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Classification as a Principle The Transformation of the Vienna K.K. Bildergalerie into a "Visible History of Art,, (1772-1781)¹

English translation: Peter Mason

The birth of the modern, art historical museum?

On 14th August 1780 Christian von Mechel enjoyed the exceptionally pleasurable experience of conducting the Empress Maria Theresa on his arm through the Obere Belvedere, the summer mansion situated on the outskirts of Vienna which she had designated a few years before as the new premises for the imperial art gallery. (fig. 1) Although Mechel had been on cordial terms with her on previous occasions, this was a very special occasion: the Empress had come to view the new arrangement to which the collection had been subjected by none other than Mechel himself.

It was an exciting moment as they entered the rooms. After all, Mechel knew quite well that he had departed from customary procedure, and that Maria Theresa was not so taken with drastic changes, especially in her later years. Accustomed as she was to a heady mixture of different types of paintings, how would she react to the strict separation of the Italian, Netherlandish and German schools in different rooms? Moreover, he had even subdivided the Italians into local schools, such as the Venetians, Romans, Florentines and Lombardians. (fig. 2) Such a strictly systematic approach could hardly be in tune with her somewhat old-fashioned, baroque taste. But that was nothing compared to the shock awaiting her on the first floor. Indeed, would she even manage to climb the fifty-six steps, with her poor health and stout figure? Exhausted and breathless, she would there be confronted with an unparalleled spectacle: the birth, development and acme of the art of painting in her own Empire, a sequence starting with an altarpiece attributed to a certain Mutina the "German inventor of the technic of oilpainting" (who later was identified as Tommaso da Modena). (fig. 3). Mechel just hoped that she would not prove unreceptive to the patriotic character of this chronological arrangement, even thought it meant that the most unattractive, late medieval paintings had to be displayed in their full glory and in combinations which were simply con-

¹ This article originally has been presented as a lecture at the Musée du Louvre, Paris 1993.

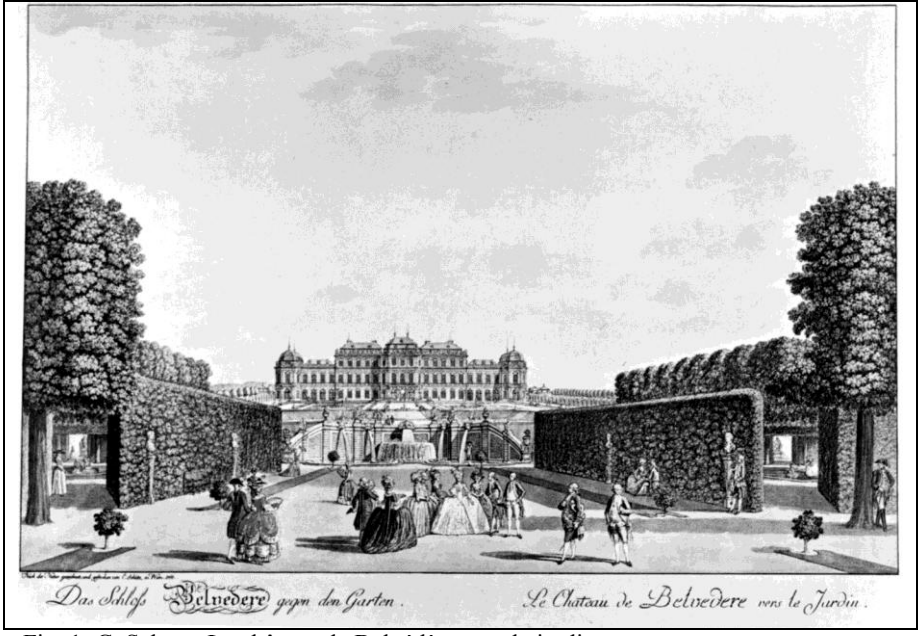


Fig. 1: C. Schütz: Le château de Belvédère vers le jardin.

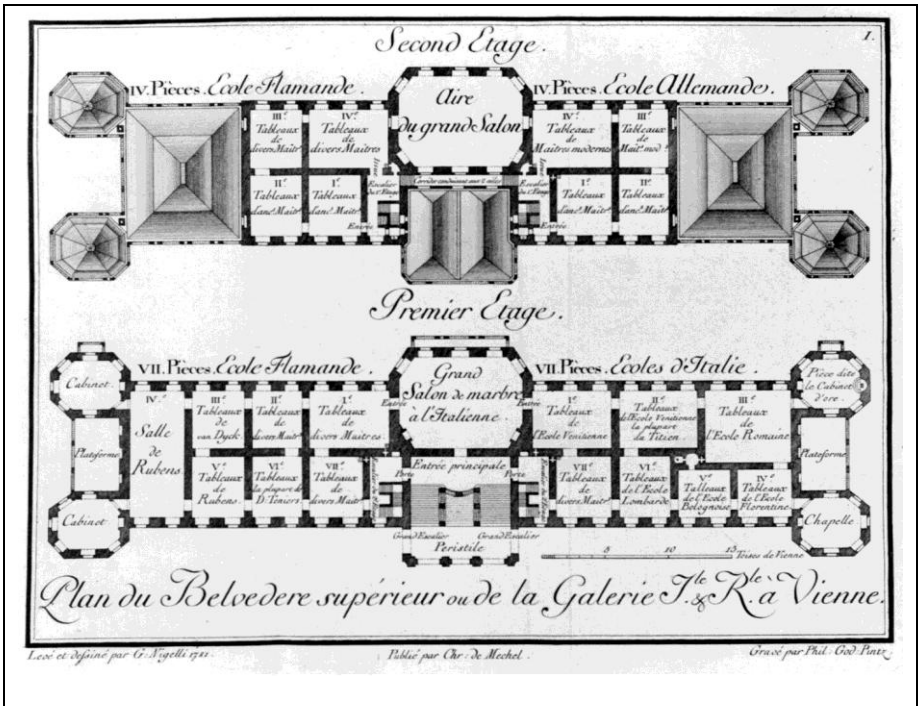


Fig. 2: Plan du Belvédère supérieur ou de la galerie impériale et royale à Vienne



Fig. 3: T. de Modena ("Mutina" according to Chr. Von Mechel): Triptych with Madonna

sidered ugly. Fortunately his expectations were satisfied and his anxieties proved to have been in vain. His Empress was content; she even ascended all the stairs with the sturdy support of his arm.

