

*Everything is in ruins,
and yet no one who has not seen these ruins can have any conception of greatness.
So the museums and galleries are only golgothas,
charnel houses, chambers of skulls and torsos - but what skulls...*

*Wolfgang von Goethe
Letter from Rome¹*

Museums, especially those considered to be national in scope like the Neues Museum on Berlin's Museum Island, are reflections of a nation's history, culture, and a sense of its "Self".² Museums organize objects in such a way as to represent their society's fundamental values and express the state's relationship to broader world cultural histories. Museums, in return, are shaped by their historical settings. They – their buildings as well as their collections – have histories of their own, well outside the historical narrative that they try to impart to a sometimes-uninterested public.

Museums are also expressions of power. They reflect the political and economic power of the government that built them, the professional power of the curators that manage and arrange the collections, and the social power of the often wealthy individuals or institutions that sustain and support them. Because museums can only collect and display a minute fraction of human creativity, they also establish a framework within which their objects are understood. In other words, their collections reflect what the museum directors, their donors, their governmental (or royal) backers, and some portion of the educated public consider to be significant in terms of human history or artistry. They define for a large portion of the public what is and isn't "art" as well as the "true" history of a nation.

Given the integral relationship a nation's museums has with the nation's sense of its own history, a study of Berlin's Museum Island can shed light in an interesting way on the Prussian state of the nineteenth-century, the new German nation that followed the Franco-Prussian War, and the reunified government of the twenty-first century that now directs Berlin's restoration and

reconstruction projects. Compared to other western European countries, Germany is a relative newcomer to the nation-state model. Berlin's competition with other capital cities (German as well as European) was a prime impetus behind the early and rapid building of the museums on Museum Island. This paper will discuss the history and importance of these museums and their architecture to nineteenth-century Germany in order to set the context for a history of Berlin's Museum Island and the Neues Museum in particular. An overview of the new design and concept behind the Neues Museum's restoration will make a cultural connection between the German state of the nineteenth century and the newly unified nation of the twenty-first century.

The Royal Collections

By the end of the eighteenth century, Germany -- as a collection of independent regions -- was already established as the land of *Dichter und Denker* (poets and philosophers). German Enlightenment figures such as Goethe, Herder, and Schiller were admired throughout Europe, while German princes and other rulers were establishing quality collections of art and antiquities and displaying them in cabinets and galleries in their royal palaces. As early as 1707, King Frederick of Prussia had a long gallery space on the second floor of the palace in Berlin that displayed his growing collection for the public to view.³

James Sheehan discusses this early history of German museums, recognizing that these collections were considered valuable for their own sake as aesthetic pieces, without a sense of their historic or cultural context.⁴ Indeed, this aesthetic experience was considered so important to society that Germans were among the first to open these collections to the public so as to improve individuals and their appreciation of beauty and virtue. Lavishly decorated, these eighteenth-century galleries were designed to give their contents a "unified visual expression,"

similar to the later historicist decorations of the Neues Museum.⁵ These collections would remain, both symbolically and physically, part of the German princely courts until the nineteenth century.

The Altes Museum: Art and Aesthetics

The Napoleonic conquest of Prussia in 1806 would present the ultimate impetus towards the creation of Germany's Museum Island in the nineteenth century. Napoleon and his forces looted art collections wherever he went. As small German states were absorbed by the French empire or disappeared altogether, their royal collections were dispersed as well. Not only did many of these find their way back to the Louvre museum in Paris, others were purchased by wealthy individual collectors who now began to amass large, quality collections of art and antiquities. When Napoleon was defeated and the German art treasures returned in 1815, it became clear to many – at least in Berlin – that this was an opportune time to build a museum to house these collections. The museum would celebrate the victory of a strong Prussia, while competing with other German capital cities such as Leipzig and Munich.⁶

With the growing sense of German-ness among the variety of German states, grand historical theories about the connection between arts and political achievement were proffered. The University of Berlin had been founded and Wilhelm von Humboldt was leading a new department in the Ministry of the Interior that had jurisdiction over the academies of arts and sciences. He and other German intellectuals such as Kant and Hegel were exposing new theories and connections between art and public morality.⁷ Indeed, Humboldt had already received the King of Prussia's agreement in 1810 that a permanent exhibition of artwork should be housed in the new university buildings near what would become Museum Island.⁸

