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KUNST  
HISTORISCHES  
MUSEUM  
WIEN

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KUNSTKAMMER WIEN  
THE ARCHITECTURAL CONCEPT

HG MERZ  
ARCHITECTS

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THE THIRD LIFE OF OBJECTS  
WHAT IT MEANS TO CREATE THE KUNSTKAMMER WIEN

For an architect, installing a collection of exceptional artifacts in an iconic museum building represents a major challenge.

Both the building and the collection - which, like Sleeping Beauty, had fallen into a long sleep - are unique. This alone, one would assume, should ensure a resounding success – what is left to design? On the contrary, such exceptional factors either result in paralysis, or demand a design that reflects both humility and delicacy.

The new installation of the Kunstammer Wien in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien had to take into account the important historical architecture devised by Carl von Hasenauer and Gottfried Semper, which precluded the staging of any kind of artificial “Wunderkammer” – the building was not designed for such a “circus” approach. On the other hand, the installation has to present a collection comprising countless individual heterogeneous artworks to a public more interested in the spectacular, who prefers immediate experiences to contemplative involvement with an artifact and its nuances – in short, we needed magical galleries!

The objects on show here have left their first life behind; removed from their original context, they have become museum objects. Their former setting, in which they were used and admired, no longer exists, and they have entered a new relationship with other objects in a collection. This second life of objects displayed in show-cases set up in an *enfilade* of galleries in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien engendered the Kunstammer Wien. In a new installation, in new receptacles but familiar galleries, they have begun their third life.

We composed configurations comprising objects, textiles, materials, media and the historical architecture to create an ambience in which visitors can experience the magic of this collection. This complex set of relationships presupposes a familiarity with the existing architecture, surfaces, decorations, lighting and especially the character of the collection and its history. The Kunstammer Wien of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien was never really a “Wunderkammer”. The collection was always presented in show-cases in a

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# KUNST HISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN

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museum. Our new installation is informed by this traditional form of installation.

We did not create über-staged galleries; wherever possible we have retained and preserved the original architecture. However, conservational measures (protection against light) required new windows, without, however, altering either their interior or exterior appearance; protective climate locks were installed at the entrances to the galleries (alterations: b18-architekten zt gmbh); all other additions such as show-cases, display areas for tapestries, and lighting (star-brick lustres by Olafur Eliasson) are part of the furnishings, designed to subtly enhance the architecture.

The reduced and subdued installation is a reflection of both the reminiscence of historical installations and the character of the objects on show.

Many of the artifacts are highly dramatic in their own right, some are a „firework“ of forms, colours and materials, some are simply magnificent artworks made of materials with an inherent aura that does not tolerate exaggeration. All this cannot just be left to drown in a dramatic stage-set.

The presentation of these exceptional artifacts based on the triad of space, artwork and visitors is an uncovering (in Heidegger's sense) of the protagonists rather than a covering with decoration. This is why we did not create countless small worlds, whose artificial manifestation would never do justice to the artworks, but an unpretentious “Schaudepot” (a depot with show-cases) that differs from a normal depot because each object is given its due and air to breathe.

Material and function of the show-cases have been reduced, but their proportions express their self-confidence *vis-a-vis* the architecture despite their subservient, practical function.

There are four different types of presentation-furniture – free-standing show-cases, hanging show-cases, table show-cases and restored historical show-cases; the placing and mixing of these different pieces of furniture creates variety and gives each gallery its individual character.

However, the principle of reduction and concentration on the exhibited artwork does not preclude interaction between artifacts. Location and concentration of show-cases – as in a Wunderkammer – therefore create the desired dialogue between exhibits. Visitors are invited to compare. Later, perhaps, they may enter into an intimate dialogue with exhibited artifacts using an app on their smart-phone in connection with RFID tags on the show-cases, hearing stories that allow them to see the objects with new eyes.

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# KUNST HISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN

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The Kunstkammer Wien is not installed as an epic museum but as a permanent collection that comprises objects from different genres, media, rarities, exotic and curious artifacts that combine to form a wonderful whole just waiting to be discovered. Our aim was not a storyline but to tell stories - and we wanted to satisfy both visitors' Neugier (curiosity to discover new things) and "Altgier" (a love of old things; F. Nietzsche).

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## STATISTICAL & TECHNICAL DATA

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2.700 m2 exhibition space

2.200 exhibits

300 show-cases with 80 different measurements  
of these 159 with integrated modified filter systems  
and 6 climate boxes

51 star-brick lusters by Olafur Eliasson

33 benches with 66 tablet computers

Many show-cases have filters that provide a closed climate environment to protect the artworks. All materials used in the show-cases were first tested for pollutants and other harmful substances, and only those materials that passed the test were actually used in the final show-cases.