

Boundless – Timeless Abbeys at the Heart of Europe

20th October 2006 to 12th January 2007

Curators: Dr. Thomas Aigner, Prof. Gerhard Trumler

Press tour: Thursday 19th October 2006, 10:30

Opening: Thursday 19th October 2006, 18:30

Exhibition venue:

WIENER STÄDTISCHE Versicherung AG

Vienna Insurance Group

Ringturm Exhibition Centre

A-1010 Wien, Schottenring 30

T: +43 (0)50 350-21115 (Brigitta Fischer)

F: +43 (0)50 350-99 21115

Opening hours:

Monday to Friday: 9.00 am to 6.00 pm; admission free

(Closed on public holidays)

Enquiries:

Alexander Jedlicka

T: +43 (0)50350-21029

F: +43 (0)50350-99 21029

e-mail: a.jedlicka@staedtsche.co.at

ARCHITEKTUR IM RINGTURM presents abbeys of Central Europe (Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia). The idea behind the exhibition was to contribute to an enlargement of our view of our joint history and culture in Central Europe. Through numerous photographs by Prof. Gerhard Trumler and sensitive historical commentary, the exhibition conveys the fascination of the boundlessness and timelessness of the world of the monasteries and convents of Central Europe. This Europe without boundaries is immediately visible in the architecture and décor of the abbeys. Both the artists and their clients operated internationally – and as a result the abbey buildings are also witnesses to a huge, boundless artistic landscape.

The world of the medieval abbey can be compared to a network covering the whole area without disrupting state and regional boundaries – rather, this network overlays the national borders. Influenced by the prevailing conditions at any one time, the network has always been subject to major alterations. Notwithstanding all the political changes, it has outlasted the centuries in a constantly changing form but without ever losing its basic structure. To be sure, from time to time abbeys have been dissolved or have disappeared for some other reason, but new ones have been founded in their place, and today certain monasteries and convents can look back on a history that goes back over more than a thousand years. As a result, the abbeys have become true symbols of boundlessness and timelessness.

Abbeys have played a significant role in helping to shape the development of religion, politics and culture in the history of Central Europe. They have always been institutions that have thought and acted relatively independently of state and regional borders. Ultimately this factor was expressed in different ways – cultural, spiritual and commercial. This can be seen most strikingly in the many buildings that were endowed by international artists and are still preserved today. By presenting buildings from different religious orders from different countries alongside one another, it becomes possible to make it easy for visitors to the exhibition to recognise their interrelationships in the history of art.

For the past two years, with the support of the Wiener Städtische, photographer Gerhard Trumler has been travelling around Austria's neighbours, capturing the fascination of the boundlessness and timelessness of the world of the medieval abbey in his spectacular pictures. The display includes shots of abbey buildings in Austria which in many cases are still unknown, yet in their scale and décor are absolutely comparable with the great Austrian monasteries. The exhibition thus opens a door into what is often still an unfamiliar world that is just waiting to be discovered: whether it be the great Cistercian abbeys of Silesia such as Lubiąż, with the longest facade of any abbey in Europe (242 m), the imposing church of the former Benedictine abbey of Kladruba in Bohemia, designed in the Gothic style during the Baroque period, or Hungary's national shrine – the archabbey of Pannonhalma near Győr.

Major themes

One major theme concentrates on the beginnings of the Benedictine abbeys in Bohemia and Hungary, shaped by the person of St Adalbert of Prague, the Archbishop who played a significant part in the foundation of the abbeys of Brevnov in Bohemia and Pannonhalma in Hungary. These two abbeys were the starting points for the foundation of all other monasteries and convents in Bohemia and Hungary; even today they are still the centres of Benedictine monastic life in these regions.

