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## Page, Canvas, Wall: Visualising the History of Art

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In 1909, the Italian poet and founder of the Futurist movement, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti famously declared, '[w]e will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind'.<sup>1</sup> He compared museums to cemeteries, '[i]dentical, surely, in the sinister promiscuity of so many bodies unknown to one another... where one lies forever beside hated or unknown beings'. This comparison of the museum with the cemetery has often been cited as an indication of the Futurists' radical rejection of traditional institutions. It certainly made these institutions look dead. With habitual hyperbole Marinetti claimed: 'We stand on the last promontory of the centuries!... Why should we look back [...] Time and Space died yesterday.' The brutal breathlessness of Futurist thinking rejected all notions of a *history* of art.

This essay considers how the history of art, embodied in art-historical canons, schools, periods, and aesthetic standards, has been conceptualised through writing, the organisation of collections, and the decoration of new museum buildings. It examines some of the moments in which the page, the canvas and the wall offer seminal and selective visualisations of the history of art and deploy notions of time and space that are complex and contradictory, and far from dead.

### Writing the history of art

The history of art began as a history of artists. In 1550 Giorgio Vasari, painter, architect and writer, published his influential *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (*Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, e architettori*), which is widely regarded as an important foundational text of art history. Vasari presented the life stories of 250 Italian artists, dating from the late 13th to the late 16th centuries, from Cimabue to Bronzino. His account was biographical and at times anecdotal. He retold the stories of these artists' lives in roughly chronological order and as a narrative of progress and periods, in which pupils learnt from their masters, and superseded them. In Vasari's account the tide of knowledge swelled with each generation before it culminated in the work of Raphael, Michelangelo and Leonardo, which was produced in the twin centres of Florence and Rome during the first half

<sup>1</sup> Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. 'Manifesto of Futurism', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds.), *Art in Theory: 1900–1990*. Oxford UK and Cambridge US: Blackwell Publishers, 1992, 145–47.

of the 16th century. This particular point of artistic achievement later historians of art would call the High Renaissance and it remained a benchmark in the teaching of art academies into the second half of the 19th century.

In 1568, the second edition of the popular *Lives* provided illustrations of all of the artists but no illustrations of their works. Wherever possible, these were based on known portraits or self-portraits. Vasari's written word was thus amplified by the image. The illustrated edition of Vasari's *Lives* also continued the tradition of presenting a series of famous men, in existence since Roman times and revived during the Renaissance.

Vasari's *Lives* not only created a blueprint for the writing of art history it also spawned similar publications using this kind of biographical approach to the artists of different countries, extending the reach well beyond Italy. Karel van Mander's *Schilderboeck* ('The Book of Painters', 1604) edited and updated Vasari's Italian canon and added a large section on German and Netherlandish artists. Joachim von Sandrart reworked van Mander's text in a German publication entitled *Teutsche Academie* (1675–79), as well as adding original biographies of German-born artists. These and similar publications remained the touchstone of a history of art that centred on the lives of artists.

During the 18th century, the history of art entered a new phase. The emphasis on a retelling of the lives of artists shifted to a broader narrative that presented the conditions of artistic production. Luigi Lanzi and Johann Joachim Winckelmann, both art historians and archaeologists, shifted attention from the artist to the work of art. In his book, *The History of Italian Art (Storia pittorica della Italia)* first published in 1792, Lanzi endeavoured to write the history of Italian art itself rather than of its artists. Lanzi adhered to Vasari's belief in a developmental history of art, but applied it to recent Italian art and combined it with a broader approach to his subject, drawing on Winckelmann's ground-breaking explorations of art and antiquity, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst (Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture, 1755)*, and the *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums (History of the Art of Antiquity, 1764)*, in which the work of art, rather than the artist, provided the object of study. Both Lanzi and Winckelmann remained indebted to Vasari's developmental paradigm while applying it to the artistic production of different historical periods.

## A visible history of art

During the 18th century, approaches to art as a developmental history, which the likes of Vasari, Winckelmann and Lanzi had been promoting, were gradually influencing the display of private and public collections across Europe.

Often the redisplay was accompanied by a printed guide or illustrated catalogue. A prime example of this dual strategy of image and text can be found in the Düsseldorf picture gallery that Johann Wilhelm II von der Pfalz, a German prince, built for his famous collection. Completed in 1714, the gallery was sited adjacent to the prince's residence and was the first European example of an independent art gallery building. As the collection gained increased independence from the palace, there was a shift away from the decorative or political arrangements of its artworks, towards one that was determined by the historical rather than the aesthetic significance of the artworks themselves.

