

## Authenticity on display

Review of:

Can Bilsel, *Antiquity on Display: Regimes of the Authentic in Berlin's Pergamon Museum*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 304 pp., 8 col. plates, 99 b & w illus., £74.00 hdbk, ISBN 9780199570553

Since the Renaissance, European museums and collections have played an essential role in the representation of antiquity, despite the fact that most elite Europeans into the modern period—at least the men—were classically educated and thus many, especially those from the north, were first acquainted with the ancient world through classical texts. The desire to study the material remains of the distant past was one of the key factors motivating the formation of collections of ancient art, in which antiquities were and, for the most part, still are presented as unmediated in their authenticity. However, many, if not most, of the antiquities we see in museums are the products of restoration, sometimes multiple restorations from different periods of time, each determined by varying notions of what it meant to reconstitute the original. What, then, is 'authenticity' and how did the concept change over time? As Can Bilsel observes, 'Rarely has a concept so central to art, architecture, museology, and preservation been subject to less epistemological scrutiny' (215). In *Antiquity on Display*, Bilsel offers a history of Berlin's Pergamon Museum from its conception in the late nineteenth century to its present state, analyzing its iconic displays through the lens of changing 'regimes of the authentic' that he defines as 'the disciplinary and institutional practices which, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, constituted and staged the monuments and sites' (229).

The Pergamon Museum, the last of five such institutions on Berlin's Museum Island, is unusual in exhibiting architectural monuments. It houses works that are now considered showpieces of ancient architecture, most famously the Hellenistic Great Altar of Pergamon, the Roman Market Gate of Miletus, and the Ishtar Gate of Babylon. Not only have countless numbers of visitors seen these works each year since the museum's opening in 1930—today over one million annually—but images of them proliferate on the internet and have long appeared as standards in art historical textbooks, attesting to their 'authenticity.' As Bilsel shows, however, the forms that they assume in the museum were arrived at through lengthy processes of deliberation and negotiation because precise knowledge of the originals was lacking. Describing the displays as imaginative 'restorations,' he considers the practices of archaeology, museology, and historic preservation that conditioned them within broader social, political, and intellectual contexts.

*Antiquity on Display* is divided into five chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by an epilogue. Bilsel introduces his subject by

describing the viewer's experience of the Pergamon Altar and its celebrated sculptural frieze of the Gigantomachy as reconstructed in the museum, along with the relationship of the altar—if indeed it was an altar—to what is known of the original monument, raising the issue of authenticity in all its multifaceted complexity. He also sketches the history of the museum from the state sponsored excavations that first secured its contents to plans for future transformation, emphasizing German interest in archaeology as a vehicle for asserting cultural hegemony in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nonetheless, he is careful to distinguish his nuanced reading of the Pergamon Museum from earlier 'post-Orientalist' critiques of European institutions that view them as purely predatory of other cultures. The introduction includes a summary of the chapters, too, and a short description of the wide array of primary and secondary sources that Bilsel analyzes in conjunction with his observations on the museum's current installations.

In the first chapter Bilsel takes up the two earliest museums built on the island, the Altes Museum, designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel and completed in 1830, and the Neues Museum, begun by Schinkel but finished by his student, Friedrich August Stüler, in 1859. (The latter was destroyed in World War II and redesigned by David Chipperfield; it reopened as the Egyptian Museum of Berlin in 2009). His purpose in discussing these institutions, however, is not to trace their histories as such—though he does that to some extent—but rather to expose the tensions in the understanding of history itself as it affected attitudes toward classical art and architecture and museums in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Germany. Bilsel identifies two main strands of thought, both derived from German Idealism, one that saw historical objects and styles as firmly rooted in the past, and another that sought to integrate the past into the present. In museum display, the tension played out between installation strategies that gave priority to teaching the history of art and those that favoured aesthetic experience. In architecture it was expressed as the choice between adhering closely to ancient models and the innovative, classicizing form of buildings such as the Altes Museum. For Schinkel, moreover, there were social and political implications to the latter approach: he understood the classical ideal to have moral as well as aesthetic authority and to be key not only to cultivation but also to societal harmony, equally applicable in ancient Greece and contemporary Germany.

