
THESEUS TEMPEL WIEN



EDMUND DE WAAL
LICHTZWANG

April 30 – October 5, 2014

Since 2012, the Kunsthistorisches Museum has organised exhibitions each year inside the Theseus Temple, in the heart of Vienna's Volksgarten park. The Temple was built between 1819 and 1823 by court architect Peter von Nobile to be the home for a single work of then-contemporary art: Antonio Canova's white marble masterpiece *Theseus Slaying the Centaur*. For almost seventy years this artwork stood alone inside the building, until in 1890 it was moved to the newly-completed Kunsthistorisches Museum where it still stands today.

The new series of exhibitions has returned the temple to its original purpose: to house remarkable artworks by contemporary artists, one at a time. More than 90,000 visitors saw the exhibitions of Ugo Rondinone and Kris Martin in 2012, a figure which rose to 120,000 for the exhibition of Richard Wright in 2013.

In 2014 the ceramicist and writer Edmund de Waal will present his new work *Lichtzwang* at the Temple. It is de Waal's first exhibition in Austria. The exhibition is curated by Jasper Sharp, and generously supported by the Contemporary Patrons of the Kunsthistorisches Museum.

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EDMUND DE WAAL ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

You put a breath down, and then another one.

There is only daylight here, through the great double doors. And it comes in through the skylight and ebbs and flows across the walls, changes. As it moves shadows gather and disperse. Why should everything be lit, pinned against walls in the dead light of a gallery, held for the moment when you pass by? There is a beauty in the fragile, contingent moment of seeing only what you can see.

On the wall opposite the doors are two huge vitrines. They hold hundreds of small porcelain vessels, no more than a few movements, glazed in a spectrum of whites. Some have a touch of silver on their rims or bases. They are placed like words on a page, or people passing through a building, or a glimpse of a musical phrase. This installation, *Lichtzwang*, takes its name from the title of a book of poems by Paul Celan, a man for whom language was a necessity and a terrible response to silence. It is a neologism, a new word, a bringing together with pressure of different sounds.

Vitrines pause the world. You put something into one, close the door and let it rest. They are also a line drawn in space, a graphic way of describing a particular volume amongst all the other volumes of rooms, or houses, or landscapes, or spaces in a city.

Lichtzwang is my attempt to see if I can draw in the air, hold collections of porcelain vessels in this particular way. It is the gamble of making something out of a fragile material and then the act of putting it into the world as an installation, a collection, a breath holding together these objects that can so easily be scattered. It is taking a bet on people, family, history, that it will stay together, but knowing that it often does not, cannot. Putting these small porcelain objects into a vitrine in a shadowy space in a complicated place, held only by *Lichtzwang* – the pressure, force, compulsion of light – is enough.

(Edmund de Waal)

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PAUL CELAN: *LICHTZWANG*

The poem by Paul Celan, after which de Waal's installation is titled, reads as follows:

Wir lagen
schon tief in der Macchia, als du
endlich herankrochst.
Doch konnten wir nicht
hinüberdunkeln zu dir:
es herrschte
Lichtzwang

We were lying
deep in the macchia, by the time
you crept up at last.
But we could not
darken over to you:
light compulsion
reigned.

BIOGRAPHY EDMUND DE WAAL

Edmund de Waal was born in 1964. Following his undergraduate studies at Cambridge University, he studied ceramics in both England and Japan. He is best known for his large scale installations, which have been exhibited in museums and galleries across the world, including the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Tate Britain, London; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; Waddesdon Manor, Buckinghamshire; and the National Museum of Wales. De Waal has also received international recognition for his writing, including his recent award-winning book, *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, which traces his family history through Paris, Odessa, Vienna, Japan and England.

De Waal is curating an exhibition of selected objects from the collections of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, which will be presented in Vienna in 2016.

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HISTORY OF THE THESEUS TEMPLE

Pietro Nobile (1174-1854, Vienna's foremost Neo-Classical architect) designed the Theseus Temple in 1819-1823 for Emperor Francis I as part of the new layout of the Volksgarten. These major building works were necessary because the French army had razed the city's fortifications in front of the imperial palace when they withdrew from Vienna in 1809. Initially devised as a private park for members of the imperial family, it was later opened to the public, becoming the first imperial public park. Since 1825 it is known as "Volksgarten" (people's park).

The Theseus Temple, a neo-classical copy of the Theseion in Athens, was conceived to house a single contemporary artwork: Antonio Canova's celebrated *Theseus Slaying the Centaur*, a seminal neo-classical group. Antonio Canova (1757-1822, a leading representative of Italian neo-classical sculpture) is also credited with devising this unusual building. In 1890, Theseus was moved to the main staircase of the newly-built Kunsthistorisches Museum, where it remains today.

The crypt beneath the Theseus Temple was accessed from a no longer extant sarcophagus-shaped side entrance; it initially housed part of the imperial Collection of Antiquities. From 1901, finds from Ephesus were shown in the temple's cella (i.e., the inner sanctum); today they are displayed in the Ephesus Museum in the Neue Burg. Later the cella served as a venue for art exhibitions staged by the Academy of Fine Arts and, from 1992, by the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Totally refurbished in 2008-2011 in collaboration with the Bundesdenkmalamt, the facades of the Theseus Temple are once again painted with a dazzling polished lead-white. The newly-installed electric lighting has turned the Theseus Temple into an elegant highlight of the nighttime skyline comprising the impressive Hofburg complex and grand buildings along the Ringstrasse.

The bronze statue "Young Athlete" (1921) in front of the Theseus Temple is by Josef Müller.

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PRESS PHOTOS

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Edmund de Waal
Lichtzwang
2014
Courtesy Gagosian Gallery
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Edmund de Waal
Lichtzwang
2014, detail
Courtesy Gagosian Gallery
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Edmund de Waal in the Theseus Temple
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Edmund de Waal in the Theseus Temple
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Edmund de Waal in the Theseus Temple
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Edmund de Waal in the Theseus Temple
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Theseus Temple
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Theseus Temple
Illuminated by night
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Theseus Temple, cross section

Drawing by Karl Schmidt (1825) after the design
by Pietro Nobile (1820)

Vienna, Albertina, Architektursammlung

© Vienna, Albertina



Antonia Canova

Theseus Slaying the Centaur (1804–1819)

The statue at its original location in the Theseus
Temple

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