In 1822 Karl Friedrich Schinkel, the most well-known of the nineteenth century architects working in Berlin, drew up a plan for a museum at the prominent Lustgarten site close to the Berlin cathedral, arsenal, and royal palace. Making a powerful statement about the significance of art in relation to the royal dynasty, the church, and the Prussian army, the Royal Museum (now called the Altes Museum) was opened to the public in 1830 and would become one of the great models of museum design.⁹ Schinkel had attended Hegel's lectures on art and culture at the nearby University of Berlin and was convinced of the social value of art as well as the timeless relevance of the classical ideal as a model for modern civic practice.¹⁰ Wilhelm III of Prussia was delighted with the neo-classical design representing, as it did, his ambitions for Berlin as a capital city.¹¹

Linking Berlin and the Hohenzollern dynasty with the classical history and culture of Greece and Rome, the Altes Museum was not only a treasure house and site for scholarly research, it was also a guardian of traditional values. The nineteenth century had witnessed the destructive forces of change and revolution, making the need to preserve and protect the past a cultural imperative for a conservative ruling class. New museums were constructed in several German capital cities as "indispensable sources of prestige and essential instruments for the spread of culture and enlightenment."¹² The display of a nation's history and its connection to a glorious heritage would not only create a framework for understanding what was valuable and important to the state, it would also provide a source of legitimacy for political authority. It is into this context that the Neues Museum was conceived and begun just a few years later in 1834.

The Neues Museum: Art and History

The revolutions of 1848 in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, even though ultimately unsuccessful in their aims, did succeed in creating an atmosphere where populist aspirations were considerable. The Neues Museum, like others in Germany, would seek not only to advance the spiritual and moral education of the nation, but to educate the general public as well. These systematically arranged collections of art and antiquities followed a general trend in museum methodology. The archaeological discoveries and growing professionalism of collectors and scientists paved the way for Germany's museums to move from oversimplified educational exhibits to laboratories for scholarly research into the material culture of all the world's continents.¹³

This "new" museum took twenty years to build and would not be completed until 1855. Designed by August Freidrich Stüler, a student of Schinkel's, the building offered exhibition space to house the Hohenzollern collection of Egyptian antiquities, prehistoric objects, and a plethora of imitation plaster casts. It was new in more than just its physical presence: it would offer a brand-new didactic framework for viewing the collections. A central staircase contained three flights of marble stairs with a reproduction of the temple of Erechteion at its upper end; collection rooms were grouped around two inner courtyards, arranged in roughly chronological order.¹⁴ Technical innovations were also part of the design scheme with hollowed and lighter-than-brick terra cotta cylinders comprising the ceiling on the third floor, allowing the placement of arched iron frames in the *Niobidensaal*.

Most famously, however, Wilhelm von Kaulbach and his assistants created huge historical murals for the museum rooms which depicted mankind throughout the various

recognized historical epochs. It would, in fact, present an “orderly illustration of human history.”¹⁵ Kaulbach’s murals were more than just decoration; according to an 1853 travel guidebook they were meant to be studied, and not just viewed, and on an educational par with the historical objects themselves.¹⁶ The murals comprised six large panels with scenes from the prehistoric times to the Reformation plus thirty-two smaller representations of different nations, allegorical renditions of the arts and sciences, as well as a number of historical portraits. It was, indeed, “an encyclopedic vision of human culture and history which reached beyond the museum’s contents.”¹⁷

The classical Greece epoch retained a privileged place in the museum, as did the Egyptian exhibit space on the ground floor. The Middle Ages were also significant, in large part because the medieval Gothic style was considered to have German origins and thus significant for the development of a German cultural identity. In particular, the Egyptian galleries enhanced the reputation of German educators, scientists, and artists. The study of Egyptology had been given a large boost by Napoleon’s Egyptian collections and now Berlin’s museums attracted international attention as well. Richard Lepsius, a prominent German Egyptologist, oversaw the installation of the Egyptian exhibit in the Neues Museum in 1855, which now made Berlin a “center of the highest rank for collections and research.”¹⁸

While Schinkel had created a museum architecture that only represented a cultural connection to history, the Neues Museum embodied history itself. Of Neo-Classical design on its exterior, the interior’s decorations and furnishings were critical to the experience of the museum and its collections. This museum would be an educational institution that presented human history as a linear and rational timeline of invention and creativity.

Changes in Focus: Art, Cultural Identity, and National Ambitions

The nineteenth century was an age of monuments: grandiose, national in scope, and designed to distinguish them in size from any preceding monuments.¹⁹ While the museums on Museum Island reflected a the liberal humanist tradition of German scholars and scientists as well as the growing professionalism of art historians, they were also monuments to a German vision of human culture and history.

