, which vary widely depending on local initiative, community involvement and regional traditions. By focusing on individual cases, researchers can identify implicit assumptions and practices within each museum, while also drawing connections to larger social and cultural dynamics.

Methodologically, *Museumsanalyse* is characterized by pluralism. It incorporates approaches from history, ethnology, sociology, semiotics, and cultural studies. Baur (2010b, p. 9) described it as an “analytical toolbox” that can be adapted to different research questions. The range of possible methods includes historical source criticism, semiotic analysis of exhibitions, narrative approaches, visitor studies and ethnographic fieldwork. Each method opens up a different perspective on the museum, and their combination can generate insights into both micro-level practices and macro-level conditions.

In our seminar, we concentrated on ethnographic museum fieldwork. Observation and interviews enabled students to investigate how *Heimat* museums are organized, how exhibitions were produced, and how relationships between volunteers, objects and visitors take shape. This approach also allowed for attention to unspoken assumptions and unintended consequences, which are not easily captured through other methods. This corresponds with the emphasis in critical museum studies on reflexivity and the recognition of the researcher’s own position (Macdonald, 2010).

Situating *Heimat* museums within the framework of *Museumsanalyse* made it possible to connect the local with the global. The small-scale, volunteer-based character of these institutions may appear marginal in international debates, but by treating them as cases within a wider analytical field, their significance becomes more evident. They reveal how museums function as social spaces in rural Germany, how heritage is negotiated within communities, and how alternative museological practices can emerge outside professionalized institutions. Thus, *Museumsanalyse* provided both the theoretical approach and the methodological tools that guided our exploration of *Heimat* museums in this seminar.

To translate this analytical framework into practice, students were given guiding questions for their field visits that echoed the plural, case-based orientation of *Museumsanalyse*. They were asked to observe not only what *Heimat* museums displayed, but also how they functioned as institutions: who and when founded them, with what intentions and in response to which local concerns? How were communities involved – as volunteers, collectors, narrators or curators? Whose histories were represented, and whose were absent? And to what extent did exhibitions and programs link local heritage with contemporary issues such as migration, environment, or identity conflicts? Students were also encouraged to reflect on educational and participatory practices: whether schools, seniors, or newcomers were engaged, and whether visitors could contribute knowledge, stories or critique.

To structure their case studies, students then mapped their findings onto the functions and values articulated in ICOM’s evolving definition of the “museum”. Each report began with a short overview of the institution (location, founding, governance, opening hours, type and size), followed by sections on its core functions (research, collecting, conserving, interpreting, exhibiting), its modes of community involvement, and its approaches to accessibility and inclusivity. Further attention was given to ethics and professionalism, including how small *Heimat* museums navigated questions of sustainability and the tension between amateur and expert knowledge. Finally, students were asked to provide critical reflections: how the museum challenged or reinforced traditional understandings of what a museum is, and in what ways – if any – it resonated with the values of Social Museology.

Given the scope of this publication and the theme of this special issue on “Social museology and the new challenges of ICOM (Dubai 2025)”, we do not present each case study in full detail. Instead, we draw selectively on the material to highlight aspects of *Heimat* museum practice that resonate with issues currently debated in ICOM, above all, questions of the museum’s identity, its social responsibilities and its relationship to community life. The individual case studies are available separately for reference (see “Case studies on *Heimat* museums: Research fieldwork” following this article).

In the next section, we offer a synthesis of the key points that emerged from our seminar discussions. Rather than recounting each museum visit step by step, we focus on recurring themes and tensions that cut

across the cases, allowing us to connect the everyday practices of *Heimat* museums in Baden-Württemberg with the global debates on the social dimension of museums. One student also visited a *Heimat* museum in their own *Heimat* – the *Museum der Schwalm* (see Case study no. 7), in Hessen. Although it lies outside the federal state on which we concentrated, we decided to keep it, as it confirms several of the tendencies also noticeable in the other museums visited.

Discussion

This study is based on a small number of visits / case studies – ten *Heimat* museums – and cannot claim to represent the full spectrum of such museums in Germany. Yet these cases are sufficient to illustrate how diverse *Heimat* museums are and how difficult it is to generalize about them. Some were closer to professional museum models, while others resembled what Jannelli has called “wild museums” (2012), shaped by improvisation and personal initiative. The fact that ten visits already produced such variety underscores both the vitality and the difficulty of generalizing about *Heimat* museums. They confirm UNESCO’s 2015 Recognition of the diversity of museums worldwide and reinforce the sense that we may now be living in a post-definition era, in which no single model can encompass what counts as a museum, or be explicitly defined as such by ICOM.

At the same time, certain patterns of *Heimat* museums became visible. They often convey a distinctive atmosphere that visitors instantly recognize. They typically lack the polished uniformity of professional museums: glass showcases, if present at all, are ageing and worn; labels are often faded or even handwritten; objects stand unprotected, within reach of visitors’ touch; guards are absent. This “vibe” (the word used by one of the students) is not simply a matter of aesthetics, but reflects a different understanding of boundaries: objects can leave the museum temporarily with schoolteachers, or be handled in demonstrations to show how they were used. In *Heimat* museums, objects retain traces of their everyday life functionality, while in professional museums they are transformed into artefacts to be looked at but not touched. This fluidity challenges conventional notions of museum ethics and conservation, yet simultaneously anchors *Heimat* museums in community life.

The same “vibe” also extends to their external presentation. On websites, in brochures, and in local press, *Heimat* museums are usually represented through photographs of their historic buildings or collections, rarely through images of the people who animate or visit them. In our review of online images of *Heimat* museums in Baden-Württemberg, only one photograph depicted a guided school tour⁴. The rest showed people-less rooms or blurred historical photographs. *Heimat* museums thus visually reproduce the impression of being museums of things rather than of people, even though in practice they are kept alive precisely by the social energy of their communities.

One of the strengths repeatedly observed was the authenticity and emotional power of these museums. Exhibitions are embedded in lived memory, relying heavily on local donations and storytelling. Visitors – especially elderly – recognize familiar objects and are prompted to share their own recollections. Children are invited to wash clothes by hand, churn butter or play old games, learning not only about the past but about their grandparents’ world. Students in our seminar noted that such moments generated genuine joy and it was shared by volunteers from museum in Unterjesingen (Case study no. 2): “there is so much joy in finding out new information when you take an object that you have no idea what it is all about, and then you find out”. These participatory and intergenerational dynamics are key to the accessibility of *Heimat* museums. What they lack in professional display techniques they compensate for with emotional resonance and opportunities for dialogue. And this is a kind of enjoyment that seems to be implied in the ICOM’s 2022 use of word “enjoyment” and not in the 2007 definition context of the same defining word, which will be discussed below.

These participatory forms are supported by the fact that *Heimat* museums often operate with highly restricted opening hours. Most are open one afternoon a week, usually Sundays, or “nach Vereinbarung” (by appointment). Some operate only seasonally, and in more remote cases (see Case study no. 1), they open only during village festivals. If a volunteer is unavailable or unwell, the museum simply remains closed. This limited

⁴ by looking up “Heimatmuseum” at <https://www.landesstelle.de/museen-in-baden-wuerttemberg/museen/>

accessibility reflects the reliance on volunteer labor. For schoolchildren, however, these constraints are less restrictive – they come by appointment. School groups are often the most regular visitors, and history teachers themselves are frequently members of *Heimat* associations, sometimes even involved in the curation of exhibitions. In this sense, *Heimat* museums are not only museums for communities but museums of communities: places where teachers, pensioners, families and newcomers actively negotiate local history.

Yet these same qualities expose structural vulnerabilities what we observed in all the visited museums. They are run by small associations of volunteers, often pensioners, with minimal or no municipal funding. Their financial base is precarious, as is their human resource base. Younger generations are not yet deeply engaged, and the question of succession remains unresolved in many places. Without renewal of participation, the authenticity that now attracts visitors risks turning into nostalgia rather than a living, evolving heritage.

This tension between professionalism and accessibility emerged as a central theme across all the cases. From a professional standpoint, *Heimat* museums fall short: inventories are incomplete, conservation standards inconsistent, exhibitions crowded with objects and light on context. But what professionals see as deficits can also be interpreted as enabling conditions. The absence of rigid frameworks makes *Heimat* museums more permeable to community involvement. Local residents decide what is displayed, lend or donate objects, and contribute knowledge. In this way, *Heimat* museums enact many of the principles of Social Museology, even if not by name. They are spaces where heritage is collectively owned, curated and animated.

The new ICOM museum definition of 2022 helps to reposition *Heimat* museums in a more favorable light. If the 2007 definition focused narrowly on museums' expected functions – “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits” for the purposes of “education, study and enjoyment” – the revised version broadened the frame. It now speaks of museums operating “with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing”. There is a significant shift. *Heimat* museums rarely meet the old checklist of functions in systematic ways, but they exemplify the participatory spirit of the new definition. They offer spaces where knowledge does not only flow from museum to visitor, but circulates both ways, through storytelling, object use, or even collaborative exhibitions.

Seminar discussions confirmed that *Heimat* museums provide all four dimensions of the new definition, though often in unconventional forms. Enjoyment may come from playful riddles for children or from themed seasonal activities, such as “washing day”, where children sat at the kitchen table and interacted with objects. And as discussed above, there is “enjoyment”, or joy, in the work of volunteers - a different facet of the term that expands its meaning beyond a solely visitor-centered experience. In contrast to ICOM's 2007 “museum” definition, which seemed to imply that enjoyment was something primarily received by visitors, the new 2022 definition opens up a more reciprocal understanding: enjoyment is not only something offered to communities but also something generated within them, through participation and shared responsibility. *Reflection* was also observed, for example in museums that juxtaposed photographs of towns during the 1940s with images of the same streets today, prompting visitors to reflect on continuity and change. *Knowledge* sharing was frequently reciprocal: museums invite locals to bring photographs and objects, which then become part of exhibitions; in turn, volunteers and visitors learn new perspectives from each other. As one participant remarked, “reflection happens a lot for museum workers or volunteers ... what does our future look like?” These reflections often concerned succession, space or the challenge of connecting historical collections with contemporary issues.

