

The Gemaldegalerie, Dresden

Background notes

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Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Duke Henry & his wife Catherine*, 1514

DRESDEN: ART COLLECTING

The Gemaldegalerie was a creation of the first half of the 18th century but there was a fabulous collection of art in Dresden long before that. In the 16th century the artists Lucas Cranach, father and son, had a close relationship with the Albertine line of the Wettins, who lived in Dresden and Frieberg. Cranach the Elder painted the fabulous life size double portrait of Duke Henry and his wife Catherine in 1514. In 1552, Cranach the Younger painted three large panels depicting scenes from the life of Hercules for Elector Maurice which were kept in the Tower room of the Residenzschloss in Dresden. Two now hang in the Gemaldegalerie in the Zwinger. These works were decorative, but they also carried a strong political agenda – there was no sense of forming ‘a collection’. Numerous rulers chose to associate themselves with the mythical figure of Hercules to create a myth of their own strength, for example, the Dukes of Burgundy in the 15th century claimed descent from Hercules.

A private collection began with the *Kunstkammer* or Chamber of Art in Dresden founded by Elector Augustus I (1526-86) and, in 1560, the year that the first inventory was compiled, it was inaugurated. Paintings played a very subordinate role. It was a universal collection of ‘rarities’ and ‘curiosities’ from every conceivable field. Many of the great world collections of present times began as a fulfilment of the wishes of just one man, but then, as this was handed on from generation to generation, the collection itself became a symbol of power or dynasty. From origins for just one family, a collection would sometimes become a state or national collection. It was the acquisition of things that no-one else could possess – something rare – something precious – something from a far-flung foreign land that represented the exotic, the exclusive, maybe a precious mineral. Paintings did not figure in the collection other than a portrait of a ruler. Decorative schemes painted in a palace would fulfil notions of grandeur and power as a political manifesto hung on a wall for viewing by honoured guests or visiting diplomats. Only later did the notion of a skill of one person become a part of the desirability of acquisition. For example, Francis I of France desperately wanted Michelangelo in France – he compromised and had Leonardo. As voyages of discovery progressed, objects from foreign lands would be displayed in protective cabinets together with objects made from precious metals or stones. Hence the term *Cabinet of Curiosities*.

The Elector Augustus’s *Kunstkammer* was one of many created north of the Alps during the 2nd half of the 16th century as a result of the rise of Humanism and the spread of Renaissance ideas from Italy. Mathematical instruments were collected, together with astronomical instruments, terrestrial and celestial globes indicated the ‘modern’ skills of map-making and charts for crossing the seas. Also listed were paintings by Durer, Cranach, Lucas von Leyden, Titian and Tintoretto. This list merged the skills from north and south of the Alps. All were underpinned by the Humanists thirst for knowledge from the ancient world which they sought to surpass.

AUGUSTUS THE STRONG

A new era dawned for the arts and collecting with the reign of Elector Frederick Augustus I (1670-1733), who from 1697 was also King of Poland and as such was known as Augustus II. His exceptional physical powers led to the epithet 'The Strong'. He followed the example of his fellow German princes and began to collect *objets d'arts* and paintings, very soon outstripping his royal colleagues, above all in the Netherlands and Flanders. He bought paintings from Italy, not just individual works but often whole collections that came on the newly established 'Art Market'. His first court painter and Superintendent of Paintings, Samuel Bötttschild played an important role as an art agent for the prince. This period saw the acquisition of Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* and Rubens' *Diana Returning from the Hunt*.



Giorgione, *The Sleeping Venus*, 1507-8

Augustus the Strong's most important advisor from 1698 in art matters was Raymond Leplat. Over a period of 30 years he acquired numerous paintings, sculptures and valuable pieces of furniture from Paris, Antwerp and Italy. Leplat was the creator of the sculpture collection. This was all the foundation of the Gemaldegalerie. There was no room in the *Kunstkammer* for all these works, nor were they intended for such a place. They were all integrated into rooms of the *Residenzschloss*, in a special gallery displayed on a wall facing windows. Augustus insisted that paintings and sculpture should be displayed together. As the collection grew it began to overflow from the castle. They were removed to the Great Hall, a temporary building which was large enough with windows boarded up to form walls.

Augustus the Strong was fully aware of the provisional character of this 'gallery', and his museum plans after 1730 foresaw a picture gallery situated at the end of the Zwinger and its pavilions and galleries, which had taken on a new function after 1728 as the 'Palais Royal des Sciences'. This new era of collecting and displaying would come to fruition during the reign of his son king Augustus III after his death in 1733.

The new king had a great interest in the arts and was an authority in many fields. He undertook the Kavaliersreise, the equivalent of the Grand Tour around Europe between 1711 and 1719 especially France and Italy where his education in artistic matters continued. His father was compelled to adopt the Catholic faith in 1679 in order to become King of Poland.

Augustus III converted in 1712 whilst in Bologna during his Grand Tour, at first keeping it a private matter. His conversion was not without influence on his art collection although his aim was always to buy works of the highest artistic quality regardless of subject matter.



Jan van Eyck, *The Dresden Portable Altar*, 1437

During his reign the collection reached its zenith and resulted in what is now known as the **Dresdener Gemaldegalerie**. From 1740 all available money went into expanding the collection until 1756 at the outbreak of the Seven Years War. Thus the Collection came into being over a period of 50 years, with works acquired not by scholars but by two rulers who were connoisseurs and lovers of the arts, and who represented the best of court taste at their time. Masterpieces of the High Renaissance and Baroque were highly valued; also 17th century paintings from The Netherlands, especially the exquisite 'Fijnschilderers,' the Little Dutch masters. The French artists Nicholas Poussin and Claude Lorrain were also included. Early works by the Germans, Durer, Cranach and Holbein were sought out to represent German art.

