

## RÉSUMÉS

### Thorvaldsen's Museum, Symbol and Interpretation

Patriotism was the prime motive of those Danes who endeavoured to tempt Thorvaldsen to return from Italy, and patriotism made it financially possible to build a museum for his collections and works.

Thorvaldsen's compatriots felt that his international fame lent lustre to his native country so that his glory became Denmark's also.

He was the Danish Phidias, and by joint efforts Copenhagen, his native town, was to become a Scandinavian Athens. Thorvaldsen's Museum was to give a harmonious picture of his glorious and active life and as such also be a national monument. The erection of the museum would create a favourable climate for the various branches of art, as had Ludwig I's buildings in Munich. Thorvaldsen's works and collections would have an educational influence on those in whose midst they were, and people would come from other countries to admire and imitate.

The initial designs for the museum were Pantheon-like temples, resembling Canova's memorial church at Possagno. Canova's temple was supposed to arouse noble feelings of honour, patriotism, and gratitude towards the artist who had united the glory of Greece and Rome.<sup>7</sup>

Canova was the only artist whom Thorvaldsen had tried to surpass time and again in his career, and as national feelings were not less strong in Denmark, the Danish spirit, which in Thorvaldsen's works united the same elements – the common cultural heritage – could be expressed in a common symbol – a Pantheon.

However, the Roman Pantheon as a model was behind the times, and even columns were about to go out of fashion, but the desire to express national feelings had not weakened. People had now, however, more liberty to combine and choose their symbolic language. M. G. Bindsbøll, who in 1839 had been entrusted with the building of the the museum, wished that the purpose of a building should be immediately recognized and understood, at the same time as he sought "simplicity of expression". In his explanation of the first drawings for the final project he wrote, "As to the style I have chosen, the forms of antiquity pervade the major part of Thorvaldsen's work to such an extent that designs resembling classical architecture must also provide the best motifs for this building. Similarly,

Thorvaldsen's friend, Canina, chose his designs from antiquity when he planned the entrance of the Borghese Garden in Via Flaminia in Rome (fig. 3). So in fact he composed rather in accordance with his own ideas than imitated the classical masters, as he could choose patterns among several different buildings representing different times.<sup>10</sup> Canina's portal building was considered one of the most beautiful modern works when Bindesbøll visited Rome, and we must take for granted that Thorvaldsen would have fully understood this free use of classical forms, which he incidentally also must have discussed with C.F. Schinkel and Leo von Klenze. Bindesbøll allows himself an even freer treatment of the historical forms. His museum is a compilation of symbols united in one expression: a tribute to Thorvaldsen. The main motif is the classical temple entrance, characteristic of both Greek and Roman art, and perhaps Thorvaldsen's initials, AT AT AT, are also hidden in its shape (fig. 4).

The entablature of the main façade is an imitation of the caryatid portico of the Erechtheion and suggests the harmony of the ionic style.

The symbolic language of the hall is to be found in the triumphal arch. It was erected for him who returns home triumphant. The frieze of figures on the external walls of the museum relates his famous doings and shows the works of art he brought back with him and which he had donated to his country; but those unloading the ship are not slaves, they are free men, of their own free will carrying the treasures to the building erected by themselves. The ochre yellow colour of the museum is Roman. A polychrome building is an invitation, a kindness to the man in the street. It is colour which binds all times and nations to each other.<sup>12</sup>

In the entrance hall crowned by Victory, Thorvaldsen's monumental works are presented, here his honour is to be found. The hall is also in principle a pronaos; only a small door leads further into the interior of the museum, as if the walls were guarding a treasure. Here the artist is buried, surrounded by the works of his life.

The court suggests a Roman cortile, but with its 18 openings leading into the museum it also serves as the peristyle of a Pompeian house.

In the plan sanctioned in 1839, there was a well instead of the tomb. The decision that Thorvaldsen should be buried in the museum, did not cause any alterations in the architecture, but it was of course a matter of importance for the decoration of the court. At the same time the decision increased the symbolic value of the entire building. The tomb in the centre

of the court, on the axis of Victory and the Christ hall, is decorated with palm leaves, roses, and white lilies seen against an azure background. It is not death, it is resurrection. There the image of his immortal soul was to remain, and so there he would never die. On three sides of the walls of the court there is above the doors a frieze of racing genii, symbolizing the course of life. Between the 18 doors the placing of two palm trees at the Christ Hall might suggest the Holy Land and the Garden of Eden. The laurels along the long sides might symbolize the classical themes in Thorvaldsen's art and also poetry and victory. The oak trees at the entrance hall might indicate Thorvaldsen's modern motifs and symbolize faithfulness and strength. The decoration of the court as a whole could then be the eternal cycle in the arbour of time. As far as the interior is concerned, Bindesbøll was probably influenced by Leo von Klenze's Glyptothek in Munich, especially as he knew that if the plans of the museum in Copenhagen could not be realized, Thorvaldsen would presumably have donated his collections and works to that town. Thorvaldsen's works were not to feel ashamed of being in Copenhagen. Just as in Munich, the decoration of the rooms was to create the right atmosphere in the spectator, and it was found that the whiteness of the marble was best set off against a background of deep yellow colours. The visitor was then able to see and feel that Thorvaldsen and his works had recovered Italy in Denmark.

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