

BETWEEN TRUTH AND STORYTELLING: AUTHENTICITY IN 19TH-CENTURY MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE

Museums are »temples of authenticity«. They have to collect, keep and research the authentic evidence of our cultural and natural heritage. But what does authenticity in the museum context really mean? What was and is considered »authentic« is a matter of continuous construction. Each museum object has its own discursive »story of provenance« by which it can identify itself as genuine and authentic, and the museum's task is to provide (mostly visual) access to these objects. The authentic objects should »tell their stories« to the visitors. Especially in the 19th century, when the museum evolved as a well-recognised institutional building type, its architecture started to play an important role as a means of communication. In the following, I will try to shed light on how »authenticity« was used for storytelling in conjunction with architecture and design. By looking at the case study of the Natural History Museum Vienna (Naturhistorisches Museum, NHM), it will be shown that the borderline between authentic truth and storytelling starts to blur and sometimes even becomes invisible.

VISUAL EDUCATION

When the first museum buildings were constructed, the pedagogic idea of »visual education« (*Anschauungsunterricht*, or object lessons) began to gain ground in German-speaking Europe mainly under the influence of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841)¹. It was believed that vision was the means of gaining knowledge². The newly established museums of the 19th century are the most prestigious manifestations of this new visual culture. In the centre of the visual lesson the museums wanted to teach stood the »authentic object«. As material testimonies, these objects were meant to »tell their stories«. This idea applied to art museums as well as natural history museums. However, whereas art museums present objects that are turned into »cultural objects« by human intervention, the »natural objects« stored in natural history museums implicitly claim to present an objective truth existing independently of human intervention. This gave the natural history museums a clearly different orientation than art museums. It was believed that through visual scrutiny of the systematic order of nature, one could understand the order of nature as such. The deeper truth behind the sheer unbelievable variety of nature should reveal itself to the eyes of the visitor. While the connotations of this truth were initially primarily religious (e. g. Natural Theology), they became increasingly secularised under the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution. In the Natural History Museum Vienna, this belief was visually represented even in the decorative programme. The sculptural group »Science Unveils Nature« by the Austrian sculptor Karl Kundmann (1839-1919) refers back to the ancient topos »Time unveils Truth«. Above the main entrance of the museum, nature is revealed to our eyes by the female allegorical figure of science (**fig. 1**). Everyone preparing to visit the museum should, it is implied, be aware of this thought.

TALKING MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE

The three central tasks museum architecture had to fulfil were to provide: 1. optimal lighting, 2. an uninterrupted visitor flow and 3. adequate decoration and furnishing³. All three functions had to guarantee visual



Fig. 1 »Science Unveils Nature«, Karl Kundmann, c. 1881, central projection, NHM Vienna. – (Photo A. Schumacher).

thematic reference to the exhibits. Particularly in the central stair hall of the museum, replicas (e.g. of the Porch of the Caryatids of the Erechtheion) merged with the museum architecture. »In the interplay between the classical formal language and the copies placed in the architectural structure, the furnishings of the stair hall had a double role between exhibition and architecture«⁶. Nevertheless, it has to be under-

access to the authentic objects. However, despite the belief in the power of vision, it soon became clear that the single natural object or systematic collections only reached expert audiences. As the mission of museums was to attract wider audiences, a new dimension of story-telling had to be incorporated into the presentations. In this context the museum architecture started to play an important role. Museum architects began to use the architectural framework and decorative programme to communicate the museum's narratives. Both the museum architecture and the decor must be understood as media of »spatial storytelling«.

Spatial storytelling – from temple to *Gesamtkunstwerk*

In terms of their design, the first museums of the 19th century drew on the vocabulary of religion and were built as temples of enlightenment and cathedrals of the modern age⁴. The Altes Museum (1825-1830) by Karl Friedrich Schinkel is an example of this kind of museum architecture, and many subsequent museums were to follow this example. Schinkel used elements of antique temples like the prominent colonnade to give his museum the character of a place of worship. Apart from designing the museum as a sanctuary, the decorative programme was still very restricted: The museum's interior was kept stylistically simple and uniform. Schinkel planned decorative murals only for the portico. The painting (now lost) that Schinkel had planned was executed after his death between 1841-1848 and »showed the educational evolution of the human race and aimed to capture the general context of the fragmentary evidence of this evolution presented in the museum«⁵.