The cases also showed the diversity of communities involved, another key feature of the 2022 definition. *Heimat* museums bring together local associations, school classes, families, and newcomers; they also occasionally connect with academic communities, such as student interns (for example, Case study no. 2) or researchers. These diverse groups often intersect in *Heimat* museums in ways they might not elsewhere. In this sense, *Heimat* museums serve as meeting places, not only between past and present, but also between different social constituencies of the locality.

A comparative perspective further sharpens the significance of these findings. In larger city museums – whether municipal, regional or national – the professionalization of collections, exhibitions, and staffing ensures high conservation standards, systematic documentation, and curated narratives. Yet these same strengths often come at the cost of distance: visitors are positioned primarily as audiences, and objects are firmly deactivated

from their former life functions. Access tends to be controlled by ticket prices, opening hours and institutional policies. In *Heimat* museums, by contrast, the boundaries between object and person, curator and visitor, heritage and everyday life are less strict. Rather than being diminished by their lack of professionalism, *Heimat* museums show how museums can function as social spaces of immediacy and belonging – forms of museality that professional institutions rarely achieve.

The gap between *Heimat* museums and ICOM is also striking in practical terms. Most volunteers are not ICOM members – it is financially impractical, as they typically earn no income for their work. Institutional membership is equally absent, and for many volunteers and enthusiasts engaged in *Heimat* museums, ICOM is unknown. Their perspective on what constitutes a museum is grounded in local practice: a collection in a historic house, cared for by the community. This disconnect highlights the enduring divide between “professional” and “amateur” museums. Yet dismissing *Heimat* museums as “pseudo-museums”⁵ overlooks their central role as places where identity, memory and belonging might be more vivid than in a big-name museum.

Here, it is useful to recall Walz’s observation that the ICOM definition functions less as a description of what museums actually do than as a normative framework: no single museum fulfils all of its elements, yet it is widely accepted as a reference point and has been instrumental in professionalising the field and in shaping how museum professionals understand themselves (Walz, 2020). Read in this light, the expansions of the definition since 2007 – such as the *inclusion* of intangible heritage and, more recently, *participation* – do not merely reflect shifts in practice; they also legitimize activities long present in small and community museums. *Heimat* museums exemplify this dynamic. While they may fall short of the earlier “checklist” functions, they are strong in the areas of participation and affective engagement. The 2022 definition, therefore, gives new language to what they already do, positioning them less as exceptions and more as part of the broader museum field.

UNESCO’s *Recommendation concerning the protection and promotion of museums and collections* (2015) frames these roles cautiously through modal verbs – museums *should* address all of society and *can* help communities face change; they *can* offer spaces for reflection and debate and *should* foster rights and equality. The careful use of “should” and “can” expresses both aspiration and fragility. *Heimat* museums demonstrate the promise of these roles (accessible, dialogic, community-embedded), while also revealing their dependence on volunteer time, local goodwill, and small budgets.

Confronting difficult histories remains uneven. A case discussed in the seminar – museum in Bisingen – illustrates both avoidance and later reform: for years, a local *Heimat* museum downplayed the nearby concentration camp history; a re-exposition eventually transformed it into a memorial museum engaging that past directly (Blum, Grupp, Kleinbach, & Mayer, 2023). The example points to a broader potential: *Heimat* museums can reproduce silences, but they can also reposition themselves toward critical engagement.

Nevertheless, *Heimat* museums face significant challenges if they are to remain sustainable and socially relevant. To survive in the future, they must more actively represent younger voices, open space for dialogue on contemporary issues, and diversify the narratives of *Heimat* beyond conservative or nostalgic frames. Some museums, such as Bisingen with its reorientation toward critical history, show that transformation is possible, though not without tensions. Others, like museum in Flacht (see Case study no. 5), illustrate internal conflicts between conservative associations and progressive directors, underscoring that *Heimat* museums are also arenas where contested values of heritage and identity are negotiated.

Policy developments in recent years reflect growing recognition of their importance and precarity. At the federal level, the *Soforthilfeprogramm Heimatmuseen* (2020–2024) disbursed nearly €11 million to almost 600 rural museums for building repairs, accessibility upgrades, and modest digital innovations. In Baden-Württemberg, the *Landesstelle für Museumsbetreuung* provides training and advice, while the “FreiRäume” program funds *Heimat* museums in expanding their role as local cultural centres (Wemhoff, 2025). EU programs such as LEADER have also been used to support exhibit modernization and infrastructure in village museums. At a more localized level, the *Wettbewerb “Vorbildliches Heimatmuseum”* (Prize for Exemplary *Heimat* Museums) organized by the *Arbeitskreis Heimatpflege im Regierungsbezirk Tübingen* has, since 1992, recognized 22

⁵ a term used by one of a museum professional from a big-name museum in the course of writing this article.

museums for innovative approaches that make them more open, participatory, and experiential (Arbeitskreis Heimatpflege im Regierungsbezirk Tübingen e.V., 2022, p. 108).

Ultimately, *Heimat* museums complicate professional hierarchies while enriching debates on what museums are and should be. They reveal that heritage care can flourish outside professional frameworks, rooted in collective memory and social practice. They challenge the assumption that professionalism guarantees relevance, showing instead that informality and permeability can create powerful forms of accessibility and belonging. At the same time, they expose the risks of disappearing or becoming irrelevant if community engagement does not broaden and renew.

Conclusion

In summary, *Heimat* museums in Germany, especially in Baden-Württemberg, show both enduring strengths and significant challenges. They are rooted in civic initiative and continue to serve as important places of cultural memory, identity and belonging. Their missions, shaped by the ethos of *Heimat*, are sustained by personal commitment and community ties. At the same time, these museums face practical constraints: scarce financial resources, reliance on ageing volunteers, uneven degrees of professionalization and difficulties in adapting to changing expectations of audiences. Some are integrated into municipal structures, while many remain isolated and underrepresented in official statistics. This uneven position makes their long-term sustainability uncertain, even as recent funding initiatives and state-level programs such as *FreiRäume* show that their value is increasingly recognized.

Our fieldwork in Baden-Württemberg highlights how *Heimat* museums often operate less like formal institutions and more like collective projects of stewardship. They depend on local knowledge and voluntary engagement, creating spaces where participation and reciprocity are central. What might appear as shortcomings - informal conservation, incomplete inventories, modest interpretation - also allow for shared authority and flexible forms of knowledge-making. In this respect, *Heimat* museums embody many of the values emphasized in the 2022 ICOM definition: community participation, inclusivity, reflection and enjoyment. They demonstrate that museums need not be defined only by growing professional standards but also by their social role within everyday life.

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Case studies on Heimat museums: Research fieldwork

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Abstract:

The research seminar “Social Museology: Exploring community, culture, and change in Heimat museums” at the Ludwig Uhland Institute of Historical and Cultural Anthropology, University of Tübingen, examined local museums as sites where memory, identity, and participation intersect. Case studies from two federal states – nine from Baden-Württemberg and one from Hesse – illustrate the variety and challenges of such institutions. Students explored core museum functions of collecting, conserving, researching, exhibiting, and interpreting; the role of volunteer associations in sustaining Heimat museums; and the balance between professional standards and amateur engagement. Particular attention was paid to accessibility, inclusivity, and the tensions between tradition and transformation, for instance, around concepts of Heimat, generational change, and digitalization. While many museums offer spaces for local identity and intergenerational exchange, they vary in the extent to which they embrace social museology, characterized by participation, critical dialogue, and contemporary relevance. The comparative lens highlights both the potential of Heimat museums to act as community anchors and the obstacles they face in renewal, inclusivity, and sustainability. These case studies serve as the empirical foundation for the article “*Reframing Heimat museums: A museum analysis of local communities’ participation and belonging*”, published in this issue.

Keywords: local history museums, *Heimat*, Germany

Estudos de caso sobre museus Heimat: Trabalho de campo de investigação

Resumo

O seminário de investigação “Museologia Social: Explorando comunidade, cultura e mudança nos museus Heimat”, realizado no Instituto Ludwig Uhland de Antropologia Histórica e Cultural da Universidade de Tübingen, examinou os museus locais como espaços onde memória, identidade e participação se entrecruzam. Estudos de caso provenientes de dois estados federais – nove de Baden-Württemberg e um do Hesse – ilustram a diversidade e os desafios destas instituições. Os estudantes exploraram as funções essenciais dos museus, como a recolha, conservação, investigação, exposição e interpretação; o papel das associações de voluntários na manutenção dos museus Heimat; e o equilíbrio entre padrões profissionais e o envolvimento amador. Foi dada

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especial atenção à acessibilidade, à inclusão e às tensões entre tradição e transformação, por exemplo, em torno dos conceitos de *Heimat*, da mudança geracional e da digitalização. Embora muitos museus proporcionem espaços de construção identitária local e de intercâmbio intergeracional, variam no grau em que incorporam a museologia social, caracterizada pela participação, pelo diálogo crítico e pela relevância contemporânea. A perspectiva comparativa evidencia tanto o potencial dos museus *Heimat* como âncoras comunitárias, como os obstáculos que enfrentam em termos de renovação, inclusão e sustentabilidade. Estes estudos de caso constituem a base empírica do artigo “Reframing Heimat museums: A museum analysis of local communities’ participation and belonging”, publicado nesta edição.

Palavras-chave: Museus de história local, *Heimat*, Alemanha

1. *Heimatmuseum "Seegersches Häusle" (Seeger's cottage), Kayh*

1.1. Museum overview

Location: a remote village Kayh, not easily reachable by public transport. Closest city: Herrenberg.

