

Balancing the National and the Decorative Arts in the Bavarian National Museum in Munich

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The purpose of the *Bayerisches Nationalmuseum* (Bavarian National Museum) in Munich can hardly be defined in a single sentence. This task might have proven easier, and indeed less eventful, had the designation *Wittelsbachisches Museum* (Wittelsbach Museum) been adopted instead, as proposed by King Maximilian II of Bavaria (r. 1848–1864). He wished to establish under this heading a museum dedicated exclusively to his dynasty, although the present name became quickly favoured. Much has already been written on the foundation and early years of the Bavarian National Museum, foremost in the *Festschriften* published in 2000 on the centennial of the opening of the institution's current building and in 2006 on the 150th anniversary of the museum's inauguration.¹ The present contribution focuses on, and juxtaposes, two features concerning the first decades of the museum that have remained unsettled in the literature: the increased accentuation of the 'national', on the one hand, and the sharpening of the institution's character as a decorative arts museum, on the other.

The creation of the Bavarian National Museum in 1855 was one of the projects of King Maximilian II "to heighten Bavarian national feeling", in line with the preservation of long-standing customs and the revitalization of traditional costumes.² In the museum's first location, opened on *Maximilianstraße* in 1867, the king's intention was expressed pictorially in a gallery of murals depicting historical events: a total of 143 scenes ranging from Bavaria's time as a province of the Roman Empire to the defence of Gaeta in 1860–1861 by Marie Sophie of Bavaria, Queen Consort of the Two Sicilies (r. 1859–1861). The gallery encompassed the entire first floor, which remained almost completely devoid of other works of art. And although the modern viewer would interpret the people in the murals as marginal onlookers, the king in fact saw the people, his nation, visualized there.³ According to the foreword of the first museum guide – which was conceived and published

1 Bauer 2000; Eikermann et al., 2006.

2 "zur Hebung des bayerischen Nationalgefühls". Murr 2000, 16.

3 See *ibid.*, 16–29, on the contradictions between the noble intentions of Maximilian II and their realization.

in 1868 by the inaugural director, Karl Maria von Aretin – that gallery had been particularly important to King Maximilian II as a sign of “his Bavarian state’s fame and prosperity”;⁴ the last chapter of the catalogue neatly lists the 143 wall paintings, explaining some in more detail. Yet, in this first official address of the museum to its public, a year after its opening in 1867 and four years after the death of Maximilian II, the national aspect remains remarkably underexposed.⁵ The king’s argument that the wall paintings constituted a representation of the people was, oddly enough, never taken up in the discussions of the programme over the following decades.

According to the 1868 guide, however, the South Kensington Museum (today the Victoria and Albert Museum) in London served as an explicit reference point for the Bavarian National Museum, as reflected in the latter’s mission to amass “a collection of models, drawn from all cultural periods, for the benefit of today’s industry”.⁶ The authors of the catalogue acknowledge that, in Munich, the gathering of such models would have to be realized largely through the transfer of works of art from the Bavarian royal palaces, whereas in London the collections had allegedly all been newly acquired. The accentuation of the decorative arts in the catalogue, along with its rather wry account of the ‘national’ aspirations of the painting programme, was most likely a diplomatic way for Aretin to communicate his hesitations about the museum’s layout, as he was never involved in its construction plans, which were a private project of the king himself.⁷ But it seems that, with his wording, Aretin also wished to keep pace with the recently founded decorative arts museums. The London museum had its origins, as is widely known, in the Great Exhibition of 1851 and opened its doors in 1857. This example was followed on the continent in 1863 by the *k. k. Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie* (Imperial Royal Austrian Museum of Art and Industry) in Vienna and in 1867 by the *Deutsches Gewerbe-Museum zu Berlin* (German Museum of Trade and Industry, Berlin), and during the 1870s similar museums were established in Leipzig, Hamburg, Dresden, and Frankfurt.

Just as the guidebook came out in 1868, Aretin died and was succeeded by Jakob Heinrich von Hefner-Altenack, who from 1853 to 1861 had served as curator of the *Vereinigte Sammlungen* (literally, the ‘united collections’, encompassing works from the royal holdings) and, after that, had overseen the *Königliches Kupferstich- und Handzeichnungskabinett* (Royal Cabinet of Prints and Drawings).