However, the use of period rooms in the Neues Museum had created some didactic problems for the museum visitor. They enhanced, but also fragmented the experience by presenting a series of pleasing, but separate, views of historical and cultural objects. The rooms were also very expensive to maintain and committed the museum to a particular and static arrangement of the collection, meaning that future growth of the collections as well as a reorganization of the exhibits was almost completely inhibited. Most urgently, the growing collections of German contemporary art needed a comparably grand museum space, but neither the Altes Museum nor the Neues Museum with its unchangeable and dramatic historicist interiors were suitable for its display.

The National Gallery for contemporary German art was the third museum on the island, completed in 1876. It was designed as a Greek temple, but the inscription “To German Art” in bold letters across its entrance pediment and a figure of Germania in the central frieze alluded to the dominant role of Prussia in the new German nation. An equestrian monument of the Prussian king, Frederick William IV dominated the entrance and the interior was also a tribute to German cultural achievements with paintings of battle scenes and events in Prussian history retaining primary locations in the galleries and staircases.²⁰

The Neues Museum had been built during a time when curators and philosophers thought art should be seen and understood as part of its historic context, but the last decades of the nineteenth century saw an increase in the display of masterpieces as single objects outside the bounds of history. Museums begin to isolate important works of art, display a smaller number of objects, and create rooms that were more bright and spacious.²¹ Art was not only a means of imparting moral and civic instruction to a growing populace, nor simply an educational tool for the masses. Rather, the collection of newly discovered archeological objects and the display of contemporary German masterpieces was part of a newly-unified country's colonial ambitions, cultural identity, and aspirations to international legitimacy.²² The three museums on the Museum Island by the turn of the twentieth century were, as Thomas Gaehtgens describes them, "effective vehicles for the promotion of Prussian cultural politics."²³ Berlin was the capital of a new Germany and Prussian art politics had changed with the times.

Museum Island: Renovation and Completion

Because the Neues Museum was such a vivid representation of classical themes, it would – along with other historicist museums – become a target of the modernist cultural critics at the turn of the twentieth century. While no attempt was made to change the exteriors of the Museum Island buildings, there were extensive renovations to the museum interiors. Additional space was needed for growing staff, for a steady expansion of holdings, and for the work of restoration and conservation. In addition, public areas were now considered important: libraries, reading rooms, and lecture halls were new features of museum spaces across Europe.²⁴ In addition, contemporary commercial galleries were displaying their art in a more modernist context: light, neutral colors in the galleries created a neutral and non-historic context for the displays,

separating the objects from the surrounding architecture. In imitation of this, the National Gallery in 1896 undertook the first renovation on the Museum Island, reducing the number of paintings on display, replacing the heavily ornamented interiors, and brightening the wall colors as well as adding new and improved artificial lighting.²⁵

In 1904, the Kaiser Friedrich Museum (now the Bode Museum) was completed on the northern tip of Museum Island. Designed in a Baroque style by Ernst Eberhard von Ihne, the interiors were again created and decorated as historic room sets even though the National Gallery had already been renovated in a more modernist style. Stubborn opposition to modernist thought and architecture continued in the German art and architecture world, but there were very few new museums being built in the historicist manner with programmatic decorations in their galleries. (Indeed, the last historicist museum built in Berlin was the Märkisches Museum completed in 1907 by Ludwig Hoffman.²⁶) The Neues Museum underwent its own renovation in the 1910s when new lighting and modern, white ceilings were installed underneath the brightly decorated paintings and murals of an earlier time. The final museum on Museum Island – the Pergamon Museum, built to house the altar of Pergamon and the Asia Minor Museum – was begun in 1910, but not completed until 1930. Another Neo-Classical building, it completed the original conception of an “encyclopedic museum complex” on the Museum Island that displayed works from prehistory through modern times.²⁷

The evolution of the Museum Island complex mirrored that of Prussia, a progression from a limited collection in a princely territory to a grand national complex of museums for a new German empire. Emperors of the Second Empire practiced cultural politics with skill and expertise. These state-supported museums presented an image of an empire with a classical heritage and a glorious future. Although the academic and artistic interests of the museums were

undeniable, they did not act in defiance or opposition to government directions.²⁸ The fight between the proponents and enemies of modernism was, to a large extent, carried on outside the bounds of the Museum Island itself.

War and Destruction

After World War I ended, the broader cultural struggle of modernism versus traditionalism continued in Germany, with modernism gaining ground during the more-liberal times of the Weimar Republic. When the Nazis took power in 1933, however, the modernist proponents and curators in the museums were generally forced from office.²⁹ Although the Nazi administration promised massive new building projects – among them museums – the net result was to have little effect on the Museum Island complex. During the early years of the Second World War, German museums were the beneficiaries of widespread looting of other European museums in defeated countries. But later on, the war became catastrophic for the Museum Island: bombing destroyed the northern courtyard of the Neues Museum and in May 1945, the Soviet Army engaged in armed combat in the Lustgarten and within the entrance columns of the Altes Museum.