Working hours: no regular hours, open only during big events nearby in the village, such as Christmas market or 1 of May.

Visit details: Guided group visit as part of a research seminar; tour given by two leading members of the Kayh Local History and Traditional Costume Association (in German: *Heimat- und Geschichtsverein Kayh*, or HGTV)

Brief description: Small local history museum housed in a half-timbered building dating from ca. 1850, with an older cellar. The collection focuses on everyday rural life, agriculture, and crafts in Kayh and the region (19th–20th centuries). Outdoor area with reconstructed historical garden and orchard-related tools; occasional small livestock during events. Operated entirely by volunteers from the HGTV. Building and grounds owned by the City of Herrenberg.

Webpage: <https://hgtv-kayh.de/heimatmuseum-seegersches-haeusle>

1.2. Core functions of the museum

Visible functions: collecting (via donations and long-term loans from villagers), conservation (basic care by volunteers), and communicating/exhibiting (guided tours, storytelling, thematic displays during events). Less developed or absent: systematic research, formal conservation methods, continuous public access. Collections care: items are numbered and recorded on paper lists, some are stored in cupboards or the barn. Objects are cleaned and repaired informally, original building materials (e.g., old roof tiles) were reused in restoration. Research: no ongoing scholarly research; some historical documentation by volunteers; occasional student projects possible. Interpretation/presentation: Tours are narrative-driven and interactive, often led by elderly volunteers with lived experience; focus on hands-on learning (e.g., washing clothes by hand, handling old shoes). Compared to other museums, interpretation is highly personal, community-embedded, and less formalized.

1.3. Community work/involvement

The museum is a community-led initiative sustained entirely by volunteers, many from older generations (60–80 years old). Two over-80 women lead children’s tours, creating intergenerational exchanges. Younger families are being encouraged to join. Communities involved: HGTV members, local school and kindergarten classes, the partner village of Herrenberg in France (Tarare), local festival attendees, and other residents of Herrenberg. Participation visibility: High during events and school visits; locals contribute objects, help with maintenance, gardening, and event organization. Involvement in curating/programming: community members decide what is displayed, set up thematic stations, and animate seasonal or historical demonstrations.

1.4. Accessibility and inclusivity

Physical accessibility is limited: the upper floor is closed to visitors due to a missing emergency exit. Social accessibility is strong: tours adapt to children, older visitors, and mixed audiences. Emotional accessibility is enhanced by informal storytelling and authentic lived experiences. For children: hands-on activities (washing clothes, old games, cooking tasks), object handling, and sensory experiences (smelling herbs, touching fabrics). For older people/newcomers: evokes memories and fosters conversation. Learning modes: dialogic and experiential rather than didactic, focus on enjoyment and personal connection for both visitors and volunteers.

1.5. Ethics, professionalism, sustainability

Collection and building preservation rely on volunteer engagement, donations and recycled materials. Professional museum practices (climate control, advanced conservation) are absent, inventories exist on paper, with some objects unlabelled. The lack of funding and municipal support creates tensions: city owns the building but does not finance operations or improvements. Amateur vs. expert knowledge: entirely amateur-driven; expertise lies in local history and traditional skills rather than museology. Financial sustainability: funded by small membership fees (€11/year individual; €15 family), proceeds from festivals, occasional project grants and ad-hoc donations.

1.6. Critical reflections

The Seegersches Häusle challenges traditional museum models by operating almost entirely outside professional frameworks. It reflects a living, community-driven form of heritage care closer to Social Museology than to ICOM's conventional image of a "museum" as a professionalized, continuously open institution. Missing from the 2022 ICOM definition are formal research, structured education programmes and guaranteed public access (limitations largely due to volunteer capacity and funding, not lack of interest). Despite minimal resources, the museum is rooted in local community identity and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Overall, there are following signs of Social Museology: collective ownership of heritage, participation in curation, and integration into local community life. However, its dependence on a small, ageing volunteer base and limited visibility could threaten its survival.

2. *Keltermuseum Unterjesingen*

2.1. Museum overview

Location: Unterjesingen, a village near Tübingen. Housed in the historic Rosecker Kelter (1784) and two other heritage buildings: the Zeeb-Haus (17th century farmhouse) and a preserved wagon-maker's workshop.

Working hours: Seasonal opening (May–October), first Sunday of each month, 14:00–17:00, with a volunteer-run café. Group visits are possible year-round.

Visit details: Guided group visit as part of a research seminar; tour led by a volunteer guide (an academic resident) with input from other volunteers.

Brief description: Small, volunteer-run local history museum focusing on winegrowing, hop cultivation, agriculture, village life, and crafts (19th–20th centuries). The Zeeb-Haus is reconstructed as a ca. 1900 home. Operated by the Förderkreis Unterjesinger Kelter e.V., founded to save the building from demolition in the 1980s.

Website: <https://www.keltermuseum-unterjesingen.de>

2.2. Core functions of the museum

Visible functions: collecting (mainly through community donations), preservation (basic preventive care and selective pest control), and communication/exhibition (guided tours, thematic temporary exhibits, events). Less developed: professional conservation and formal interpretive narratives. Collections care: objects are inventoried in the regional digital database (<https://bawue.museum-digital.de/institution/80>) by volunteers, mainly students; most items lack documentation. Research: occasional BA/MA theses and student projects; object histories reconstructed via local informants. Interpretation: highly personal, mix of reconstructed period rooms (Zeeb-Haus) and “wildly curated” open displays; interactive elements (e.g., protest wall in Peasants’ War exhibition). Presentation is informal, dialogic, and community-driven.

2.3. Community work/involvement

Founded through local activism to preserve the Kelter; entirely volunteer-run. The core team mixes older villagers with younger university students. Communities involved: local residents (donors, storytellers, café hosts), academic interns, school groups, and partner institutions (e.g., Tübingen City Museum). Participation visibility: high during events, open days, and in exhibition content (many labels/stories come from locals). Involvement in curation/programming: community members initiate exhibits (e.g., “100 Years of School”), lend objects, provide knowledge and decide on events. Objects may be temporarily used by locals for demonstrations (e.g., butter churning in schools), reinforcing shared ownership.

2.4. Accessibility and inclusivity

Physical accessibility is limited by historic architecture (stairs, narrow spaces); guided tours adapt to needs. Social accessibility is strong: low or no entry fees, open to all age groups, flexible tour focus. For children: hands-on activities (using old tools), interactive exhibits. For older people/newcomers: evokes memories, encourages conversation. Learning modes: experiential and conversational rather than didactic; seasonal events (wine walks, music evenings) blend leisure and heritage.

2.5. Ethics, professionalism, sustainability

Preservation efforts focus on practicality: duplicates kept to replace damaged items; preventive care and minor repairs by volunteers. Professional tools include digital inventory and collaboration with larger museums; conservation standards applied flexibly. Amateur vs. expert: expertise lies in local history and crafts; professional museology enters via academic volunteers/students. Financial sustainability: small municipal subsidy, membership fees, donations, event proceeds, occasional project grants. An ethical approach values access and use of heritage objects by the community over strict “do not touch” policies. Deaccessioning is rare and handled informally.

2.6. Critical reflections

Keltermuseum Unterjesingen challenges conventional museum models by prioritizing community ownership, participatory curation and local knowledge over formal professional frameworks. It fulfills much of the 2022 ICOM definition’s emphasis on inclusion, accessibility, and social engagement, but lacks continuous research, professional conservation and a structured interpretive plan. The “wild” curation style (called this way by our guide with a reference to the concept of “wild museum” discussed earlier) invites personal discovery and reflects Social Museology’s principle of the museum as a living social space embedded in village life. Its main risks lie in financial precarity and dependence on a small volunteer base, but its strength is deep community integration and the authenticity of its grassroots heritage care.

3. Museum 'Im Dorf' Betzingen

3.1. Museum overview

Location: in the center of a small town Betzingen, a partial locality of Reutlingen, by a main road.

Working hours: Sundays from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., April through October

Visit details: visited by Berit Karl and Mel Bittner on June 22, 2025, walked through on our own, corresponded via email with Christian Rilling (Historical Museums Reutlingen) and Friedemann Rupp (SAV Betzingen)

Brief description: affiliate museum of *Heimatmuseum Reutlingen*, focus on village life in times of industrialization, former house of local farmers, run by volunteers of SAV (Swabian Alb Association) with assistance of museum workers from Reutlingen

Webpage: <https://www.reutlingen.de/historischemuseen/museumimdorf>

3.2. Core functions of the museum

The museum in Betzingen manages to fulfil the tasks of collecting, exhibiting, conserving and interpreting, with the latter two in a less traditional sense, regarding the five functions in the current ICOM's definition of museum. The process of collecting objects happened organically, partly as a transfer of objects from the *Heimatmuseum* in Reutlingen, partly from local donations and findings at flea markets. Today, this has stagnated, with the exception of occasional findings through excavation work. Conserving takes place in the sense of dusting and removing of dirt at the end of the season, with oversight by museum workers from Reutlingen. No active research is conducted, despite the collaboration with museum workers and scientific assistance by the University of Tübingen. For the conception of the museum, a group of cultural anthropologists with interest in the museum's collections supported the historic research, to contextualize the exhibits within local history. The current research for the annual temporary exhibitions is mostly carried out by members of the SAV, led by their own interests. Since the house is a reconstruction of rooms in its function and location around 1900, visitors get a mostly organic feel of how farm life would have looked like, connecting the interpreting and exhibiting function in the entire house. The living rooms are presented similarly, as if people were still living there, using each room for its former intended purpose. There are creative installments of different types of grains, making it a place of autonomous learning and reflection. Some objects are marked with handwritten paper of the original owner, some have professional plaques.

Most visible and active functions of the museum appear to be interpretation and exhibition, although the museum in its structure has not changed in the last 20 years. The original concept of the museum, established throughout the years, seems to work thus far with its various contents and its presentation, which resembles the philosophy of other *Heimat* museums visited.