From 1763 onwards, the collection was completely rehung according to national schools and the emerging principles of art history. In 1778, the French architect Nicolas de Pigage and the Swiss engraver Christian von Mechel published an impressive catalogue raisonné of the collection. Volume one contained entries giving the standard information we expect to see today: artist's name, title of work, medium and dimensions. This information was accompanied by a brief description of the work. The second volume contained meticulous engravings by von Mechel, which recorded the gallery's actual hang, showing each wall and the precise location of each work.



Christian von Mechel, *The Electoral Picture Gallery at Düsseldorf: Paintings on One of the Walls in the First Gallery, 1775*, engraving, 21.3cm x 25.8cm  
 Wellcome Library, London

Photo: Wellcome Collection. CC BY 4.0

The illustrations and accompanying text thus offered the reader a virtual visit to the gallery.<sup>2</sup> In privileging the ensemble over the individual work of art the illustrations draw attention to the gallery walls. Baroque profusion had given way to a less dense hang that recognised the value of individual artworks by allowing space between the works on the walls. The earlier decorative hang, which deliberately combined works from different schools and eras to delight and divert the connoisseurial eye, was rejected in favour of an arrangement that established art-historical connections by bringing the works by artists from the same

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the gallery and catalogue, see Thomas Gaehtgens and Louis Marchesano. *Display & art history: the Düsseldorf gallery and its catalogue*. Los Angeles, Calif.: Getty Research Institute, 2011.

school into close proximity, making it possible to study several works by one artist together. The forms of viewing established at the Düsseldorf picture gallery prioritised the individual artist together with a developmental history of art, and were to become paradigmatic for picture displays. Pigage and von Mechel's illustrated catalogue, produced in a large print run with the text in French, helped to disseminate knowledge of the gallery's hang widely across Europe. It also lent permanency to the hang, creating a monument to the collection.

Von Mechel's work in Düsseldorf attracted the attention of the Austrian Emperor Joseph II, who was keen to update the display of his picture gallery at the Belvedere in Vienna. From 1779 to 1781 von Mechel was thus busy reorganising the Imperial picture collections, whose extensive holdings enabled him to realise a hang that was more historically precise than that of other European collections. Von Mechel pitched the Northern against the Southern schools, and established a detailed overview of early German painting, which formed a particularly impressive part of the Imperial collection.

In his catalogue of the Imperial collection, von Mechel wrote that he had endeavoured to present a visible history of art. In his view, the gallery was conceived as a teaching collection, which visualised the history of art and functioned like a library. One of the strengths of the collection, according to von Mechel, was the fact that it possessed so many monuments of early art, which facilitated a deep chronological and developmental hang.<sup>3</sup> The rehang of the Imperial picture collection was widely discussed at the time. It had many admirers, as well as critics who regretted that the ability of a work to illustrate a particular moment in the history of art was valued over a work's allegedly timeless aesthetic quality.<sup>4</sup>

Visitors to the gallery could experience the developmental history of art from its so-called infancy to its maturity (to use Winckelmann's terminology), and they could compare works by artists of the same school and by the same artist. Each work was valued as a historical record, a monument, to use von Mechel's telling term. The gallery was a means to visualise these narratives and connections.

In both the Düsseldorf picture gallery, with its outstanding holdings of Rubens' work, and the Imperial picture collection displayed at the Belvedere in Vienna, comparative looking became possible and was indeed encouraged. Comparative analysis constitutes one of the founding practices of art history, which culminated in Heinrich Wölfflin's *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (*Principles of Art History*, 1915) and has remained standard practice in art history to this very day.

Central to the comparative approach, stylistic analysis shifted the investigation of art from a focus on individual artists and their oeuvres to a broader category of schools and styles, enabling attributions according to stylistic criteria. It also contributed to the formalisation of art-historical knowledge and the emergence of art history as a professional discipline.

This kind of comparative analysis, which focused on the study of an artist's development, depended on a collection that was rich in examples. Never was there a richer collection of artworks than the one at the Louvre amassed by the royal family and augmented during the French Revolution and the reign of Napoleon I. As Napoleon's armies conquered large swathes of Europe and reached as far as Egypt, they were accompanied by a train of administrators armed with well-researched wish lists, instructing them on what to loot and what to leave behind. In the wake of the Italian campaign of 1797 and subsequent campaigns, hundreds of crates filled with precious artworks poured into the Louvre. From 1802 onwards, the newly appointed director of the museum, Dominique-Vivant Denon, redisplayed the ever-growing collections. Writing to Napoleon, he explained the motivations for the new hang, which began with the works of Raphael:

3 Christian von Mechel. *Verzeichniß der Gemälde der Kaiserlich Königlich Bilder Gallerie in Wien*. Vienna, 1783, 5.

4 For an account of the reception of the Vienna rehang, see Debora J. Meijers. *Kunst als Natur: Die Habsburger Gemäldegalerie in Wien um 1780*. Schriften des Kunsthistorischen Museums 2. Milan: Skira, 1995, 138f.