At the end of the 11th century new reformed orders such as the Cistercians and Premonstratensians came into being. For the first time they created international, cross-border structures which resulted

in intensive cultural, spiritual and commercial relationships between the abbeys. There are correspondingly close architectural relationships between the Cistercian buildings of this time. This becomes evident in, for example, the importance of Strahov in Bohemia for the proliferation of the Premonstratensians in Bohemia, Moravia and Lower Austria, or of Heiligenkreuz for the Cistercians in Lower Austria and Hungary. One could regard these orders as to all intents and purposes the first big international “companies”. The exhibition shows numerous abbeys of these orders in their relationship to one another, thereby allowing one to discover real treasures such as a Romanesque stone lectern dating from the early 13th century from Osek in Northern Bohemia.

The Cistercians were also very important for the settlement and colonisation of Europe. As examples of this the exhibition shows the order’s abbeys in Silesia whose impressive buildings still stand today. Particularly imposing is one photo of the interior of the church at Lubiąż, which after 1945 was robbed of its magnificent Baroque décor and today stands totally empty. It is particularly fascinating to compare this with pictures from an earlier age when it still had its full décor, including the famous choir stalls created by the Viennese sculptor Matthias Steinl. This is another example of the way in which the world of art too operated internationally back in the Middle Ages and early modern period.

As the 11th century drew to a close, another order to emerge was that of the Carthusians, who live a very contemplative life. The aim of this order was to combine reclusiveness and community living, which is also expressed in the architecture of their abbeys, known as “charterhouses”. These are not a closed complex of buildings but individual anchorite cells linked to the church by a walkway. Thus each monk can live a solitary life and meet with the others in the church for prayer. Among the most impressive abbeys of this type that still remain are the Gaming Charterhouse in Lower Austria and the ruins of the oldest charterhouse of the Holy Roman Empire in Žiče in Slovenia.

Somewhat of a contrast to these are the buildings of the mendicant orders that came into being from the 13th century onwards as a result of the opposition to the riches of the Church. Their buildings were functional and – as befitted their extensive preaching work – designed for large numbers of people. Examples which can be seen in the exhibition include one of the most beautiful mediaeval interiors in Hungary, the Franciscans’ chapter house in Sopron which dates from the 14th century, as well as the church of the Dominicans in Ptuj in Slovenia.

In the Late Middle Ages an acute need for reform arose among Benedictine and Augustinian canons because of various deplorable states of affairs in their abbeys. Roudnice in Bohemia, Krakow in Poland and Klosterneuburg in Lower Austria are examples of the great reform movements that developed as a result of this. In the 15th century important ideas emanated from Roudnice for the reformation of Klosterneuburg and the founding of Austrian abbeys such as Dürnstein.

How insignificant the borders were can be seen especially in the role of Bohemian / Moravian, Silesian and Austrian convents and monasteries during the re-settlement of the Hungarian abbeys in the 18th century. Here all the monasteries and convents had been abandoned in the 16th century as a result of the conflict between the Hapsburgs and the Osmons. After the Osmons had been driven back and Hungary re-conquered, numerous abbeys were then rebuilt with help from abroad. Csorna near Győr, for example, was first rebuilt by the monks of Pernegg in Lower Austria and a short time later rebuilt again by the abbey of Hradisko in Moravia. The photos of the Romanesque crypt of Louka near Znojmo in Moravia, hardly an hour’s journey from Vienna are particularly impressive. Of course the prestigious role played by many abbeys during the Baroque period must not be ignored. The imperial suite in Klosterneuburg, the Prince’s Hall in Lubiąż in Poland and even the famous Aula Leopoldina in Wrocław in Poland manifest, as it were, their link to the ruling dynasty.

Exhibition: The exhibition presents all the abbeys together with displays about their history and the history of their art. Supplementary maps make it easy for the visitor to get his bearings with regard to their current position. In addition there is the option of accessing a virtual archive of Central European monasteries and convents via computer terminals: this enables the user to view high-resolution photographs of documents that are not available to the general public, such as the foundation charters of Göttweig (1083), Břevnov in the Czech Republic (993) or Pannonhalma in Hungary (996) – 20,000 of them in all – and to define and research the background for him- or herself.

Catalogue: Joachim Angerer, Thomas Aigner, Gerhard Trumler: Klöster im Herzen Europas. Grenzenlos – Zeitenlos (Vienna 2006, Verlag Christian Brandstetter). Price: € 49.90.