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Liam Gillick. Filtered Time
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CATALOGUE TEXT

Barbara Helwing: A short history of the Vorderasiatisches Museum

Condensing our history in the form of a telegram, it appears that the Vorderasiatisches Museum has followed a short and straightforward trajectory, an arrow through time and space, but it has not. This telescoped perspective conceals the complexities of a history that requires contextualization. Looking more closely, we can see how the museum's history began long before the unification of the German Empire and even before the cuneiform script of Near Eastern monuments was deciphered. Our first Assyrian object, Sargon II's victory stele, was purchased in Larnaca in 1846 and arrived in Berlin in 1848, in the same year that the first revolutionary movement in Germany failed. This was followed by Assyrian reliefs bought in London during the mid 1850s that are at the core of the later Vorderasiatisches Museum.

Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm IV fully bought into the Assyrian frenzy that had begun in Paris and London after the first discoveries of monumental art in Nimrud and Nineveh, some of which was featured in the World Exhibitions at the Sydenham Crystal Palace in 1854. Friedrich Wilhelm briefly subscribed to the British Excavation Funds, and his new museums managed to purchase two groups of reliefs, one from the always debt-ridden Sydenham Crystal Palace Company in 1855, and a second from William Loftus that came from Nineveh in 1858. Not that Assyrian art was really respected. Rather, it was included in the Berlin collections merely as a fascinating predecessor of the established aesthetic benchmark of Ancient Greek art. Even Henry Rawlinson, famous as one of the first to document and decipher cuneiform Persian script, considered it not as high-quality art in itself, but as something to be recognized for its historical relevance. From 1860 until 1880, these reliefs were presented in the so-called Assyrian Room in Berlin's Altes Museum, while plaster casts of Assyrian reliefs were arranged into a frieze above the Egyptian court in the Neues Museum. By then, the deciphering of cuneiform script had advanced and opened a view onto a previously unknown world. Competition for the favor of museum visitors arose from 1880 when the first sculpted fragments from the Pergamon Altar reached Berlin, appearing spectacular – and new. The Assyrian antiquities were merged with the Egyptian Department from 1885 onwards until in 1899 when a new Near Eastern Department was established whose first director was the philologist Friedrich Delitzsch. The collection was kept in the Neues Museum from 1889 to 1899, the so-called Speicher Building from 1899 to 1911, and in the basement of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum from 1911 to 1936, Mesopotamian antiquities finally concluded their odyssey in the Pergamonmuseum where they have been on display since 1930.

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The early history of the Near Eastern collection spans the proclamation of the First German Empire in 1871 and a succession of Prussian rulers who made the development of an all-German national consciousness their central aim. The fledgling German empire entered head-on into competition with the established world powers – Great Britain and France. At the same time, the role of museums was changing as they transformed from places of contemplation and self-education – as conceptualized by Wilhelm von Humboldt – towards showcases for the Empire’s achievements. The acquisition of antiquities for proud display became a national duty and a circle of patriotic philanthropists supported Berlin museums with donations and complete collections. The rapidly growing acquisitions required adequate spaces, and new museum buildings sprouted on museum island, with the Neues Museum opening in 1859, the Nationalgalerie in 1876, a first and short-lived Pergamonmuseum opened in 1901, followed by the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in 1904.

The collections of Near Eastern art on display in these new museums were growing beyond the first Assyrian reliefs. From the 1880s, museum representatives in the Ottoman Empire began to purchase Near Eastern antiquities for Berlin, but soon the necessity was felt in Berlin to excavate rather than buy. The authoritarian German Empire strongly supported archaeological excavations as an expression of national pride. Philanthropists financially contributed to these works through private organizations, first the Orient Comité, later the German Oriental Society. James Simon, after whom Museum Island’s latest building is named, is memorialized to represent this active group of patriotic museum supporters at the time. Through various sharing agreements with other nations, considerable portions of other excavated finds were shipped to Berlin, making an adequate presentation of these finds an urgent priority.