*It is a life of the master of all painters. The first time you walk through this gallery, I hope you will find that this exercise [i.e., the new hang] already brings a character of order, instruction, and classification. I will continue in the same spirit for all the schools, and in a few months, while visiting the gallery one will be able to have... a history course in the art of painting.<sup>5</sup>*

Denon's hang followed the new practice of arranging works according to schools. The depth of the Louvre's growing collections allowed the arrangement of works to focus also on individual artistic development. In the case of Raphael, it showed the influence of his master Perugino, the gradual articulation of his own style, culminating in the late work, *The Transfiguration* (1516–20), then regarded as Raphael's greatest artistic achievement.

In Maria Cosway's print we can glimpse the actual distribution of these works on the gallery wall. Arranged symmetrically and centred around *The Transfiguration*, we see two works by Perugino top left and right. Beneath those are two works by Raphael, *The Coronation of the Virgin* (1502–04) and the *La Belle Jardinière* (1507), which flank *The Transfiguration*. The predella panels and portrait below demonstrate the gradual development and range of Raphael's oeuvre. Together the pictures displayed in this bay form an art-history lesson, demonstrating the influences, progression and breadth of an artist's career.

The visitor was able to scan the pictures vertically and read influence, or horizontally and comprehend development. For all its art-historical didacticism, the hang also remained symmetrical and indebted to earlier forms of decorative display. Denon's confident and art-historically compelling arrangement of Raphael's works can be read as a visualisation of Vasari's biographical and developmental narrative and formed part of the museum's larger project of offering panoramic displays of the history of art.

## Fictional spaces of artistic encounter: visualising tradition

The admiration for Raphael found quite unexpected and surreal expression in the novel, *Outpourings of an Art-Loving Friar*, which Wilhelm Wackenroder co-wrote with Ludwig Tieck and published in 1797. The novel belongs to the new Romantic genre of the *Künstlerroman*, which helped to popularise the figure of the artist and his – for mostly the protagonist in these novels was a he – struggle for artistic fulfilment. The art-loving monk, the novel's central character, longs for an intense engagement with the art of the past. His aesthetic judgements follow Vasari's and chime with more recent ideas expressed by the followers of the Romantic movement.

The monk idolises the work of Raphael and of the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer. In the following scene he demonstrates an extraordinary desire to identify pictures with their makers. After a visit to a princely picture gallery in which the art-loving monk delights in seeing the works by Raphael and Dürer displayed side by side, the narrator dreams that he returned to the gallery at night. As he approaches, low murmurings emanated from within. On entering the gallery, he finds a group of artists from the past in conversation over their works.

At the far end of the gallery, the narrator spots Raphael and Dürer standing side by side, holding hands, and silently contemplating each other's pictures. The awestruck narrator approaches, too frightened to address the divine Raphael but determined to greet 'my' Albrecht and 'pour forth my love for him'.<sup>6</sup> With a jolt he awakes. In an attempt to salvage the dream's after-image, he turns to the pages of Vasari's *Lives* and is delighted to discover 'in

5 Quoted in Andrew McClellan. *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California University Press, 1994 [1999], 140.

6 Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck. *Outpourings of an Art-Loving Friar*. Translated from German and with an introduction by Edward Mornin. New York: Ungar, 1975 [original in German, *Herzergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders*, 1797], 57 and the following quotation.

Adolphe Best, *A view of the interior of the Hemicycle with spectators admiring the mural painting by Paul Delaroche in the Salle des Prix of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, 1858*, wood-engraving, 32.3cm x 48.9cm, a double-page plate published in *L'Illustration* 17 April 1858, pp. 248–49.

British Museum

Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0



Detail of Paul Delaroche's mural *Hemicycle*, 1840–41, in the Salle des Prix of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, depicting Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and Michelangelo

Photo: Bridgeman Images



the writings of old Vasari how during their lifetimes these two sublime painters, though they never met, had become friends through their works'. He finds in Vasari the vindication for his fantasy of friendship between two of Romanticism's most revered artists, Dürer and Raphael.

The monk's dream articulates a longing for a dialogue with the past that goes well beyond the contemplation of works hung side by side on the gallery wall. The gallery is a dream space that transcends time and comes alive with the artists of the past. It holds the promise of transhistorical exchange, of contemporary artistic production that is conversant with the past. The desire to establish a dialogue with the art of the past and to visualise tradition became central to the museums and academies of the 19th century.

