

Editorial TAGESSPIEGEL supplement

The Bode-Museum and the Period of Rediscovery

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The re-opening of the Bode-Museum on 17th October 2006 sees the general restoration and complete refurbishment of the second building of the Berlin Museum Island to the opened again to the public. One can confidently say that the National Museums in Berlin are experiencing a story of great success. With the temple of the National Gallery standing on a prominent plinth alongside the Unter den Linden thoroughfare and very quite visible from the Lustgarten, the actual beginning of the Museum Island to the rear of Schinkels Altem Museum, the presently restored Bode-Museum forms a no less spectacular full ending to the Museum Island on its northern tip.

For the first time, with the opening of the Bode-Museum, formerly the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, the complete dimensions of the Berlin Museum Island are once again opened up to be experienced as a living organism. For it is indeed eight years since the Museum Island was split in two by the railway line: into one chaotic vibrant part, on the one hand, with almost two million visitors yearly to the area extending to the Pergamon Museum situated in front of the railway line, and on the other hand the quasi extinct area undergoing many years of building and restructuring on the other side of the tracks where the Bode-Museum sat shaded from the light – lifeless and shut up. The Berlin Museum Island has now again been returned to its erstwhile unified nature awaiting to be experienced by the public!

This has seen the vaunted cultural and academic facilities around the Museum Island enlarged and made more compact; a concentration of museums, libraries and university institutions quite unique in the world. For as one looks down to the Spree from upon the Monbijou Bridge, advantageously reconstructed in good time by the State of Berlin at the point of the Bode-Museum, even if its rounded beauty was formerly belittled as le cul de Berlin, it is immediately quite apparent how the Museum Island when viewed from the Bode-Museum is in the direct line of sight of Berlin's Theatre District: the Berliner Ensemble on the Schiffbauerdamm, the Admiralspalast, the Friedrichstadtpalast and the stages of the Deutsches Theater. One of the most curious venues of the *heiteren Muse* is found directly opposite the Bode-Museum on the other bank of the Spree in the form of the dramatic Shakespeare arena of the "Hexenkessel" Theatre and the Strand Bar, which has grown to become legendary, with thousands sitting in reclining chairs opposite the illustrious setting of the Bode-Museum pursuing enjoyable summer pleasures.

The reopening of the Bode-Museum together with the Monbijou Bridge do not merely mean that there is a revitalisation of the whole Museum Island by the eager streams of public visitors together with a significant improvement in urbanistic integration. Much more importantly, the reopening is crucial for Berlin's museum cultural landscape with the return of the Old Masters to the island! Gone forever are those plans and ideas which would have seen the Museum

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Island restricted to archaeological collections, with the reestablishment of the Bode-Museum with its sculptures, architectural fragments, mosaics, applied arts and paintings dating from Late Antiquity up to the 1800s.

It has again become manifestly apparent that the Bode-Museum and the Old National Gallery form a relationship with each other not merely because there are the first two generally restored buildings at the end of the Museum Island, rather because they comprise the two significant non-archaeological collections on the site. As a building ensemble restored in conformity with their listed status, they underscore the tremendous investment, including financial, made by the National Museums in Berlin and their political supporters in seeking to fulfil the obligation made of them through the UNESCO designation of the Museum Island. It is the obligation to more than simply restore the institutions as historical backdrops, but rather to make their history and developments readily demonstrable and traceable.

The UNESCO award as a World Heritage Site also extends, however, to the intellectual architecture of Berlin's Museum Island. This is expressed in the audacious composition, the visualisation of the entire universe of the arts and cultures of the occident, with all of its postulations, on the site of the Museum Island in the form of a reciprocal exchange of multifariousness and unity, a concordia discors of world culture. A precondition of this, as laid down by the former General Director Richard Schöne, in 1882 to Wilhelm von Bode, is that "all collections of the high arts" should remain together on the Museum Island. Bode, as the extremely dynamic acquisitions director for the Gallery of Sculptures and Paintings, instead wanted to leave the Museum Island hoping for a new building near to the Martin Gropius Building. It was the archaeologist and General Director Richard Schöne who prohibited Bode from implementing an exodus of the Old Masters from the island to be housed in a separate special museum.