That day in the summer of 1781, a few months before the expiry of the Empress, must have been something like that. Whether Mechel's proud letter reporting the visit contains exaggerations or not is of secondary importance.²

There can be no doubt that the new arrangement caused a sensation, especially after the finishing touches had been added between that moment and October 1781, the date of completion. Apart from a similar attempt in the Uffizi in Florence, no other collection of paintings was arranged according to such a system. This explains why contemporaries viewed the event as revolutionary. Later museum historians have let themselves get carried away even more, and have regarded Mechel's new arrangement as heralding a new era. The birth of the modern, art historical museum is located here in the Habsburg court in Vienna in the year 1781. The evidence that is usually cited is a passage from the catalogue which Mechel wrote to conclude his rearrangement. This passage, in which Mechel justifies the principle of arrangement that he had followed, is certainly interesting enough. I shall cite it too, but I do not intend to leave it at that. The passage even served as the starting point for the monograph that I have published on this theme and of which I hope to give

² Mechel to Fr. Dom. Ring (Karlsruhe), Vienna 7 January 1781: „Ach freund den vergangenen 14. August werde sie [the payment for my work] im ganz Umfang gefühlet, den da besah Mutter Theresia mit ihren erhabene Kinder alles; Zimmer vo[r?] Zimmer, gos Vergnüg und freude in jede Saal und ich (was denken Sie wohl) war Ihr Arm, Ihre Stütze - an diesem Arm bestieg sie die Treppe des zweijten Stocks; Was meijnen Sie wohl dass dieser Arm gefühlet hat.“ (Universitätsbibliothek Freiburg im Breisgau, Nachlass Fr. Dom. Ring IVB: Mechel-Briefe.)

you an impression.³ Let us therefore begin by listening to Mechel's explanation of his method:

„The objective of the whole endeavour was to utilise this beautiful building, which is highly appropriate for the purpose through its division into numerous rooms, in such a way that the arrangement as a whole and in its several parts would be educational and would approach most closely a visible history of art. Such a large, public collection, intended to educate more than to provide mere passing enjoyment, can be compared to a well-endowed library, where the visitor with a thirst for knowledge is pleased to find work of all kinds and periods, not only what is attractive and perfect, but alternating contrasts, the contemplation and comparison of which – as the only road to knowledge – will enable him to become a connoisseur of art.“⁴

Time and again these formulations have led to an interpretation of Mechel's rearrangement as the birth of the modern, art historical museum.⁵ After all, this was the first time that a „mixed“ arrangement was abandoned and the transition made to a chronological arrangement by school, principles which ever since, so the argument goes, have been maintained in practically every art museum.

However, it is debatable whether the revolution was really such a radical one after all. Of course, it can all be found in the quotation if one chooses: on that reading, „educational“ refers to modern popular education, and „history of art“ refers to academic art history. „Chronological arrangement“ can then only be taken to be the dictate of a progressive, evolutionary concept of time.

I would like to propose a different reading, one based on different ideas contained in the quotation, which we tend to overlook on a first reading. For example, what are we to make of the simple fact that Mechel describes his *purpose*? What does his emphasis on *the whole and its several parts* entail? What role is played by *alternation* in the educational goal, what is one supposed to learn, and how is knowledge *acquired*? This shift of emphasis enables the well-worn citation to come to life again and to speak a language which sets Mechel's rearrangement within an eighteenth-century perspective. We are in fact confronted with a taxonomy, which as such had its origins in natural history and which was now explicitly applied to the arrangement of a picture gallery. Instead of the concept of evolution, we find a model which is

³ D. J. Meijers: *Kunst als natuur. De Habsburgse schilderijengalerij in Wenen omstreeks 1780*, Amsterdam 1991. Published in German as *Kunst als Natur. Die Habsburger Gemäldegalerie in Wien um 1780*. (Schriften des Kunsthistorischen Museums Bd 2) Wien, Mailand 1995.

⁴ Chr. von Mechel: *Verzeichniss der Gemälde der Kaiserlich Königl. Bilder Gallerie in Wien*. Vienna 1783, XI-XII.

⁵ For instance, A. Stix: *Die Aufstellung der ehemals kaiserlichen Gemäldegalerie in Wien im 18. Jahrhundert*. Vienna/Prague/Leipzig 1922; A. Lhotsky: *Die Geschichte der Sammlungen*. Festschrift des Kunsthistorischen Museums zur Feier des fünfzigjährigen Bestandes. Vienna 1941-1945. The position adopted in this older literature is repeated in more recent studies. An intermediary position has been taken by B. Savoy (Hrsg.), *Tempel der Kunst. Die Geburt des öffentlichen Museums in Deutschland 1701-1815*. Mainz am Rhein 2006.

ultimately propelled by God, in which earthly diversity (schools, periods) was traced back through logical gradations to an ideal Unity (the Art of Painting). I shall therefore try to demonstrate that Mechel's *visible history of art* was more a gradual than a drastic innovation.

Rosa and Mechel: courtier and entrepreneur

Let us return to Christian von Mechel's first steps toward Obere Belvedere in the year 1778. (fig. 4) Mechel found himself in Vienna at the invitation of Emperor Joseph II, whose favours he had done his utmost to secure when the Emperor broke off his journey the year before in Basel, the city where the printer and publisher of prints Mechel ran a flourishing business. As usual when royalty paid a visit, Mechel had proffered his services as a guide and had escorted the Emperor to his premises to show him his products, including the recently completed engravings for Nicolas de Pigage's catalogue of the Electoral Gallery in Düsseldorf, a project which had earned Mechel great honour at the time.⁶ It is not inconceivable that he was angling for a similar commission in Vienna, although it became clear that the Emperor was more interested in the technical side, whether it concerned Mechel's printing works or the local factories.⁷ All the same, Mechel's persistence was rewarded with an invitation to return the visit.

What did this business-like, Swiss burger find in the courtly circles of Vienna upon his arrival in 1778? And what was expected of him, a relative outsider? The best illustration of the difference in culture is the meeting with his most immediate rival: the director of the picture gallery, the court painter Joseph Rosa, who had been charged with the rearrangement of the gallery since 1772. (fig. 5).

