

BOOK REVIEW

Antiquity on Display: Regimes of the Authentic in Berlin's Pergamon Museum. By CAN BILSEL. Classical Presences. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xvii + 281. Hardcover, £74.00/\$150.00. ISBN 978-0-19-957055-3.

How and when exactly did “the authentic” come to matter in museum presentations? Taking the reader on a tour through the history of the Pergamon Museum, Can Bilsel discusses the political and philosophical debates involved in the construction of Berlin’s Museum Island from the late eighteenth century to the present day. Although he acknowledges the influence of the Post-Orientalist tradition in understanding modern and contemporary archaeology and museology on his approach, he nevertheless departs from this in emphasizing the long-term dynamics of experiencing exhibits.

It is a significant advantage of Bilsel’s evocative writing style therefore that he succeeds in literally guiding the reader through the museum, (almost) allowing those that have not been able to visit in person to experience it through reading his book. To what extent they would then share his being left “awestruck and disorientated” by the museum’s imaginative “reconstruction” of the Pergamon remains, however, another matter as Bilsel appears to acknowledge through his rather enthusiastic use of the word “I.”

This insistence on the subjectivity of experiencing museums can be a little problematic as it occasionally threatens to undermine the relevancy of Bilsel’s research. Nevertheless, Bilsel overcomes this problem by setting out clearly the intellectual, philosophical and political context of acquiring and presenting ancient monuments and artefacts in modern museums throughout Europe and especially in Germany.

After the guided tour of the Introduction, Bilsel illustrates in the first chapter the visualization of classical Greece for political and ideological purposes by means of a discussion of Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s *A view of Greece in its Prime*. At stake was the production of an ideal in modern Prussia, rather than a recreation of an idea of classical Greece. Sketching similar developments in Britain and France, the main point of this chapter is to argue that the acquisition of ancient

artefacts was a result of imperialism. The presentation of such antiquities did not yet involve any pretence of recreating authenticity.

Chapter 2 follows up on this by showing how the most famous 19th century archaeological excavations involved the decontextualizing of classical and Hellenistic monuments and destruction of Byzantine and Ottoman archaeology. Despite the selectivity of these campaigns, however, the “discovery” of the Gigantomachy challenged especially Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s conception of classical Greek art as simple, noble and orderly. Bilsel’s stimulating discussion in this context of Jacob Burckhardt’s reception of the Gigantomachy in comparison with the Laocoön group, would have profited from an illustration of the latter. (It is also unfortunate that Burckhardt’s name is misspelled. In general, however, this publication deserves to be praised for its use of illustrations and its careful editing.)

A real strong point of the monograph is the discussion of the impact of institutional and governmental politics in addition to architectural and archaeological philosophy on the formation of the Pergamon Museum and the Museum Island. The conflict that resulted in the replacement of Fritz Wolff as architect by the more controversial duo of Wilhelm von Bode and Alfred Messel is the subject of Chapters 2 and 3. Bode was highly influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche’s and Julius Langbehn’s take on *Volk* and *Kultur* and translated their philosophy in presenting antiquity for the purpose of aesthetic enjoyment rather than *Bildung* and research.

The results of this aesthetic approach is demonstrated most clearly by the description in Chapter 4 of Walter Andrae’s rebuilding of Babylon’s Ishtar Gate and the Processional Way: rather than the reconstruction of the “originals” Andrae produced “an ornamental pattern that is more aligned with the *fin-de-siècle* preoccupations of *Jugendstil* and Art Nouveau” (182–3).

Although Bilsel provides a fascinating review of the political and cultural context in which the Pergamon Museum was created, the concentration on this theme shifts away from the question of how and when the “authentic” came to matter, to such an extent that Bilsel waits until page 229 before defining this crucial concept. The discussion of “Regimes of the Authentic” in France and Britain, provided in the Epilogue, therefore falls flat. Instead, it might have been better if he had kept the focus on the history of the Pergamon Museum, using the extra space to include more detail on the post-WWII period.

All in all, however, *Antiquity on Display* is another fine addition to OUP’s *Classical Presences* series and is highly recommended not just for scholars interest-

ed in the reception of antiquity in 18th- and 19th-century Germany, but, thanks to its accessible style, also for anyone planning to visit Berlin.

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