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The 'Basilica' in the Bode-Museum: a Central (and Contradictory) Space



Fig. 1: Berlin, Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. General view of the Basilica in 1917.

In October 1904, the Berlin-based newspaper *Continental Correspondence* reported with great fanfare a visit to the recently opened Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, called in the title of the article “the grandest museum of fine art in the world”:

From the main entrance one enters the imposing hall surmounted by the great dome in that unpretentious Rococo style, that has become through Schlüter quite historical for Berlin, but which is treated by architects with but a moderate measure of recognition. The chief ornament of this hall is, in

conjunction with the bold curves of the staircase, a casting of Schlüter's powerful statue of the Great Elector, which next to Verrocchio's *Colleoni* and Donatello's *Gattamelata* is recognized as the grandest example of modern sculpture. Passing through a fine well lighted connecting corridor, which will later on be decorated with statues, we reach the Basilica, a room in ecclesiastical style extending up through two stories and whose simple dignified form is reminiscent of S. Maria di Carignano in Genoa. Old church chairs ornament this room and five niches on each side exhibit altar paintings and sculptures. The idea of giving such a Museum a representative central room, which should serve at one and the same time to aid people finding their way, as a place to rest and gaze upon its great reposeful outlines after the manifold variety of the works of art, and finally to give rise to solemn feelings as in a church from which latter indeed most of the works of modern art developed, – this idea is just as new as fruitful.[1]

It would be too easy to mock the emphatic tone of the article, which borders on propaganda and rewrites art history in a curious way: setting Andreas Schlüter on the same pedestal as Donatello and Verrocchio may appear somewhat exaggerated, whereas completely inaccurate is the comparison of the Basilica architecture with the 16th-century Genovese church of Santa Maria Assunta di Carignano, as the former is a direct derivation of San Salvatore al Monte, build in Florence at the end of the 15th century. It is difficult, however, not to feel a certain empathy with this description: the entrance to the present-day Bode-Museum is still marked by this grandiose succession between a monumental lobby with a baroque architecture dedicated to the glory of the Hohenzollern, and – after a corridor – a “representative central room”, the actual size replica of an Early Renaissance Florentine church: the “Basilica” (fig. 1).[2]

For our anonymous reviewer, the Basilica is first and foremost a space – space of orientation, space of rest, space of meditation. If the niches are said to “exhibit altar paintings and sculptures”, no particular work is mentioned. Later in the review, paintings of the museum are highly praised, such as “Rembrandt's wonderful *Mennonite preacher*”, or “the spirited and fanciful *Pan* of Signorelli [which is] for the first time given proper prominence”. These paintings (the former is on view at the Berlin Gemäldegalerie, the latter has been lost since 1945) were not displayed in the Basilica, but in the 2nd-floor galleries – a choice that could well be explained by iconography: a Protestant priest and his wife or a pagan god with his naked devotees were not especially suited for this kind of architecture. The works displayed in the niches of the Basilica were, indeed, of strictly Catholic obedience – coming from important cities in Italy, from Modena with Antonio Begarelli's *Crucifixion with Angels* to Venice with Alvise Vivarini's *Sacra Conversazione*. Strangely enough, the 15th-century Florentine altarpieces in the Berlin collection that better matched the architecture of the Basilica – whether by Filippo Lippi, Andrea del Castagno, Piero del Pollaiuolo or Sandro Botticelli – were to be found in the 2nd-floor galleries, which gathered the major masterpieces of the museum.

Such a division was not incidental. It followed museum theories professed by Wilhelm Bode, the great curator of the Berlin Museums and active mind behind the edification of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum – to which he would posthumously give his own name. For Bode, the ideal museum should have rooms lighted from above – a belief stated as early as 1883, in a memorandum signed by Princess Victoria and her husband the Crown Prince Frederick Wilhelm (later “Kaiser Friedrich III.”), but whose ghostwriter was most probably Bode himself.[3] In 1904, one did not necessarily enter the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum as described by the *Continental Correspondence* – that is to say, directly towards the Basilica. On the contrary, one was



Fig. 2: Antonio Begarelli, *The Crucifixion*, photograph taken in the Basilica of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, Berlin, ca. 1910.

