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The Restoration of the Bode-Museum

Bodo Buczynski

Chief Restorer of the Sculpture Collection and the Museum of Byzantine Art

"The Bode-Museum, formerly the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, is a historical neo-baroque listed building with original spolia from various cultural heritages and epochs, which, as part of the architectural ensemble that forms Berlin's Museum Island, was declared a World Heritage Site in 1999 by UNESCO. Following the handing back of the renovated building by the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning in November 2005, the co-ordinated re-installation of the exhibition areas with their collections – the Sculpture Collection and the Numismatic Collection – was commenced. The historically arranged rooms of the Bode-Museum are unique. It was the physical fruition of an idea of its spiritus rector – Wilhelm von Bode – for the composition of a Gesamtkunstwerk. Various genres – sculptures, applied arts and paintings – were brought together within specifically designed architectural spaces, to allow visitors to view valuable original pieces and give them an insight into the respective epochs of the cultures of the occident.

As part of the plan for the general restoration of the complete building, the historical fixtures installed during the construction phase were also restored. These include all spolia such as portals and fireplaces being replaced back to their former positions as well as all the fixtures from the post-war period. This meant that the historical rooms were preserved with their floors and ceilings, doors and portals.

The historical appearance of the building marked the benchmark for the complete restoration. Considerations such as modern museum technology and exhibition organisation, climatisation and lighting had to be resolved harmoniously using state-of-the-art solutions, to underpin the international standing of Europe's most extensive and largest sculpture collection with the Museum for Byzantine Art and the Numismatic Collection in the exhibition areas on the northern point of the Museum Island.

The new appearance also entailed copious restoration of the main works of the collections.

I would like here to highlight a few examples of the restoration works. Marion Böhl worked on the restoration of the Venetian Crucifix (cat. no. 45), dating from around 1400, and with its dimensions it is one of the largest and most significant artistic pieces in the Italian Collections. Following an intensive examination, its restoration comprised a complete conservation of the wooden cross-section and the unmasking of its excellently preserved original condition. These processes have returned valuable characteristics to this work.

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Iris Menge-Alles was the expert responsible who headed the restoration of the so-called Braunauer Pieta (cat. no. 7669), dated to 1430/35 and made from original lime wood.

The group discovered several instances of maintenance and restoration works carried out over the previous centuries. An extensive retrospective examination enabled the determination of the original colour design while at the same time the group of figures could be reconstructed with the missing Cross, meaning that the new exhibition is able to represent the Pieta in its original composition.

As part of an external diploma project at the Academy of Fine Arts in Dresden, Ms. Hiltrud Jehle completed the conservation and restoration of a grouped terracotta artwork with a representation of three angels playing music. The angel ensemble was composed in Portugal during the mid-eighteenth century as part of a monumental nativity scene. The emphasis of the project was directed towards a complete cleaning of the surface, the re-gluing of parts broken off, the consolidation of the paint surfaces and the treatment of open cracks together with an intensive examination of the polychrome work. Restoration work undertaken by Mr. Klaus Leukers saw the completion of the Maria Magdalena dating from 1425 and ascribed to Hans Multscher. Following an extensive examination of the various states of the work and the later sculptural reworking, the darkened patina coating applied in the 19th century was completely removed from the entire surface of the sculpture. The second version dating probably from the 16th century was revealed. Dieter Köcher was the expert responsible for a technological examination of a sculpture of Maria and a Crucifix (cat. no. 7089 and 7090), dating from around 1230, from the crucifixion group of the Church of St. Maurice in Naumburg. After the division of the museum inventory after the Second World War, the Maria was brought to the Sculpture Gallery of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation in Berlin-Dahlem (West) and the Crucifix to the Sculpture Collection of the State Museum in Berlin (East). At the end of the 1950s and into the 1960s, the sculptures were almost simultaneously restored and, independently of one another, were largely exposed to show their original versions. The amalgamation of the two Berlin Sculpture Collections provided the opportunity to jointly examine the sculptures prior to the new display. The technological findings are to be included as new aspects in discussions and interpretations of art history.

Alongside this work undertaken by the Museum's in-house staff, extensive restoration works carried out by freelance restorers. These works included the reconstruction and restoration of the Tiepolo Cabinet, the three original Italian Renaissance ceilings as well as a number of portals and fireplaces and historical altars which today have been re-installed to their original exhibition locations. I would like to thank all the restorers and staff who, through their interdisciplinary exchange of ideas, have completed this in the workshops and repositories of the Bode-Museum employing the greatest of care, expertise and patience."

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