Friedrich August Stüler's Neues Museum (1843-1855), on the other hand, can be regarded as the first museological *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In its architectural and decorative design, the showrooms made

lined that the architecture and decoration in the Neues Museum consisted only of contemporary replicas and artwork – no historical artefact found its way into the decorations. Stüler was intensely criticised by his contemporaries for the richness of his decoration. When the Viennese museums (Art History Museum [Kunsthistorisches Museum, KHM opened 1891] and Natural History Museum [NHM opened 1889]) were built, the discussion on the extent to which decorations should be used to interpret the exhibitions was still ongoing. The Austrian art critic Alfred Nossig rejected the Neues Museum as too inflexible and »resembling a place of amusement rather than a serious sanctuary«⁷. In Nossig's opinion, the architecture of the Viennese museums found the right mix between the two polarities represented by Schinkel's Altes Museum and Stüler's Neues Museum. He stated: The »monotony of Schinkel's rooms [was] avoided and Stüler's principle applied in a more satisfactory way«⁸. Other critics like the Austrian architect Julius Deininger also came to a similar conclusion: »The decorative furnishing of the inner rooms is not overly rich, but very appropriate to its purpose«⁹. But although the decoration of the Viennese museums seemed less distracting than in Stüler's Neues Museum, the fusion of architectural framework and exhibition was – as will be shown – brought to a new level. In accordance with Semper's idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*¹⁰, architecture and furnishings were put completely at the service of conveying the museums' narratives¹¹. Even more than in the KHM, the architecture and the decorative programme in the NHM had the function of interpreting and conveying the exhibition's narratives. In this context, the concept of authenticity plays an important role. The decorative programme oscillates between absolute commitment to truth and playful joy of narration.

In the following, three different approaches to authenticity in the NHM's architectural and decorative scheme will be briefly introduced: material, visual and object authenticity.

Material authenticity – the meaning of stones

During the 19th century, geology became an independent scientific discipline. Newly established geological surveys provided hitherto unknown data not only about earth history and mining resources, but also about new quarries for building material. This was reflected in museum collections and also in museum buildings. The Trinity Museum in Dublin (1857) is an example of this¹². By using Irish marble, it not only promoted national quarries but also transformed the museum itself into a geological collection. The same idea was taken up by the Oxford University museum (1885/1886), the Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art (1888), and the NHM Vienna (1889). In all these museums, the materiality, especially the application of prominent stones, was to display the richness of the resources of the home country. The museum buildings can thus be considered geological stone collections in and of themselves.

But unlike the other museums, the NHM Vienna emphasised the materiality not only through its architectural usage of stones but also by making building materiality a prominent theme of the scientific exhibition. At the same time as the museum was being constructed, Felix Karrer (1829-1903), a geologist and volunteer at the mineral collections of the NHM Vienna, used the building boom of the time to assemble a large stone collection, which he donated to the museum on its completion. This collection became one of the museum's most prestigious exhibitions (**fig. 2**). At the time of the opening, it was located in one of the most prominent rooms of the museum¹³.

The simultaneous architectural usage and exhibition of building stones in the scientific collection made the NHM a double bearer of material authenticity: marble and coloured stones in particular had a special significance. They often referred to prominent architectural predecessors in history, whose significance was thus also transposed onto the new architecture. This layer of meaning was emphasised and addressed by the



Fig. 3 1 detail of plate 625, »Süd-See Typen«. Anthropologisches Album des Museums Godeffroy in Hamburg. – 2 detail of Solomon Islands caryatide by Viktor Tilgner, in room XVI, NHM Vienna. – (1 after Friedrichsen 1881, pl. 625; 2 photo A. Schumacher).

misinterpretation of the parrying club of the Solomon Island warrior on the photography (fig. 3, 1) as headgear decorated with a crescent shape on the caryatide (fig. 3, 2)²². Other changes seem to be based on intentional decisions: details (like nose pegs) deemed »too foreign« were omitted, while the artist introduced others (like the moustache, which was in fashion at the time) to make the figures more familiar²³.

Even though it has not yet been possible to find all the templates for the caryatides, it seems likely that most of them were based on similar native type photographs that were deemed authentic. An interesting exception in this programme are the Maya caryatides (fig. 4). Van Bussel identified the template for the Maya caryatides in a photograph of the famous Maya relief »Lintel 24« from Yaxchilan (fig. 5)²⁴. This example deserves special attention because here Tilgner worked on the basis of an authentic Mayan artwork.