From this past experience, Hefner-Altenack had existed in the orbit of the Bavarian National Museum since its founding and had even contributed to the constitution of its collections, which equipped him with extensive knowledge of the museum’s structure

4 “seines Bayerlandes Ruhm und Wohlfahrt”; “Das bayerische Nationalmuseum” 1868, VII.

5 The history paintings encompassed battle scenes dating back centuries, which could be included in historical exhibitions today without any political or social reservation. However, achievements of the history of Bavaria were also shown, which would today be conceived as highly dubious, if not objectionable. This could be said, for example, of the conquest of Venezuela in 1528 in favour of the Welser family of Augsburg merchants, members of which established a slave trade that already in the sixteenth century was described as cruel. “Das bayerische Nationalmuseum” 1868, 369–370, no. 135.

6 “welchen Nutzen eine Sammlung von Vorbildern aus allen Culturperioden für die Industrie unserer Tage haben musste”; *ibid.*, IV.

7 Aretin 2006, 78–80.

and contents. Upon the opening of the museum, the collections – across all genres of art – were arrayed in chronological order on the lower two floors, presenting a cultural-historical tour through history. To improve this purportedly overcrowded display, Hefner-Alteneck began by withdrawing many objects in order to introduce galleries devoted entirely to the decorative arts, the so-called *Fachsammlungen* (specialized collections). These were set up on the first floor within the galleries furnished with murals of historical scenes, the whole rearrangement being finished in 1872 (fig. 1).⁸ Rooms were dedicated respectively to arms and armour, to costumes and textiles, to ceramics, to ironworks, and to glass. This situation is documented in the earliest surviving photographs of the building's interior: examples of the decorative arts are presented on freestanding rows of shelves and on racks, partially concealing the history paintings. These rooms were to be followed by two others for contemporary design, a room for copies of works of art, a photo studio, and a room with plaster casts – a combination that illustrates the new department's function of providing role models for artisans.

Hefner-Alteneck certainly had no antipathy towards national undertones. Indeed, as much as he deemphasized the particularly Bavarian imprint of the museum's contents and mission, he stressed their 'German' character; this development was in line with the decreased importance of Bavaria after its defeat by Prussia in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866.⁹ With some distance, he described the mural programme as Maximilian II's – and not his own – "*Lieblingsidee*"¹⁰ (favourite idea) and noted visitors' preference for these far from subtle scenes over the decorative arts: "because a large portion of the audience, whether more or less educated, has little interest in the essentials of the national museum and is only attracted by these eye-catching paintings".¹¹ Indeed, the scholarly presentation of arts and crafts was of far greater concern to him, especially in light of the recent foundations of museums of the decorative arts in Vienna and Berlin.¹² Surprisingly, he made no mention of the *Bayerisches Gewerbemuseum* (Bavarian Museum of Trade and Industry) in Nuremberg, founded as early as 1869 and clearly determined to serve the education of craftsmen and thereby to support local production. Although this institution came close, in its title, to what Aretin and Hefner-Alteneck sought for Munich, it seems as though the latter ignored it – either because he deemed it a rival or he considered it too insignificant – while acknowledging the more prominent *Germanisches Nationalmuseum* (Germanic National Museum).¹³

8 Schickel 2000a, 39–40; Kamp 2006, 87–88. See Hefner-Alteneck 1899, 328–338.

9 Hefner-Alteneck evokes childhood memories of his contemporaries when speaking of the impressive collections of the municipal armoury of Munich: "*Möge dabei an das gedacht werden, was damals unser Vaterland war, und was wir den Männern zu danken haben, welche ein einiges deutsches Vaterland geschaffen!*"; Hefner-Alteneck 1899, 324. Kamp 2006, 89–90.

10 Ibid., 289, in addition to 199–200.

11 "*denn ein grosser Theil des höheren wie des niederen Publikums hat wenig Interesse für das Wesentliche des Nationalmuseums und wurde nur durch diese ins Auge fallenden Gemälde angezogen*"; ibid., 290.

12 Ibid., 277–281.

13 Ibid., 289, 379. In return, the Bavarian Museum of Trade and Industry seems not to have made any reference to the museum in Munich. Ultimately, the former could not prevail as an independent institution and became incorporated into the Germanic National Museum in the late twentieth century, see Bott 1989.

