



Figure 1

Max Beckmann, *Self-Portrait in Tuxedo*, 1927, Oil on canvas, Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Association Fund, BR41.37

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Abstract
S.311

Lynette Roth

“OLD WORLD ART ON THE SOIL OF THE NEW”

PLASTER CASTS AND THE
GERMANIC MUSEUM
AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

WITHOUT QUESTION, the work of art most readily associated with Harvard’s Busch-Reisinger Museum is Max Beckmann’s iconic *Self-Portrait in Tuxedo* [Figure 1](#). The first modern painting to enter the museum’s collection—in 1941—it depicts the artist at the height of his fame in the late 1920s.¹ When it debuted in Berlin at the Secession exhibition in 1928 it was immediately recognized as a major work, one marking a new stylistic development in the artist’s use of large planes of colour, especially black.

While the Beckmann portrait may have been the first modern painting in the museum, the first painting to enter the collection—in 1909 and also a portrait—was another one entirely: it was a recent likeness of German Emperor Wilhelm II by the academic painter Arthur Kampf [Figure 2](#). Not unlike Beckmann, the Kaiser was a man with a



Figure 2

Arthur Kampf, Portrait of Emperor William II of Germany, 1908, Oil on canvas
Harvard Art Museums/Busch-Reisinger Museum, Gift of Mr. Hugo Reisinger, BR09.1

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penchant for portraits of himself and a love of costume. Seen here with his right arm also pressed against his side, the emperor wears the uniform of the Gardes du Corps; his high-dress helmet rests on the table. The gift of the portrait to the museum by one of its primary supporters, Hugo Reisinger, was highly symbolic. The painting had recently debuted at the first exhibition of contemporary German art in the United States at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the time, Wilhelm II was seeking to build a stronger relationship between Imperial Germany and the U.S. and an ideal opportunity had presented itself in the fledgling Busch-Reisinger, then the Germanic Museum.²

THE FOUNDATION OF A MUSEUM FOR GERMAN CULTURE AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY—PLASTER CASTS AS INSTRUMENTS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A GERMAN ARTISTIC CANON IN THE U.S.

In the late 1890s, a special committee, including the German-born Kuno Francke, had called for the foundation of a museum for German culture. A professor of German literature at Harvard, Francke believed this act to be a “necessity” if his field of study was “to defend itself against dominant English and French influence.”³ Although German was, until 1915, the most common language taught in the U.S. and the nation’s university system looked to German institutions as models, the average New Englander, as Francke saw it, knew little of German literature and nothing of German art.

In a report entitled “The Need for a Germanic Museum” Francke and two German department colleagues noted that such a museum would be “the first attempt to bring before the eyes of the American students a picture of early European and medieval civilization. It would, at the same time, be a worthy monument to the genius of a people which has had a large part in shaping the ideals of modern life and which has given to this country millions of devoted citizens.”⁴ Harvard’s President Charles William Eliot, himself the product of an exchange with the German university system, supported the endeavour, along with a number of influential Bostonians.

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Founded officially in 1903 as the Germanic Museum with Francke as its curator, the collection was to include only replicas, including electroplate reproductions and plaster casts of medieval and Renaissance sculptures and architectural stonework. Replicas would allow one to show, according to Francke, the “best of German art, even if only as reproductions.”⁵ Of course, plaster casts were commonly used at the time in American art academies and museums as they allowed for the three-dimensional study of masterpieces, particularly from Classical and Renaissance traditions. In this case, the museum initially sought to represent the “Germanic”—encompassing Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, England, Denmark and Scandinavia—in a consecutive manner beginning in the Neolithic age.