The relief »Lintel 24« from Yaxchilan, held by the British Museum in London (Inv.-No. Am 1923, Maud. 4), depicts the sacrifice to Kukulcan. Alfred P. Maudslay and Désiré Charnay had discovered the relief in 1881. The template Tilgner used for the two caryatides is most likely photograph No. 705 (held by the Weltmuseum Wien), which is recorded in the inventory with the description: »Photographie einer altmexican. Steinsculptur: bas relief d'un temple sacrifice a Cuculcan – Quezalcoatl. D'après un moulage de M. Alfred Maudslays auf Carton. H. 26,5 cm, 19,5 cm«. It belongs to a series of photographs »purchased at the expense of the construction management« (inventory files, Weltmuseum) and is attributed to Désiré Charnay²⁵. As we know from the correspondence, the museum was in direct contact



Fig. 4 Maya caryatides by Viktor Tilgner, room XIV, NHM Vienna. – (Photo A. Schumacher).

with Désiré Charnay (letters dated 23 April, 15 November and 30 December 1883 from the museum to Charnay).

The translation of the relief (**fig. 5**) into the two caryatides (**fig. 4**) presented the artist with a special challenge and during this process, several visual changes were made. The most important one is the

translation of the kneeling figure in the relief (interpreted by Charnay 1887 as a male priest²⁶) into a female caryatide²⁷. We do not know whether this decision was based on the desire to have each culture presented by a male and a female figure, or on a new scientific interpretation by the museum's experts. Another significant adaptation was the attenuation of the bloodletting sacrifice. Whereas the relief clearly shows that a thorny rope is pulled through a hole in the priest's tongue, the female caryatide only holds this rope in one hand. This retraction from the distressing blood ritual could be interpreted as result of the 19th-century perception of the Maya culture as civilised and peaceful²⁸. This is surely one reason, but on the other hand, the museum obviously tried to steer clear of too much sensationalism. The female caryatide seems to hold a rose twig with a thorny stem. This could be an allusion to the description of the ritual given by Désiré Charnay in 1887. There he quotes B. de Sahagun, saying: »They pierced a hole with a sharp itzli knife through the middle of the tongue, and passed a number of twigs, according to the degree of devotion of the performer. These twigs were sometimes fastened the one to the other and pulled through the tongue like a long cord«²⁹.

However, apart from these adaptations, the accuracy with which Tilgner tried to follow the photograph and translate it directly into a three-dimensional representation is astonishing. Most of the clothes as well as the headgear follow the photographic template quite closely. Even the very ornamentally depicted stick in the hand of the standing male figure – interpreted by Charnay as a palm³⁰, today as a torch³¹ – was rendered accurately into three dimensions, resulting in the creation of a completely fictional ethnographic artefact. Although the museum was in possession of a substantial number of Mexican antiquities (including a collection from Dominik Bilimek), the question remains as to why the decision was taken to present this relief even though the object itself (or a plaster cast) was not in the possession of the museum. As we can reconstruct from the correspondence between the museum and Désiré Charnay, there were obviously plans to acquire several moulages (a cast of »Lintel 24« may have been among them) but due to a lack of money, this idea had to be abandoned. In a letter dated 1885, the curator of the ethnographic collection Franz Heger (1853-1931) expressed his regret that the museum could not afford to have the moulages made as planned³². The Maya relief was of immense importance within the scientific discourse and also for the public reception of the Ancient Mesoamerican cultures. The NHM Vienna, which saw itself as the equal of museums in London and Paris, wanted to incorporate the latest state of research. The possession of a plaster copy would have been seen as authentic enough to be displayed among the Mayan collections. But even without the cast, the artistic reference was considered sufficient to conjure up the magic of the authentic object. At the same time the artistic creation of a fictional but fact-inspired storyline made the subject attractive to the visitor.



Fig. 5 »Lintel 24« from Yaxchilan, British Museum in London (Inv.-No. Am1923, Maud. 4). – (Photo Michael wal [Creative Commons]).