While this first „homme d'art“ to be brought to Vienna by the Emperor Joseph met with universal acclaim, Rosa had little reason to be pleased. The account of his bitter experiences which he penned a few years later presents the event as a takeover.⁸ The man who had already spent six years on the complete reorganisation of the gallery was suddenly forced to hand over the keys to Mechel and to witness the latter's interference with his own work.

⁶ *N. de Pigage: La Galerie Electorale de Dusseldorf ou catalogue raisonné, à et figuré, à de ses tableaux.* Basel 1778.

⁷ See J. C. Lavater's report of this visit, cited by L. H. Wüthrich: *Christian von Mechel. Leben und Werk eines Basler Kupferstechers und Kunsthändlers (1735-1817)*, Basel & Stuttgart 1956, 140-142.

⁸ *E. von Engerth: Kunsthistorische Sammlung des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses, Gemälde, Beschreibendes Verzeichnis*, Vienna 1882-1886, I, LXXII-LXXIV.

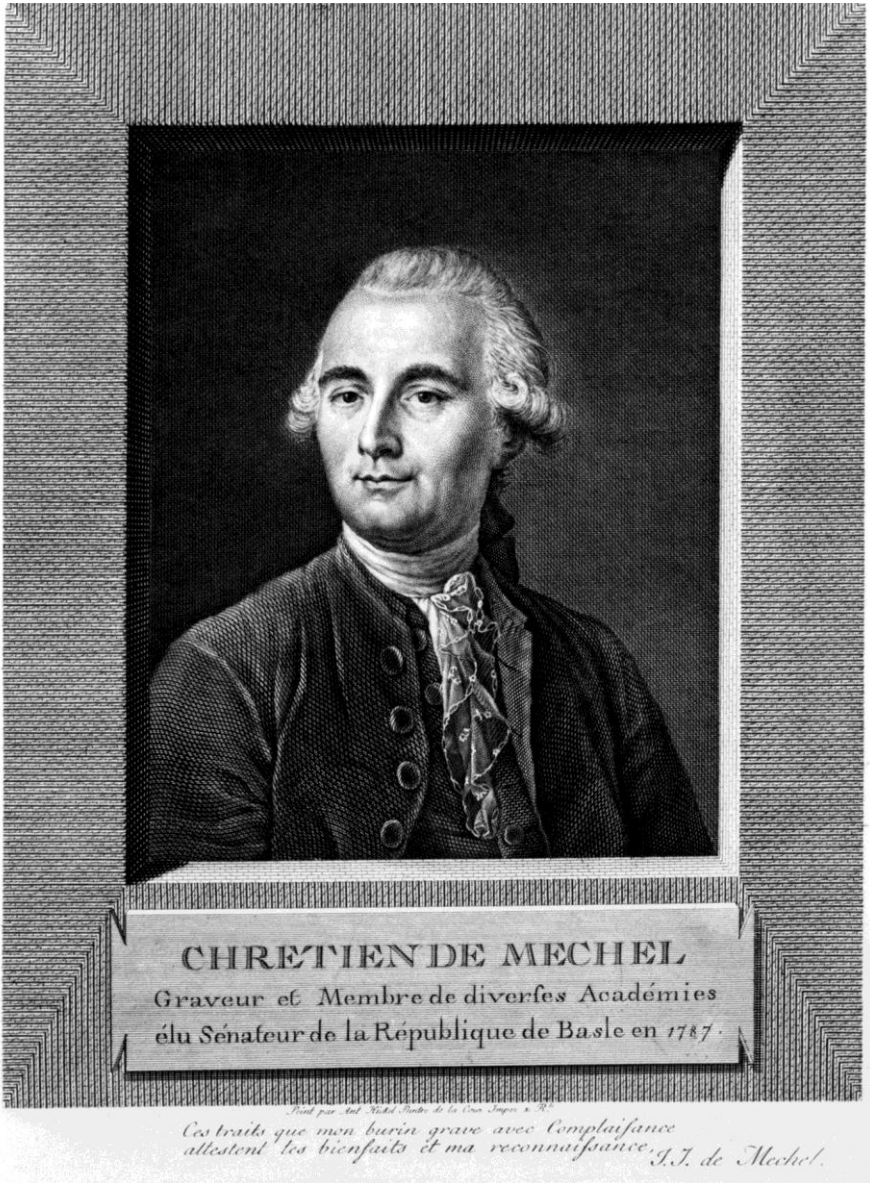


Fig. 4: J. J. de Mechel: Portrait of Christian von Mechel



Fig. 5: Martin Knoller: Portrait of the painter and gallery director Joseph Rosa

It is not immediately obvious why Rosa had to be replaced. After all, he favoured an approach which was later continued by Mechel. He compiled a systematic inventory of the collection of paintings; he travelled to concentrate the masterpieces from the scattered Habsburg collections in Vienna; and – above all – he started to hang the paintings by school.

The difference has to be sought elsewhere. Rosa does not appear to have had any special interest in *older* German and Netherlandish paintings, and he had none whatever in the chronological sequence and patriotic sentiments which we find in Mechel's arrangement. He was primarily interested in the *flowering* of the art of painting rather than in its *growth*. This difference in emphasis reveals Rosa's position as belonging to a different background from Mechel. A cursory glance at his biography can explain this. Rosa was born in Vienna in 1726 in an established family of animal and landscape painters. He himself practised this particularly intimate, private genre. After attending the Vienna Academy, he spent most of his time in Dresden, where he continued his training in the renowned art gallery of King August III. He rose to the position of court painter and professor in the Fine Art Academy, until his appointment as imperial director of the gallery in Vienna took him back to his native city in 1772.

The background of Mechel, who was nine years his junior, is very different. He came from a labouring family of bookbinders, publishers and engravers which had been established in Basel for centuries. His traditions were therefore rooted in the democratic city states of Switzerland. His entire education and ensuing career were devoted to the twin endeavour of shaking off and exploiting this background. So when he broke off his university education to follow the family profession of engraving, he did all within his power to gain access to the aristocratic and courtly circles of Europe. Training to become a highly developed professional was an essential prerequisite of this strategy.