Fig. 1: View of Gallery 4 on the first floor of the Bavarian National Museum (Arms and Armour, 1520–1620), with the murals in the background showing the Battle of Brienne (1814) and Max Joseph issuing the Bavarian constitution (1818).



The transformation of the Bavarian National Museum was apparently widely discussed in the years that followed. The Munich art critic Carl Albert Regnet, certainly a supporter of Hefner-Alteneck, summed up the issue when he wrote in 1873 that “the historical gallery was intended to be a link in the chain, but instead became a crack in it”.¹⁴ Artistically, he considered the wall paintings to be unremarkable. It had to be admitted,

14 “Die historische Galerie sollte ein Verbindungsglied in der Kette sein und wurde zum Riß in derselben”; Regnet 1873, 61. See Kamp 2006, 92.

Regnet continued, that the new specialized collections, while presenting ample models for blacksmiths, locksmiths, armourers, etc., offered hardly any for carpenters, turners, stonemasons, or silver- and goldsmiths. This imbalance was due to aspects of the centuries-long development of the trades, in addition to the sheer impossibility of encompassing everything.¹⁵ Despite the criticism, Regnet saw fulfilled in these galleries Maximilian's dedicating words, as presented on the museum's façade: "To the honour of my people and to their example".¹⁶

Not everyone took such a pragmatic view of the reinstallation of the museum. The art dealer Joseph Maillinger published a pamphlet in 1877 in which he lamented the reduction of the aspect of honour specified in Maximilian's inscription, while he found the second purpose, the education of the people through the promotion of industry,¹⁷ to be overemphasized. Clearly adhering to an idea of progressivism, Maillinger advocated a greater explanation of historical development via a chronological display; in his estimation, only this could awake national awareness and enact the training of all technical forces.¹⁸ Moreover, he interpreted the partial concealment of the history paintings as a violation of the will of the founder.¹⁹ Only here was the 'national' mission juxtaposed to the decorative arts in such a highly polemical tone, opening up a dichotomy that did not particularly interest Hefner-Altenneck. As much as Maillinger's invective seems to have been ignited by a private feud with the museum's director, it may indirectly have led to the foundation of the *Bayerisches Armeemuseum* (Bavarian Army Museum) in 1879. Indeed, this development was backed by the Bavarian Ministry of War, which was headed by Maillinger's uncle and namesake. The new collection would familiarize visitors with the glory of weapons and military success and would evoke "patriotic consciousness"²⁰ in a way that the diverse collections of the Bavarian National Museum were incapable of.

[• Beck]

15 Kamp 2006, 91.

16 "Meinem Volk zu Ehr und Vorbild". Compare the line of reasoning of Dr Johann Nepomuk Sepp, member of the Bavarian *Kammer der Abgeordneten* (Chamber of Deputies), when he argued on 17 February 1872 for a new museum building in light of the worldwide importance of the Bavarian National Museum: "weil dieses Gebäude nicht etwa ein Schaukasten ist, sondern eine Lehrschule für jedermann und insbesondere für den Gewerbsmann"; "Verhandlungen" 1872, 544; Schickel 2000a, 41.

17 "zweite Zweck der Volksbildung durch Hebung der Industrie"; Maillinger 1877, 6. See Kamp 2006, 90–91.

18 "die ineinandergreifende Verwirklichung beider Zwecke, das ist durch die möglichst exakte und möglichst vollständige Darlegung der geschichtlichen Entwicklung, wodurch nationales Bewusstsein geweckt und die Ausbildung aller technischen Kräfte nach der conceptiven wie nach der productiven Richtung angebahnt wird"; Maillinger 1877, 8.

19 Ibid., 10.

20 "vaterländisches Bewusstsein"; Kamp 2006, 91.

Fig. 2: View of the gallery dedicated to Ferdinand Maria, Elector of Bavaria, in the first building of the Bavarian National Museum, ca 1875.