In showing how Schinkel's architecture '... prefigured the way antiquity was to be visualized, restored, and displayed in Berlin in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (33), Bilsel opens the first chapter rather circuitously with an analysis of Schinkel's painting, *A View of Greece in its Prime* (1824-25), now known only through copies of the original, which was destroyed in 1945. Reading the painting as an allegory of post-Napoleonic Europe, he uses it to trace the history of German philhellenism and illustrate Schinkel's particular take on it. Although providing a wealth of contextual information, this chapter is unnecessarily digressive and its tendency to jargon sometimes results in a lack of clarity. The

organization of Bilsel's arguments, moreover, as well as the lack of indication where they are going, can make them difficult to follow in places. These problems somewhat hamper the book throughout, which is otherwise a rich, informative, and thoughtful study.

The second chapter discusses the discovery of the Gigantomachy frieze and its reconstruction and display in the museum in the context the history of imperial German archaeology. Bilsel begins by exploring the excavation of the ancient city of Pergamon, now Bergama, in Turkey, by Carl Humann, a German engineer and amateur archaeologist. In 1879 Humann initiated the 'golden age' of German archaeology in Asia Minor and the Middle East by excavating the foundations of the Pergamon Altar, which had been integrated into later Byzantine and Islamic structures. By 1880 he had sent to Germany ninety-seven slabs and about two thousand fragments from the Gigantomachy frieze, representing the mythological battle for supremacy of the cosmos between Olympian deities and earthly Giants. Along with them went thirty-five slabs from the smaller Telephos frieze that adorned the inner court of the altar and depicted the story of Pergamon's eponymous mythical founder; these slabs are now exhibited in the room to which the altar leads, located just behind it. The reassembling of the frieze and the 'reconstruction' of the altar in the first incarnation of the Pergamon Museum was finished by 1901, but the building was demolished eight years later. By that time, though, the spectacular sculpture had come to serve as an 'imperial icon' in Prussia, which identified itself with the Pergamon Kingdom. Concurrently, the 'baroque' style of the Hellenistic frieze, thanks in part to the influential writings of the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, was gaining ascendancy over the classical Greek aesthetic in German taste.

In chapter three Bilsel examines various proposals for Berlin's Museum Island up to 1907 and the debates over architectural style and exhibition strategies from which the current Pergamon Museum emerged. The institution was begun through the cooperative efforts of Wilhelm von Bode, a prominent connoisseur and curator, and Alfred Messel, a well-known architect. Bode was appointed General Director of the Royal Museums in 1906, and one year later he proposed that three new museums be built on the island: an Antiquity Museum, a Near Eastern Museum, and a German Museum—the last to display art and artefacts from Germany and neighbouring countries from the Stone Age to the seventeenth century—all of which were later merged into the Pergamon Museum. Bode also oversaw the construction on the island of a Renaissance Museum, first called the Kaiser Friedrich Museum and now the Bode Museum, which opened in 1904. Opposing the didactic academic approach to exhibition, Bode wanted to offer viewers an aesthetic experience. With this goal in mind, at the Kaiser Friedrich Museum he developed innovative 'style rooms', dedicated to private collections and named after donors, which attempted to provide historical ambience by displaying furniture, fireplaces, door frames, and such with painting and sculpture of the same period. These were not what we now call 'period rooms', for they did not recreate

specific environments, and the furnishings and architectural elements were considered to be subsidiary. However, Bode's idea of using décor to enhance aesthetic experience would prove important at the Pergamon Museum.

The Babylonian antiquities now in the Pergamon Museum and the history of their excavation are the subject of the fourth chapter. Undertaken by the German Orient Society, excavations in Mesopotamia were spurred by rising interest in the ancient Assyrians at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly by the notion that their civilization preceded and influenced those of the biblical Hebrews and classical Greeks and that their religiosity was somehow akin to the spirituality of modern Germans. The dig was led by two architects, Robert Koldewey and his assistant, Walter Andrae, who, using fragments from the Ishtar Gate, the Processional Way, and the Throne Room Façade, 'reconstructed' the monuments in the museum from hundreds of thousands of fragments, mostly pieces of baked mud. Their challenge lay in the sparsity of visual evidence and lack of ancient treatises to guide them. Influenced by the writings of various German theorists—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, August Wilhelm Schlegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Gottfried Semper—they ultimately took what Bilsel characterizes as a Romantic approach to their task, based on the notion of 'organic unity' as expressed in Schlegel's writings. Instead of attempting to reproduce the Babylonian monuments, they tried to understand their system of production and replicate it in Berlin. Andrae even used stage set designs he had created for *Sardanapal*, a play about the ancient Assyrians, in his museum installations.