3.3. Community work/involvement

The museum's contents and events are led and organized by members of the SAV. For a few years, there has been cooperation with the local school, where third graders regularly come to visit. Members of the association are struggling to find replacements to volunteer at the museum as they age, since the majority are made up of older locals. The volunteer work is vital to the association, considering that the museum building provides the meeting place for events, both public and exclusive, by the SAV. Focusing on the appreciation of nature and *Heimat* largely as a hiking club, the association intends to protect tradition and promote local community. Through the cooperation with young cultural anthropologists in the founding of this *Heimat* museum in the 1980s, the museum has been built by people from various backgrounds and ages: former farmers, association members, academics, city officials, and other locals. This partnership has faded over time with the stagnation of the collection, but can nevertheless be found today as well. Participation is made visible through a visitor log, which documents visitor count, people volunteering, events and open houses, but also spontaneous meetings

on site, where seemingly older important locals discuss happenings in and around Betzingen, which are named in the log. The community members are mostly involved through their own interest in the history of the town. This is also highlighted by the early obtaining of objects, the political pressure to renovate the building and carry out the conceptual plans for the museum, realized by members of the association.

3.4. Accessibility and inclusivity

In particular, the museum is not accessible for people in wheelchairs and with visual impairment, considering the lack of spatial adjustments in the old farmhouse. With a separate staircase outside the building, dividing the farm on the ground floor and cellar and the living quarters upstairs, the *Trippelhaus* is characteristic of historic farmhouses in Betzingen. Photographs and text on info panels mention names important to the history of Betzingen, without explaining their role, which draws a distinct emotional line between newcomers and locals. Most visitors, as observed, walk through the museum autonomously, apart from booked guided tours, making the museum easy to access without high social barriers. Interactive elements consist of various town reliefs and the ability to touch most exhibits. One can find a few mock-ups of different types of grains and other staples of farm life. In the room wholly dedicated to *Trachten*, the museum utilizes mannequins to showcase a wedding party in the various local traditional clothing. Although the museum does not appear to be outwardly interactive, the composition of the various elements of everyday life produces an evocative atmosphere, as if one was living there over a hundred years ago. While it does not cater towards children specifically, the variety of objects and its presentation construct a place of playful knowledge transfer. People can opt to simply walk around and look, or to read info panels, leaving the choice to the visitor of what contents to reflect on and gain knowledge from. The day of our visit was an open house focused on the kitchen and basement, which the children of the owners helped set up. Thus, the museum is an institution particularly intended for local families and older people, since they are likely to want to reflect on the town's history and possibly its future. The museum encourages learning through historical reflection of local everyday life, also in comparison with the history of the state of Württemberg. By repeatedly showcasing the house with a specific topic in mind, it creates a shared experience of exchanging knowledge within a community, trying to bridge the gap between generations, considering most museum volunteers are local elders.

3.5. Ethics, professionalism, sustainability

Efforts in sustaining the institution include mostly finding new volunteers involved in the SAV to assume responsibility. Professionalism is performed by way of presenting small objects behind glass cabinets, LED lights, and info panels, but also through the display of achievements, such as newspaper articles and the award of "*Vorbildliches Heimatmuseum*" (*Prize for Exemplary Heimat Museums*) in 1994. Discussions were held over the contextualization and importance of the traditional costume of Betzingen, which were resolved amicably amongst the volunteers. The conception and realization of the museum in correspondence with museum workers in Reutlingen (who oversee the institution), scientists and a graphic designer make this museum appear more professional than other *Heimat* museums. With the assistance of the Historical Museums Reutlingen and their professional museum workers, the association receives a small budget for their annual temporary exhibitions and help if necessary, for instance with poster design. The temporary exhibitions are also a strategy of keeping the collection and the institution alive, without changing the original state of the exhibition, but to bring in more visitors. Due to this collaboration, the museum is effectively advertised on the website of the city of Reutlingen, with photographs of all themed rooms and their composition in the building. Furthermore, the museum workers employed by the city send a museum technician and collection administrator in regular intervals to Betzingen, to inspect the building and the exhibits; if required, they revise the problem. The financial foundation is laid by the city by paying for the establishment of the museum, including essential research in the beginning, and granting budgets for small projects from time to time. Hence, the museum demonstrates less of the financial challenges other *Heimat* museums show, therefore adding to its increased professional appearance. In contrast, additional information on info panels or on the exhibits itself are made throughout the exhibition

with handwritten notes, which give it a personal, but also amateur touch. Since several objects in the museum are loaned by former farmers and locals, which are, at this point, more considered as donations rather than a loan, the museum does not have to worry about object deaccessioning.

3.6. Critical reflections

The Museum 'Im Dorf' Betzingen challenges the traditional understanding of a *Heimat* museum, in its sort of hybrid position between professionalism and amateurism. It still demonstrates common challenges of *Heimat* museums and the collecting of objects, but it stands out in its conception and financial support by the city. Regarding the new ICOM's definition of a museum, this institution falls short in the active part of conservation, collection and research, whereas remains of the original conceptions and realizations are noticeable for the visitor to this day. What stood out to me was the fine line between, at first glance, a professional museum rooted in local history and objects and then noticing the personal, amateur details, displaying not only the history of the town, but the museum itself as well. From my standpoint, there are a few signs of Social Museology, foremost the museum acting as the meeting place for community members at events organized by the local association, where the history, present, and future of Betzingen can be organically discussed, and especially older locals are cultivating a tight-knit sense of community. This, on the other hand, seems to be an obstacle, preventing newcomers, such as migrants and younger non-locals, from fully assimilating into the local community. Yet, the biggest discrepancy with Social Museology is the lack of discussion of contemporary issues and reflection of exhibits. Nonetheless, the Museum 'Im Dorf' Betzingen creates a foundation for community, albeit mostly for local families and elders, in trying to connect to their town's history.

4. Museum im Amannhof

4.1. Museum overview

Location: Museum im Amannhof 11, Rottenburg am Neckar, Germany; medieval house in the medieval core of the small town, next to the historical city wall and another restored medieval building

Working hours: Thursdays from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.; additionally on holidays and by appointment.

Visit details: individual visit by Carolin Saia on Sunday, June 22, 2025; on my own, no guided tour.

Brief description:

- Type: historic townhouse turned into a museum with two purposes
 - to present the house's history: over time, it served both as a penal institution with prison cells in the lower parts of the building, and as a living space for citizens of Rottenburg, especially so-called "Ackerbürger", townsmen who farmed fields outside the city walls
 - To exhibit objects belonging to the local *heimatkundliche* (local + regional heritage focused) collection
- Focus: local architecture, penal history, civic/bourgeois everyday life, local artists, viniculture/hop cultivation
- Size: small, 600+ exhibits
- Run by: Sülchgauer Altertumsverein, a local volunteer-run heritage society
- Website: <https://www.sav-rottenburg.de/museum-im-amannhof-11>

4.2 Core functions of the museum

The house itself is a protected heritage and was renovated and restored in 2020, opening as a museum in 2022. The goal is to preserve a heritage site central to Rottenburg's identity, combining penal history, civic living and historical migrant narratives. This is due to the Amannhof's own history: The house was built in 1715 to serve as a prison for Rottenburg and its surroundings and was later, in 1833, sold to craftsmen and town-based farmers (*Ackerbürger*) and restructured into a private living space, including a barn and a stable.

The Sülchgauer Altertumsverein (SAV) aims to keep local memory alive. The collecting is done by SAV volunteers, drawing from local donations and historical society archives. The museum is home to a collection of objects including 14th–19th century furniture, clothing, religious artifacts, toys, but also working gear and tools ranging from chores around the house, to viticulture and hop cultivation. The exhibits on display are shown in situ rather than in vitrines. Interpreting is tactile and immersive – visitors can sit on furniture, play with toys.

The heritage society is doing continual research work on local history. Apart from the museum exhibitions, they have several publications and regular historical or archeological lectures on Rottenburg's or the region's history. Within the exhibition there are few interpretive labels and many objects are displayed with minimal context. Exhibitions feature house-based narratives highlighting stories and probable livelihoods of actual persons who have lived in the Amannhof in the past.

The SAV also manages the Sülchgau Museum in Rottenburg, which features other aspects of city history than the Amannhof, focusing more on the history of the town and its connection to the broader political history of the region that belonged to Further Austria (German: *Vorderösterreich*; comprising the Habsburg territories in Swabia and the Upper Rhine area) from 1381 - 1806. For this case study, the Amannhof was chosen among those two museums because its focus on historical everyday life and working culture, along with its close ties to former residents, makes it resemble a *Heimat* museum more closely than the Sülchgau Museum, which presents itself as a more conventional history museum.

4.3. Community work/involvement

Community involvement regarding the SAV is strong: volunteers (mixed ages, mostly locals, several academics, historians and archaeologists among them) manage curation, restoration, and events. Juvenile offenders contributed through community service during renovation, giving a symbolic link to the building's penal history. There is an open invitation to the public and the town's communities to join open-house events like lectures, restoration efforts, but no active outreach to surrounding communities was observable during my visit. While curation, donations, restoration of the Amannhof and even the building of the exhibitions were community efforts, there are no signs of ongoing or planned future participatory efforts.

4.4. Accessibility and inclusivity

Physically, the six-story historic house has limited barrier-free access, lots of narrow and steep staircases, and for visually impaired persons, there is no alternative way to attain the information provided on the labels in the exhibition. This is nothing uncommon for small, volunteer-run museums lacking resources for creating barrier-free exhibitions.

Socially, the volunteer-driven approach gives a welcoming impression to locals and newcomers. Touchable objects like furniture and toys make the museum more child-friendly than it appears at first glance and create some contrast to the rather academic language used on most of the exhibition texts and on the website of the heritage society. In addition to these hands-on, free-to-touch objects, a scavenger hunt-style quiz for children serves as an interactive element that enables playful exploration of the rooms.