Hefner-Alteneck seems to have remained fairly unimpressed by this movement. By the time the second edition of the museum's guidebook appeared in 1881, he had formulated a broader understanding, namely, distinguishing the chronological presentation of the museum's general collection (fig. 2), which "contains works of art of every kind, from Roman times to the present, from all civilizations [*Culturländern*], with special consideration to Bavaria", ²¹ from "the separate collections, which visualize the most important branches of handicraft". ²² He therefore conceded, almost apologetically – referring back to the situation more than ten years prior – that the various crafts were not able to

21 "Das b. Nationalmuseum enthält Kunstwerke jeder Art von der Römerzeit bis zur Gegenwart, und zwar aus allen Culturländern, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung Bayerns"; "Führer" 1881, 7.

22 Ibid., 8: "die Separatsammlungen, welche die wichtigsten Zweige des Kunsthandwerks vergegenwärtigen".

demonstrate their individual development within the former display. Casually, reference is also made to the murals depicting the history of Bavaria, their description being much reduced compared to the first edition of the guide.²³ A disclaimer prior to his introduction made clear that the works of art should serve as examples and models for artists, despite the fact that the museum was not a proper “*Gewerbe- und Industrie-Museum*” (Museum of Trade and Industry).²⁴

Fig. 3: View of the gallery of ironworks in the second building of the Bavarian National Museum, 1902.



Beyond these discussions about how best to display the museum's collection, structural damage, flawed fire protection, and lack of space at the *Maximilianstraße* location

²³ Ibid., 8, 129–142.

²⁴ Ibid., 4.

eventually led to the planning and construction of an entirely new building, begun under Wilhelm Heinrich von Riehl, director from 1885 until 1897.²⁵ Hefner-Altenneck's twofold division was maintained in the new building on *Prinzregentenstraße*, with the cultural-historical survey on one floor and the series of specialized collections on another (fig. 3), a clear separation that marked an improvement from the previous location's improvised display.²⁶ Although there were no longer the history paintings that had characterized the museum at *Maximilianstraße*, notions of the 'national' were a now more subliminal guide for the visitor.

Fig. 4: View of the Bavarian National Museum's second building, on *Prinzregentenstraße*, 1902.



The building's architect was Gabriel Seidl, while Rudolf Seitz decorated and organized the interior. The approach taken by the two collaborators was firmly rooted in the anniversary exhibition of the *Bayerischer Kunstgewerbeverein* (Bavarian Arts and Crafts Association) in 1876, and more precisely in Seidl's *Deutsches Zimmer* (German Room) within the section *Unserer Vaeter Werke* (Works of Our Fathers). The German Room had been decorated in the style of the German Renaissance – in those days quite innovative as it turned away from the predominant revival of antiquity and of the Italian Renaissance – and, for decades to come, proved to be a formula of success for building activity in Munich. For the Bavarian National Museum, Seidl combined various elements associated with the

25 Volkert 2000, 14, 16, 19; Schickel 2000a, 40, 52; Brendecke 2006, 103–104.

26 Schickel 2000a, 43. The dualism in the new building was criticized by Gustav von Bezold, then director of the Germanic National Museum in Nuremberg, who advocated for museums to decide whether to uniformly opt for a historic-academic approach or one geared towards providing guidelines to artisans. Bezold 1899, 84–85; Koch 2000, 216.

Renaissance in southern Germany, arranging them in a picturesque configuration (fig. 4) that was markedly distinct from the Tudor Gothic architecture of the location at *Maximilianstraße*. At the new museum, which opened in 1900, the notion of the 'German' did not intrude on an impartial visitor, but it was very much perceived and appreciated by critics.²⁷

In place of an emphasis on Bavarian pride in the face of the German Empire, we find a more low-key, folkloristic version of the 'national'. Terms such as *Heimat* (home) and *vollstämmlich* (folklore), which were virulent in those years, were also explicitly used in connection with the newly unveiled museum. Indeed, they were epitomized in a third section, in the basement, comprising the so-called *Bauernstuben* (peasant rooms) and the ethnographic department.²⁸ As the *Magdeburgische Zeitung* put it, the museum was ultimately dominated by "carved, forged, woven, chiselled dialect",²⁹ and this included not only the architecture and interior decoration but also the presentation of the specialized collections. Using terms like 'home' and 'folklore' may have been a specifically Bavarian way of reassuring itself of its nationality in those decades, and it certainly was – much as it is still today – a rather inward-looking view. An emphasis on Bavarian independence would have been perceived as secessionist and anachronistic, but at the same time the imperial German tone was restrained: no attempt was made to extend the national concept beyond Bavaria, despite the wider geographical range of its objects. More broadly, throughout the state of Bavaria the notion of the Reich seems not to have been in full blossom at this date, as reflected in the lack of Wilhelmine monuments.