meant to use the lateral stairs of the entrance hall to enter the second-floor rooms – either on the right-hand side, to the Italian schools, or on the left, to the Flemish and German schools. The Basilica was not part of the artistic path followed by the visitor from the Early to the High Renaissance; it was rather conceived as a didactic tool, allowing those who never went to Italy to understand not only the monumentality mixed with austerity of Florentine architecture, but also the variety of iconographies and techniques represented by different altarpieces, whether they were modeled or painted – or sometimes both, as demonstrated by the altarpieces in glazed terracotta by Andrea della Robbia. The Basilica was a place to learn, the upper galleries were spaces to enjoy.



Fig. 3: Berlin, Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. View of the Basilica in 1945.

The decision to build a basilica has been rightly interpreted as the debt of Wilhelm Bode to a scholar he greatly admired in his youth, and to whom he was very close during the last decades of the 19th century: Jacob Burckhardt.[4] The Basilica can be seen as a materialization of the “Civilization of the Renaissance” described in a fabled book by Burckhardt bearing this title and first published in 1860.[5] Burckhardt described the church as a key place of the development of the Italian genius. He also insisted on the public space of the *piazza*, which was represented in the Basilica (however inappropriate it would have been in a church) in the two columns surmounted by a lion and a she-wolf, which symbolized, respectively, the Florentine and Sieneese states – homes of the favorite schools of Bode. Since the Basilica displayed a history of Renaissance culture, no masterpieces of painting and

sculpture were needed here, rather typologies. The most precious works by the Della Robbia family – the ones of Luca – were displayed in the upper galleries; as for Donatello, one of Bode's favorite sculptors, one found him only upstairs (Burckhardt hated Donatello, an artist he found too realistic and overrated).

A few years after its opening, the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum had already become too small; even with the First World War and the great crisis that followed, acquisitions never stopped and soon raised a problem of space. The north wing of the Pergamon Museum, which opened in 1930, was conceived as a home for the Northern European collection. In the Basilica, one must have felt that the grandiose architecture looked somewhat empty in its original state: soon after the opening, the walls of the lateral chapels had been painted with neo-Renaissance motives (fig. 2). However, no additional works were displayed there; the new acquisitions were primarily intended for the galleries.

Then came the Second World War. The collections of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum were evacuated at the beginning of the conflict, and first stored in the basement of the Pergamon Museum before they were transferred to bunkers in the Zoo or in Friedrichshain, and in March 1945 (only part of them) outside Berlin.[6] The works of the Basilica which could not be removed were left in situ or merely walled in – a protection that proved very useful for the antique columns supporting the loggia, as the museum building was severely damaged by Allied bombings (fig. 3).

In 1956, the museum reopened with its new name: in the capital of the German Democratic Republic, "Bode-Museum" sounded definitely less imperialistic than "Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum". Many works of art were missing: they were either in West Berlin or presumably destroyed (such as the Sienese she-wolf once displayed atop one of the Basilica's columns; her Florentine companion still exists, but has not been exhibited for decades: fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Florentine, 16th century, *Marzocco*, Berlin, Bode-Museum, storage.

In 1964, an exhibition was organized at the Bode-Museum to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the death of Andreas Schlüter, the creator of the equestrian monument in the entrance of the museum (the original version of which, installed in front of the City Palace, had been evacuated from Berlin in 1945 and replaced later in front of Charlottenburg Palace, in the West part of the city).[7] Two decades after the end of the conflict, the German Democratic Republic was no longer skeptical of Prussian imperialism: the historic glory of Berlin was to be recuperated at any cost. The resulting show occupied the whole Basilica (fig. 5); from the original equilibrium of the museum, it seemed as if the German baroque had invaded the Florentine



Fig. 5: East Berlin, Bode-Museum. View of the Basilica during the exhibition *Andreas Schlüter und die Plastik seiner Zeit* (1964).



Fig. 6: East Berlin, Bode-Museum. View of the Basilica in 1976.