The relationship between past and present is perhaps most stunningly visualised in Paul Delaroche's *Hemicycle* (1840–41). This monumental mural, executed in oils, adorns the curved back wall of the Salle des Prix (also known as the Salle de la Distribution), the auditorium which hosts the annual prize-giving ceremony of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris. It depicts a gathering of artists, from antiquity to the early 18th century, and comprises 75, larger than life-size figures. These include painters, sculptors, engravers and architects. At the centre of Delaroche's composition sit three figures from Greek antiquity: the architect Iktinos, the painter Apelles and the sculptor Phidias. At their feet kneels the genius of the arts who is about to distribute laurel wreaths to the students of the École des Beaux-Arts. To the

left gather the painters who were particularly esteemed for their use of colour, among them prominently Titian, Rembrandt, and Rubens. These are followed by a group of mostly Italian and French sculptors which includes Cellini, Donatello and Goujon. To the right of the central group the architects have assembled, among them Brunelleschi, Palladio, and Mansart. These are followed by a second group of painters, mostly of the Roman and Florentine schools, and hailed for their draughtsmanship. These include the revered triad of Leonardo da Vinci in a burgundy-coloured velvet cloak, the dazzling Raphael, dressed all in white, and the brooding Michelangelo, a lone genius with few pupils or followers.

The mural dramatises a 'figured history of art', which makes visible long-established academic traditions of master-pupil relationships, of different schools, and of the struggle between colour and line that continued to dominate 19th-century academic discourse.<sup>7</sup> The academic tradition is fully visualised as a history of men – not a single female artist is represented – and at the same time it is localised. French artists proudly take second place behind the Italians who predictably dominate, especially those of the Florentine school. Inspired by the value judgements of the Romantic era, prominence is also given to the German Dürer, easily recognisable with his red hair and beard, who gazes at Raphael from amidst the Italian painters.

In the Salle des Prix the architect Félix Dubin and Delaroche created art history's paradigmatic dream space, which placed its protagonists in direct relation to one of Raphael's most hallowed works. It explicitly references *The Disputation of the Holy Sacrament* (1509–10) and thus elevates the contemporary practice of art to a secular religion. Time and space were here far from dead. Instead they joined forces to create art-historical theatre. The *Hemicycle* constitutes a fantastic visualisation of art history configured in Vasari's terms as a history of artists.

## The public art museum: framing histories of art

In his *Précis des leçons d'architecture données à l'École Polytechnique* (*Précis of the Lectures on Architecture*, 1802–05), Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, a pupil of the architectural visionary and influential teacher, Etienne Louis Boullée, and himself Professor of Architecture at the École Polytechnique, presented a modular design for an art museum, which became the blueprint for many early 19th-century museums of art. He conceived a universal museum focusing on the arts of painting, sculpture and architecture. The design simultaneously combined and separated the art forms it contained, allocating to each one wing, plus a fourth wing to temporary exhibitions.

Durand envisaged his museum as a repository of diverse treasures and complex knowledge, which required 'the calm that must prevail' in a library in order to study the collections.<sup>8</sup> Alongside the main display galleries Durand arranged a suite of '*cabinets des artistes*'. Although he does not explain the function of these small square rooms, it seems likely that they were intended as study spaces for artists. The museum was therefore conceived as a space for the contemplation of art and the training of artists. Many museums had designated days for artists to copy works in the collections, undisturbed by the general public. The practice of copying encouraged trans-historical encounters and reworkings of iconic works and integrated living artists into the museum.

In the early decades of the 19th century, purpose-built museums proliferated. They were often designed for specific collections and detailed attention was paid to the ways in which the architecture and the decoration schemes framed the exhibits. From the many possible examples this essay focuses on just three, each of which offered a clearly articulated and ambitious frame for its collections.

7 Stephen Bann. *Paul Delaroche: History Painted*. London: Reaktion Books, 1997, 203.

8 Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand. *Précis of the Lectures on Architecture*. With introduction by Antoine Picon and translated by David Britt. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2000 [original in French *Précis des leçons d'architecture données à l'École Polytechnique*, 1802–05], 161.

## Frame I: the classical

The Glyptothek in Munich was the first museum to be directly modelled on Durand's design. It was also the first of three museums that Ludwig I of Bavaria commissioned when he was still crown prince. The Glyptothek, a museum of sculpture, opened to the public in 1830. In 1836, the Pinakothek, a picture gallery for old masters, followed, and in 1853 the gallery for contemporary art, the Neue Pinakothek, completed the triad. The focus on sculpture, painting and the contemporary partly acknowledged Durand's claims for a universal museum but answered that claim with the construction of separate buildings focused on their respective collections.