Bode used this denial to his advantage, whereby in 1896 he persuaded Wilhelm II that the next large building on the Museum Island, after the National Gallery was opened in 1876, would not be a museum for the arts of the Antiquity, but a Kaiser Friedrich Museum, now the Bode-Museum, to accommodate the entire post-Antiquity arts. In other words a museum for paintings and sculptures ranging from Byzantium times to the Middle Ages, from the Renaissance and Baroque periods up to the late 18th century. For those arts then that we, from our position today, look back on and classify as the Old Masters, but which from the viewpoint of Antiquity were perceived to be the arts of modernity the continuation of which is to be found in the contemporary arts of the National Gallery. Bode thus became – paradoxically – the agent of the optimal completion of the Museum Island following the guiding spirit of his one-time adversary Richard Schöne. With his Kaiser Friedrich Museum, inaugurated on 17th October 1904, Bode had, in his presentation of European art and by

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the interplay with all the other institutions on the island, permanently established the continuous artistic development right from its very origins and running through to 1900. The renovated Bode-Museum is a return to this idea of what a museum can be. It is then a rediscovery of the ongoing flow of time of European art history as the common theme of Berlin's Museum Island within all its diverse institutions.

And now with this reopening, an epoch of German history will once again be made spectacularly manifest, an epoch that with regard to its architecture has sometimes been considered to be characterised by dubious taste, the epoch being that of the German Empire. It cannot be disclaimed that the Bode-Museum, as the former Kaiser Friedrich Museum, is the Hohenzollern art palace par excellence. Constructed from 1889 to 1904 with severe problems establishing foundations in the water, it was created by the Royal Court Architect, Ernst Eberhard von Ihne, with the personal artistic involvement of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The building, according to the critics of the time, was unrecognisable from the outside as a museum. Rather more it was perceived as historical palace architecture comprised of Renaissance and Baroque elements to produce a resolute monotony, or which on the other hand was built as the result of imperialistic megalomania having no place spreading itself all over the Museum Island alongside the temple-like structures with their nods toward Antiquity.

After the completely senseless loss of the Berlin Schloss, judgements today are somewhat milder. Instead, not least given the visual experiences given by the post-modern, one is inclined to allow oneself to be enchanted by the theatrical pose and the dignified serenity of the art academy so boldly situated surrounded by water. This feeling is intensified to complete rapture upon entering the atrium housed under the large cupola with the reproduction of Schlüter's equestrian monument "Reiterdenkmal des Großen Kurfürsten" placed at the centre. Certainly this was once seen as a monumental room dedicated to the glory of the House of Hohenzollern, a hymn of praise to the ruling family encapsulated in stone. However, the exquisitely restored spatial composition is so overwhelming, including in its propagandist naivety, that one can almost breathe in the spirit of the imperial city so lampooned by Fontane in 1900. One is astounded at the architectural imagination with which Berlin countered the no less neo-baroque Wilhelmian styles of Vienna and Paris. What has actually resulted is a grandiose pastiche, which pays homage to the Royal Architect Schlüter in a manner similar to Michelangelo's manneristic designs in Florence. Florence as the city where the Renaissance was born was an idea retained by Bode as the beating heart of his museum. A basilica modelled on the San Francesco al Monte in Florence forms the significant centre of the museum. Florence and the Renaissance as the rebirth of the arts with the unchaining of man through art and science allowing the development of the self-aware individual found in modernity. Bode created an artistic setting in his basilica for this

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cult of Renaissance with overlapping genres of sculptures, paintings and installations from the 15th and 16th centuries. Crowned by the Medici coat of arms the basilica is also, antithetic to the dedication of the entrance hall to the Hohenzollern, a pantheon to all those collectors and patrons who, like the Medicis, invested their wealth internationally to enable the Berlin Museums, through spectacular acquisitions and endowments particularly with regard to the Old Masters, to achieve the standards of the much older museums of London and Paris. The most important of these patrons, who often came from the Jewish citizenry of Berlin, was James Simon, whose bust today is exhibited alongside that of Wilhelm von Bode in the basilica's gallery.