The approach of choosing a narrative of personal stories of historical inhabitants of Amannhof has the potential to inspire an emotional connection with them and to encourage reflection and dialogue on justice, *Heimat*, and local heritage – though deeper critical narratives or explicit links to contemporary parallels are not mentioned.

4.5. Ethics, professionalism, sustainability

Efforts to protect and sustain the collection and the building of the museum itself are visible through the careful and award-winning renovation of the historical building (in 2024 the museum won the so-called *Bürgerpreis* of

the *Denkmalstiftung Baden-Württemberg*, a prize given to citizens' initiatives or associations for exemplary commitment to the preservation of cultural heritage sites). Collections are sustained through both volunteer care and city support.

The style of professionalism in the exhibition is alternative with informal inventories and open display. A few vitrines in the museum contain more delicate objects, such as pieces of art or jewelry. To some point, there is some amateur vs. expert tension noticeable in the way the heritage society's academic standards and self-representation are shown in their publications and on their website, on the one hand, and the lack of academic depth in many of the labels within the permanent exhibition in the Amannhof, on the other hand.

On-site, there was no mention of major ethical challenges like deaccessioning, economic or ecological sustainability, or staff roles.

4.6. Critical reflections

Thought-provoking aspects of the exhibition were the highlighted contrast between reconstructed prison cells and cozy bourgeois interiors as well as the juvenile offenders' role in renovation.

The museum expands the traditional idea of museum, working without glass cases, using the historical house itself as part of the exhibition, and letting visitors touch or use objects. One striking missing aspect regarding the latest ICOM museum definition is the limited inclusivity of diverse narratives.

The allover approach leans toward Social Museology regarding the museum being community-run by the SAV and participatory efforts during renovation. It lacks, however, structured co-creation involving surrounding communities outside the association and critical debate. While the museum offers a space for lectures and exchange regarding historical topics, it does not seem to serve as a space for social exchange or gathering. The museum at Amannhof cannot be clearly classified as being conceptualized or practically working according to Social Museology principles, even though some aspects can be found. It seems to be more about heritage preservation than active social dialogue or tending to actual contemporary needs and issues of the city's communities.

5. Heimatmuseum Weissach und Flacht

5.1. Museum overview

Location: Leonberger Straße 2, 71287 Weissach-Flacht. The museum is located in an old school in the city center of Flacht (a district of Weissach). Weissach is a small city in Baden-Württemberg.

Working hours: Open every Sunday from 2-5pm. Guided tours outside regular working hours are possible. This year, the museum has to go on an early summer break.

Visit details: I visited the museum on Monday, June 30th, 2025. The museum director, Susanne Kittelberger, gave me a tour through the museum from 9:30 to 11:30 am.

Brief description:

- Founded in 1990 by Willy Schray (former school principal)
- Purpose: preserve typical everyday objects of rural life from the 18th and 19th century in Flacht
- Museum consists of the permanent exhibition (three floors, color-coordinated rooms), the Gallery Sepp Veas (ground floor), a temporary exhibition (changes every few months) and a museum café
- Free entry
- Goal: one thousand visitors per year
- Museum director: Susanne Kittelberger
- The museum is run by the "*Heimatverein Weissach und Flacht e.V.*" (local association of around 40-50 people who regularly volunteer at the museum)

- Two young women offer guided tours for groups every Sunday
- Website: <https://www.heimatmuseum-wf.de>

5.2. Core functions of the museum:

The museum collects objects that show the visitors what the everyday rural life in Flacht in the 18th and 19th century was like, aiming to represent the demographic structure of Flacht. Flacht and Weissach used to be separate cities, but in 1971, the two cities were united into one municipality, and the smaller city Flacht became a district of the bigger city Weissach. Originally, Willy Schray put his focus on collecting objects to represent the history of Flacht in his museum, while putting the history of Weissach aside. But in 2010, the museum got redesigned out of political reasons and since then, it reflects the history of both Weissach and Flacht, instead of focusing on Flacht only. In comparison to Flacht, Weissach is more urban and industrialized than rural like Flacht. The local community of Flacht is deeply influenced by its agricultural past. The founder of the museum, Willy Schray, had two main interests that influenced his process of collecting and conserving objects. On the one hand, he wanted to collect objects of everyday rural life in Flacht, such as tools used in agriculture, clothing, school material and furniture. On the other hand, he was a passionate geologist and archaeologist who collected as many stones, roman coins and ceramics as he could find in the southwest of Germany. He established his own documentation system which consisted of many folders containing information about the objects he found. Every object got its own number and a brief description on a page inside one of his folders.

Most of the objects displayed in the museum today are donations from the local rural community. According to the museum director Susanne Kittelberger, they have been given to the museum by locals for various reasons, such as a lack of space in their own home. Some objects have also been rescued by museum staff before house demolitions or during house clearances. In the *Heimatmuseum Flacht*, visitors can have a look at a reconstructed living room and a kitchen from the 19th century, but most objects in the exhibition do not have detailed descriptions. Some examples are a bible from 1849, a broom, a shovel, a hammer, a typewriter, a wedding dress and a couple of photos from the 1920s, a bathtub, a sewing machine, a few pots and ladles, etc. Unfortunately, neither the former museum director, nor the *Heimatverein* (local heritage society) kept up with Willy Schray's documentation system while still continuing to actively collect and constantly receive more objects by the local community. The current museum director is trying to organize and categorize the objects stored in the attic, aiming to research their origin, function and history once sorted. However, because the museum is severely understaffed and underfunded, it lacks the necessary resources for in-depth research and professional conservation. In comparison to other museums that work with digital screens or audio guides, the *Heimatmuseum Weissach und Flacht* rather aims to educate and connect with the visitor through emotions and recognition. By positioning and showcasing objects used in everyday rural life, the museum wants the visitors to interpret them and ask themselves how these objects could have been used in the past. Moreover, the museum relies on the objects to evoke memories and wants the visitors to tell each other stories from the past.

5.3. Community work/involvement

The museum is rooted in the local community of Weissach and Flacht. It is run by the *Heimatverein Weissach und Flacht e.V.*, a local association founded in 2000, aiming to support the museum financially through the payment of an annual fee and practically through the organization of temporary exhibitions and events. The 40-50 members of the *Heimatverein* are mainly male pensioners from Flacht with a passion for history. They also run the museum café and practice regular dialogue with the visitors. Everyone in the town is invited to join in, donate objects, tell stories and engage in the process of curating and setting up a new exhibition. The museum offers guided tours for all sorts of groups and has a special program for school classes, leaving room for questions and discussions. At the end of the exhibition, guests can leave their opinion and detailed feedback in a guestbook.

5.4. Accessibility and inclusivity

You can access the museum easily by taking the bus and getting off at the bus station right in front of it since it is in the town center. Unfortunately, the museum doesn't have an elevator, so it isn't equipped for the physically disabled. Older people often recognize objects displayed in the exhibition since they used them in the past or remember stories of their parents who lived a rural life. However, younger people tend to have problems trying to understand the history of the objects since there are very few explanations and no videos or audio tapes to show and explain their purpose. The museum focuses on representing the past of Flacht, but it rarely connects it with the present of Flacht today and the current issues of the local community. That's the reason why it is recommended for school classes to book a guided tour where they can ask questions. Families or groups who visit the museum on a Sunday often get in touch at the museum café or during special events like exhibition openings. Both museum staff and visitors have already expressed their appreciation for such events that make room for conversation. Currently, the museum director is developing a special program for the younger generation, as she has noticed that the museum is primarily visited by older people.

5.5. Ethics, professionalism, sustainability

Principles such as sustainability, diversity and accessibility are very important to Susanne Kittelberger's museum work. Not only does she want to make the museum more accessible for different communities, she also wants to find solutions to make it more sustainable in the long-term. Susanne Kittelberger wants to transform and modernize the museum, relocate it, use more gender-sensitive language in her texts and digitalize the exhibitions. Right now, you can already find multiple videos on past temporary exhibitions on the museum's website, but neither the objects in the attic, nor in the permanent exhibition are digitalized in any sort of way. Susanne Kittelberger hopes to digitalize them one day so that museum staff and visitors can browse through the objects on the official museum website. She also has a critical position towards the term "Heimat" and is in favor of renaming the museum to "*Stadtmuseum*" ("city museum" instead of "local heritage museum"). However, she claims that both discussions about gender-sensitive language and renaming the museum from *Heimatismuseum* to *Stadtmuseum* ("city museum") are two entirely academic discourses that are irrelevant for the local community in Flacht. She finds critical reflection on the term "Heimat" particularly important. Due to Germany's past, *Heimat* has a negative connotation to it, but traditionally, most local heritage and history museums are called "*Heimatmuseen*". However, since the *Heimatverein* does not believe that reflections on the term "*Heimat*" are necessary, the museum will most likely retain its name. This is one of many examples to demonstrate tensions between the conservative *Heimatverein* and the progressive museum director. Currently, there is far too little attention on the restoration of objects and some of them are quite literally falling apart, such as a wooden bucket on the third floor. Most objects are not inside of vitrines, but rather freely positioned in the room, touchable for everyone. Susanne Kittelberger has been rethinking this concept for a while. On the one hand, visitors appreciate that they can touch objects, but on the other hand, from a professional lens, that is quite problematic from a conservation perspective of historic objects. Since the museum does not have enough space to store objects, the attic is chaotic. Moreover, the museum does not have enough financial resources to battle the woodworm that is slowly destroying the objects stored up there. The mayor even wants to close the museum since it has more expenses than income and transform it into a residential building with rental apartments. Lastly, there are tensions between the museum director and the *Heimatverein* because they have very different visions for the future and upcoming temporary exhibitions. The museum director usually proposes an idea for an exhibition and the *Heimatverein* can execute it with their small budget. If needed, they can ask the municipal council for extra financial support. On the contrary to the museum director who wants to modernize the museum, the *Heimatverein* wants to keep things exactly the way they are, and they cannot seem to find a compromise.