In chapter five Bilsel studies the evolution of the present Pergamon Museum and its displays from 1907 to 1930. After the death of Messel in 1909, the project was taken over by the architects Ludwig Hoffmann and Wilhelm Wille, who significantly transformed earlier plans for the building. However, a debate ensued between Hoffmann and Wille over the exhibition of the Gigantomachy Frieze, though neither advocated Messel's original idea of creating a kind of 'theater stage', an imagined version of the façade of the altar. Nonetheless, Messel's (and Bode's) solution, which was supported by Theodor Wiegand, an archaeologist who was the director of Berlin's Antiquity Collection, ultimately prevailed. Wiegand's other contribution to the museum was his 'reconstruction' of the Market Gate of Miletus, produced from excavated fragments shipped from Turkey by the archaeologist and based on a local type of ancient monumental facade. While some critics of the 1920s decried the lack of authenticity in the Pergamon installations, Wiegand defended the integrity and vitality of his creations, which, unlike more scholarly displays, appealed to the widest spectrum of visitors.

Bilsel concludes his study in the epilogue with the question of defining authenticity, tracing the emergence of the concept and its broader relationship to nineteenth-century historicism, especially with respect to architectural style. Soon after the opening of the Pergamon Museum in 1930, the sort of imaginative, Romantic restorations displayed there began to be prohibited by the creation of international charters for historic preservation. A modern concept had emerged

that identified authenticity for monuments dating from antiquity with their ancient state and supported 'transparent' intervention, focused on preserving what could be salvaged rather than attempting radical reconstruction, Romantic or otherwise. But as Bilsel observes, such a seemingly objective standard is really quite problematical and has led to the erasure of later transformations of sites—of their histories—that are no less 'authentic'. He cites the example of the Athenian Acropolis, where medieval Christian structures, including a church, were demolished by a Greek Christian nation that sought to identify itself with the Golden Age of the ancient Pericles. Presumably not wanting to turn back the clock on restoration practices, Bilsel still admires the 'sublime', if fanciful, exhibits in the Pergamon Museum, now historical monuments themselves. The critical response, of course, is that their inherent interest notwithstanding, they should not be passed off for what they are not. He notes at the beginning of the book that '... visitors ... occasionally ask the museum's guards whether what they see is 'original' or not ...' (13). One wonders what they are told.

Among the strengths of Bilsel's study is how fully the development of the Pergamon Museum is examined within the German context, though that in turn formed part of a broader history of museums and, as noted at the beginning of this review, a longer history of displaying antiquities. Bode's 'style rooms', for example, were preceded by those of more than a century earlier at the Museo Pio-Clementino (now part of the Vatican Museum), where classical sculpture was exhibited in rooms shaped and decorated like ancient ambients, such as the Sala Rotonda, a 'pantheon' exhibiting statues of Olympian deities.<sup>1</sup> These spaces were well known in nineteenth-century Germany, especially through those who had been on the Grand Tour. Recalling his travels to Italy, the future King Ludwig of Bavaria professed in 1806 that 'here in Munich, we need to have what in Rome is called a *museo*'; his Glyptothek, partly inspired in its architecture and installations by the Museo Pio-Clementino and the Villa Albani in Rome, opened in 1830, the same year as Schinkel's Altes Museum.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, one of the most distinctive aspects of the Pergamon Museum—which, oddly, Bilsel does not fully address—is that it displays monumental architecture. Was it the first modern museum to do so? Did it inspire others, such as the Cloisters Museum in New York, a pastiche of medieval architecture created from building fragments of the Middle Ages, which opened in 1938?

Whatever lines of inquiry it leaves, *Antiquity on Display* is an important book, both for the history of German museums and the larger field of Museum Studies. Bilsel's perceptive analyses of various issues—not all of which could be discussed in

<sup>1</sup> See Jeffrey Collins, 'Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican City: Ideology and Aesthetics in the Age of the Grand Tour,' in *The First Modern Museums of Art: The Birth of an Institution in 18<sup>th</sup>- and Early-19<sup>th</sup>-Century Europe*, edited by Carole Paul (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012), 113-43, esp. 125.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian von Buttlar and Bénédicte Savoy, 'Glyptothek and Alte Pinakothek, Munich: Museums as Public Monuments,' in Paul (see note 1), 305-29, esp. 305, 308-10.

this review—raise critical questions about exhibition practices, historic preservation, and authenticity that remain relevant to museums today.

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