Renaissance. Florence would take its revenge in the 1970s, when the walls of the Basilica were adorned with strictly 15th-century Florentine reliefs, a solution that was also unsatisfactory, as works of smaller dimension seemed a bit lost in the immense walls (fig. 6).

In 1987, monumental altarpieces (sculpted and painted) were reinstated in the niches, while walls were adorned with a salmon color, in complete contradiction with the sober architectural principles of the Early Renaissance (fig. 7). The primary effect of this restoration was to make the Basilica appear warmer; this is why the central space was also occupied by some works from the sculpture collection.

After the fall of the Wall, the reunification of Germany was also one of the Berlin Museums collections; a decision was taken to display the paintings collection in the Kulturforum and the sculptures at the Bode-Museum, which reopened in 2006 after a long restoration. An attempt was made, though, to restore the Basilica's original aspect (fig. 8) – although the Gemäldegalerie preferred to keep at the Kulturforum some altarpieces that were displayed here in 1904 and to loan other, less important works.[8]

Over more than a century, the Basilica has remained a place of orientation, a space of rest or of meditation, as stated in the 1904 article, but also a space that does not seem to have solved its original ambiguities: is it central or peripheral? Should it be didactic or aesthetic? Typically Florentine, generally Italian – or even European? A place to admire works or a place to meditate? During the fall of 2011, the Basilica had never been so full: hundreds of visitors were waiting on benches, looking at a digital screen for the hour when they could admire the “real” masterpieces they came to see (the exhibition of the portraits of the Italian Renaissance), only looking distractedly at the works on display around them.[9] After the exhibition, the Basilica was once again deserted.

There are some moments, however, when the impression one has in the Basilica is not disappointing. This is especially the case for the exhibition openings. For a moment, the function of the Basilica seems to be fulfilled: the audience is gathered together (as was the purpose of a basilica during Antiquity), and listens to the speeches almost as if they were made by a priest – so as if it were a *real* church (fig. 9).



Fig. 7: East Berlin, Bode-Museum. View of the Basilica in 1987.

Such a use for a museum may be seen with suspicion: this is the role devoted to these central spaces in many American museums, partly inspired by the Berlin example, where the principal aim is not so much to admire works of art on display as to raise funds.^[10] The German Democratic Republic could certainly not be accused of mercantilism; however, a rare photograph shows that the Basilica was also thought, in this period, as a place of performance (fig. 10). Is it a coincidence?

Looking back into the history of the museum, one can argue that the original function of the Basilica was indeed that very one. On 18 October 1904, the solemn inauguration of the museum was celebrated in the Basilica with great pomp. The emperor himself, Kaiser Wilhelm II, made a speech to celebrate a museum that bore the name of his father. Bode had organized everything in the galleries, mostly from home where his failing health forced him to stay; using photographs and sketches, he told his assistants exactly what to do. A sketch in the Berlin Central Archive, where the central stage and the different spaces where the guests could take



Fig. 8: Berlin, Bode-Museum. View of the Basilica in 2006.

their place are ideated exactly as in a theater, shows that Bode also carefully conceived the opening ceremony (fig. 11). A diagram, printed on the reverse side of every invitation, transformed the drawing of Bode into a strict division of the ground floor into six categories (fig. 12): from the “E” and “F” seats, one could probably not grasp much of the speeches! James Simon, the greatest donor in the history of the Berlin Museums, was in the “M” category (fig. 13): Simon did not attend the ceremony on the ground floor, not even in the front seats, but on the loggia (or mezzanine, hence the “M”) of the Basilica, giving him a point of view dominating and detached at the same time: the place of King Louis XIV in the royal chapel of Versailles. Next to Simon, in a wheelchair, was Wilhelm Bode – the busts of both men now commemorate their presence on the loggia that day (fig. 14). After the ceremony, the German Emperor came to see Bode on the loggia to congratulate him on the museum.^[11] A quarter of century later, the Basilica was the only logical choice for the funeral of Bode.^[12] It is not only the physical center of the Bode-Museum; it is also at the core of its intricate memory.

I wish to thank Alessandra Galizzi Kroegel, Babette Buller, Julien Chapuis, Douglas Kline and Petra Winter.