A crucial role was played by Mechel's apprenticeship in the Parisian workshop of Jean Georges Wille, a much admired figure who occupied a key position in the print world at the time. During his stint there, from 1757 to 1760, Mechel came into contact with many important figures from the international art world, such as Heinrich von Heineken, Pierre-Jean Mariette and Hugues Adrien Joly, as well as Wille's highly placed clients, so that he had ample opportunity to develop his mastery of the rules of courtly behaviour and his flair for business. During a trip to Rome, which he made before setting up a firm in Basel along the lines of Wille's company, he made the acquaintance of Johann Joachim Winckelmann.

Thus while Rosa provided the court in Dresden with pastoral paintings and opera décors, in the traditional role of permanent court artist, Mechel was employed in the „free market sector“, and in a medium which guaranteed many points of contact with contemporary scientific developments. Engravers were responsible for the illustrations to the flood of scientific publications, including the field of art and architecture. Moreover, they were required to have a very highly trained power of analytical perception for an activity which was gaining immensely in popularity in the eighteenth century: the reproduction of

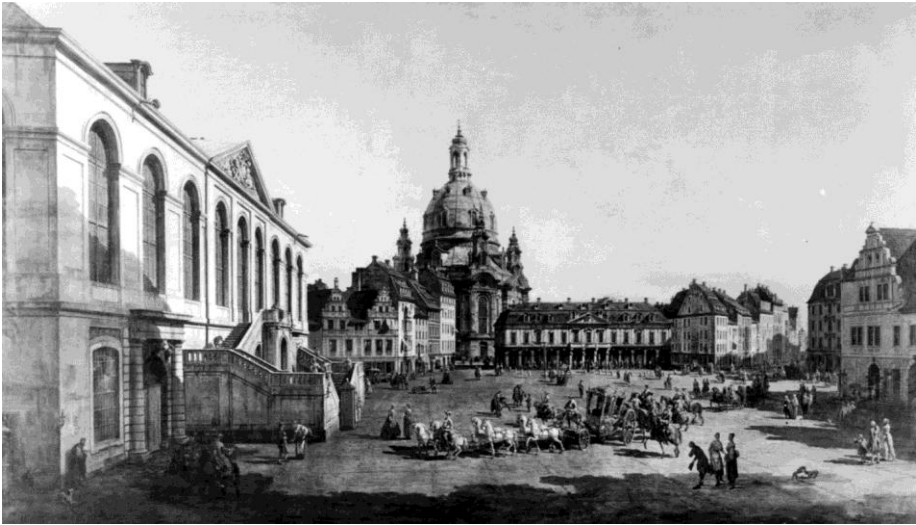


Fig. 6: Bernardo Bellotto, named Canaletto: The Neumarkt in Dresden with the royal gallery on the left

famous paintings in print form. Taken together, these factors go some way to explaining why Rosa was replaced by Mechel. In the cultural spectrum of the 1770s, Mechel was on the side of the Enlightenment – through his Swiss background, his modern profession and his interest in the stages of development of German art – while at the same time he had at his disposal all the skills of a courtier. He thus harmonised perfectly with the enlightened art policy programme formulated by Johann Georg Sulzer as a precondition for the revival of German art. No doubt, Sulzer’s stipulations for the artist also applied to the gallery director: „he must not be put to work in the regent’s cabinet, where the latter functions as a private person, but summoned to the throne for a commission which is as important as that of a military commander, a magistrate or an economist (Landespolicey)⁹. It is clear that the court painter Rosa was not sufficiently master of this role, accustomed as he was to decorate the immediate private quarters of princes and the nobility. Apparently his vision of the gallery was also insufficiently attuned to a public, political function.

Nevertheless, it is still difficult to explain the fact that it was Rosa who introduced the arrangement by school in Vienna. To gain a better understanding of this procedure, let us consider Rosa’s practice ground, the Electoral Gallery in Dresden. The analysis of the arrangement of this gallery will also turn out to temper our view of the novelty of Mechel’s Viennese „revolution“.

⁹ J. G. Sulzer: *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste*, Leipzig 1773-1775, II, 72-73.

Observation and comparison as the only path to knowledge

When Rosa arrived in Dresden as a young artist around 1750, the gallery was at the peak of its celebrity, not only because of the wealth of its masterpieces, but also because of the way in which they were arranged in the recently renovated and reorganised gallery building, the Stallhof on the Neumarkt. (fig. 6 and 7)

For the first time there was a separate section, the „innere Galerie“, specially set apart for Italian masters alone. The rest of the display area, the „äussere Galerie“, offered the usual pattern of paintings from different schools, distributed over the walls in a consistent mixture. It was thus a striking combination of the principle of arrangement by school with the principle of mixing. Moreover, a large number of Italians also featured in the mixed area among the North and South Netherlandish, German and French masters.

How are we to account for this apparent ambivalence? As there was no explicit discussion of the motives for this arrangement at the time, one gains the impression that there was simply a lack of theory behind it. However, this silence is misleading. Apparently there was a silent consensus on how paintings were supposed to be hung. As yet there were no two rival parties who were forced to make their principles explicit. This situation arose in Vienna two decades later, when the advocates of the mixed arrangement were ousted by the advocates of an arrangement by school. In Dresden, on the other hand, it was still possible for the mixed arrangement (the outer gallery) and a concentration of Italian works (in the inner gallery) to coexist amicably, or even to complement one another.

Upon closer examination, this apparently ambivalent arrangement itself proves to be based on a system. A clue is provided by the introduction to the 1765 catalogue. Although this text does not provide a direct explanation of the arrangement, it does offer insight into the expected mode of observation. The gallery, it states, is intended for „the genuine connoisseur, who studies them [the paintings], experiences their Beauty, reflects on it as a connoisseur, and concludes which painting is to be preferred to another and in which parts these qualities lie.“¹⁰ First of all, this formulation shows that the gallery was not simply intended to overwhelm the visitor with its diversity of masterpieces, but was supposed to lead to serious study. The form of this study, we learn from the quotation, was to observe, compare and assess. The systematic nature of the comparison proves, in fact, to be achieved by reference to the theory of the „parts of the art of painting“ adhered to by Roger de Piles, which still played an important role in the later eighteenth century. By these „parts“ was meant the analysis of the various aspects of individual paintings: the choice of theme, composition, drawing, use of colour and expression, so that they could then be

¹⁰ J.A. Riedel: *Chr. F. Wenzel. Catalogue des Tableaux de la Galerie Electorale à Dresde. Leipzig 1765.*