The architect Leo von Klenze modelled the Glyptothek on Durand's four-square, single-storey design, creating a linear route through the crown prince's private collection of ancient sculpture. The arrangement visualised Winckelmann's chronology of ancient art that he had developed in his seminal *The History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764). The itinerary unfolded clockwise. Starting with examples of Ancient Egyptian sculpture, it led through the phases of Greek sculpture as identified by Winckelmann, and continued with sculptures and busts from Ancient Rome, before culminating in the display of contemporary neo-classical works by the likes of Antonio Canova, Bertel Thorvaldsen, Johann Gottfried Schadow and Christian Daniel Rauch.

The collection's strong emphasis on the classical and neo-classical was framed by a broader visualisation of the history of sculpture, which was embodied in the 18 monumental statues placed in niches on the exterior of the building.<sup>9</sup> These represented sculptors and were based on known likenesses or self-portraits. Those on the entrance façade drew on both Greco-Roman mythology and history: the god Hephaistos who works in metal, the Greek sculptor of the Parthenon marbles Phidias, and his patron, the Athenian politician Pericles, the Roman emperor and patron Hadrian, the demi-god Prometheus, who according to legend created man from clay, and the mythological inventor and sculptor in wood Daedalos.

The choice of figures acknowledged the importance of patronage and represented the making of sculpture in wood, clay, stone and metal. Pericles to the left and Hadrian to the right of the main entrance respectively, signified the Greek and Roman wings of the collection that awaited the visitor. The west façade showed six Renaissance sculptors in chronological order: Ghiberti, Donatello, Peter Vischer the Elder, Michelangelo, Cellini, and Giovanni da Bologna. The east façade presented the contemporary sculptors Canova, Thorvaldsen (who modelled his own likeness), Rauch, Pietro Tenerani, Gibson, and Ludwig Michael Schwanthaler.

The exterior of the Glyptothek in Munich, 1868, stereoscopic image. Photographer Charles Gaudin, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Photo: Rijksmuseum, CC0 1.0



<sup>9</sup> See Heinrich Sieveking. 'Materialien zu Programm und Entstehung des Skulpturenschmucks am Außenbau der Glyptothek', in Klaus Vierneisel and Gottfried Leinz (eds.), *Die Glyptothek München: 1830–1980*. München: Prestel-Verlag, 1980, 234–55.



The Renaissance period is predictably dominated by Italians, while the contemporary ranges more broadly to include two Italians, two Germans, a Dane and a Welshman.

The Glyptothek was a shrine to the classical tradition in sculpture and its contemporary neo-classical revival. Both its decoration and collection sidestepped intervening periods to construct an unbroken tradition of the classical. The Renaissance was acknowledged only on the façade. The project also demonstrated a strong interest in recent archaeological scholarship, which had established that ancient sculpture had originally been painted and that the pediments of ancient buildings had been decorated with free-standing sculptures rather than with reliefs. This was evidently the case with the famous Parthenon sculptures, which had been on public view in London since 1806. The sculptures on the pediment of the Glyptothek present the various branches of sculpture production, including working on a Corinthian capital, sculpting a figure, applying a finishing coat of paint to a sculpture, modelling and painting pots.

For the Glyptothek, reference to Greek pediment sculpture was particularly important because in 1812 Crown Prince Ludwig had acquired the pediment sculptures of the Temple of Aphaia on the Greek island of Aegina. They were a rare find and one of the museum's star exhibits. The connection between the representation of sculpture, its production, decoration, and contemporary restoration was most fully exemplified in the crown prince tasking Thorvaldsen with completing the pediment sculptures using the fragments of the Aphaia temple.<sup>10</sup> The fragments of the past were made whole by one of the great contemporary sculptors. This truly represented the continuation of tradition. Time and space were far from dead. They were collapsed in the present, which was imbued with the achievements of the past.

## Frame II: celebrating Raphael and the High Renaissance

From 1824 onwards Ludwig, by then King of Bavaria, was planning a gallery for the public display of the royal picture collection, the Pinakothek. Once again, von Klenze was charged with the design of the building. To highlight the importance of the Italian Renaissance in the history of painting, the architect opted for a Renaissance idiom. Access to the gallery was from the narrow east-facing side. The visitor ascended the staircase and arrived in the *Stiftersaal* (hall of patrons) which celebrated the patronage of the Wittelsbach, Bavaria's ruling family. From here a sequence of large, top-lit gallery spaces unfolded, containing large works. These galleries were flanked on the north by side-lit cabinets designed to accommodate smaller works. Johann Georg von Dillis, the gallery's director, arranged the collection in broadly chronological order and by schools, presenting a history of art according to Vasari's developmental narrative and with an emphasis on national schools that had by then become the norm for gallery hangs. He also separated out the collection's exceptional holdings. The stunning array of works by Rubens, many of which had come from Düsseldorf via Wittelsbach descent, were given prominence by placing them in the central gallery. The Italian schools von Dillis placed towards the end of the itinerary, arguing that collection displays required the drama of anticipation.