Fig. 9: Berlin, Bode-Museum. View of the Basilica from the loggia during the opening of the exhibition *The Lost Museum. The Berlin Sculpture and Paintings Collections 70 Years after World War II* (18 March 2015).



Fig. 10: East Berlin, Bode-Museum. Unidentified event in the Basilica in 1987.

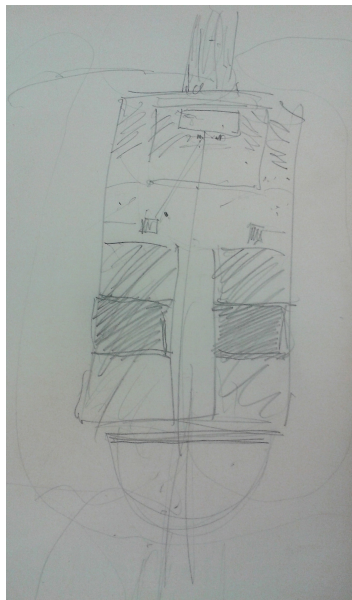


Fig. 11: Wilhelm Bode (attributed to), *Sketch for the organization of the Basilica during the opening ceremony of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum*, 1904, Berlin, Zentralarchiv der Staatlichen Museen.

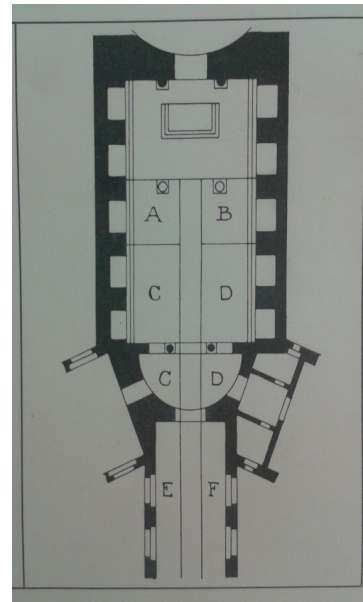


Fig. 12: Map of the Basilica on the reverse side of the invitation to the opening of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum on 18 October 1904, Berlin, Zentralarchiv der Staatlichen Museen.

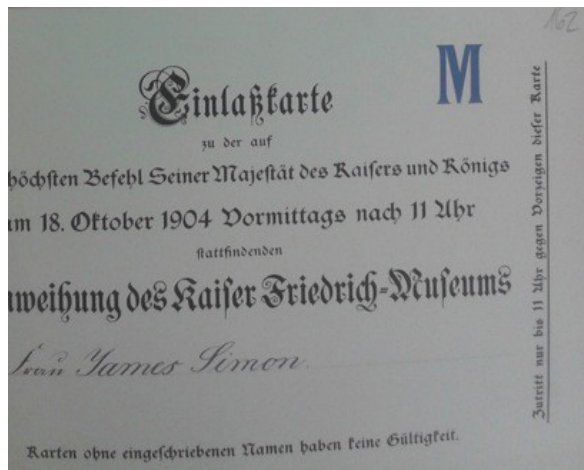


Fig. 13: Invitation to the opening of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum on 18 October 1904 with the name of James Simon, Berlin, Zentralarchiv der Staatlichen Museen.



Fig. 14: Berlin, Bode-Museum. View of the loggia of the Basilica in 2006, with the busts of James Simon (l.) and Wilhelm von Bode.