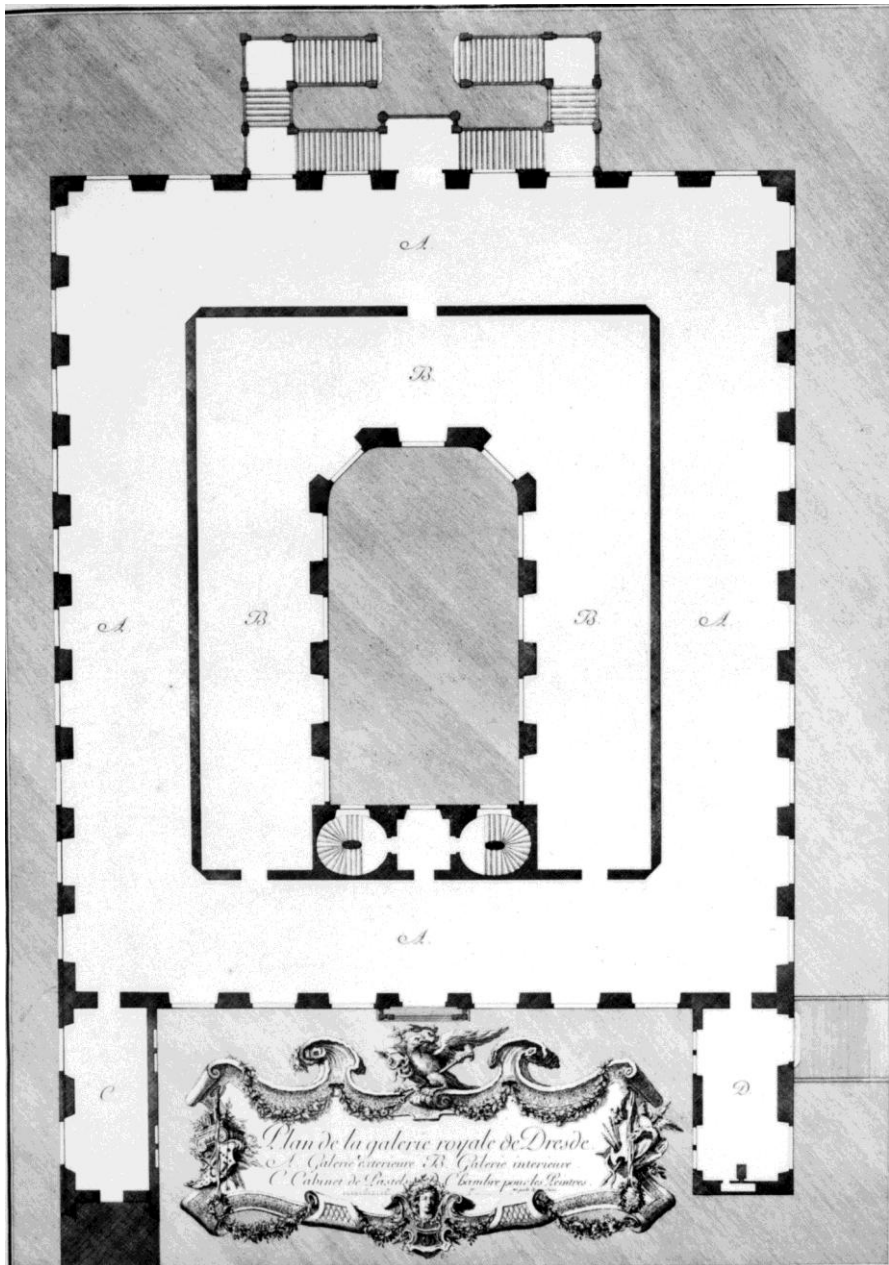


Fig. 7: Plan de la galerie royale e Dresde, from Heinrich von Heineken

compared with one another and their relative qualities could be determined. This was what visitors to the gallery were expected to do, and a mixed ar-

rangement, in which very diverse paintings hung in proximity to one another, was an invitation to practise this mode of observation.

Besides the catalogue text, this procedure of observation, analysis and assessment based on comparison can also be deduced from contemporary treatises. A good example is Christian Ludwig von Hagedorn's *Betrachtungen über die Malerey* (Dresden 1762). Von Hagedorn, a prominent art expert who was appointed as head of the Saxon art collections and academies a year after the publication of this work, was well acquainted with the Dresden gallery. Although his book was primarily intended as a guide for the execution and assessment of *individual* paintings, it also provides indirect clues toward a better understanding of the *ensembles* by which the works were grouped in this gallery.

A crucial role is played by von Hagedorn's plea for the study of differing qualities among as many different artists as possible. For by giving the individual artists diverse talents, the Creator had ensured that the art of painting, like nature, would be governed by a pleasurable variety. Since this was a natural law, so he reminds his readers, it was binding on human beings too. The artist must combine the best elements of the various masters and schools to create a new unity of his own; and the director of a collection ought to try to achieve the same variety, for „complete uniformity of ideas [themes], of drawing and of the use of colour would eventually make our finest art galleries extremely monotonous“, as Hagedorn expressed it.¹¹ In combining a number of paintings within a gallery, the same message was to be expressed as that which applied to the art of painting itself: there was a single Art, which appeared to us in various guises, whether you call it the “parts of painting” or “schools”. It was this ideal unity which was to form the backcloth to the variety of the arrangement. Von Hagedorn supports his theory with a citation from Cicero: had the latter not already stated that the sculptors Myron, Polykleitos and Lysippos produced a single art in spite of – or rather, thanks to – their mutual differences?¹²

This emphasis on diversity explains why the idea of a general division by school had not yet been applied to a gallery. This does not mean that people *never* thought in terms of schools: such a classification was already fairly common in *catalogues* of paintings, as well as in collections of prints and drawings. Hanging paintings on the wall, however, and subsequently assessing them by associating them *a priori* with a particular school, tended to encourage prejudice, Hagedorn believed.¹³ How often, he notes, does someone fail to find a painting beautiful any longer once he has been told that it is the work of

¹¹ Chr.L. von Hagedorn: *Betrachtungen über die Malerey*. Dresden 1762, 105-106.

¹² Hagedorn: *Betrachtungen über die Malerey* (Anm. 11), 107.