For the most part, the collections had been saved in various parts of Germany – in various salt mines and even in the anti-aircraft battery in the Berlin Zoo.³⁰ With the division of the city of Berlin came the division of the collections. The Soviets had managed to capture the Pergamon friezes and other antiquities stored in the Zoo, even though they were in the British sector. These pieces and others retrieved in the Soviet sector were not returned to Berlin until 1958.³¹ By this time, postwar restoration projects at the Museum Island in East Berlin had been completed, except for the Neues Museum. Normal activities resumed in the restored portions of

the other museums under the new German Democratic Republic, as part of the government's program to claim the "good" and classical German heritage.³² The Neues Museum, too badly damaged and too expensive to restore for a struggling East German economy remained closed. Emergency measures ensured the structural integrity of the building itself, but it remained a symbol of war's destruction for over forty years.

During these postwar and divided years, the Federal Republic of Germany built new museums in West Berlin, most notably the New National Gallery designed by Mies van der Rohe, a modernist icon. Both halves of the city also created their version of a Berlin history museum; no doubt, each was in some measure reflective of the political and economic realities of their separate governments. Near the end of the forty-year period, West Berlin was chosen the European Cultural City in 1988. Perhaps in competitive response to this honor, the East Berlin government began restoration work at the Neues Museum in 1989 – ironically, just months before the Berlin Wall came down..³³ After reunification, this restoration work halted in order to allow for even grander plans at the Museum Island.

Reunification and Restoration

At the heart of Germany's new "capital dilemma" was the question of what to preserve, rebuild, restore, or re-create.³⁴ After the German parliament decided to move the German capital from Bonn to Berlin, the money and ideas for restoration projects poured into Berlin. In this euphoria that followed reunification, the first round of an architectural competition on the rebuilding and restoration of the entire Museum Island complex was held in 1993. Grandiose in its conception, the projects would include new buildings, the restoration of the museums, and the reworking of pedestrian connections between the buildings and the surrounding streets.

The Director of Berlin's Museums, Wolf Dube, preferred the rather radical plan proposed by Frank Gehry, although the jury -- chosen by city planners and government officials -- gave the prize to Giorgio Grassi. His was a more conservative plan that retained the traditional, classical feeling of the museums whereas Gehry had called for the demolition of the Neues Museum and creation of new curvilinear and glassed structures in the center of the complex.³⁵ The German press reported on the bitter controversy over this choice, describing the jury's desire to "rebuild Berlin as a city of stone and classical detail" and not as a modern Disney World attraction.³⁶

After only eighteen months, however, Grassi withdrew from the project and the jury then turned to David Chipperfield, the runner-up in the original competition. By this time, the project itself had been reduced in scale due, in large part, to dwindling economic resources from a struggling German economy. Now there was only money for the individual museums to undergo badly-needed restorations: the National Gallery reopened in December 2001; the Pergamon Museum remained open to the public while undergoing repair, and the Bode Museum is due to reopen in 2005. The Altes Museum is under consideration for restoration, with the chosen architects proposing a glass roof over the two courts.³⁷

A second, more limited competition for the Neues Museum restoration was held and won again by David Chipperfield. After a series of revisions, his plan will not be an exact reconstruction of the Neues Museum, but will juxtapose modern elements with the old. A new visitors pavilion is also part of the Chipperfield project. A low glass building, it will stand behind the Neues Museum and slope down toward the Pergamon Museum (the most visited attraction on the Museum Island). At an estimated cost of \$270 million, the Chipperfield project is due to be completed in 2008 according to a recent German publication.³⁸

Chipperfield has designed his work to answer a number of complex questions about preservation and restoration in the politically-charged atmosphere of Berlin. He has combined a recognition of the value of the original Neo-Classical architectural style of the Neues Museum with a modernist sensibility toward historicist decoration. Where the original museum contained a three-story marble staircase, the new staircase will be a minimalist representation with a muted color palette and modern materials. Frescoes and murals will remain and be restored, where possible, but will not be re-created where they have already been destroyed.³⁹

In 1999, the entire Museum Island complex was declared a world heritage site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Describing it as a “unique ensemble of museum buildings”, the UNESCO nomination report reflects on the evolution of approaches to museum design and calls it the “most outstanding example” of an art museum complex in a symbolic and central urban setting.⁴⁰ Although this designation implies that the traditional buildings and setting will be preserved, it has not stopped the contemporary additions to the site from going forward.