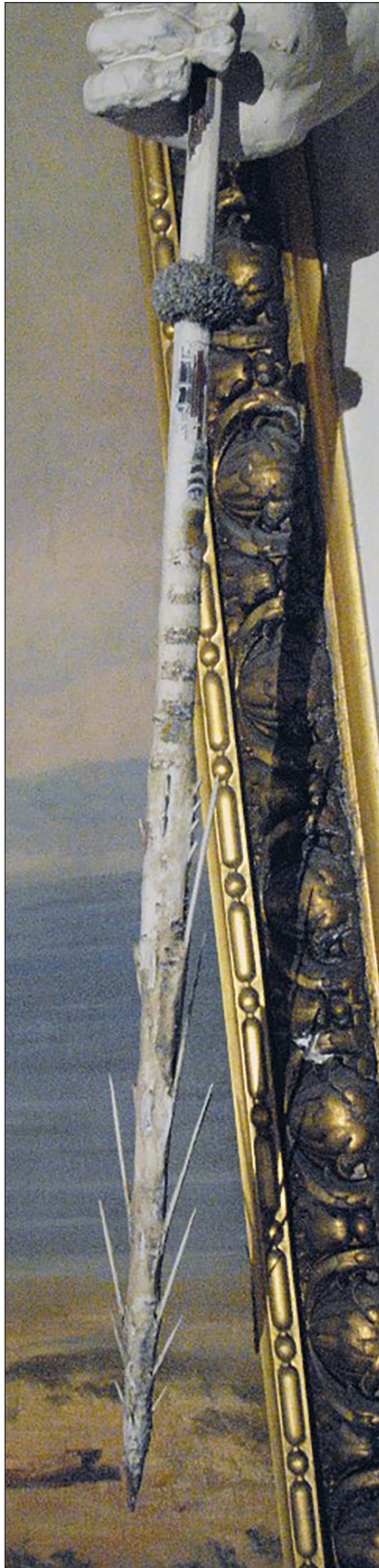


Fig. 6 Solomon Islander holding an authentic »Novara spear«, Viktor Tilgner, c. 1885, NHM Vienna. – (Photo A. Schumacher).

Object authenticity: use of spolia – fusion of frame and content

As already mentioned above, the architectural concept of »talking« museum architecture led to a fusion of frame and content. But while Stüler's Neues Museum was still a kind of stage architecture that provided an appropriate backdrop for the exhibited collections, in the Viennese museums the boundary between architecture and collection was questioned by the usage of spolia. It is well known that in the KHM, in one room of the Egyptian and Near Eastern Collection, three original Egyptian monolithic columns support the ceiling: »The columns, which had been excavated in Alexandria, were a gift to Emperor Francis Joseph I in 1869«³³ on the occasion of the opening of the Suez Canal. Until recently, it was believed that these columns were the only spolia in the Viennese museums. But according to new research, the NHM Vienna also has a spolium that is integrated into the decorative programme³⁴. The aforementioned caryatide of the Solomon Islander (see fig. 3, 2) seems to carry a real collection object – the Novara spear (fig. 6).

The Novara spear was intentionally reassembled or »upgraded« to make it look more similar to the »prototype of a Solomon Islands spear«. Thus, the object itself has to be considered to be at the intersection of authenticity and »reconstruction«.

Both Viennese »spolia« (spear and columns) can be understood as »material anecdotes«. Through the mix of authenticity and storytelling they have the power to address the visitor in a witty and playful way. The choice of a Novara object is not surprising given the fact that the Novara expedition has to be considered the most important scientific enterprise in the NHM's history. The integration of spolia is thus intended to enhance the power of the museum's architecture and furnishings as media of spatial storytelling.

CONCLUSION

As Leslie Bedford put it in 2001, »[...] museums are storytellers. They exist because once upon a time some person or group believed there was a story worth telling, over and over, for generations to come«³⁵. At the centre of this storytelling always stands the authentic object, but very often the borderline to imagination and fantasy gets blurred. The museums' »talking« architecture contributed to this process. The artistic reinterpretation of the decorations gives the authentic object the power to conjure up faraway places or lost worlds, thus transforming the museum into the ultimate form of »heterotopia«³⁶.

