

Wohnen in Berlin um 1800

Berlin, Mar 23–24, 2002

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„Schöner Wohnen im Schönen Staat. Wohnen in Berlin um 1800“
(„House Beautiful in the Beautiful State. Living in Berlin circa 1800“)

„Schöner Wohnen im Schönen Staat. Wohnen in Berlin um 1800“ („House Beautiful in the Beautiful State. Living in Berlin circa 1800“) held March 23 - 24 2002 in Berlin, Germany. This conference was the third installment in the interdisciplinary research project „Berliner Klassik“ (Classical Berlin) organized by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Science (www.berliner-klassik.de). Berliner Klassik reconstructs Berlin in the period from 1786 to 1815, a time of particular cultural and scientific richness and diversity in the city. Berlin's importance in Prussian and German cultural history during this period has previously been obscured by scholarly fascination with Weimar and Jena as the centers of classicism, and the Academy of Science's project endeavors to address this misconception.

Werner Busch provided the appropriate interdisciplinary introduction to the conference in his prologue, describing and interpreting a watercolor of a Berlin apartment interior and several quotations out of an E.T.A. Hoffmann story. (Both of these sources would reappear in the papers of later presenters, providing the feeling in the end that the conference had come „full circle.“) Manipulating the information gleaned from these examples in various ways, Busch revealed his primary concern: what can we know about this period for certain? He encouraged, therefore, rigorous examination and criticism of pictorial and textual sources for presenters and audience members.

Conference organizer Claudia Sedlarz explained the context for the conference: „Living in Berlin circa 1800“ is an attempt to understand the emergence and impact of a new form of style and taste in Berlin. Reaching beyond the formal constraints of wallpaper and furniture, „living“ denotes for Sedlarz an entire range of social and artistic practices expressed most vividly through Berlin's thriving salon culture. Sedlarz hoped that speakers would move, as the title of the conference suggests, from the confines of an individual living room to the realm of the entire Prussian state.

On the first day, the three morning speakers concentrated strictly and quite formally on the courtly interiors of various Prussian nobles' and monarchs' palaces. Carola Zimmermann described architect Carl Gotthard Langhans' signature elliptical rooms of the 1790s. Langhans imported from England and France this interior architectural form, distinguished by oval ceilings and floors, but with square straight walls. Decorated with busts of classical muses, contemporary poets draped in togas, or held up by ornate Corinthian columns, these rooms became all the rage in Prussian royal palaces.

In the next presentation, Adelheid Schendel led the audience through various decorative schemes

in the early nineteenth-century Kronprinzenpalais. In this project, two of Berlin's most beloved historical personalities are united: Queen Louise, the spouse of Frederick William III, and the architect/designer/style guru Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Schinkel created fabulous rooms for Louise with chamois-colored walls, star-speckled ceilings, or draped „Turkish-tent-style“ wall-coverings.

In the last morning presentation, Jörg Meiner delved into Frederick William IV's personal redecoration of a suite of rooms in the Hohenzollern Berliner Stadtschloß (City Palace). Frederick William IV designed (with Schinkel's help) a „chronology of style“ leading from classical Greek and Roman through Gothic and ending in a baroque/rococo confrontation with the powerful presence of his grandfather, Frederick the Great.

The first morning's three papers showed the emergence of a different sense of taste during this period, one in which Prussian aristocrats tried to participate in a new, hybrid European style. The Berlin architects they hired ushered them into the new classical era by copying ideas seen on trips to England, France, and Italy, or by replicating forms painted on recently excavated Greek or „Etruscan“ vases. Prussia was keeping up with the antiquity-crazed European royals.

The afternoon sessions on the first conference day dealt primarily with bourgeois interiors and architecture. Maria Ocon Fernandez started in the present, with the symbol par excellence of Bauhaus minimalism, the Wagenbach lamp. Her presentation traced the ebbs and flows of ornamental style, showing that Bauhaus theorists, categorically rejecting elaborate nineteenth-century historicism, looked back to the Biedermeier period for a vision of simplicity, and that, in turn, the proponents of Biedermeier themselves had classical and antique forms as models. She stressed the importance of the word *Bequemlichkeit* (comfort) as a translation for the classical concept *utilitas* in architectural manuals and writing of Berlin authors during the early nineteenth-century.