While the establishment of specialized collections had been in vogue 40 or 50 years earlier and had sometimes even juxtaposed a 'nationalizing' agenda, by the early twentieth century this framework had fallen out of relevance. Hefner-Alteneck had, in 1868, planned two rooms devoted to the modern "industrial arts," and the guides of the 1880s at least mention similar presentations of contemporary glass, for example, from Salviati in Venice, from Lobmeyr in Vienna, and from Steigerwald in Regenhütte, Bavaria.³⁰ However, such displays no longer found a place in the museum's new building. The opposition of the conservative Bavarian Arts and Crafts Association to the reform movements of the *Vereinigung für angewandte Kunst* (Association for Applied Arts), founded in 1903, and the *Deutsche Werkbund* (German Association of Craftsmen), founded in 1907 – both of which were artist-led – did not directly catalyse, as one might expect, the establishment of an alternative to the Bavarian National Museum that would focus on decorative arts. It was rather Philipp Maria Halm, the museum's interim director from 1914 to 1916 and director

27 Schickel 2000b, 74–75; Sangl 2000, 105–107; Koch 2000, 211, 213. The 'picturesque' and the 'atmospheric' were catchphrases for the arrangement of the exhibits. It was rather this that attracted wider criticism, the display being considered unscholarly and the objects lacking informative labels.

28 Bauer 2000.

29 "geschnittener, geschmiedeter, gewebter, gemeißelter Dialect"; Bauer 2000, 234, quoting the *Magdeburgische Zeitung* from 2 October 1900.

30 "Führer" 1881, 84. This could not have been more than a small attempt to incorporate contemporary arts and crafts. According to "Führer" 1900, 10–13, Hefner-Alteneck intended to stage a temporary exhibition with both older and modern pieces, though this was never actualized.

until 1931, who appealed in 1915 to the Ministry of Education for the foundation of a museum of applied arts.³¹ Halm acknowledged that the collections of the Bavarian National Museum could not neglect their dynastic backbone, and as a result they would continue to embody much more an aristocratic than an everyday way of life. Furthermore, the specialized collections covered only the period until around 1830 and lacked “objects in the simplest functional forms, [those] utility devices characterized by their structural simplicity and objectivity, the ‘primitives’, which carry within them the greatest value for modern artistic thought and creativity”.³² Halm did not want to consider an expansion of the scope of the Bavarian National Museum itself, noting that “a redesign of the museum is completely out of question due to its fundamentally distinctive structure, which is rooted in the will of its supreme founder and with which the new building also forms an inseparable whole”.³³

Eventually, in 1925, the desired museum was created as *Die Neue Sammlung* (The New Collection). Today, the museum calls itself in English the ‘Design Museum’, a self-designation that is probably more comprehensible to modern ears than its German name, the latter being tightly bound to the reform movement of the early twentieth century. For more than seven decades, this ‘new collection’ was housed in an annex to the Bavarian National Museum, the so-called *Studiengebäude* (study building). With the foundation of the design museum, the specialized collections were prevented from further chronological expansion and from incorporating contemporary pieces. In Halm’s words from 1915 and the associated preservation of the concept of the Bavarian National Museum following decades of the institution’s development, the authority of the founder shines through for the last time.

31 Hufnagl 2006, 148–149.

32 “So mangeln den einzelnen Sammlungen vielfach Gegenstände in den einfachsten Zweckformen. [...] namentlich die durch konstruktive Einfachheit und Sachlichkeit sich auszeichnenden Gebrauchsgeräte, die ‚Primitiven‘, die gerade für das moderne künstlerische Denken und Schaffen die stärksten Werte in sich tragen”; quoted after Wichmann 1985, 24.

33 “Eine Umgestaltung des Nationalmuseums in diesem Sinne ist aber durch eine grundsätzlich verschiedene Anlage, die in dem Willen seines allerhöchsten Gründers wurzelt und mit der auch der Neubau ein unzertrennliches Ganzes bildet [...] gänzlich ausgeschlossen”; *ibid.*

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