¹³ Hagedorn: *Betrachtungen über die Malerey* (Anm. 11), 64.



Fig. 8: Engraving after Hans Holbein

a German? The observer must discover the qualities of the paintings by his own efforts, and only then consider the issue of the possible attribution to a school.

In that case, however, how are we to account for the separate Italian display in Dresden?

The answer may sound paradoxical: this explicit privileged position accorded to the Italian school can be seen as the first step toward a reassessment of the national German school. It should be remembered that a division by school, as that was practised in catalogues and print collections earlier on in the eighteenth century, was not primarily intended to meet a demand for geographical classification, but rather as a manner of indicating the differences in artistic appreciation. The schools were characterised on the basis of the same „parts of the art of painting“ which have already been mentioned. For instance, the Roman painters, headed by Raphael, were primarily masters in concept and delineation, while the Venetian school, following in Titian’s footsteps, excelled more in its use of colour. The Northern Netherlandish school followed suit, but its exponents made a more banal choice of theme. The German school’s strong point was expression, though in other respects it lagged behind the other schools. This was the familiar characterisation of the various schools. Such an already existing arrangement by artistic qualities, which around 1750 was responsible in Dresden for the combination of a mixture of schools and a separate school (the Italian), was thirty years later the basis for a general classification in Vienna.

This can be seen to confirm my hypothese that the principles of combination and of isolation can both be derived from a single theory. Moreover, the argument on which Mechel’s step toward an actual arrangement by school was based was already present in Dresden in embryonic form, that is, in the attempt to raise the status of the Northern schools, particularly the German. While Mechel grouped the German paintings together for this purpose and also arranged them chronologically in the stages of growth, flowering and decay, the Dresden revaluation was less forthright and lacked explicit patriotic statements. This can be illustrated from the terms used to assess the *Madonna of Mayor Mayer*, which was attributed to Hans Holbein at the time (fig. 8). Because of its precise realism, this Northern Painting was considered worthy of inclusion in the publication in print of the Dresden gallery, which consisted almost exclusively of Italian paintings.¹⁴ But the explanatory comments are still wary: despite all its qualities, it is evident that the painter „had never entirely rid himself of that dry, sometimes superficial style of painting which is still to be found in the work of our earliest artists, called the Ultramontane by the Italian masters“. However, the comments continue, „it cannot be denied that even in Italy a Leonardo da Vinci, a Pietro Perugino, a Giovanni Bellini and so many others, without omitting Raphael entirely, worked at first in the same style“.

On the one hand, this description reveals how a German master was still viewed within the frame of reference of Italian art in 1757. Once again this throws light on the question of why a large number of Italian works were still

¹⁴ H. von Heineken: *Recueil d’estampes d’après les plus célèbres tableaux de la Galerie Royale de Dresde*. Dresden, 3 vols., 1753, 1757 and 1874.

hung among works from other schools in the Dresden outer gallery. Study of the great German masters of the past was important, but they could not stand on their own. On the other hand, the description also explains why the Italians were given a separate display area. It is tempting to explain this presence everywhere as arising from a pure desire to impress, connected with the enormous number of Italian works owned by the gallery. However, an interpretation of this kind fails to account fully for the purpose of the gallery as formulated in the introduction to the catalogue: it was not so much a question of dazzling with brilliance, but of promoting the common good by shaping the nation's taste.¹⁵ The centuries-old superiority and exemplary value of Italian art thus assumed a new, more economic function. Saxon artists and connoisseurs were to elevate their own school through study of the Italians, and thereby to serve the prosperity and prestige of the nation. The relegation of the Italians to a separate display area served this purpose. After all, if they were hung together, the visitor would be enabled to consider the differentiations which existed *within* this school. This would facilitate the task of following in their footsteps, a project which was so essential if the German school was to be improved.

It transpires, then, that this semi-mixed arrangement was in fact based on a theory. The gallery was intended to display the diversity of pictorial schools which combined, led by the Italians, to form the Art of Painting. Seen in this light, the step taken by Mechel in arranging the works by type is not fundamentally revolutionary. The fact that Rosa, with his Dresden background, had already begun to move in that direction furnishes an additional argument to support this interpretation. What Mechel did was to extend the system of ramifications which was already current in art theory, and to make it visible on the walls. The result was certainly a startling one, and it is therefore hardly surprising that this change provoked strong reactions among both opponents and defendants. Mechel was accused of „gallery murder“ because he had recast the Viennese collection in a „Bildermusterkarte“ [sample display] which stood in sharp contrast to the „Augenweide“ [pleasure for the eye] offered by a genuine gallery like the one in Dresden.¹⁶ On the other hand, another critic, a certain Johann Karl von Wezel, sprang to Mechel's rescue in an explicit defence of that very taxonomic approach. Through this system of ramifications, he claimed, Mechel had turned the collection into a genuine gallery, just as a natural historian subdivides his cabinet of minerals or shells history collection by class, order, family and sort.¹⁷

These reactions suggest an opposition between „systematic“ and purely „decorative“ approaches. However, as I have attempted to show, it is not this

¹⁵ J. A. Riedel, *Chr. F. Wenzel: Catalogue des Tableaux* (Anm. 10).

¹⁶ „Fortsetzung der Gedanken über den Zustand der Künste in Sachsen, bei Gelegenheit der Ausstellung vom Jahr 1781. Zweiter Brief. Görlitz den 5. April 1781“, *Deutsches Museum*, Sept. 1782, 237-262.

¹⁷ J. K. von Wezel: „*Auszüge aus Briefen*. I, Wien, den 15. Dez. 1782“, *Deutsches Museum*, I, 1783, 182-185.