5.6. Critical reflections

In conclusion, the *Heimatismuseum Weissach und Flacht* is a small museum with many challenges and its future is unclear. In comparison to other museums, it has a bottom-up approach in its decision-making process. Besides

that, its exhibitions are rather hands-on and close to the visitor than other exhibitions in big museums. Due to underfunding and understaffing, the museum can't pay enough attention to the professional research and conservation of objects. Currently, it is at a critical point and in need of modernization, digitalization, inclusivity and greater accessibility. It is crucial to offer more events for younger people and to include their voices. Also, the museum must diversify its group of visitors to represent the rapidly changing community it is located in and listen to their wants and needs. But that is only possible if the museum director and the *Heimatverein* put their differences aside and work together on the transformation of the *Heimatmuseum* - or *Stadtmuseum*.

6. *Heimatmuseum Altdorf*

6.1. Museum overview

Location:

- located in the middle of the town Altdorf (4.600 inhabitants)
- situated next to the major hall and the library
- It is a historic building, where Johannes Michael Hahn (a founder of Hahnsche Gemeinschaft) was born, which also attracts visitors with an interest in his theological teachings.

Working hours:

- open one day a month (usually, it is on the last Sunday of the month)
- opening hours are also communicated on a noticeboard by the entry door, the local newspaper and on their website
- one can also arrange special tours for school classes or other groups.

Visit details:

- Visited by Miriam Carolina Mauthe
- visited on June 29, 2025
- happened to be the 10-year anniversary of the Heimatmuseum → they offered cake and coffee and had tables and chairs out, so people could come and hang out
- Toured the museum by myself and then asked a guide questions about the museum and the displays (how they work, how they select the displays, what their aims are...)

Brief description:

- Has 6 rooms on 2 floors and one cellar (can only be visited with a guide)
- The rooms have different aims and work with different media and displays
- It is free entry
- Was founded by the Association for Altdorf's history ("*Arbeitskreis Altdorfer Heimatgeschichte*") in 2015
- The association runs the museum, plans new exhibits, cares for the house, is organizing the renovations of the upper floors of the house to also use them for exhibitions in the future
- Aim: a critical reflection of the past for a better present and future

6.2. Core functions of the museum

The *Arbeitskreis Altdorfer Heimatgeschichte*, which founded the museum in 2015, aims to reflect the past and contribute to shaping a better future. Therefore, they researched how the town of Altdorf changed over the years and what makes it what it is today. They decided to exhibit parts of its history in various ways in the different rooms. One room, for example, is dedicated to Michael Hahn and it holds a library of all his works in print and a small collection can be listened to in an audio installation. Two other rooms show what was part of the rural life in the town 100 years ago. For all these rooms, the museum exhibits objects to help grasp its history visually. There is also a collection of interviews with older people about their life when they were younger and

how the town changed. Here, they keep adding more videos, whenever someone agrees to be interviewed by them and they can find the time to follow up.

6.3. Community work/involvement

The *Arbeitskreis* not only founded the museum but also runs it. They are always happy about new members, so theoretically, everyone can become part of the *Arbeitskreis* and the museum. At the moment, they count about 60 members. Additionally, on anniversaries, the museum organizes a celebration where it offers cake and coffee ("*Kaffe und Kuchen*" is a German staple for celebrations), and everyone in the town and outside the town is invited to join.

The museum also has one room dedicated to all the associations of the town that are older than 50 years. Those got to participate in the design of the room. Everyone has a part of a glass vitrine to exhibit things and they have tablets over the vitrine to explain what their association does, how it works or what it achieved.

6.4. Accessibility and inclusivity

Unfortunately, the house that holds the museum is a very old building. Therefore, it is not accessible to people with mobility aids. There are tight staircases and small floors between rooms. Otherwise, it is quite accessible since there are various media involved: signs to read, audios to hear, objects to feel, and guides who love to tell you things about the history of the town. This also makes the museum interactive and engaging for various generations. And they furnished the kitchen of the house in the style of the middle of the last century and designed it as a meeting space. To sit down and enjoy a talk. This invites visitors to come into dialogue with each other and them and reflect on what was seen and heard during the visit to the other rooms.

6.5. Ethics, professionalism, sustainability

The Heimatmuseum uses different tools in their exhibit. There are glass vitrines for archeological artifacts that were found around the town, and for the objects lent by the associations of the town. They also use digital tools for the *Mediathek* with the interviews and a picture gallery of the town in the 1940s. But there are also objects to touch and to interact with (for example, in the functioning kitchen or the cellar where they show you how it was used as a communal space to make "*Most*". And they have a lot of tablets to read about the history of the town, which was researched by one member of the *Arbeitskreis* who works as a teacher.

6.6. Critical reflections

This *Heimat* museum is a lot less cluttered with objects than I usually expect to see. It also has an exhibition practice that resembles that of larger museums, in the sense that they offer a wealth of context and information about the items they exhibit. It feels very thought out and curated when walking through the rooms, and I think that helps the *Arbeitskreis* to achieve their goal of the visitors reflecting the past instead of just looking at a bunch of objects.

7. Museum der Schwalm

7.1. Museum overview

Location:

- Museum der Schwalm in Schwalmstadt-Ziegenhein, Schwalm-Ederkreis in Hessen
- located in Steinerne Haus (build in 1363) in the middle of a historic center
- good accessibility by private and public transport.

Working hours:

- Tuesday-Sunday 14.00-17.00
- Entrance Fee: 5€; disabled/students 3; under age of 14 free
- Guided Tour (2€/p.Pers. or 15€/p.tour)
- closed in the winter holiday until Easter
- one can also contact them for special tours, other opening times, research interest

Visit details:

- individual visit by Manja Leinwather
- Visited on June 22, 2025
- visit on my own, talked with locals
- special day with a program through a big local celebration

Brief description:

- *Heimatmuseum*
- focused on local historic craft and dress
- The museum, archive, and shop are run and organized by *Schwälmer Heimatbund e. V.* (local heritage society; 600 Pers (09/2020)).
- The origin of the Collection: The first Collection was established under Heinrich Schwalm and Harry Heußner in 1911 with the *Knüllgebirgs Verein* until the World War I put it on hold. The Collection was continued in 1920 under Günther von Steinau-Steinrück und Hermann Witkugel with the *Knüllgebirgs Verein*. Occupying two rooms in Wiederholdstraße.
- 13.10.1927, the collection opened for the public
- Through the growing collection they first moved to six Rooms at Grenzebacher Tor at Muhlstraße and later in 11.06.1938 acquired the Steinerner Haus. Until the Collection was again put into storage through WW 2
- In 1949 the *Schwälmer Heimatbund e.V.* was founded, and the museum reopened under their new tutelage at 19.06. in the same year
- In 1981 the art collection of "*Willingshäuser Malerkreises*" was added

7.2. Core functions of the museum

The *Schwälmer Heimatbund e.V.* that runs the museum is dedicated to preserving the culture and customs of the Schwalm region. Knowledge of the Schwalm's way of life, crafts, traditions, and traditional costumes, as well as the history of the Schwalm region as a part of Hessen, must not be lost. Instead, it should be made accessible and preserved for future generations. To continue to fulfil this mission, they rely on volunteers. Within the association itself, as well as at the Schwalm Museum, opportunities await all who feel a connection to the region and want to contribute to preserving its history.

All five functions are visible in the concept of the visited museum. The museum exhibits a multitude of objects of this region through-out history. While the museum reopened with two rooms in 1949 in the current building, it now includes, among other things, regional collections of art, weapons, and objects related to the city's history. Therefore, they had to expand and now own the whole three-story building, as well as another smaller building for the archive and reference library (with over 2,500 books) located: Am Zeughof 1; 34613 Schwalmstadt. This building is also open for the public and allows various options to browse through and research the catalogued objects as well as regional and family history. Furthermore, design and craft students/researchers of the world are visiting the museum and researching historic crafts of the region. The archive stores files and documents from the 17th to 20th centuries about the Schwalm region, emigration register of the former Ziegenhain district, Documents and records of surrogate soldiers, documents about individual communities, businesses, associations a.s.o., documents about the towns of Ziegenhain, Treysa, Neukirchen and Schwarzenborn, collections of laws, regional newspapers from 1885 to 1970 and photos.

The Heimatmuseum shows some reconstructed rooms of *Lebenswelten* (“living environments”) before 1900, featuring a kitchen, bedroom, living room, as well as workshops that feature the local craftsmanship, pottery, and shoemaking. At the same time, other rooms showcased only objects and their functions, illustrated through photos, short films or information texts. Flax production and the white work embroidery received particular attention; the latter was recognized as intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2024. The shown information conserves historical knowledge, as well as giving pointers to modern parallels. The building also provides rooms to host parties, workshops or other events.

7.3. Community work/involvement

The museum offers various opportunities for local community members to participate. In particular, the crafts presented in the exhibitions are supported by workshops and talks aimed at preserving traditional knowledge and passing it on to future generations. These sessions are led by both amateurs and professionals, as far as I could determine in my research.

The archive also benefits greatly from the active engagement of local clubs, associations, and businesses, who contribute their histories and relevant data. In addition, families enrich the collection by donating or lending heirlooms, photographs, and other artifacts, which deepen the museum’s holdings and historical knowledge.

Many local customs and costume groups (*Brauchtums- und Trachtengruppen*) actively support the museum by keeping traditional crafts, clothing, and dances alive. They perform and demonstrate these customs to both local and international audiences, enhancing the museum’s visibility and educational outreach.

This local participation is documented in numerous photographs, interviews, and object descriptions. During events, a large and active group of local volunteers regularly demonstrate crafts, dress in traditional attire, and provide visitors with background information.