Alongside the central galleries ran a corridor, which von Klenze had modelled on Raphael's Loggia at the Vatican Palace that the artist had decorated together with his pupils. This was just one of the many references to Raphael expressed in the building. The foundation stone was laid in 1826 on 7 April, believed to be the artist's birthday.<sup>11</sup> Peter von Cornelius designed a decoration scheme for the corridor's 25 domed bays, which showed scenes from the lives of famous artists and offered a history of art that pitted the Southern schools against those of the North. Hovering high above the visitor, the frescoes occupied the cupola

10 Raimund Wünsche. 'Ludwigs Skulpturenwerbungen für die Glyptothek', in Klaus Vierneisel and Gottfried Leinz (eds.), *Die Glyptothek München: 1830–1980*. München: Prestel-Verlag, 1980, 67–72.

11 Peter Böttger. *Die Alte Pinakothek in München. Architektur, Ausstattung und museales Programm*. Munich: Prestel-Verlag 1972, 467. Quoting from the preface to the first catalogue written by Johann Georg von Dillis.



The exterior of the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, 1868, stereoscopic image. Photographer Charles Gaudin, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Photo: Rijksmuseum, CC0 1.0



Johann Poppel, *Alte Pinakothek in Munich*, engraving, published in 1854 in *München mit seinen Umgebungen vorzüglich in geschichtlicher Beziehung. Mit vierzehn Bildern*, by Johann Michael von Söttl British Library

Photo: British Library

No known copyright restriction

and the north-wall lunette of each bay. Ernst Joachim Förster, the German painter, art critic and one-time pupil of Cornelius, dubbed the scheme a history of painting in pictures and commended Cornelius to have acquitted himself of this difficult task with poetic flair and imagination.<sup>12</sup> But Förster also criticised the lack of linearity in the decoration scheme and in the arrangement of the collections.

The frescoes in the corridor's 25 bays presented the history of both the Southern and Northern schools. The respective narratives unfolded chronologically and converged in the middle bay. Twelve bays were decorated with episodes from the lives of artists of the Southern schools based on Vasari's *Lives*, and the other 12 showed scenes representing artists of the Northern schools selected mainly from the texts by von Mander and Sandrart.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ernst Förster. *Briefe über Malerei in Bezug auf die königlichen Gemäldesammlungen zu Berlin, Dresden und München*. Stuttgart and Tübingen: Verlag der F.G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1838, 142.

<sup>13</sup> Gisela Goldberg. 'Ursprüngliche Ausstattung und Bilderhängung der Alten Pinakothek', in *Ihm, Welcher der Andacht Tempel baut ...': Ludwig I. und die Alte Pinakothek. Festschrift zum Jubiläumsjahr 1986*. München: Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen München, 1986, 163.



**View of the Alte Pinakothek loggia in 1930, before the destruction in the Second World War.**

**Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich**

Photo: © bpk / Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen

The final bay dedicated to the Northern schools focused on the life of Rubens, whose work played such an important role in the Munich collection.

The adjoining central bay, which provided the conceptual focal point of the scheme, contained scenes from the life of Raphael. The lunette showed Raphael's death in the manner of a Christian lamentation. The biblical figures have been replaced with famous artists, among them Michelangelo and Raphael's star pupil Giulio Romano. *La Fornarina* bends over her dead lover in an expressive gesture of grief traditionally associated with Mary Magdalene, and Pope Leo X, with members of his household, has come to pay his last respects. In the background one can just make out Raphael's final work, *The Transfiguration*, which was regarded as the pinnacle of academic achievement. The high point of painting and the master of all painters were thus at the centre of the scheme.

The celebration of Raphael is crucial to an understanding of the building's pictorial scheme and was also evident in the organisation of the collection. Dillis deliberately placed the works of the Italian schools at the far end of the gallery for the visitor to traverse the entire collection before encountering the prized works by Raphael. These were located in the very last room, which Dillis called 'a kind of Tribuna', referencing the famous space at the heart of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence which contained the best of the Medici collection.<sup>14</sup> From here there

was no way forward, no progression. After due contemplation and reverence, visitors had to retrace their steps. Raphael's works were a destination, not a stop along the way.