After learning of the initiative through political channels, Kaiser Wilhelm II contributed notably to the foundational collection, offering 22 plaster casts, among them major, large-scale reproductions of the Naumburg west choir screen (ca. 1250), the Freiberg Golden Portal (ca. 1230), and the Hildesheim bronze doors (1015).⁶ The selection, which also included founder statues from the Naumburg choir, among them Ekkehard and Uta, was made under the auspices of the Berlin museums and casts were produced in the Berlin workshop. Wilhelm von Bode, General Director of the Königliche Museen zu Berlin (Berlin Royal Museums) from 1905 on, had in 1887 published the first history of German sculpture, *Geschichte der deutschen Plastik* (in his capacity as Director of the Sculpture Department of the Königliche Museen zu Berlin). Bode also had close ties to the emperor, and his views, along with those of Richard Schöne, Bode’s predecessor in the post of General Director, influenced the group of casts at the heart of the new Germanic Museum.⁷ The selection and production of replicas can thus be seen to reflect a newly established national canon and, in the case of the Germanic Museum, one made for export abroad. The cast of the Naumburg choir screen, still extant today, was first made expressly for the Germanic Museum.⁸

While they were not considered to take the place of originals, the replicas functioned, in Francke’s own words,

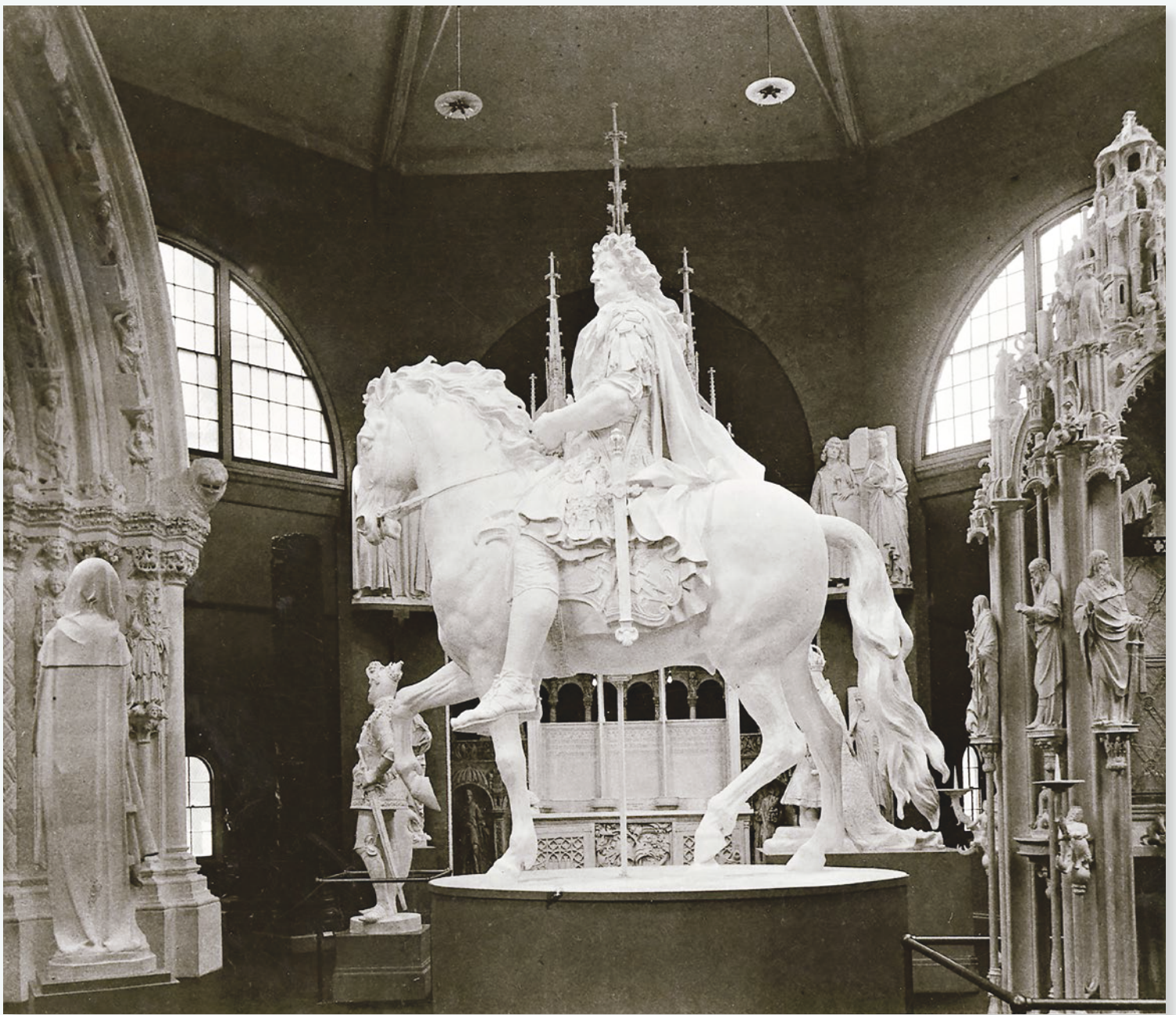


Figure 3 Interior view of Rogers Hall, ca. 1905, (former gymnasium, original location of the Germanic Museum, since destroyed)

Busch-Reisinger Museum Archive
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as “valuable auxiliaries in the historical study of art.” They were, from the museum’s very inception, intended to accompany slides of the originals, electrotype and print reproductions and photographs, as well as books in the museum’s library. By 1908 it was thought that the collection had the potential to be “the most significant representation of old world art on the soil of the new.”⁹

The new Germanic Museum was initially housed in Rogers Hall, a former gymnasium at Harvard [Figure 3](#).¹⁰ Here, the Kaiser’s gift of a cast of Andreas Schlüter’s 17th-century equestrian statue, *The Great Elector*, can be seen prominently displayed. Francke later disparaged Frederick Wilhelm I’s placement as “somewhat absurd,” riding as he was between the Freiberg portal and Naumburg choir



Figure 4 Interior view of Romanesque Hall, Adolphus Busch Hall, prior to 1931