Matthias Hahn showed various examples of petit-bourgeois façade and interior ornamentation in Berlin and Potsdam. Newly wealthy parvenus appropriated and adapted classicistic aristocratic style in stenciled wall and floor coverings, or in external frieze-like architectural elements. Hahn showed the dissemination of patterns and models in decorator and wallpaper-hanger publications and commented on the ever-swifter commercialization of aristocratic style.

Karl Hiller and Sabine Grimmig-Haga, an art-historian and conservator duo, shared the results of their excavation/restoration project on one of Berlin's earliest apartment buildings. The building in the newly incorporated Friedrich-Wilhelms-Stadt neighborhood housed as many as 12 family groups at one time from the beginning of its existence in 1831. The speakers not only demonstrated technical proficiency by showing the process of ceiling decoration using stencil forms and describing the wildly imaginative color schemes (often created with poisonous pigments), they also added a social historical component to the paper by indicating a shift in the occupations of inhabitants and allowing a glimpse into the life of a typical Berlin painter/decorator.

The afternoon lectures illustrated the dissemination of taste and style within various levels of Berlin society. Audience members agreed in the end-of-the-day discussion that while bourgeois society copied the aristocracy, aristocrats became ever more bourgeois, proving yet again the nineteenth century as the era of double-sided assimilation.

Day two of „Living in Berlin circa 1800“ was intended to broaden the conference perspectives,

moving beyond what was on the walls and ceilings of Berlin rooms to what took place within those walls. Achim Stiegel opened by appraising the unique position of Berlin's furniture makers in the Berliner Klassik. During this somewhat liberalized era, official Prussian reforms loosened the guild stranglehold on commerce. Cabinetmakers experimented with new furniture forms (exemplified in the creation of various types of graceful secretaire) and with new manufacturing strategies, such as the specialization of labor and mass production. Stiegel's paper led the audience convincingly from parlor through furniture warehouse to the highest halls of Prussian bureaucratic power.

The next two papers contended with the tradition of the „salon“ - probably the most well known form of cultural sociability during the Berliner Klassik. Ernst Siebel discussed the difficulties in capturing the salon's intricate communication modes and structures pictorially: the essence of the salon was a fleeting dialogue, an ephemeral moment, something continually evolving. Although several watercolorists of the time attempted to immortalize salon life, invariably they could only hint at the complex configuration of friendship, amorous, and artistic networks the salon provided. Siebel stressed the importance of family scenes and activities and explained the role of furniture within salon culture. Nikolaus Gatter elucidated the role of Karl August Varnhagen van Ense as a collector and archivist of salon culture and as the gatekeeper to the legacy of his famous wife, salonnière extraordinaire Rahel Levin Varnhagen. Husband Varnhagen provides the perfect example of an unreliable historical source: descriptions of his wife's salon were written years after the fact and are rife with exaggeration, nostalgia, and sentimentality. Gatter charted changing salon fashions from the early 1800s to the Revolution of 1848, addressing the question of „attic“ salons, Republicanism, Bettina von Arnim's wicker chairs, and Rahel Varnhagen's borrowed silver.

In the afternoon, Ulrike Münter provided the only literary offering of the conference with an analysis of truth and fantasy in two E.T.A. Hoffmann stories written in and about Berlin: Ritter Gluck (Knight Gluck) and Das öde Haus (The Deserted House). Hoffmann's difficult relationship to artistic creation is paralleled in the complex and tortured relationship he has to Berlin; the sense of freedom and excitement he feels in the city can just as easily turn into fear of poverty and unearthly menace. Hoffmann is perhaps the first to usher Berlin into its symbolic metropolitan role as city of alienation and dislocation.

Elke Katharina Wittich analyzed a new form of architecture beginning in the Berliner Klassik, one that dissolved the distinctions between public and private. Architecture periodicals of the era published elevations and façade models of buildings, illustrations suggesting a new openness of spirit, as though suddenly rooms had been conceived to accommodate unexpected guests and spontaneous business meetings. Over six-dozen Palladian „country houses“ had been constructed by 1800 for Berlin's grand-bourgeoisie near the city limits.

The second day of the conference tied the first day's formal interior design elements to their social and intellectual counterparts. Each presentation attempted to sharpen the outlines of the concept Berliner Klassik and to fill it with the picture of a bustling early nineteenth-century city. The next conference in the series will also be held in the drafty but immensely attractive central atrium at the Academy of Sciences on April 20 and 21 and promises to further develop the theme of Berlin city life around 1800 (for programme details see: <http://home.arcor.de/berlinerklassik/>).

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