In highlighting the achievements of Raphael and the High Renaissance, the Pinakothek presented a history of art that followed the academic paradigm. Since the days of Vasari, this version of art history had been understood to have already witnessed its glory days. The work of Raphael was not to be surpassed. Ever since the early 16th century, artists had been late-comers, imitators, followers, at best refiners of a synthesised ideal of art. Hence the Pinakothek's deliberate focus on the High Renaissance created a challenge for the display of its collection and for its pictorial scheme, resulting in a convoluted itinerary and a fragmented chronology.

The obvious contradictions that the focus on the High Renaissance created were somewhat minimised in a further programmatic scheme, which placed statues of famous artists on the south façade like saints on top of a church. The 24 monumental sculptures, by Ludwig Michael Schwanthaler, represented artists of the German, Netherlandish, Spanish, French and Italian schools, thus picturing the sequence of schools as it unfolded inside the gallery.<sup>15</sup> However, the number of representatives allotted to each school was disproportionately weighted towards the Italians, 13 in total; the Germans came second with five statues. The scheme combined the ideal with the national, but was manifestly at odds with the actual holdings of the collection. The Pinakothek framed its collection as an ideal history of art, which celebrated the achievements of Raphael and the High Renaissance, and placed significant importance on German art.

<sup>14</sup> Böttger, *Die Alte Pinakothek in München*, 471. Quoting from the preface to the first catalogue written by Johann Georg von Dillis.

<sup>15</sup> Goldberg, 'Ursprüngliche Ausstattung und Bilderhänger der Alten Pinakothek', 140. Quoting from Johann Georg von Dillis's original list.

### Frame III: towards a cultural history

In 1874, the architect and art writer, Gottfried Semper, proposed a detailed plan for the programme of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.<sup>16</sup> The museum was to house the Imperial collections, which were exceptionally wide ranging and included artifacts from Ancient Egypt and the Middle East, antiquities from Ancient Greece and Rome, the Imperial armoury, European decorative arts, prints and drawings, and European old-master paintings.

Semper was adamant that the architectural display had to reflect the collections, hence he proposed a scheme which focused on a broad history of culture, context and epochs. On the four sides of the building the history of Western culture unfolds horizontally, spanning classical antiquity to the present. Across the building's two long façades, back and front, Antiquity and the Renaissance face each other. The shorter façades are given to the intervening epochs – Byzantine, Romanesque, and Gothic – and on the opposite side, facing the Ringstrasse, the present. Thus the now traditionally important epochs, classical antiquity and the Renaissance, dominate. The façades can also be read vertically. On each storey an essential driver of cultural production – which Semper considered to be the material and intellectual contexts, and individual motivation – was visualised.

The ground-floor reliefs focused on the materials and techniques used in artistic production, such as oil-painting, stained glass, and the laying of mosaics. The first floor presented a wide range of intellectual influences personified in mythological, fictional and historical figures, including important patrons of the arts such as Alexander the Great, Lorenzo di Medici, Pope Leo X, and several Holy Roman emperors, who prefigured the then current Habsburg dynasty. The first-floor decoration also contained personifications of cities that were considered to be important centres of cultural production.

The top-floor scheme celebrated individual contributions to the production of art with monumental statues of artists, drawing from classical antiquity to the then present. This vastly expanded time-frame of representation meant that securing a place in the scheme became more contested, and the canon of all-time greats thus contracted. On the main façade of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, the long Renaissance has made room only for Giotto, Jan van Eyck, Dürer and Raphael standing side by side, Michelangelo, Titian, Rubens and Holbein.<sup>17</sup>

The interior of the museum makes use of the grandiose architectural setting to create theatrical spaces that stage a broad history of art. The vestibule erupts in a spectacular dome that is crowned by a round opening through which a further domed space is glimpsed. The oculus references the Pantheon in Rome, antiquity's best-preserved edifice and the final resting place of art history's hero, Raphael. The entrance hall thus immediately invokes the sacred spaces of antiquity, Christianity, and art, making the museum itself a sacred space.

The references to the Renaissance continue into the entrance hall with busts of Renaissance artists representing the main branches of the arts: the architect Bramante, Michelangelo as sculptor, the painter Raphael, and Cellini as ambassador of the decorative arts. The space glimpsed through the oculus, the Kuppelsaal, celebrates Habsburg rulers as the patrons of the arts, literally implying that behind every great artist there is a generous patron.