A new abrupt change in style from these Baroque and Renaissance influences is found with the smaller copula stylised in the playful form of Frederickian rococo with the statues of the Prussian General, Frederick the Great. These are the first monuments to be erected anywhere in Prussia for deserving citizens of the State.

The centre-line of the Bode-Museum thereby reveals itself to be a continuous homage to the good order within the State, to the mutually beneficial partnership of the citizens with their rulers in bringing glittering masterpieces of modernity and the Renaissance, in particular, to the youthful capital of the new German Empire for the delight and benefit of all its citizens. The collection and preservation of art on a grand scale as a national responsibility, with this put on view in the exemplary service of the German Empire, is another important aspect of the reopened Bode-Museum. The artistic sense and the cultural responsibility of the Wilhelmian Empire with its museum institutions, is presented for our contemplative amazement in a quite unique way in the form of the Bode-Museum.

But this is not yet enough. Bode's unparalleled accomplishment was based in his artistic genius which, with great energy and connoisseurship, gave expression again in the museum to the distinctiveness and peculiarity of the works gathered there.

In harmony with this purpose, he arranged for his museum to be composed as a collage comprised of the most diverse of styles. Eclecticism was the guiding principle by which the artistic works were again made comprehensible with their historical context. As a student of Jacob Burckhardt, Schüler always perceived artistic works to be historical witnesses of their respective epochs and the living and artistic forms that prevailed therein. Created on the basis of this attitude, the Bode-Museum is therefore in no way an attempt to merely mimic the past, rather it is a conscious comprehensive composition of stylistic spaces interacting with the central significant painting and sculptural co-existing in provocative proximity to furniture, floor carpets and examples of applied arts.

What Bode was actually striving for, were rooms of contemplation for the enjoyment of the beauty of great art. The idea behind his museum was to rediscover, and reinvent, a time that was lost using the medium of art. The past, therefore, was of less interest to him as a cultural historian than the enduring unearthing of the beauty that he, through his role as an aesthete and an artist, wanted to evoke by

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means of his museum design. During the period of industrialisation, in which Berlin prospered as the leading industrial city in Europe bringing with it a corresponding multitude of social problems that had to be solved, a time of utilitarianism and economy, Bode had created, with his Florentine-Venetian water-surrounded palace, a centre for the artistic endeavour dedicated to beauty for the purpose of educating public taste, and for promulgating connoisseurship and erudition in the fine arts, as a prerequisite for happiness for living within the industrialised society.

What have we inherited of this? An entrancingly beautiful museum, restored and emboldened by the Viennese architect, Heinz Tassar and his Berlin office in a manner that conforms to the listed status and the purpose of use as a museum. There is also a theatrical method of staging, similarly inspired by Bode, which is admittedly somewhat toned down given contemporary attitudes to taste, and which continually seeks to avoid any impression of glut. There is, moreover, a rich artistic sweep of works from the Old Masters, supplemented by the unique collections of the Museum for Byzantine Arts and the Berlin Sculpture Collection, and which are presented to a wide-ranging extent that has never been seen before. The Berlin Collection is the most complete collection to be found anywhere! Mellow Bode full of gracefulness, elegance, beauty and dignity. As a modern counterpart to the former James Simon Collection and to underscore the alignment of today's collections with the tradition established by Bode, there is also the Würth Art Collection to be viewed. The summation of the parts is the Bode-Museum as a rediscovered, newly endowed academy of the arts in the heart of Berlin, an incomparably rich ensemble of sculptures and paintings, applied arts artefacts and supplemented beautifully with the largest numismatic collection in the world.

A museum as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, of which Berlin and Germany can be extremely proud. For this we have to give thanks to our fellow colleagues at the National Museums in Berlin and, in particular, to all the staff of the Sculpture Collection and the art galleries which provided assistance. To be thanked by the National Museums in Berlins are, first and foremost, the Federation and all those States which, as financial supporters of the Foundation of Prussian Cultural Heritage, have made possible this general restoration and handover of this museum as a national monument for the arts and culture in Germany, thereby furthering the Federal co-operative ideal.

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