In large part, the controversy over the Museum Island restoration project mirrors the controversy between the old divisions of East and West Berlin. The initial plan to “reinvent” the Museum Island after reunification was part of a larger atmosphere that sought to reinvent large portions of Berlin – removing the Stalinist taint from East Berlin while creating a modernist wonderland in the empty rubble-strewn area that was Potsdamer Platz. The lack of sustainable funds coupled with an eventual outcry from East Germans about the stripping away of their postwar architectural and cultural heritage helped to diminish the scope of the renovation projects (like the Neues Museum) in and around Berlin.

Michael Wise stated that capital cities are “not only workplaces but stages for the visualization of power.”⁴¹ Certainly this is true of a capital city with as many architectural, cultural, and political layers as Berlin. Nowhere are the layers more evident in the city than in the central area that contains the Museum Island, Humboldt University, the former site of the Royal Palace and the former Arsenal on its four corners. The Museum Island and its collections were unlike Germany’s other monuments to its political system and military victories. Monumental museums like these proclaim the connection between the present and the past, between contemporary culture and its historical heritage, and between modern rulers and their predecessors. The grandeur of their design and the breathtaking splendor of their collections connect a nation to its cultural heritage. Designed to be a reflection of the government’s power, wealth, and generosity toward the masses, museums are also celebrations of a culture’s scholarly achievements and aesthetic sensibilities. Berlin’s Museum Island is truly a unique ensemble of a country’s attempt to frame its sense of “Self.” Significant artifacts are displayed, but so are the traces of the museum’s own history. It is one that mirrors nearly one hundred and fifty years of German history itself.

Notes

¹ Quoted in James J. Sheehan. *Museums in the German Art World from the End of the Old Regime to the Rise of Modernism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 437.

² H. Glenn Penny. *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 2.

³ Sheehan, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 3-41.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 32.

⁶ Rita Capezzuto. "Berlin Rebuilds the Museum Island" *Domus* 831 (November 2000), p. 38.

⁷ Sheehan, p. 57.

⁸ Edward P. *Museums in Motion: an Introduction to the History and Function of Museums*. (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1979), pp. 28-29; Capezzuto, p. 38

⁹ Thomas W. Gaehtgens. "The Museum Island in Berlin" *Studies in the History of Art* 47 (1996), pp. 55-56.

¹⁰ Tony Bennett. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 17-18.

¹¹ Capezzuto, p. 38

¹² Sheehan, p. 84

¹³ Penny, pp. 25-26.

¹⁴ www.stadtenwicklung.berlin.de/denkmal/denkmal_in_berlin/en/weltkulturerbe/neues_museum.shtml

¹⁵ Penny, p. 2

¹⁶ Sheehan, p. 132.

¹⁷ Gaehtgens, pp. 56-58 and Sheehan pp. 133-134.

¹⁸ Gaehtgens, p. 56.

¹⁹ Rudy Koshar. *From Monuments to Traces: Artifacts of German Memory, 1870-1990*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p. 30.

²⁰ Gaehtgens, p. 56 and Sheehan, p. 111.

²¹ Sheehan, p. 178.

²² Sheehan, pp. 139-141 and Bennett, pp. 19-20

²³ Gaehtgens, p. 61.

²⁴ Sheehan, p. 178.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-182.

²⁶ personal journal: 22 May 2003

²⁷ Capezzuto, p. 39.

²⁸ Gaehtgens, pp. 72-74 and Sheehan, pp. 183-185.

²⁹ Sheehan, p. 185.

³⁰ Capezzuto, p. 39.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

³² Koshar, p. 269.

³³ Jeffrey M. Diefendorf, Jeffrey M. *In the Wake of War: the Reconstruction of German Cities after World War II*. (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 69 and Alexandra Richie, Alexandra. *Faust's Metropolis: A History of Berlin*. (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, Inc. 1998), p. 742.

³⁴ Michael Z. Wise. *Capital Dilemma: Germany's Search for a New Architecture of Democracy*. (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), p. 145.

³⁵ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe. *Frank Gehry: the City and Music*. (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2001), pp. 31-33.

³⁶ Capezzuto, p. 40.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ "Berlin's Rich Museum Landscape to Get Facelift" in *Deutsche Welle* (26 June 2003)

³⁹ Capezzuto, p. 40.

⁴⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Report on the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. 23rd Session. Marrakesh, Morocco: 1999

⁴¹ Wise, p. 15.