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Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Bodestr. 1-3, 10785 Berlin

In the Light of Amarna. 100 Years of the Nefertiti Discovery

7 December 2012 to 13 April 2013

James Simon. Business leader and patron of the arts

Among the great patrons of the arts in 19th and 20th-century Berlin, James Simon (1851–1932) occupies a place all of his own. The bust of Nefertiti in the Neues Museum is forever linked with his name. But this stunning artefact is not the only thing for which the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin have him to thank. In 1920 Simon donated to the Egyptian Museum some 5500 objects which, as financier of the excavations in Amarna, had been entrusted to him after the division of finds in 1912.

Born to Jewish parents on 17 September 1851, James Simon grew up in a period of economic prosperity. The grammar school he attended kindled his love of ancient philology and it would remain with him, undiminished for the rest of his life. Although he was predestined to take over the family business and follow a professional career as a cotton merchant, he never lost sight of his cultural interests. Once a man of independent means, he began collecting art and expanded his collection with unceasing fervour. Due to his close ties with Wilhlem von Bode, the eminent figure at the Berlin museums, James Simon became their most important patron. His collecting activities went hand-in-hand with the museum director's visionary plans, creating a unique symbiosis between the two.

Sponsored by Emperor Wilhelm II, the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum (now Bode-Museum) opened in 1904, marking, in many respects, the culmination of Bode's life's work. James Simon felt it imperative that he was involved in the undertaking, both as collector and Prussian patriot. He stipulated, for example, that the precious objects in his Renaissance collection be displayed in a 'Simon cabinet' specifically designed for the purpose. Twelve years later, in 1916 he made it known to Bode that he intended to donate the bulk of his art collection to the museum. This second donation, made in December 1918, was utterly unique—no other collector was prepared to part so radically with his property in the crisis years after the war.

James Simon became a man of international cultural significance when he turned his interest to the Middle East and its ancient cultures. He founded the German Orient Society in 1898 and financed the digs in Tell-el-Amarna from 1911. The finds unleashed a wave of Egypt mania in Germany that has not abated since.

The James Simon Foundation was established in 2006. It awards the James Simon Prize every two years for exemplary deeds in the fields of civic duty and culture. It was precisely the combination of these two areas that shaped the life of this great, forgotten patron. As a token of our indebtedness to him, the Museum Island's main entrance building, designed by David Chipperfield, will bear the name James-Simon-Galerie.



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