Busch-Reisinger Museum Archive
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screen.¹¹ The initially more comprehensive aim for a more general Germanic tradition was revised to focus on German sculpture and architecture (notably, the focus of the imperial gift) as a result of lack of space and the necessary financing.¹²

The collection quickly outgrew its temporary home in Rogers Hall and Francke turned to a host of German-Americans in order to fund a major expansion. Only two would eventually come forward: Hugo Reisinger, who had gifted the Kaiser portrait to the museum and his uncle and father-in-law, the German immigrant and St. Louis beer magnate Adolphus Busch. Known in his own time as a “great friend of the German Emperor,” Busch had become president of the Germanic Museum Association in 1906 when the Emperor William Fund was established by the American Friends of the Germanic Museum in honour of the Kaiser’s silver wedding anniversary.



Figure 5 Interior view of Renaissance Hall, Adolphus Busch Hall, 1928

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The new Germanic Museum was built with the museum's plaster cast collection in mind. Busch had insisted on a German architect and, in keeping with Francke's understanding as a cultural historian, historicist architect German Bestelmeyer employed different styles in his 1910 design to evoke—even if in a general sense—the settings of the original artworks. The building's main hall resembles the nave of a medieval church, complete with barrel vault, massive pillars, and chapel-like spaces.

The building, known as Adolphus Busch Hall, was completed in 1917, but, in light of anti-German sentiment and Francke's absence, its opening was postponed until 1921. When the museum did open, visitors were greeted in the main hall, as they are to this day, by the Kaiser's gift of the Freiberg Golden Portal, which marked the transition from the Romanesque to the Gothic [Figure 4](#). The northwest wing of the building suggested a Renaissance style with



Figure 6 'Max Beckmann' exhibition, Germanic Museum, Adolphus Busch Hall, 1949

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Figure 8 Interior view, Adolphus Busch Hall, after 1959

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The Great Elector again prominently displayed. Like the other sculptural and architectural casts, the Schlüter replica had been tinted in the interim as a means to better mimic the material of its original, here bronze

Figure 5 .

