

From Royalty to Bourgeoisie: Exploring the Altes Museum

The Altes Museum or Old Museum was constructed in Berlin between 1824-30 by Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841). Originally known as the “Königliches Museum,” it was commissioned by King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia for the purpose of being the first public art museum in Prussia as well as the first royal museum. As the relationship in the 19th century changed between art, the observer, and who should be a part of that experience, the Altes Museum was erected to embody the idea of Berlin as a center of learning and culture, and to elevate its citizens in the presence of art.

The Berlin Museum emerged from a small group of the ruling class and it was first officially demanded and proclaimed by the Art Academy under Friedrich Wilhelm II. (Das Berliner Museum entsteht aus einer kleinen Gruppe der herrschenden Schicht. Öffentlich wurde es zuerst gefordert und verkundet... in der Kunstakademie unter Friedrich Wilhelm II.)¹ After the Wars of Liberation, his son, King Friedrich Wilhelm III, continued to advocate for the foundation of a public art museum to display the collection of artifacts that Prussia had amassed over the years. During the reign of Napoleon, Prussian art was forcefully taken to be displayed in Paris, which alerted the Prussian people that a permanent home to show off their national heritage was necessary.² While ideas for a museum were already in the air, it is safe to say that the main reason why construction started when it did was in response to Napoleon’s looting. In an attempt to add a cultural side to a predominantly military state, art history became a scholarly discipline, and the conservation of art an occupation, all while plans for the “Königliches Museum,” situated across the royal Lustgarten at the royal palace, were conceived.

¹ Stock, Friedrich. “Urkunden Zur Vorgeschichte des Berliner Museums.” *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 51, trans. Google Translate, pg. 205.

² Gaehtgens, Thomas W. “Altes Museum, Berlin: Building Prussia’s First Modern Museum.” In *The First Modern Museums of Art: The Birth of an Institution in 18th and early 19th century Europe*, edited by Carole Paul, 285-301. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012

The design of the Altes Museum fell to one of the most well-established architects of the day. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, who had already designed the Prussian Iron Cross in 1813, and who was raised during a period where civic virtue dominated society. Working with the philosophies of Humboldt in mind, Schinkel wanted to create a building that embraced Greek and Roman culture so that those who entered would be thrust into an intellectual environment that would mold their personalities to reflect the highest ideals and raise Prussia to the peak of classical civilizations.³ As stated in an article from the *London Times* in regards to the museum, “There are Roman, Greek, and Egyptian halls, perfect in their way.”⁴ In true Neoclassical fashion, the Altes Museum features a large colonnade with a staircase behind that leads into the museum.⁵ While on the upper level, one can look out at the Berlin cityscape, which perfectly shows off the museum’s integration into the urban setting. From there, one enters into a rotunda with a coffered dome ceiling containing Corinthian columns with classical statues in between. Both the interior and exterior design of the museum encapsulate the civilizing effects of art upon the nation. Looking like a Greek temple or the Pantheon, the Altes Museum became the model of the new Prussian aesthetic. Shortly after the completion of the museum in 1830, the king of Prussia had commissioned one of the most famous sculptors of the age, Bertel Thorwaldsen, to give the museum a commanding presence and to make it known that this new royal museum would be purchasing works from some of the most respected galleries in Europe.⁶

Until 1845, the Altes Museum was called the Royal Museum or Königliches Museum. This changed when the link between the high art of antiquity and the inner feelings of the German *Volk* began

³ Ilse-Neuman, Ursula. “Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Berlin Cast Iron.” In *Cast Iron From the Central Europe, 1800-1850*, edited by Elisabeth Schuttermeier and Derek E. Ostergard. Bard Graduate Center: New York, 1994, pg. 58.

⁴ “Prussia (From Our Own Correspondent)” *London Times*, September 8th, 1852, pg. 6.

⁵ Reusink, Jan-Willem. Photo of the *Altes Museum south façade*, Berlin, Germany, 1830. Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841), <https://www.inexhibit.com/mymuseum/altes-museum-berlin/>.

⁶ “Miscellany” *Coventry Standard*, July, 2nd, 1841.

to change. Self-cultivation or *Bildung* was key to bourgeois society, and at this time the people wished to do away with the monarchy and establish a state based on a constitution. Faced with censorship, suppression, and lack of representation, the location of the Altes Museum turned it into the embodiment of bourgeois values due to it being opposite from the royal Lustgarten.⁷ While still meant to cultivate the middle-class, the museum turned into a sanctuary where people were free from political conflicts. While the classical ideal was meant to keep a well-ordered society, the Prussian people turned the museum from originally being a representation of Prussian royal power, to a symbol of liberal nationalism.