Smaller exhibitions occasionally highlight the involvement of other local groups, such as school classes. The museum shop also features publications by local authors as well as artworks and handicrafts created by regional artists.

7.4. Accessibility and inclusivity

The museum is designed to be accessible to people of all ages and educational backgrounds. A mix of presentation formats and a wide range of topics allows for diverse and engaging visitor experiences. One particularly compelling feature is the inclusion of interviews with former residents – the last two individuals who wore traditional dress full-time and passed away only recently – and contemporary individuals reenacting the use of historical tools or wearing traditional clothing. These personal narratives foster emotional connections, inspire participation and encourage reflection and dialogue. They also open the possibility for visitors to see themselves as potential contributors to the tradition.

The exhibition on traditional dress and regional culture encourages visitors to explore other Heimatmuseums in the region or even join local customs and costume groups (*Brauchtums- und Trachtengruppen*). While opportunities for dialogue and reflection exist, they are not explicitly facilitated by the exhibition design. Nevertheless, many active participants keep the traditions showcased in the museum alive. They contribute to the visitor experience and educate newcomers and younger generations in local crafts and cultural practices such as dance and dialect.

However, certain accessibility needs are not adequately addressed. For example, there is no elevator or Braille signage available, basic features commonly expected for inclusivity. While there are tactile elements on display, the museum lacks interactive or playful installations that could offer a more immersive and accessible experience for a broader range of visitors.

7.5. Ethics, professionalism, sustainability

The museum's website and archive highlight several strategies for preserving and promoting both the collection and the region's cultural heritage over the long term. These resources reflect a thoughtful and sustainable approach to museum work.

In terms of professionalism, the museum's overall concept and implementation stand out. Compared to other Heimatmuseums, which are sometimes perceived as cluttered or lacking clear organization, this museum demonstrates a more structured and deliberate curatorial approach, reflecting a higher standard of professional practice.

7.6. Critical reflections

Compared to other Heimatmuseums visited, the Museum der Schwalm presents a more structured and coherent concept, although it still includes the commonly found reconstructions of *Lebenswelten* ("living environments") in furnished rooms.

A notable strength is its focus on people: through photographs and interviews, the museum offers a stronger emotional connection to the individuals behind the traditions. This personal dimension enriches the visitor experience and sets it apart from more object-centered approaches. The museum successfully combines heritage preservation and research with elements of social engagement.

8. Heimatmuseum Ebingen

8.1. Museum Overview

- **Location:** The museum is in a former school building in Albstadt-Ebingen. It is a typical half-timbered house (*Fachwerkhau*), located near the town centre.
- **Opening hours:** Every Sunday and on holidays from 2–5 p.m., with a winter and summer break. Group tours can be arranged on other days.

Visit details:

I (Katalin Banvölgyi) visited on June 29 with my boyfriend. We went through the museum on our own. I also talked to a man working there and a woman from the *Förderverein*.

The museum was first established in 1926 by a teacher who was also an archaeologist, seeking to showcase his findings. It was reopened in 1992 with help from the *Förderverein* in a new building. The museum is run by volunteers from the *Förderverein Heimatmuseum Ebingen e.V.*

The exhibition is spread over two floors:

- On the first floor, it shows the history of the museum and the city.
- On the second floor, there is a recreated apartment from around 1900, displays of historical everyday life, and a small seasonal exhibition.

8.2. Core functions of the museum

When I entered the first room, I was surprised by how many objects were on display. It was immediately clear that collecting is very important to this museum. According to the people I spoke with, they actually have more objects than they can handle and not enough storage space. A man who used to store some of their items passed away, and now they're unsure where to keep everything. One woman joked that maybe they should just sell some of it at a flea market.

Most of the objects have been donated, either permanently or as loans. A few were bought at flea markets. The team also engages in some research; for example, they tried to uncover the story behind a package currently on display. At one point, I overheard staff discussing how to place an oven in the exhibition based on a historical photograph.

Still, many of the objects are presented with little explanation. Everyday items are often placed in vitrines without much context, so it's not always clear what they are or how they were used. The museum flyer includes the line, "A picture says more than a thousand words", which seems to reflect their philosophy. They want to display as many objects as possible and let them speak for themselves.

That approach, however, sometimes leads to a lack of focus. Some exhibits don't have a strong connection to the town or region. For instance, one vitrine presents "100 years of broadcasting in Germany", seemingly because the museum happens to own a number of related items. But it doesn't offer much insight into Ebingen or the local context. A more selective approach, the one that highlights stories tied to the region, might help the museum to better reflect its role as a Heimat museum.

8.3. Community work and involvement

The museum is run by a *Förderverein*, a local Support Association open to anyone who wants to get involved. According to one of the people I spoke with, the association currently has around 250 members, though only about 20 are actively engaged in the museum's day-to-day activities. Most of the volunteers are older, and younger people haven't been stepping in to take their place. That's one of the reasons the museum is only open for a few hours each week.

Supporters can contribute in different ways, whether by donating money, sharing objects, or volunteering their time. Because the *Förderverein* is responsible for running the museum, anyone who joins has the opportunity to participate in decisions and shape how things are done.

The museum also serves as a social space. One woman told me she had stopped by simply because she knew who was on duty and felt like having a chat. It became clear that people do not just come for the exhibition: they come to connect and to see familiar faces.

8.4. Accessibility and inclusivity

The museum is free, with a donation box if you want to give something. It's financially accessible, but not physically, there are stairs and no elevator. I also felt a bit like an intruder, maybe because we were the only visitors and the people were surprised that someone from outside the town came. Also, the reconstructed apartment upstairs made it feel like walking into someone's home.

There are no interactive or playful elements, which might be boring for children. But there are things that could still be interesting, like old toys and technology (cameras). In one room, music played from an old radio, which added a nice touch.

There are changing exhibitions, which could make it worth visiting more than once, but the woman said they are the same every year. Most visitors are older people who donated something and come to check if it's still on display.

The museum's idea of *Heimat* is very nostalgic. That might be why younger people don't connect with it. Topics like National Socialism are not directly addressed, so the past is portrayed in a very positive light. That could make some people remember it in an overly romantic way, while others might feel the need to question it.

8.5. Ethics, professionalism and sustainability

The ground floor looked more professional, with big text boards and proper showcases. Some objects were displayed freely in the room. Upstairs, the recreated apartment felt a bit like an open-air museum. In the other rooms, there were more vitrines but also many free-standing objects.

Some labels were simply printed on paper or placed in folders, which gave them a less professional appearance. Often, it wasn't clear how the objects connected to the region, which gave the impression that the people running the museum were more like amateurs than professionals.

It seems like their goal is to preserve and show as many objects as possible, especially since they don't have enough storage space. That also makes the exhibition feel crowded and somewhat disorganized.

8.6. Critical reflections

Heimatmuseum Ebingen shows a very traditional idea of what a museum is, and what *Heimat* means. They are not planning to make many changes, and they also lack the necessary funding and personnel to do so. In some ways, the museum feels more like a storage room or archive than a place for learning.

There are ways to get involved, but not many people do. So even though participation is technically open, there's not much actual engagement. There's also little sign of Social Museology. The museum is clearly loved by the people who run it, but it may struggle to stay relevant for future generations unless something changes.

9. Museum im Stadthaus, Freudenstadt

9.1. Museum Overview

- **Location:** Freudenstadt, on the town marketplace
- **Opening hours:** Tuesday-Sunday, 10:00-17:00
- **Visit details:** Individual visit by Katalin Banvölgyi on July 31, 2025
- **Visitor experience:** Explored the museum independently; no staff were present at the time of visit.

The museum was originally founded in 1912 as a Black Forest museum and redefined as a *Heimatmuseum* in 1936. It was revitalized in 1976 and underwent major renovations in 2012. Today, the museum is operated jointly by the *Heimat- und Museumsverein Freudenstadt e.V.* (Freudenstadt Local History and Museum Association) and the municipality (city and district). It is spread over five floors, with each level exploring different themes:

- 1st floor: Black Forest tourism
- 2nd floor: World War II, post-war rebuilding, local artists

- 3rd floor: Regional history
- 4th and 5th floors: Historical local crafts

An additional option is a visitor-accessible mine, open from May 1 to the end of October on weekends and holidays, with guided tours available by appointment.

9.2. Core Function of the Museum

The museum primarily is a collecting and storytelling institution. It was evident that the museum combines object display with substantial textual interpretation: compared to other *Heimat* museums, there were fewer objects but more written explanations. The museum association engages in research and publication, focusing on local topics such as regional artists and historic sites, including a local monastery.

A notable aspect is the sensitive interpretation of World War II. The exhibition encourages empathy and reflection by narrating the cruelty of war and its impact. Artifacts related to National Socialism are displayed discreetly, hidden behind panels that invite visitors to choose whether to view them, thus creating a balance between exposure and discretion.

9.3. Community Involvement

As with many *Heimat* museums, community involvement is central to the institution's operation. Membership in the museum association is open to all, and the museum actively invites new members to contribute to its ongoing development. Contributions include object donations from individuals, institutions such as the city archive, and local residents.

The building itself houses not only the museum but also a library, a café, and an event space. Interestingly, the event room doubles as an exhibition space, with display cases that can be concealed with curtains during events. This multifunctional use reflects the museum's integration into the cultural life of Freudenstadt.

An exemplary community project is the listening station within the World War II exhibit. Developed in collaboration with a local high school, students interviewed contemporary witnesses and recorded dramatized excerpts. The station presents voices of various individuals, including children and parents, offering diverse perspectives on wartime experiences.

9.4. Accessibility, Inclusivity, and Visitor Engagement

The museum is partially accessible, with the first three floors reachable by elevator. While most texts are in German, select rooms offer printed handouts in German, English, and French that summarize key themes.