Art History was a new academic discipline and sometimes attributions were inaccurate. Jan van Eyck's Dresden altarpiece was attributed to Durer and Holbein's Charles de Solier was attributed to Leonardo. Early Italian paintings and those from Spain were absent, only added to the collection in the 19th century. During the 18th century paintings streamed into Dresden from all over Europe as agents monitored art sales, but the highlight of acquisitions in 1745 was the purchase of 100 of the best paintings from the collection of the Duke of Modena Francesco III – works by Correggio, Titian, Veronese, Dosso, Andrea del Sarto, Guido Reni, Velasquez, Rubens and Holbein. This was followed by 268 pictures from the Wallenstein collection in Dux, Bohemia and 69 paintings from the Imperial collection in Prague, including Ruben's *Wild Boar Hunt*. The collection was thereafter one of the most important in Europe. The culmination of this expansion was the acquisition of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna* from the monastery church of San Sisto in Piacenza for 20,000 ducats. Ownership of an undisputed masterpiece by Raphael was a long cherished wish of the king.

The next king Frederick Christian and his Bavarian wife Maria Antonia disapproved of the profligate spending programme for art, and their silent opposition permeated the court. This king, however, reigned only for 3 months. He was more interested in reviving and studying Antiquity, his interests would drive a renewal of Classicism in Dresden, ideas that were wholeheartedly supported by Johann Joachim Winckelmann. The collection grew only slowly but its reputation across Europe grew rapidly as it was lauded as one of the greatest cultural achievements in 'Augustan' Saxony. The new motivation was driven by a wish to use the collection to enlighten and educate. The new gallery was to become a place of public learning. In its new purpose built home the collection created a sensation. The same lavishness that went into developing and perfecting Dresden's outward appearance in the 18th century, also fed, enriched and enlarged that vital underlying cultural life of the city, the treasures of the Arts and Sciences, so valued by the city as an outward expression of its privileged position in Europe.



The Zwinger Museum

In the 19th century a further building was planned from 1836, a building that would meet all the demands of the new century. The Neue Königliche museum was built on the Zwinger designed by the imaginative architect Professor Gottfried Semper. Now the paintings would be displayed in national or local schools or in a collection of one master. Acquisitions continued, many 'modern' works. Fifteen 17th century Spanish works came from the estate of King Louis Philippe of France after his deposition. Italian and Netherlandish works continued to be popular purchases, like *St Sebastian* by Antonello da Messina and *The Holy Family* by Mantegna. The collection of Italian Quattrocento paintings first came into being. Young artists from all over Europe came to Dresden to learn art by copying old masters.

In the 20th century the era of National Socialism posed a threat to the existence of the collection. Hans Posse was initially removed from his position as Director when the NS assumed power but was later reinstated and entrusted with the development of the museum that Adolf Hitler was planning for his home town of Linz. The gallery closed its doors in 1938 before the occupation of Sudetenland and again in 1939 before the conquest of Poland. When the military offensive was stepped up in 1942 the paintings were all removed for safe keeping. Towards the end of WW2, as Russian troops were closing in, the storage facilities east of the Elbe were abandoned in favour of bomb proof locations to the west of the river, in tunnels, limestone mines and sandstone works.

On February 13th 1945 Dresden was destroyed. Semper's museum building and the Zwinger were seriously damaged. On the entry of the Russians into Dresden, 'trophy commissions' were charged with inspecting the Dresden collections and deciding what should be allowed to stay in Germany and what would be taken away. The Schloss Pillnitz was undamaged and was used as a central location for inspecting all the art. Vast quantities were shipped to Moscow and Kiev. It looked as though the collection would be lost to Dresden for ever.

Activities in the museum were resumed on a modest scale directly after the war. On 6th July 1946, Schloss Pillnitz opened as a central museum bringing together the remnants of the collection. For about 10 years there was no sign of any change. On 25th August 1955 a declaration by the Soviet government was handed over in Moscow to a delegation of the German Democratic Republic stating that Dresden's paintings were to return home. They were displayed in two large-scale special exhibitions first in Moscow, then in Berlin making them available to the public for the first time in 17 years. Work on the first leg of reconstruction of the building (the central section and east wing) was completed 15th May 1956, and the second stage 4th October 1960. Although the bulk of the paintings survived the war there were still some serious losses. They were all catalogued, masters old and new, 206 were destroyed, 507 were missing of which more than 50 have since been found and returned.

The paintings of Bernardo Bellotto and drawings by Canaletto provided an accurate record of the city's lost beauty and its historic buildings that serves as a yardstick for all innovation and reconstruction. The Gemaldegalerie with its paintings has become the leitmotif for people's hopes and aspirations, and in its representation of destroyed buildings, a substitute for all that has been lost. In February 1998 the gallery was refurbished thanks to the new political and economic possibilities opened up by the reunification of Germany. State of the art facilities for the modern era were added and the decorative scheme from Semper's era was re-instated as an important part of Dresden's heritage. Italian paintings hang on a red ground, Dutch and Flemish on green, Spanish and 17th century French on grey. The appalling losses in Dresden may be the reason that a feeling for its history is so alive in the city. It is proud of its place among 'Europe's most privileged cities'.



Bernardo Bellotto, *The Moat and the Zwinger*, c1751

13th – 14th August 2002 the River Elbe flooded and Dresden was deluged.

All the collection was saved. Modern underground storage was abandoned.

Suggested reading

Jonathon Brown, *Kings & Connoisseurs : Collecting Art in 17th century Europe*, Princeton University, 1995



Jean Etienne Liotard, *The Chocolate Girl*, c1744

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