Around the very same time that the Germanic Museum was beginning to build such a collection in earnest, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which had amassed a considerable cast col-

lection, had altered its policy and sought to acquire only original works of art. The Museum of Fine Arts Boston and the Germanic Museum's sister institution at Harvard, the Fogg, soon followed. Such a change would be slow in coming to the Germanic Museum—occurring officially only with Francke's successor and the museum's second curator, Charles Kuhn, in 1930. In addition to a selection of its foundational collection of reproductions, the Busch-Reisinger now holds nearly 40,000 works of art dating from the seventh century to the present day. In the post-war period, in order to make room for originals, medieval and modern, plaster casts were largely removed from display—*The Great Elector* being among the first to go.

THE CHANGING FACE(S) OF THE BUSCH-REISINGER MUSEUM AND THE CANON(S) OF ART FROM THE GERMAN-SPEAKING WORLD

By 1949, which saw a major touring exhibition of the work of Max Beckmann at the museum, Renaissance Hall was devoid of plaster casts **Figure 6** . Only in the transept between the Gothic and the Renaissance can Beckmann's self-portrait be seen, flanked on either side by plaster casts of 13th-century *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* figures from Strasbourg Cathedral **Figure 7** . The new "face" of the collection—that of defamed and exiled German artist Max Beckmann—is here framed, literally, by the museum's historic holdings and its institutional past. Not coincidentally, the

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two “exquisite” figures represented, for Francke, both the height of medieval sculpture and what he saw as its imminent decline into “extravagant emotion and artificiality.”¹³ This image thus epitomizes the changing face(s) of the Busch-Reisinger Museum and the canon(s) of art from the German-speaking world.

Although casts from the Germanic Museum, which was re-named the Busch-Reisinger in 1950, were de-accessioned in the 1960s, a core collection, including nearly all from the imperial gift, remained. Until the late 1980s, the museum showed its plaster casts, albeit in drastically reduced numbers, in direct dialogue with original works of art. While larger casts, such as the Freiberg portal, were (as Bestelmeyer had intended) embedded in the building’s very architecture, such combinations were not solely the forced—as Francke called it “absurd”—cohabitation of centuries and styles. For example, an undated photograph shows a cast of the Werden crucifix (made in the Berlin Gipsformerei and not acquired by Francke, but by his successor, Kuhn, in 1933) in close proximity to Renée Sintenis’ *Daphne* **Figure 8**. Such a willed interaction can be under-

stood as an attempt to integrate more broadly defined notions of culture and those of art, the reproduction and the original, the medieval and the modern, to complicate a strict chronological or stylistic approach to museum installation and teaching.¹⁴ Once the Busch-Reisinger Museum relocated to its first updated



Figure 7

‘Max Beckmann’ exhibition, Germanic Museum, Adolphus Busch Hall, 1949

Busch-Reisinger Museum Archive
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museum facility in 1991, such links to a common tradition were largely lost. Adolphus Busch Hall and the collection still on view there became an all-too-well-concealed “hidden treasure.”

Committed to the study of its foundational collection as key to the museum's identity and its teaching and research mission to this day, the Busch-Reisinger began a multi-phase project for the revitalization of its historic building and plaster casts in 2012.