The first systematic German excavations were undertaken in Zincirli in 1892. Large-scale excavations became the focus of the Royal Museums’ work in Mesopotamia with expeditions to Babylon from 1899 and Assur from 1903. Imagine the archaeologists, spending months and years in “the field”, distant from home, family and news, exposed to extreme climate and health hazards, surrounded by hundreds of local workers. Culture and daily habits would have been quite new and alien to each other. These 19th century archaeologists rapidly disappointed their sponsors who had expected treasures rather than a pedestrian method of documentation aimed at disentangling the history of the built phases of Babylon and Assur. Frustration was so extreme that the committee threatened to withdraw its support. This method of working meant that the central wonder we appreciate today, the blue Ishtar Gate, was not immediately brought to Berlin. In fact, it came in two separate shipments of approximately 800 crates each bearing brick fragments with only traces of ceramic glaze. What we see today is the result of careful work to combine these crumbling fragments of historical glazed bricks with meticulous archaeological documentation under the visionary artistic ingenuity of Walter Andrae, architect, artist, excavator of Assur, and our first museum director from 1928.

The Pergamonmuseum project had begun under Emperor Wilhelm II to showcase the results of the recent large excavations in the Ottoman Em-

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pire. The first Pergamonmuseum building failed completely due to negligent planning. The second, the one we celebrate today, was in the making since 1907. World War I thoroughly interrupted the planning. But despite postwar financial hardships, work was resumed during the Weimar period and maintained even through the 1929 World Economic Crisis. By 1930, the first exhibition rooms were opened to the public.

The exhibition concept of the Vorderasiatisches Museum had been developed during the years 1928 to 1930 by Walter Andrae. He surely was not alone in this endeavor. Theodor Wiegand, director of the neighboring Antiquities Collection, pursued a parallel approach to exhibiting architecture in interior spaces (Außenräume in Innenräumen) that is also known as Wiegand's concept. But while Wiegand focused on architecture exhibited largely in the form of eclectic combinations of walls, columns and sculpture inspired by architectural handbooks, Andrae imagined a "Living Museum", a place that might afford the visitor an opportunity to experience the lived atmosphere inside an Assyrian building, and to grasp the spirit of these places, beyond the imagination of most visitors. Andrae closely tested the impressions that might be achieved with the collection and he experimented with individual room layouts, his assistants executing sketches to illustrate his ideas. To Andrae, the museum was more than just an exhibition of objects, it should be a place to generate meaning.

The construction was planned as a monumental Wilhelmian hurrah, but Walter Andrae's conceptualization of its exhibition displays took inspiration from the diverse creative potentials of the Weimar period, including an awareness of the power of theatre in that time. The museum was intended to recreate an "atmosphere of the Orient", to be achieved through the uninhibited use of strong colors and careful staging. Another source of inspiration was his personal fascination with the anthroposophic movement, which he translated into a desire to inspire and refresh visitors' experiences through an awareness of the symbolic power of objects.

When the first rooms opened in 1930, the display of the reconstructed Processional Way and Ishtar Gate, a result of Walter Andrae's vision and stamina, was warmly received. Acknowledging the great costs at times of economic crisis, the mainstream press celebrated the completion of the museum as a "great victory over the external and internal hardships of the time" (Friedrich von Oppeln-Bronikowski, 1930). Nevertheless, a certain skepticism was also felt, with Adolf Behne, in *Die Weltbühne* in 1930 (14 October), quoting Max Friedländer from the *Vossische Zeitung*: "Every museum is an artificial and enormous structure and even the best is the result of compromises". Behne was not at all convinced by the Babylonian reconstructions and had rather wished for specific works of art, rather than "hundreds of square meters of copies of glazed bricks, with which we reconstruct at the height of a house the battlements of the city wall from Babylon for 30 meter under a glass cover – errors excepted...".

The museum opened its doors just three years before the Nazi regime seized power and began its Gleichschaltung system of totalitarian control leading to World War II and the death camps. When Germany went to war, the first permanent exhibition in the Pergamonmuseum closed. Museum staff continued to work, objects were crated and stored away in the