⁷ Bilsel, Can. *Antiquity on Display: Regimes of the Authentic in Berlin's Pergamon Museum*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pg. 72.

Annotated Bibliography

Altes Museum: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. "About Us." *Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin*.
www.smb.museum/en/about-us/history.html.

This website is the page for the history of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. It discusses the creation of the museum system in Berlin and how Prussia has been dedicated to the preservation, study, and appreciation of art and culture for several hundred years.

Bilsel, Can. *Antiquity on Display: Regimes of the Authentic in Berlin's Pergamon Museum*, 56-72.
 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

This document discusses design examples represented in specific German museums of the period. It explains how certain architectural designs of the Altes Museum contributed to it being a model for other 19th century museum buildings. Moreover, it shows how the romantic classicism of the building was meant to create a link between the high art of antiquity and the inner feelings of the German *Volk*.

Gaetgens, Thomas W. "Altes Museum, Berlin: Building Prussia's First Modern Museum." In *The First Modern Museums of Art: The Birth of an Institution in 18th and Early 19th Century Europe*, edited by Carole Paul. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012, 285-301.

Found through the Melvyl search, this multi-author book discusses the evolution of the first public museums of art throughout Europe in the 18th and early 19th centuries and the standards these early museums set for all subsequent institutions of their kind. This specific 16-page chapter focuses on the Altes Museum and its cultural-political relationship between Friedrich Wilhelm III and his people.

Ilse-Neuman, Ursula. "Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Berlin Cast Iron." In *Cast Iron From the Central Europe, 1800-1850*, edited by Elisabeth Schuttermeier and Derek E. Ostergard. Bard Graduate Center: New York, 1994, 55-73.

This 22-page book chapter on the architect Schinkel discusses how his artistic vision guided the development of architecture in Berlin as well as throughout Prussia. The writing concludes with how Schinkel's work motivated people to take pride in Prussia's architectural and engineering achievements and to unify art and industry.

"Miscellany" *Coventry Standard*, July, 2nd, 1841.

Found in the British Newspaper Archive, this snippet of the *Coventry Standard* newspaper provides a bit of information regarding the first few years of the Altes Museum. It mentions the commissioning of Thorwaldsen and the attempt to obtain pieces from the gallery of a famous Vatican cardinal.

Moyano, Steven. "Quality Vs. History: Schinkel's Altes Museum and Prussian Arts Policy." *The Art Bulletin* 72, no. 4 (Dec 01, 1990): 585-608. doi:10.2307/3045763.

Taken from a JSTOR search, this 24-page article clarifies the original purpose of the Altes Museum and the goals of Prussian state patronage. It compares the building with the collects on display and how aesthetic standards (romantic) began to replace systematic, historical organization (classical).

Pierce, Brienne. "The History of The Altes Museum in 1 Minute." *Culture Trip*. April 7, 2016. <https://theculturetrip.com/europe/germany/articles/the-history-of-the-altes-museum-in-1-minute/>.

This article came from a quick web search of the Altes Museum. It contains a brief but important summary of why this museum was built and how it fits into the urban center in relation to the surrounding structures.

"Prussia (From Our Own Correspondent)" *London Times*, September 8th, 1852, pg. 6.

Found in the London Times Archive, this newspaper snippet discusses what is going on around Europe. The section on Prussia that deals with the Altes Museum explains how the museum ignores nationalist, Prussian art in favor of artifacts and pieces from antiquity.

Spender, Stephen. "The Significance of Schinkel." *Design Quarterly*, no. 154 (1992): 2-4. doi:10.2307/4091259.

Found through JSTOR, this 3-page article provides a romanticized vision of the mind of Schinkel through his travels and the way he designed his buildings. It focuses specifically on his travels and where he accrued ideas for his architectural works in Germany.

Reusink, Jan-Willem. Photo of the *Altes Museum south façade*, Berlin, Germany, 1830. Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841), <https://www.inexhibit.com/mymuseum/altes-museum-berlin/>.



Stock, Friedrich. “Urkunden Zur Vorgeschichte des Berliner Museums.” *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 51 (1930): 205-222. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23350479>.

This article was cited in the paper by Thomas W. Gaehtgens titled, “Altes Museum, Berlin: Building Prussia’s First Modern Museum.” Found through JSTOR, this 17-page document from a German’s perspective talks about the founding of the Altes Museum and what is on display from regions around the world. It notes the philosophies from the thinkers of the time that went into the ideas for the architecture and foundation of the building.