Notes

- 1) Deussing 1884, 43-66.
- 2) Yanni 1999, 33.
- 3) Jovanovic-Kruspel 2014, 34.
- 4) Jovanovic-Kruspel 2014, 18-19.
- 5) Witschurke 2015, 79.
- 6) Witschurke 2015, 100.
- 7) Nossig 1889, 509.
- 8) Nossig 1889, 509.
- 9) Deininger undated, 6.
- 10) Semper 1884, 344.
- 11) Nossig 1889, 512.
- 12) Trinity College Dublin: <https://www.tcd.ie/Geology/about/museum.php> (23.07.2020); Jackson 1994, 149-154.
- 13) Karrer 1892, 1-302.
- 14) Edwards 2009, 167-193.
- 15) Jovanovic-Kruspel in print.
- 16) Jovanovic-Kruspel/Schumacher 2017.
- 17) Jovanovic-Kruspel in print.
- 18) Austrian State Archive, Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv, Stadterweiterungsfonds, Fasc. 77, 149th session, 30 April 1884.
- 19) Austrian State Archive, Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv, Stadterweiterungsfonds, Fasc. 77, 149th session, 30 April 1884.
- 20) Jovanovic-Kruspel in print; Jovanovic-Kruspel/Blumauer in print.
- 21) Friedrichsen 1881, 175 photographs and 28 plates.
- 22) Jovanovic-Kruspel/Blumauer in print.
- 23) Jovanovic-Kruspel/Blumauer in print.
- 24) Van Bussel 2007, 99-119; 2018, 149-206.
- 25) Weltmuseum Wien; Photographic Collection, Mag. Baumann, e-mail communication, 25 February 2019.
- 26) Charnay 1887, 1-514.
- 27) Van Bussel 2018, 149-206.
- 28) Van Bussel 2018, 149-206.
- 29) Charnay 1887, 450 note: B. de Sahagun, Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España.
- 30) Charnay 1887, 450.
- 31) The British Museum, Collection online: The Yaxchilan Lintels. https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3086874&partId=1 (23.07.2020).
- 32) F. Heger to D. Charnay, letter dated 8 July 1885, held in the Weltmuseum Vienna.
- 33) KHM, History of the collections: <https://www.khm.at/en/visit/collections/egyptian-and-near-eastern-collection/history-of-the-collection/> (23.07.2020).
- 34) Jovanovic-Kruspel/Blumauer in print.
- 35) Bedford 2001, 27-34.
- 36) Foucault 1998, 175-185.

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Zusammenfassung / Summary

Zwischen Wahrheit und Geschichtenerzählen: Authentizität in der Museumsarchitektur des 19. Jahrhunderts

Museen sind »Tempel der Authentizität«. Es ist ihre Aufgabe, die authentischen Zeugnisse unseres Kultur- und Naturerbes zu sammeln, zu bewahren und zu erforschen. Aber was bedeutet Authentizität im Museumskontext wirklich? Was als »authentisch« galt und gilt, ist das Resultat ständiger Verhandlung. Jedes Museumsobjekt hat seine eigene diskursive »Provenienzgeschichte«, durch die es sich als echt und authentisch identifizieren kann, und es ist die Aufgabe des Museums, (meist visuellen) Zugang zu diesen Objekten zu ermöglichen. Die authentischen Objekte sollen den Besuchern »ihre Geschichte erzählen«. Vor allem im 19. Jahrhundert, als Museen zu einer bedeutenden institutionellen Bauaufgabe wurden, begann ihre Architektur als Kommunikationsmittel eine wichtige Rolle zu spielen. Anhand der Fallstudie des Naturhistorischen Museums Wien wird gezeigt, wie »Authentizität« für das Erzählen von Geschichten in Verbindung mit Architektur und Dekoration genutzt wurde. In diesem Prozess beginnt die Grenze zwischen authentischer Wahrheit und Geschichtenerzählen zu verschwimmen bzw. manchmal sogar unsichtbar zu werden.

Between Truth and Storytelling: Authenticity in 19th-Century Museum Architecture

Museums are »temples of authenticity«. They have to collect, keep and research the authentic evidence of our cultural and natural heritage. But what does authenticity in the museum context really mean? What was and is considered »authentic« is a matter of continuous construction. Each museum object has its own discursive »story of provenance« by which it can identify itself as genuine and authentic, and the museum's task is to provide (mostly visual) access to these objects. The authentic objects should »tell their stories« to the visitors. Especially in the 19th century, when the museum evolved as a well-recognised institutional building type, its architecture started to play an important role as a means of communication. The case study of the Natural History Museum Vienna will be used to highlight how »authenticity« was used for storytelling in conjunction with architecture and design? In this process the borderline between authentic truth and storytelling starts to blur and sometimes even becomes invisible.