

Collecting to Shape and Reflect the Nation (London, 22–23 Oct 26)

V&A South Kensington, London, Oct 22–23, 2026

Deadline: Apr 15, 2026

Darja Jesse

"Collecting to Shape and Reflect the Nation: Changing Museum Strategies from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century".

The Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) and the Germanisches Nationalmuseum (GNM) are collaborating to organize a pair of conferences that will explore the connections between museums' pasts and their future missions. Through a first event in London in October 2026, and a second event in Nuremberg in October 2027, we aim to explore how large-scale museums with a nationwide scope can critically assess their own past to inform their present-day self-understanding, and to discuss the ways in which these museums can, as 'national' institutions, help to foster cohesion in 21st-century multicultural societies.

The London conference, "Collecting to Shape and Reflect the Nation: Changing Museum Strategies from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century", will adopt a comparative approach, taking as its starting point the V&A and GNM. Both founded in 1852, these two institutions shared certain common goals and approaches at their foundation, yet diverged along individual trajectories in line with their respective national histories during the 19th and 20th centuries. The conference will explore these commonalities and connections, as well as the divergences and asymmetries in this entangled Anglo-German museum history, balancing the relation between larger historical narratives and detailed case studies.

Beyond the specific context of the V&A and GNM, the conference seeks to widen this discussion to explore other large-scale memory institutions in Europe, founded and/or adapted in the context of broader national historical and political change across the 19th and 20th centuries.

We invite papers that address, but are not limited to the following questions:

- In which bilateral (e.g. Anglo-German) and international encounters and networks did museums form their 'national' mission?
- How were museum profiles and the role they claimed in society continuously reframed in the 19th and 20th centuries?
- How did collections and museum architecture interact, and how was this relationship shaped by institutions' self-image?
- How did museums 'perform' concepts of nationhood, nationalism and imperialism in the respective political and intellectual contexts (e.g. in Victorian Britain, the Kaiserreich, the British Empire and Nazism, but also beyond the Anglo-German context)?

- How have museum officials in the 20th and 21st centuries sought to make sense of historical legacies, in order to stabilise and legitimise their institutions' mission?

Please submit your abstract (200 words) and a short biography (100 words) for a 20-minute paper to Simona Valeriani via collectingtoshapethenation@vam.ac.uk by 15 April, 2026.

We welcome applications from a broad range of researchers and museum professionals at all career stages.

There will be no registration fee to participate in this in-person conference, and a substantial subsidy to support travel and accommodation expenses in London.

You will be notified of the acceptance of your proposal by 20 May 2026.

The conference is organised by Simona Valeriani at the V&A and Joachim Berger, Natalie Boonyaprasop, Darja Jesse, and Heike Zech at the GNM.

Reference:

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