REDISCOVERING PLASTER CAST COLLECTIONS AS AN IMPORTANT RESOURCE FOR THE MUSEUM'S SELF-CONCEPTION, IDENTITY AND MISSION

Art museum interest in plaster cast collections may have waned dramatically in the United States in the course of the 20th century, but, more and more, such holdings are being “re-discovered” as an important resource. Specifically in the case of the Germanic Museum, plaster casts are integral to understanding its role in the establishment of a German artistic canon in the U.S.¹⁵ Committed to the study of its foundational collection as key to the museum's identity and its teaching and research mission to this day, the Busch-Reisinger began a multi-phase project for the revitalization of its historic building and plaster casts in 2012. An initial renovation, including building updates, new signage, as well as the restoration of exhibited casts, has brought the hall back into the public imagination. In 2014, on the eve of the Busch-Reisinger's grand re-opening with its sister institutions, the Fogg and Sackler, in a new Renzo Piano-designed facility, scholars from Europe, the United States, and Canada gathered in Cambridge for a study day to discuss museums, museum histories, and art historiography through the lens of the Busch-Reisinger.¹⁶ A related museum tour, incorporating text, historical and comparative photographs, and faculty and curatorial video commentary, will soon also feature Adolphus Busch Hall. Available on the visitor's handheld device, the tour will explore issues of museum identity and mission, the purposes of collecting and the rationale of display, and art collecting as a pedagogical, art historical, and political project. A further project for the reinstallation of Adolphus Busch Hall is planned to ensure the plaster cast collection will remain a valuable teaching resource for faculty, students, and the general public.

- 1_ As has been widely documented, the painting was removed from the Nationalgalerie, Berlin, in 1937 or 1938 and sold abroad.
See <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/304344?position=0>
- 2_ See Franziska v. Ungern-Sternberg, *Kulturpolitik zwischen den Kontinenten: Deutschland und Amerika; das Germanische Museum in Cambridge/Mass.*, Cologne 1994.
- 3_ Kuno Francke, *Deutsche Arbeit in Amerika*, Leipzig 1930, p. 41.
For more on the museum's history, see Peter Nisbet and Emilie Norris, *The Busch-Reisinger Museum: History and Holdings*, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge/Mass. 1991; Guido Goldman, *A History of the Germanic Museum at Harvard University*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge/Mass. 1989; Reiner Pommerin, 'Die Gründung des Germanischen Museums an der Harvard Universität', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 61, 1979, pp. 420-430.
I hereby wish to acknowledge the seminal research done by Agnes Mongan, Curatorial Intern in the Busch-Reisinger Museum, Almut Trinius, and Stefan Engelhorn, Curatorial Fellow in the Busch-Reisinger Museum, Heidi Gearhart. Their work has greatly informed the Harvard Art Museums' ongoing revitalization of the Busch-Reisinger's foundational collection and its historic home. I also owe many thanks to Kathryn Brush and Jeffrey Hamburger for their commitment to the museum's plaster casts.
- 4_ 'The Need of a Germanic Museum at Harvard (1897)', reprinted in Nisbet/Norris (as note 3), p. 20.
- 5_ Francke (as note 3), p. 41.
- 6_ See Kuno Francke, 'Emperor William's Gift to Harvard', *International Studio*, 36, no. 141, 1908, pp. 13-18.
- 7_ For more on Bode and his impact on the formation of American collections, see Julien Chapuis, 'Bode und Amerika: Eine komplexe Beziehung', *Jahrbuch Preussischer Kulturbesitz*, 43, 2006, pp. 143-176.
- 8_ Kathryn Brush, 'Naumburg und Cluny: Vergleichende Internationalitätsbegriffe in der europäischen und amerikanischen Kunstwissenschaft um 1920', *Der Naumburger Meister. Bildhauer und Architekt im Europa der Kathedralen*, Petersberg 2012, p. 32.
- 9_ Then American Ambassador to Germany David Jayne Hill as cited in Kuno Francke, 'The Germanic Museum', *Reports of the President and the Treasurer of Harvard College, 1907-08*, Cambridge, 1909, p. 314.
- 10_ Casts were installed in Rogers Hall as early as 1900. See Francke (as note 3), p. 42.
- 11_ *Ibid.*, p. 51
- 12_ *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 13_ Francke (as note 6), p. 18.
- 14_ I would like to thank Heidi Gearhart for drawing my attention to this image.
- 15_ See, for example, the inclusion of the museum's founding in Gregor Langfeld, *Deutsche Kunst in New York*, Berlin, pp. 23-28.
- 16_ See <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2014/03/museum-as-study-subject/> last accessed 10/06/2016).