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basement. But the architectural pieces could not be moved. Brick walls were constructed in front of the walls of the Ishtar Gate, and protective covers were installed over the wall reliefs. While the building survived with moderate damage, the Soviet Trophy Commission confiscated a large part of the collection, including the life-size Assyrian reliefs and moved them to Moscow. A general lack of construction materials and workers initially delayed repair work to the museum, but renovation became more systematic after 1950 once the status of the four Berlin sectors had been decided upon. The Vorderasiatisches Museum within the Pergamonmuseum was now part of the GDR (DDR), and was firmly reestablished on Museum Island at the heart of new East Berlin. Restoration work began under Andrae's successor Gerhard Rudolf Meyer. A first provisional opening took place in 1951 on the occasion of the World Festival of Youth and Students. In the associated guide booklet, Mesopotamian civilizations were characterized as a slave-keeper societies, but beyond ideological lip service paid to the new East German regime, objective scholarly research did resume in the museum. Renovation continued until 1953 when the museum fully reopened with the addition of painted freezes high on the walls of the first rooms, and a re-creation of the red painted Assyrian Palace Room, including painted copies of plaster reliefs.

In 1958, Moscow handed back the Assyrian relief panels to the museum that now represented a comradely Socialist state, and the plaster copies were exchanged for the original pieces. Over the next few decades, the museum served as a place of contemplation and education and as a showcase heralding the achievements of GDR education and academia as an anchor of state reputation in the new capital. The museum lent objects to international exhibitions and museum staff traveled widely. Professional networks were maintained, and museum staff began to engage in field research again through excavations in Iraq and Syria. Staff engaged in field work at Abu Hgaira in Syria. Despite financial hardships due to a lack of international currency, they persisted and excavated sites dating from the 3rd millennium BCE that were threatened by contemporary dam construction. Finds were shared between the Syrian authorities and the Vorderasiatisches Museum, enriching the collections further. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989 and the two sections of Germany reunited in 1990, the museums of East and West Berlin followed suit, forming a large association of museums and research institutions under the umbrella of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Plans were quickly developed to refurbish and rebuild the museum buildings in former East Berlin. Since 1999, Museum Island as a whole has been listed as a UNESCO Heritage site. Since then, construction work within the framework of the "Masterplan Museum Island" has not ceased and will continue at the Pergamonmuseum for years to come, the final stage being the forthcoming renovation of the Vorderasiatisches Museum. Despite the fact that half of the Pergamon has been closed for restoration of the Antique wing of Classical Roman and Greek art, it is still the Berlin museum that attracts the most visitors. But now, the rest of the Pergamon needs a break – maintenance, refurbishment, new climate systems and bringing up to contemporary building codes – a complete reconstruction. So there we are today.

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In the future, the Vorderasiatisches Museum will inhabit two floors. Planning a new permanent exhibition with almost twice the existing space, while respecting the admirable concepts of our predecessors and creating a new and inspiring museum experience for our future visitors is our task in the coming years. In the twenty-first century, our visitors have new questions and confront new challenges. Taking inspiration from this final interpretation of the old days through Liam Gillick's Filtered Time, we look forward to new experiences ahead.

A Telegram from History

First acquisitions in the mid 19th century +++ stop +++ First excavations in Zincirli in 1892, followed by work in Babylon (1899-1917), Assur (1903-1914) and Uruk (1912-13 and since) +++ stop +++ Founding of the Near Eastern Department in 1899 +++ stop +++ Division with Constantinople and Baghdad for Babylon and Assur +++ stop +++ Reconstruction of Babylonian architecture +++ stop +++ Opening of the first rooms of the Pergamonmuseum in 1930 +++ stop +++ 1945 removal of the Assyrian reliefs and numerous objects by the Soviet Trophy Commission +++ stop +++ From 1947, post-war efforts to renovate a war-damaged building and present the public with a visitable museum +++ stop +++ 1958 return of war booty from Moscow +++ stop +++ Tours proudly provided to Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet cosmonaut, Indira Gandhi, prime minister of India and other prominent people, on the occasion of their state visits to Berlin, capital of the GDR, showcasing an open-minded socialist state +++ stop +++ 1992 reunification of the Berlin Museums +++ stop +++ 1999 Museum Island Masterplan +++ stop +++ 1999 listing on the UNESCO World Heritage List +++ stop +++ 2001 begin restoration of the war-damaged Tell Halaf sculptures, rediscovered in the museum basement and exhibited in 2011 as a glorious testimony to ingenious restoration and a sign to never give up hope +++ stop +++ 2023 closing of South Wing for renovation.

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