

OPINION

# Marseille ‘Revenir’ exhibition sets out to reframe migrations, especially ‘Return’



Migrants depart by boat from Petit-Fort-Philippe Beach and head towards United Kingdom in Gravelines, France on January 17, 2025 [Joanna Chichelnitzky – Anadolu Agency]



by **Naima Morelli**  **naimamorelli**



Running until 16 March at the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations (MUCEM) in Marseille, the exhibition “Revenir” (“Return”) invites visitors to explore the experiences of returning to one’s homeland.

As I walked to the museum in the southern French city, some graffiti on a restaurant shutter caught my eye: “If a place attracts you, it’s because there is something waiting for you, and your story there has already been written.”

These words stuck with me as I turned the corner and the incredible MUCEM building stood before me, epic in shape and location, silhouetted against the cloudy sky, seemingly suspended on the sea.

“Revenir” focuses on the idea of home, travel and returning. This is not only the scope of the show, but the wider project of the museum, which is dedicated to Mediterranean cultures, especially to that very specific blend for which this city port is renowned.

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Through a rich collection of objects, artworks and personal narratives, “Revenir” brings to life the experiences of those who have returned or longed to return. I saw documents such as passports and old property deeds; personal mementos like house keys and family photographs; and symbolic objects that evoke the emotional landscape of homecoming.

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*Both ordinary and extraordinarily precious, these items serve as tangible links to the past.*

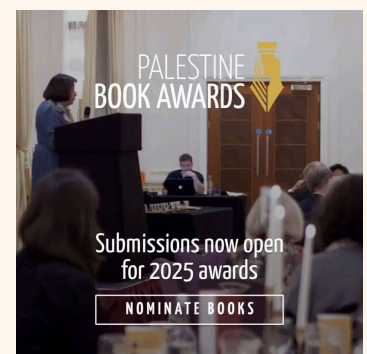
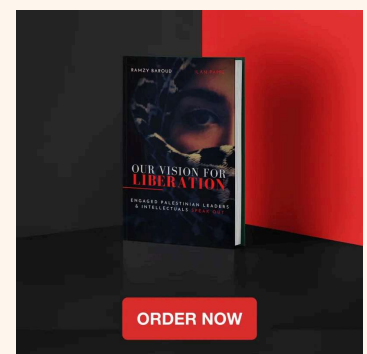
They embody the hopes, dreams and struggles of those who have undertaken the journey of return.

Curators Giulia Fabbiano and Camille Faucourt have approached the exhibition with a desire to move beyond the typical crisis-focused narratives of migration. Rather than focusing on the challenges of departure and integration, they seek to highlight the subjective and collective experiences of exile and the ways that these are transmitted across generations.

“The return is not merely a closure or a return to a previous state, but also a dynamic process that continually reshapes individual identities and collective belongings,” Fabbiano told me. She added that the show is the culmination of an extensive research project titled “Retours migratoires en Méditerranée” (“Return Migration in the Mediterranean”).

Led by five teams of researchers, this initiative involved collecting objects, documents and testimonies from various locations around the Mediterranean. They conducted fieldwork in places such as Syria, Algeria and Lebanon, for example; the island of Procida in Italy, the city of Bitola in North Macedonia and the villages of Iqrith and Bir’em in the Galilee. Their efforts have resulted in a diverse and nuanced collection that sheds light on the many facets of the return experience.

As I wandered through the exhibition space, I couldn’t help but ponder the fundamental question at its heart: what kind of connection remains with one’s place of origin after departure, after settling in a new country?



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To answer this question, the exhibition draws inspiration from the words of sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad, who suggested that return is often the dream and desire of all immigrants in any country. For some fortunate individuals, returning home is an annual ritual, a chance to reconnect with roots during summer vacations. For others, it signifies a permanent resettlement after years, or even a lifetime, spent in exile.

However, the reality of return is not always so straightforward. Politics, instability, conflict or the sheer passage of time can render the return impossible, leaving many to grapple with the emotional and practical challenges of a home that no longer exists as they remember it.

"In the thematic section: *The Prohibition of Return*, the idea of home is contested, inaccessible or entirely obliterated," explained Fabbiano. "Return is no longer just a physical act, it becomes an expression of longing, a form of activism, a site of resistance."

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*This tension is most vividly expressed in the Palestinian, Syrian and Balkan contexts.*

The exhibition juxtaposes historical artefacts with contemporary artistic responses, bringing into focus the struggle of those for whom return remains an impossibility.

A striking display has maps produced by the Israeli anti-Zionist Jewish collective, De-Colonisers. These maps document Palestinian villages destroyed by Israeli settler-colonialism, offering a counter-narrative to state-imposed amnesia. Among the artefacts are a key and a passport, passed down by the granddaughter of a Palestinian trade union activist expelled during the **1948 Nakba**. "The key, although it no longer opens a door, remains a potent symbol of belonging and resistance, mirroring the thousands held by Palestinian families in exile," said Fabbiano.

This display is in direct dialogue with Taysir Batniji's artwork "Sans titre" ("Untitled"), a poignant installation featuring a set of glass keys, an identical copy of the artist's key ring



from Gaza. This project is part of a series that Batniji has developed since June 2006, when he left Gaza without being able to return.

"These projects not only express the frustration felt at this forced roaming, but also reveal, through the daily immobilisation suffered by Palestinians, the impossibility of controlling and shaping space and time," says the artist on his website. "This personal dispossession of the home echoes the collective dispossession of the land in 1948, since which time Palestinians, in the hope of a return, have kept the keys to their homes."

Another compelling artwork, reflecting on time and memory, is a photographic work, a collaboration between Sabyl Ghoussoub and Tanya Traboulsi, which captured the same rocky beach in Lebanon in different times. The newest picture is printed on the wall, while the older is juxtaposed upon it, framed under a glass, in a struggle to reconcile the past with the present.

One of the most striking aspects of the exhibition was the way it highlighted the role of memory in the experience of return. For many of the individuals featured in "Revenir", the act of returning was as much about reconciling the memories of home with the reality of the present, as it was about physical relocation. "Before being a country, home is first and foremost a place in our imagination, in our emotional landscape," explained Fabbiano.

While never directly mentioned, the show is permeated by a strong sense of destiny, whether individual or of entire populations. The feeling is that of a lack of belonging that creates an expanded belonging, a home far from home. And as local visitors gathered around the curators, eager to share how they personally connected to the show, I can see how for many, Marseille became this home far from home, a city, a microcosm which contains multitudes. A place where these very human stories wait to be written.

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