Notes

1. *The grandest museum of fine art in the world. Opening of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum at Berlin*, in: *Continental Correspondence*, no. 74, 1904, p. 1.
2. The major articles on the Basilica are: Max Seidel, *Das Renaissance-Museum. Wilhelm Bode als 'Schüler' Jacob Burckhardts*, in: *Storia dell'arte e politica culturale intorno al 1900. La fondazione dell'Istituto Germanico di Storia dell'Arte di Firenze*, ed. by Max Seidel, Venice 1999, pp. 55-109; and Michael Knuth, *Wilhelm von Bodes Ausstellungsinszenierung in der 'Basilika' des Kaiser-Friedrich-Museums*, in: *Bode-Museum. Architektur – Sammlung – Geschichte*, ed. by Bernd Wolfgang Lindemann, Berlin / Munich 2010, pp. 100-137. For this paper, I drew extensively from both sources.
3. On Bode in this very period, see Neville Rowley, *Wie Man ein Denkmal wird. Wilhelm Bode und die Berliner Museen, 1883/1884*, in: *Museumsvisionen. Der Wettbewerb zur Berliner Museumsinsel 1883*, ed. by Nikolaus Bernau, Hans-Dieter Nägelke and Bénédicte Savoy, exh. cat. (Berlin, Technische Universität, September-December 2015), Kiel 2015, forthcoming.
4. On this aspect, see especially the essay by Max Seidel quoted on note 2 above.
5. Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien. Ein Versuch*, Basel 1860.
6. These issues were the subject of a recent exhibition organized by Julien Chapuis at the Bode-Museum: *The Lost Museum. The Berlin Sculpture and Paintings Collections 70 Years after World War II* (19 March-27 September 2015). The catalogue is forthcoming.
7. *Andreas Schlüter und die Plastik seiner Zeit. Eine Gedächtnisausstellung anlässlich der 250. Wiederkehr seines Todesjahres*, ed. by Edith Fründt, exh. cat. (East Berlin, Bode-Museum, n. d.), East Berlin 1964; see also the recent exhibition on the artist in the same museum: *Andreas Schlüter und das barocke Berlin*, ed. by Hans-Ulrich Kessler, exh. cat. (Berlin, Bode-Museum, 4 April-13 July 2014), Munich 2014.
8. See Sophie Schulz, *Le Musée de Bode à Berlin. La conception muséographique de Wilhelm von Bode autrefois et aujourd'hui*, MA Thesis (École du Louvre, 2013), pp. 38-39, who mentions a problem of air conditioning in the Basilica and cites the former director of the Berlin Sculpture Collection and Museum for Byzantine Art, Arne Effenberger ("Die Durchmischung einiger Räume mit Gemälden – meist nicht die allerbesten – konnte erst in hartem Ringen mit der Gemädegalerie durchgesetzt werden").
9. On the exhibition, see *The Portrait in Renaissance Italy. From Donatello to Bellini*, ed. by Keith Christiansen and Stefan Weppelmann, exh. cat. (Berlin, Bode-Museum, 25 August-20 November 2011 - New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 19 December 2011-18 March 2012), New York 2011.
10. On the influence of Bode on American museums, see Julien Chapuis, *Bode und Amerika. Eine komplexe Beziehung*, in: *Jahrbuch Preußischer Kulturbesitz*, 43, 2006, pp. 145-176.

11. Wilhelm von Bode, *Mein Leben*, Berlin 1930 [now in: Wilhelm von Bode, *Mein Leben*, ed. by Thomas W. Gaetgens and Barbara Paul, Berlin 1997, I, p. 311].
12. *Wilhelm von Bode. Ansprachen bei der Trauerfeier in der Basilika des Kaiser-Friedrich-Museums, am 5. März 1929*, n. pl., n. d.

Figures

Fig. 1: Berlin, Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. General view of the Basilica in 1917.

Fig. 2: Antonio Begarelli, *The Crucifixion*, photograph taken in the Basilica of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, Berlin, ca. 1910.

Fig. 3: Berlin, Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. View of the Basilica in 1945.

Fig. 4: Florentine, 16th century, *Marzocco*, Berlin, Bode-Museum, storage.

Fig. 5: East Berlin, Bode-Museum. View of the Basilica during the exhibition *Andreas Schlüter und die Plastik seiner Zeit* (1964).

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Abstract

At the heart of the Bode-Museum in Berlin, opened in 1904 under the name Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, is a monumental evocation of a church interior in the Florentine 15th-century Renaissance style. The 'Basilica', as the space is named, has always been seen as symbolical; yet, when one studies the successive dispositions of the works in the museum over a century, one senses that the Basilica has often been felt as a curatorial problem: should the major altarpieces of the collection be displayed in the lateral chapels of the Basilica, in keeping with their original religious destination, or be hanged on the walls of the other, "secular" galleries of the museum? Addressing this question will suggest that the very center of a museum can also be a gigantic void.

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Title

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