The emotional impact of the listening station was especially powerful. Visitors gradually realize that the main narrative is told through the eyes of two children living in post-war ruins. This personal framing fosters empathy and emotional connection – even for those unfamiliar with the city's history. The theme of reconstruction is also portrayed positively, described almost as miraculous. A hands-on station invites visitors to rebuild a model of the city using wooden bricks, encouraging playful engagement with historical memory.

Elsewhere, interactive displays include a Swabian dialect guessing game. Visitors can match dialect words with their meanings, reinforcing regional identity and linking directly to exhibits on the area's historical affiliations.

9.5. Ethics, Professionalism, and Sustainability

The museum reflects a mix of traditional, professional, and innovative museological approaches. Professional elements include well-lit display cases (an improvement over other *Heimatmuseums*, such as Ebingen – see *Case Study no. 8*) and extensive textual information. Innovative features include interactive elements such as the listening station and hands-on models. Common for many Heimat museums, technical issues (a non-functioning screen) also suggest areas for improvement.

One particularly engaging exhibit on Black Forest tourism used life-sized paper cut-outs printed with historic photos, arranged in realistic scenes. These were more evocative than mannequins, bringing past environments to life through staged immersion. Original signage from hotels and businesses further enhanced the atmosphere.

In contrast, the top-floor exhibits, labelled as *Heimatmuseum*, retained a more nostalgic character. Located in the attic, these rooms conveyed a “classic” *Heimat* museum atmosphere with creaky wooden floors, a slightly musty scent, and loosely arranged historic objects representing crafts such as shoemaking and distilling. These free-standing displays, with minimal labels, felt more improvised or amateur, despite good lighting. The contrast between these rooms and the more curated lower floors highlighted the museum’s layered and evolving identity.

9.6. Critical Reflections

The *Museum im Stadthaus* exemplifies how *Heimatmuseums* can navigate the tension between nostalgia and critical engagement. Its updated exhibitions, especially those addressing World War II through personal narratives and participatory projects, reflect a socially responsive and emotionally resonant approach. At the same time, remnants of the older, more static display style persist, particularly in the attic rooms. This duality raises important questions about continuity, curatorial intention, and the negotiation of local identity through museum practice. The integration of community voices, particularly through school collaborations and object donations, aligns the museum with the principles of Social Museology. However, the absence of staff during the visit may signal challenges in sustainable staffing and accessibility, issues shared by many small museums.

10. Heimatmuseum Möhringen

10.1. Museum overview

Location: Möhringen, a large southern district of Stuttgart in Germany. It is housed in the Spitalhof, a historic complex.

Working hours: every Sunday from 2pm till 6pm, guided tours by appointment, closed on all public holidays, as well as Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve.

Visit details:

- Individual visit by Khawla Abdulla, on June 29, 2025.
- received by the volunteers of the museum - by 3 women: Christine, Renata and Petra.
- I also received a private guided tour of the entire museum. Free admission.
- **Brief description:** the museum was founded in 1934 by Rudolf Weißer, a local historian, with the goal to create a collective memory for Möhringen and to preserve and show its own identity and history, independent of Stuttgart. In the 1960s, it was moved to its current location. The museum is also part of the Stuttgart City Museum network. The museum is small and spans two floors. The museum is run by the *Lebensraum Möhringen – Fasanenhof – Sonnenberg ILM e.V. initiative*. The museum organizes regular temporary exhibitions, such as the one currently running until October 2025 titled “*Möhringen damals und heute – in alten und neuen Ansichten*” (“Möhringen then and now – in old and new views”). An exhibition on nativity will then succeed it.

10.2. Core functions of the museum

The museum partially reflects the current ICOM definition. The museum collection comprises objects and photographs that commemorate Möhringen. For example, historical monuments like the Martinkirche or the Rathaus are displayed. As well as the stories of individuals who contributed to Möhringen as a whole, but also specifically to the museum. The museum collection mostly consists of everyday objects such as stamps, cutlery, pottery, books about Möhringen, toys, clocks, and war objects like military helmets, rifles, war diaries from World War II, and uniforms. The objects in the museum were not subject to research. They are donated directly by the residents of Möhringen, mostly by older, established families. The museum does not inquire beforehand about objects or pictures. But when introduced to a new element, the search for further objects related to it begins. The museum is particularly careful about the conservation of its objects and photos. The majority of the objects are protected in glass display cases to prevent deterioration over time. Massive objects are displayed without protection but must not be touched. The museum does not take an interpretive approach, but rather remains quite neutral, focusing on showcasing the reality of the older days of Möhringen.

The display of Möhringen's original coat of arms in the local museum challenges the notion of neutrality in heritage preservation. Central to the controversy is the depiction of a Black woman, referred to historically with the offensive term "*Mohrin*", which stemmed from a 19th-century misinterpretation linking the town's name to a legendary Alemannic leader named Moro. This misreading led to the racialized figure being adopted as a symbolic representation of the town. While the image had long been embraced as part of Möhringen's identity, criticism intensified in 2020, when over 10,000 people signed a petition criticizing the coat of arms for perpetuating colonial and racist stereotypes. In response, the local council initiated a participatory redesign process open to residents of all ages. By continuing to exhibit the outdated emblem, the museum appears to prioritize the preservation of local tradition over critical engagement with the exclusionary and offensive meanings the symbol may hold for others.

The Möhringen Heimatmuseum showcases the daily rural life of Möhringen, as well as its industrial development. There is a need to showcase the evolution of Möhringen over time, with a narrative that is both specific and personal. However, this narration can be influenced by the type of donations that the museum receives.

10.3. Community work and involvement

The museum is ingrained in the community. It is currently run by a volunteer team. Although it is officially a branch of the Stuttgart City Museum, the on-site work is entirely carried out by local volunteers. The museum structure is also democratic. The topics that are chosen for temporary exhibitions are decided as a team, often in consultation with the public. This active involvement creates a sense of responsibility among the people of Möhringen. Throughout the years, the museum has seen its collection expand. The people of Möhringen are actively involved in the collection of the museum. They bring personal items that belonged to them, to their parents and their grandparents. For the people of Möhringen, the means of preservation of objects can also be by sharing their personal objects with the *Heimatmuseum*. There is an aim to preserve not just the family's history but also the history of Möhringen. A collective effort is made to shape the memory of Möhringen. Older residents of Möhringen often express the wish that their memories should be passed on to the museum after their death so future generations can learn from them. The museum encourages all sorts of contributions from the public stories or objects. The participation of the people of Möhringen is authentic and spontaneous.

10.4. Accessibility and inclusivity

The museum is easily accessible; it is 5 minutes away from the train station. However, it is not that evident to recognize the museum, because it is hidden by bushes and trees. When you navigate through the bushes, you will arrive at the garden of the museum, which somehow calms the soul and the sense of being lost. Socially the museum is well integrated into society, it regularly organizes city guided tours and visits for elementary schools

and kindergartens. The demographic audience of the museum is diversified, ranging from older German citizens to the younger residents. The museum also organizes special tours for newcomers to integrate them into the society. The museum chooses a more traditional approach to displaying its objects, rather than implementing playful games or interactive screens. The museum is not intended to be an attraction, but rather a place of contemplation – a space to reconnect with the past and share a collective memory across generations. The museum helps to pass on knowledge and educate the population on the heritage of Möhringen. The museum plays a central role as a place of memory and identification for Möhringen residents. It creates a sense of continuous connection and documents everyday culture that is often overlooked in official city history. The volunteers at the museum feel a connection to the museum and are enthusiastic about bringing their contributions.

10.5. Ethics, professionalism, sustainability

The museum demonstrates a strong commitment to preserving and sustaining its collections. However, the nature of a *Heimatmuseum's* collection drastically differs from that of a larger, professionally established museum. This difference lies in its emphasis on identity. The primary mission of this *Heimatmuseum* is to transmit and display a sense of local identity, rather than to critically reinterpret or transform it.

The work conducted in *Heimat* museums is often considered too amateur in the traditional museum field, as inventories are typically maintained by volunteers or individuals with limited formal training. The absence of digital tools reflects the lack of staff with the necessary technical expertise. From a professional museological perspective, the practices of this *Heimatmuseum* can appear unprofessional and outdated.

Tensions between volunteer-based teams and professional museum workers do arise. These may manifest as power dynamics or miscommunications, especially when external institutions become involved. For instance, the relationship between the Möhringen *Heimatmuseum* and the Stuttgart City Museum was characterized to me as having shifting dynamics. The larger institution has, at times, claimed certain objects from the *Heimatmuseum*, arguing that such items are better suited for professional curation. These interventions are often justified by referencing the greater expertise of the city museum's staff compared to the less formal experience of the *Heimatmuseum's* volunteers.

Since the Möhringen *Heimat* museum is funded by the city of Stuttgart, this dependency also opens the door for external influence on its decision-making processes. At the same time, the museum has the highest visitor numbers among Stuttgart's three local heritage museums. As the city's funding is allocated based on annual visitor statistics, the Möhringen *Heimat* museum currently enjoys a relatively stable financial situation.

10.6. Critical reflection

The Möhringen *Heimat* museum fits in the traditional understanding of what shapes a museum. The notion of *Heimat* is central to this museum and is personified as something inherited, familiar and stable, which can make it difficult for people with different backgrounds to feel included. In the museum, decisions about exhibitions are made democratically within the team, but the content remains very traditional and uncritical. There is little effort to challenge dominant narratives or include controversial perspectives. Therefore, the structure may be participative, but the content is static. The *Heimatmuseum* partially relates to the principles of Social Museology. It relates to it by embodying strong community participation, functioning as a space of collective memory, and reinforcing the population's identity and belonging. However, it does not relate to Sociomuseology because it lacks critical inclusion of marginalized voices and has minimal engagement with contemporary social issues like migration. What stood out to me was that there was no plurality of narratives but rather a unique one. In the museum collection, a section is dedicated to women, which is a sign of evolution, but their stories are not shared as evenly as the stories of men.