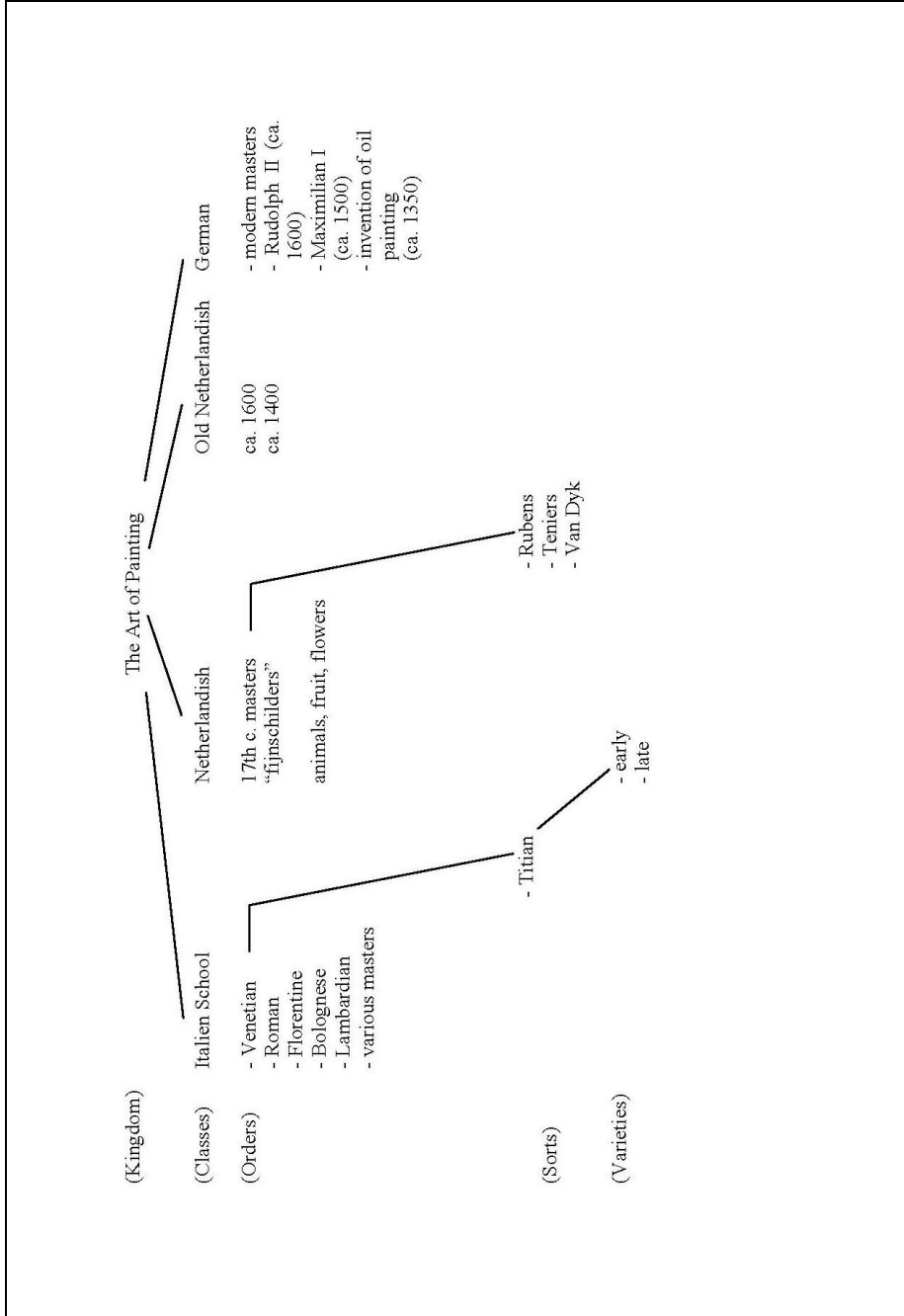
opposition which marks the difference between the Viennese taxonomy and the Dresden „Augenweide“. In both cases, what was at stake was the creation of unity in diversity, based on a taxonomic way of thinking; but while in Dresden the emphasis was on diversity, in Vienna it was on unity.

The two arrangements did not differ fundamentally either when it came to the consequences for the respective views as to how knowledge should be acquired. Both the Vienna and the Dresden galleries were primarily intended for connoisseurs. The difference lies in the fact that the Dresden arrangement assumes the existence of *de facto* connoisseurs, while Mechel assumes that his gallery can turn visitors into connoisseurs. In both cases, it is assumed that these connoisseurs study the paintings comparatively, a procedure which Mechel even qualified as „the only road to knowledge“. There were differences, however, in *what* they compared. In Dresden it was contrasts which were held to be instructive, while Mechel referred primarily to comparisons between similar works. As a Mechel devotee, the Berlin publisher Friedrich Nicolai, put it in 1784: „The mind is more at ease when it surveys objects of one kind, than when it is disturbed by objects of various kinds“. But, Nicolai continues, it is even more instructive „if similar objects lead one gradually from a lesser to a greater beauty“. He is referring to the various stages of the Netherlandish school through which the visitor passes, from „the Good“ (Teniers) via „the Beautiful“ (Van Dyck) to „the Sublime“ (Rubens).¹⁸ The systematic arrangement proves to contain a specific „progression“ for Nicolai, albeit a qualitative progression rather than a chronological one. This brings us to the most essential feature of the Viennese arrangement: the temporality followed by Christian von Mechel.

A visible history of art

If it was not the division by school which made the rearrangement of the Habsburg art gallery in Vienna a revolution in the history of the museum, was it perhaps the partial chronological arrangement? No previous art gallery had displayed the slightest trace of this principle, apart from the collection in the

¹⁸ F. Nicolai: *Beschreibung einer Reise durch Deutschland und die Schweiz im Jahre 1781*, Berlin/Stettin, IV, 1784, 492-500.



(Kingdom)

(Classes)

(Orders)

(Sorts)

(Varieties)

The Art of Painting

Italian School

Netherlandish

Old Netherlandish

German

- Venetian
- Roman
- Florentine
- Bolognese
- Lombardian
- various masters

17th c. masters
"fijnschilders"
animals, fruit, flowers

- modern masters
- Rudolph II (ca. 1600)
- Maximilian I (ca. 1500)
- invention of oil painting (ca. 1350)

- Titian
- Rubens
- Teniers
- Van Dyk

- early
- late

Uffizi in Florence, which was reorganised at more or less the same time.¹⁹ It is certainly true that this marked an important change, as I have already indicated. In this connection I have already referred to enlightened arts policy in the sense of Sulzer and to the function that the gallery played in it, calling for a modern approach like Mechel's rather than a traditional courtly approach like that of Rosa. Mechel found a way of profiling the Northern schools, above all the Germans, in relation to the Italians, which satisfied the new patriotic criteria. Following in the footsteps of theories of the „history of mankind“ like that of Isaac Iselin, and of the „history of art“ like that of Winckelmann, he was not only interested in differentiation by place, but also by period. For by demonstrating the birth, growth and flowering of German art, the possibility was opened up for improvement in the future.²⁰ All the same, that does not mean that Mechel was the father of the modern art historical museum. If we attempt to reproduce his system, it yields the following structure:

I am here following the observations of the contemporary critics, especially Wezel and Nicolai, who were mentioned above. It is striking that both of them point out that, in walking through the gallery, the visitor passes through a series of „Stufen“ (gradations, stages) in painting. As witness their statements, they see no fundamental difference between gradations of time and gradations of quality. In other words, the development of art over time has not yet freed itself from the grasp of the taxonomic system in order to play the all-pervasive role that it was to assume a few decennia later in the nineteenth-century museum.

