



Wilhelm von Bode 1845–1929

Following the family tradition, Wilhelm Bode first studies law in Göttingen and Berlin. In his free time he is drawn to museums, for example the Paintings Gallery in the Altes Museum. Here the “desire to choose art history as a lifelong vocation [...] becomes more and more vivid”, as he later reports in his memoirs. He still passes the state examination in law, but then changes to the study of art history in 1869 and is already awarded his doctorate at the end of 1870.

He then goes on a journey: twelve notebooks, which are preserved in his bequest to the Central Archive, are filled with notes on museums, galleries, private collections and works of art during his six-month tour of Dalmatia and Italy in 1871. In 1872 Bode begins his unprecedented career at the Royal Museums as adjunct to the Collection of Sculptures and Plaster Casts, which at the time still included both casts of classical antiquities and works in the Sculpture Collection. At the same time, he also serves as adjunct to the Paintings Gallery. He remains closely connected to both collections throughout his life, starting first in 1883 as director of the newly founded “Department of Sculptures of the Christian Era” and in 1890 as director of the Paintings Gallery.

Dissatisfied with the presentation of both departments in the Altes Museum, he plans a fourth building at the tip of Museum Island: the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. Bode as director is a master of acquiring new works despite the museums’ chronically low acquisition budget. He advises well-heeled private collectors in Berlin and throughout Germany on building up their collections; he procures works of art for them, and they trust his expertise. The same is true of the numerous European art dealers with whom he has established an extensive network. In return for his expertise, they willingly sell him the best works for “his” collectors and “his” museum. Bode hopes to receive financial

support and donations for his museum from private collectors, ideally large parts of the collections assembled under his guidance. In some cases this succeeds splendidly, as in the case of James Simon. In 1897 Bode founded the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museumsverein, in which half of the members were among the most renowned private collectors in Berlin during the Empire, including many Jewish bankers and entrepreneurs.

In the course of numerous journeys throughout Europe, he develops his matchless expertise, which is widely acknowledged in the professional world: The connoisseur knows countless works of art first hand, which enables him to distinguish originals from forgeries or copies and to attribute works of art to an artist. But even the best expert can be mistaken, and seldom is it so bitterly debated as with Bode’s acquisition of the “Bust of Flora” as an alleged work by Leonardo da Vinci.

Wilhelm von Bode, ennobled in 1914 and called the “Bismarck of the Museums”, was politically deeply rooted in the Wilhelmine Empire. As Director General of the Royal Museums (1905–1920), he was extremely beholden to the conservative imperial family. The anti-Semitic statements known from some of his letters stand in contrast to the close relationships he had with many Jewish patrons in his Museumsverein, as evidenced by other correspondence. And yet they are a reflection of his time: like many of his contemporaries, Bode cultivated strong resentments toward “Jewishness”. As far as we know, however, he never publicly expressed anti-Semitism, although he included anti-Semitic statements in the manuscript of his memoirs, which were intended for publication. This ambivalence between mentality and actual behavior requires a differentiated, source-based consideration of Wilhelm von Bode’s life’s work.