The Renaissance theme also dominates the space beyond the entrance hall.<sup>18</sup> Above the monumental staircase floats Mihály von Munkácsy's vertiginous oil painting, *The Apotheosis of the Renaissance* (1888). Its architectural setting echoes that of the domed entrance hall and simultaneously extends the upward sweep of the monumental staircase. A figure wearing some kind of Renaissance dress, with one hand on the banister to steady

16 Gottfried Semper. 'Entwurf eines Programmes für die bildnerische Decoration der Façaden des K.K. Museums für Kunst und Althertum' [1874]. Reprinted in Beatrix Kriller and Georg Kugler, *Das Kunsthistorische Museum: Die Architektur und Ausstattung*. Vienna: Edition Christian Brandstätter, 1991, 67–69.

17 For succinct schemas of the decoration scheme, see Cäcilia Bischoff. *Das Kunsthistorische Museum: Baugeschichte, Architektur, Dekoration*. Vienna: Brandstätter Verlag, 2008.

18 Beatrix Kriller. 'Das Vestibül, das grosse Stiegenhaus und die Kuppelhalle', in Beatrix Kriller and Georg Kugler, *Das Kunsthistorische Museum: Die Architektur und Ausstattung*. Vienna: Edition Christian Brandstätter, 1991, 211–65.





**Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, built between 1871 and 1891**

Photo: Nico Kaiser, CC BY-NC 2.0

himself, the other outstretched to indicate the awe at the vision unfolding above him, ascends the steep stairs. Placed on the threshold that straddles the museum's physical space and an art-historical dreamspace reminiscent of the one that Wackenroder's art-loving monk occupied, this figure takes the museum visitor into a fictional space that transcends time.

From the painting's large oculus the figures of Fame and Glory descend on a studio in which some of the most famous artists of the Renaissance are busy at work. In the foreground, Leonardo and Raphael are seen in intense conversation. To their right sits Michelangelo in melancholy isolation, mallet in hand. Behind them Veronese is working on a large canvas. Close by, Titian is instructing a pupil in the study of the nude. At the back of the composition an artist is showing his work to his patron, Pope Julius II. Discussion, work, instruction and interaction with a patron define the life of the artist. The triad of Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo together with the exponents of colour, Titian and Veronese, powerfully embody the tenets of the academic paradigm. Von Munkácsy's *Apotheosis of the Renaissance* reiterates an established Vasarian version of art history but shifts the emphasis from the celebration of the individual artist to a more general representation of artistic practices and art-historical periods, and a focus on the patrons of art. The painting celebrates the Renaissance, not Raphael.

The painting's dizzying space remains virtually inaccessible to the viewer, suggesting a relationship with the past that is different to the one articulated in Delaroche's *Hemicycle*, in which the artists of the past were present in the moment of the academy's prize-giving ceremony. In von Munkácsy's work the spatial illusion presents art history as both a celebrated quasi-sacred practice and one that is distinctly of the past. The Renaissance has become an art-historical period, one among many, as the full decoration scheme of the staircase demonstrates with its representations of other art-historical periods, running the whole gamut from Ancient Egypt to the Rococo. On the walls of the staircase a broad history of art unfolds, which maps onto and augments the chronology displayed on the four façades of the building. The overall scheme of the Kunsthistorisches Museum thus frames its collections as both cultural history and a history of period styles. Representation and narration no longer rely exclusively on the figure of the artist.



Mihály von Munkácsy,  
*The Apotheosis of the  
 Renaissance*, 1888, fresco  
 (detail)  
 Kunsthistorisches Museum,  
 Vienna

Photo: Bridgeman Images

Nevertheless, the artist continues to be central to the visualisation of the history of art. Often the decoration scheme spoke to notions of an established canon, which gained specificity through the inclusion of local artists or artists whose work was strongly represented in a museum's collection. The schemes inflected an established tradition in ways typical of their time and place. By combining canonical artists with local heroes and patrons, they help to visualise an ideal artistic tradition, as well as imperial, national and local identities.

The scheme for the South Court of the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) in London, executed in the 1860s, included British figures, such as the architects Inigo Jones and Christopher Wren, the wood carver Grinling Gibbons, the painters William Hogarth and Joshua Reynolds, as well as the Irish painter William Mulready, alongside the likes of more familiar artists, such as Giotto, the ubiquitous Raphael, Holbein, and Titian. At the National Gallery in Berlin, figures of famous Germans representing a range of disciplines and professions are placed on a frieze in the stairwell. Here a broader cultural frame is focused narrowly on the representation of nationhood.

Thus the museum's walls form an integral part of the construction of a history of art. A more recent invocation of such a tradition is to be found in the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London, which opened in 1991. The names of canonical artists are incised on the wall which flanks the staircase leading to the first-floor galleries of the medieval and early Renaissance collections. Vasari's history of art as a history of artists lives on. And women are yet to enter the pantheon.