

64th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 6

Art and commerce: Austrian documentary

The Great Museum

By Bernd Reinhardt
7 March 2014

This is the sixth of a series of articles on the recent Berlin international film festival, the Berlinale, held February 6-16, 2014. Part 1 was posted February 20, Part 2 February 24, Part 3 February 26, Part 4 February 28 and Part 5.

Austrian director Johannes Holzhausen's film *The Great Museum* is a fond, and at the same time, scathing documentary about the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Museum of Fine Arts) in Vienna. Along with his camera crew, art historian and filmmaker Holzhausen went behind the scenes to explore one of Vienna's (and the world's) leading museums, which manages the cultural legacy of the Habsburg dynasty.

It is a difficult legacy, says one of the participants. How can one present this art, largely produced to assert and reinforce the power of the Habsburg dynasty (one of the most important royal houses in Europe from the 11th through the 18th centuries), in a contemporary way? How can it help inspire people today? The cautious response of one museum employee—"Well, the glass cabinets are modern"—points to a real problem.

The Vienna museum complex is not only a site devoted to preserving the past, it is also a business enterprise. It is in competition with other museums and cultural institutions across the globe. The museum is subject to a rigid finance plan and has undergone budget cuts.

The sympathy of *The Great Museum* clearly lies with museum workers who with great dedication ensure that works of art are available to the public day after day. Again and again, Holzhausen shows artwork in the hands of employees in the process of transportation, examination or restoration. The existence of such works is entirely dependent on the careful attention and respect paid by these workers.

The head of the Vienna museum's Collection of Arms and Armour is just such a man. We see his retirement ceremony. The museum director says a few words and shakes the man's hand in front of the press. Shortly afterward, his file ends up in a large anonymous archive like many before and probably many after him.

When the camera pans lovingly over the rough brush strokes on a canvas, the images seem to suddenly spring to life. Each

of them embodies a particular history. What secret lies behind this cartoon for a painting made by Rubens, which was later changed by other painters? And the mechanic who skillfully constructed that model battleship 150 years ago would have no doubt cursed in the course of his work, just like the modern restorer. The complicated mechanism of the piece enables a tiny band to strike up a tune and the ship's small guns really can fire.

The tourism industry shows only limited interest for such details and the vicissitudes of history. "Eternal values" and "myths" bring in more customers.

We witness the March 2013 ceremony reopening the "Imperial Chamber of Art", closed for a decade of renovations, which was previously just the "Chamber of Art". The camera pans over the magnificent ceiling to the sound of a baroque fanfare. The Austrian president appears and is respectfully guided through the splendidly decorated rooms in what is a very artificial atmosphere. The film first shows the fastidious preparation for the event by museum staff, who laboriously memorize the protocol for the ceremony. And, of course, we also know that the museum is dependent on government funding.

Any compromise between genuine art and commerce is unsustainable. Repeatedly, Holzhausen captures images revealing the vulnerability and uniqueness of old works of art. He dispenses with voice-overs, interviews and music, and relies exclusively on "fortunate accidents".

Interview with Johannes Holzhausen

WSWS reporters spoke to Johannes Holzhausen, director of *The Great Museum*.

WSWS: Could you explain what your motivation was for making this film?

Johannes Holzhausen: Art played no role in my parents' home. As a young man, I happened by chance on an exhibition of classical modern art in Munich. A door opened up for me. Suddenly I saw the world very differently.

I had a similar, formative experience in the cinema. I went out of the cinema [the first time] with the feeling that the world

had changed. Art expresses itself through various media and the connecting link is knowledge. Through the study of art, one can obtain knowledge and gain a deeper appreciation of the world.

WSWS: Your film emphasizes the vulnerability of art.

JH: The employees feel a certain humility toward the objects in their care. They are proud of the fact that they are responsible for these objects, probably for the course of their working lives, and that they can pass them on unsullied to an infinite chain of successors. This applies not only to professionals in Vienna, but in general to all museums. But there is an internal fault line that runs through such a museum.

In an earlier age, the priority was the custody and maintenance of the objects for future generations. This was the thinking that lay behind the museums founded in the 19th century. Since the 1990s, museums have increasingly had to fall into line with the priorities dictated by neoliberal economics.

This manifests itself in different ways. Until the mid-1990s, Austrian museums were subsidized by the state. Then they were converted into institutions competing on the free market with a basic grant from the state. This grant has not been increased since then, meaning that the museums have to generate more and more income.

The staff has changed. Museum directors increasingly come from the private sector. The path is no longer art history studies, museum staff, curator, collection director, museum director. There are more and more appointments from the private sector, such as auction houses. The director of the Belvedere Museum [Österreichische Galerie Belvedere in Vienna], Agnes Husslein, for example, worked previously for Sotheby's, the art auctioneers. The director of the Albertina [museum, also in Vienna] was formerly an employee of a state bank, which has its own art collection.

The measure of success for a museum is no longer the continuity of custodianship of art, but rather the number of visitors, the quota. I think this principle is completely wrong.

Art has a life expectancy that far exceeds daily updates. This has to be respected. The emphasis on the number of visitors helps strengthen tendencies that argue museums are a commercial operation. Then revenue becomes the decisive factor.

WSWS: Museums are coming under pressure to sell works of art to pay debts to the banks. This is the case at the moment at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The Portuguese government is also debating when is the best time to sell off paintings by [Joan] Miró in order to achieve maximum returns. Once again to pay off the banks. This is the way art is treated these days.

JH: Yes, you're quite right. We have a chancellor and a president in Austria who are both Social Democrats, but neither is prepared to take a stand over such issues. This discrepancy was a point of interest for me in my film—how do they respond to such commercial pressures? Is art to be regarded under the

aspect of the "Imperial", or is there something else?

WSWS: The grand opening of the "Imperial Chamber of Art" appeared designed to direct the observer to the splendour of the Habsburgs' lifestyle: stressing Austria as the location of high culture. This is far removed from questions such as, who actually were the Habsburgs? What was the role they played in the 18th and 19th centuries? A period in which they were largely hated throughout Europe as fierce opponents of progress and culture.

JH: Politicians react along the lines: let's not get too close to the real nature and history of the Habsburgs, after all their descendants still play a role today. The head of the present House of Habsburg would never have been invited to an event seriously exploring the history of his forefathers. But to surround oneself with the possessions of his grandfather, that's quite all right. This is not a serious confrontation with history.

WSWS: Museum budgets are under threat and at the same time the prices for works of art are soaring.

JH: It's absurd. This applies primarily to contemporary art. Pieces by [British artist] Damien Hirst change hands for sums with which, to put it bluntly, you could buy a whole room full of Rembrandts. Some years ago, I visited the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and went past the old masterpieces. Behind me, visitors were being conducted individually through a dark corridor that ended in a pitch-black room containing Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull ["For the Love of God", 2007]

The whole history of European art going back hundred of years was merely the sweetener, the "warm-up band" prior to the main concert—Damien Hirst. That was crazy, such a shift of values. This is such a painful and degrading experience for any serious curator and for the museum staff.

The head of the Collection of Arms and Armour featured in the film is old school. He is no longer needed. What comes instead is a new brand: "Imperial". One must entice visitors. But the new is merely the old under a false flag, reduced to a cheap promotional poster. The gain in knowledge through art is lost completely. Art has an enlightening power in itself, it has its own actuality. The aim must be to convey this enlightening power.

To be continued

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