

The German Art is Upstairs: Anonymous (Johann Pezzl), Description of Vienna's Belvedere (1786–90)

Abstract

Johann Pezzl (1756–1823) was one of the most important writers of the Viennese Enlightenment. Between 1786 and 1790, he wrote a series of texts about the city of Vienna and its important attractions. His writings also included a description of the Belvedere, purportedly written by an anonymous visitor in the late 18th century. The account describes the arrangement of the exhibits along regional lines (e.g., German artists were featured on the upper floor). It also shows that geography was the dominant organizational category (as opposed to chronology). The account also mentions the museum's diverse audience, suggesting that it was a place of broader enculturation.

Source

The Belvedere. It is located at the furthest end of the suburban area, on the southeast side of Vienna, on the hill that makes up the territory from this region of the world to the city. Its creator was Prince Eugene for whom it served as his summer residence in the years of his greatest splendor and respect, and who put the stamp of his great taste on it, as on all his works, although at that time in Vienna his taste was not yet to everyone's liking.

After the various purposes assigned to this pleasure site after the death of its first owner, the building was dedicated to service as the home of the priceless gallery of paintings, and the garden, as the public pleasure venue for *le beau monde* of Vienna.

The actual main entrance is on the side of the line that runs right up next to the place. The visitor must enter there to take in the entire view in the direction of the actual layout. However, there is another entrance located below, through the garden; it is generally used because of its close location and greater convenience. The upper main entrance opens into a spacious courtyard that has buildings and beautiful avenues on both sides; in the middle there is a large, pleasant pond. The main building, an elongated square, is completely out in the open. It has a splendid façade, perhaps too overloaded with ornamentation. The visitor climbs up a showy double stairway and comes, behind a colonnade, into the great round marble hall: this is the centerpiece, opening into the entrances of both side wings, each of which contains seven rooms and two round cabinets. The marble hall itself is already hung with several large paintings that it can best hold because of its soaring height, which extends throughout the building. The right wing contains the matchless riches of the Italian School. In the left wing, the treasures of the Flemish School are displayed.

On the upper floor, the masterpieces of the German School hang in the four rooms of the right wing; in the four rooms of the left wing are the monuments of the old Dutch School.

Everyone must definitely see such a painting collection. Anyone who wanted to describe it would write himself down to a nubbin.

Mr. [Christian von] Mechel from Basel put it in that order from 1778 to 1781. He lacked for nothing: the frames

alone cost over 70,000 florins. The inventory of all the pieces handed over to him was so large that, because of a lack of space, he winnowed out over a thousand of the less valuable pieces. They are stored in the lower garden building and are of such artistic value that a second gallery, which would still always rate attention, could be established with them.

Considerable changes have been undertaken in this gallery over the last year. As the monasteries have been eliminated, many beautiful pieces have been discovered in Italy and the Netherlands and have found their way here. In addition, the Emperor has increased the collection with purchases and other acquisitions. The space in the rooms has been used more efficiently, and more paintings hung, or arranged to better advantage. Several of the pieces excluded by Mr. Mechel have been brought up for public viewing, and several of the displayed paintings, as pieces of lesser value, have been placed among the excluded paintings. The four previously closed cabinets at the corners of the building have been opened and small choice paintings hung there to make more space in the other rooms. Of course, the catalogue of the gallery prepared by Mr. Mechel has become almost unusable as a result of all these improvements; however, experts maintain that the new arrangement has real advantages over the old one.

The gallery is open to the whole world every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. It is actually visited only in the warmer months. Young artists very easily obtain permission to copy self-selected pieces.

On Mondays there is usually a jostling turmoil. A number of citizens from the lower classes, apprentices having a lazy Monday, and indeed, even lowly maidservants with children in arms visit the picture gallery to pass the afternoon pleasantly. I would like to see a change in this. Children present a danger to the gallery: they sometimes touch the most outstanding pieces with their dirty fingers. What is the point of having children view the gallery at all? I believe that, without constraining the public, children and other very lowly people could be denied entrance, because such a painting collection is not a puppet show. After all, it is known that that sort of people is not capable of getting anything better out of viewing the collection than they would from watching, out of boredom, the peep show of a Savoyard.

Behind the building, facing the city, is the rather spacious garden. It forms a gentle slope. From the upper terrace, but even more so, from the first floor of the castle, there is a charming view over most of the city and the suburbs, of the Kahlenberg and the vineyards located there, and to the right, over the Danube regions. The garden would not have this view, if it were planted with more and taller trees; on the other hand, it would possess another advantage, namely, more shade, which is presently to be found only in the lower part. Because of the lack of this feature, so essential to a garden, it is not visited very often by *le beau monde*, and then only toward late evening.

Source: Anonymous [Johann Pezzl], *Skizze von Wien*. Six numbers, Vienna and Leipzig, 1786–1790, no. 1, pp. 436–42; republished in *Tempel der Kunst: Die Geburt des öffentlichen Museums in Deutschland 1701–1815*, edited by Bénédicte Savoy. Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2006, pp. 489–90.

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