Wezel's formulations in particular speak volumes. The four main divisions of the collection – the Italian, Netherlandish, Old Netherlandish and German schools – „are like the four main branches, each of which has its own subsidiary branches, or to put it in more philosophical terms: they are the four main classes, each of which is divided into a larger or smaller number of orders, just as the natural scientist classifies minerals, plants and animals.“ Thus the Italian school as a main class has six orders: the Venetian, Roman, Florentine, Bolognese and Lombardian schools plus a room with various masters. The Northern schools, however, have a „Zeitordnung“ which leads the visitor from wall to wall past the sequence of periods. „It can therefore be seen“, concludes Wezel, „that the arrangement is completely systematic.“²¹ Thus the arrangement of the Northern schools in periods appears to occupy the same plane as

¹⁹ D. J. Meijers: „Naar een systematisch presentatia“. In: E. Bergvelt, D.J. Meijers, M. Rijnders (red.), *Kabinetten, galerijen en musea. Het verzamelen en presenteren van naturalia en kunst van 1400 tot heden*. Zwolle 2005, 271. The unexecuted idea for an chronological arrangement haven't been formulated as early as 1771 in Dresden by Graf Vitzthum. See V. Spenlé, *Eine chronologische Historie der Malhery in Gemälden*. Vorschläge zu einer Neuordnung der Dresdner Gemäldegalerie 1771. In: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 67 (2004), 461-478.

²⁰ I. Iselin: *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit*. Basel 1764. J.J. Winckelmann: *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*. Dresden 1764.

²¹ J.K. Welzel: *Auszüge aus Briefen* (Anm. 17), 182-185.

the arrangement of the Italians in local schools, viz. that of the orders in which these branches are ramified. At the time no one regarded this as illogical, which is hardly surprising, since in both cases the works are classified in terms of their painterly qualities. This can also be seen from the presence of what we would regard as yet another category among the orders of the Netherlandish school: the animal, fruit and flower paintings. Moreover, the fact that it is not primarily a *chronological* arrangement can be seen from the departures that were made from the chronology here and there. For instance, the painter Anton Raphael Mengs is not hung in the eighteenth-century German school room, but in the Roman school beside Giulio Romano.

It was not until the end of the century that „a-historical“ arrangements of this kind, ultimately based on the categories of natural history, were regarded as inappropriate. In his attempt to add the time factor, Mechel ran up against the limitations of the taxonomic arrangement. What Mechel and his followers still saw as *the* solution for the growing demand for a „temporalisation“ of art was more or less simultaneously rejected by Kant as a theoretical impossibility: in his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* Kant argued that the system of natural history, like any other system, can only grow internally, not externally. This implied that, just as an animal body is unable to acquire an extra limb by growing, it is impossible for a taxonomy to acquire a third dimension – the temporal dimension.²²

Mechel's latter years in Berlin and the conflict with the new order

We may therefore conclude that the print dealer Christian von Mechel and the court painter Joseph Rosa, even though each of them represents a different background within the social and artistic spectrum of the late eighteenth century, both remained within its confines. There was no real conflict between the two orders until after 1805, when the old man Mechel left for Berlin, driven from his fatherland by the „Java of the revolution“ and in search of the last traces of genuine aristocracy in Europe. For a moment there is a glimmer of a new future for him: a commission to arrange the royal art collection as a preliminary to the foundation of a new museum, what was later known as the Alte Museum. But Berlin is in the grip of the new age too – indeed, particularly so. The preparations for the museum are in the hands of a „committee“ whose members, Schinkel, Waagen and Von Humboldt, do not know what to make of the old man's analytical, schematic approach. Their plans for the museum are not „Enlightenment“ but „Bildung“, no logical taxonomy of art but its evo-

²² W. Lepenies: *Das Ende der Naturgeschichte*. Wandel kultureller Selbstverständlichkeiten in den Wissenschaften des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts. Frankfurt am Main 1983, 63.

lutionary development. The modern, art historical museum is born as Mechel dies.

Figures

1. C. Schütz: Le château de Belvédère vers le jardin. Coloured engraving. 1785. Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien.
2. Plan du Belvédère supérieur ou de la galerie impériale et royale à Vienne. From Chrétien de Mechel. *Cat. des tableaux de la galerie impériale et royale de Vienne*. Basel, 1884.
3. T. de Modena (“Mutina” according to Chr. Von Mechel): Triptych with Madonna, S. Wenceslaus and S. Palmatus. Tempera on wood, 79 x 54 cm (center) and 79 x 44 cm (wings). Ca. 1355. Karlstein, Kreuzkapelle/Narodni gallery Prague.
4. J. J. de Mechel: Portrait of Christian von Mechel. Engraving after a painting by Anton Hickel. 1785/87. Öffentliche Bibliothek der Universität Basel.
5. Martin Knoller: Portrait of the painter and gallery director Joseph Rosa. Oil on canvas. 83,5 x 64,5 cm. Österreichische Galerie Wien.
6. Bernardo Bellotto, named Canaletto: The Neumarkt in Dresden with the royal gallery on the left. Oil on canvas, 136 x 236 cm. 1749. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.
7. Plan de la galerie royale e Dresde, from Heinrich von Heineken. *Recueil d’estampes d’après les plus célèbres tableaux de la galerie royale de Dresde I*. Dresden, 1755.
8. Engraving after Hans Holbein d.J.: Madonna of Major Meyer. From: Heineken II, 1757. The painting later turned out to be a copy from the seventeenth century.