

James J. Sheehan

The History of German Art Museums



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"Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive, but to be a German historian was very heaven." Slightly revised, Wordsworth's lyrical memory of what it was like to experience the revolution of 1789 nicely describes my feelings about Berlin during the revolution of 1989. With a suddenness that continued to amaze us, the transformation of the DDR dominated the Wissenschaftskolleg's common life throughout the year. It is difficult to imagine a better place to have experienced this transformation. Berlin, always the most powerful expression of Germans' hostilities and division, necessarily became the center of Germans' reconciliation and rediscovery. Over the course of a few months, we saw the city redefine its space and begin its own long process of unification. Largely due to the efforts of the Rektor, the Fellows had many opportunities to meet with colleagues from the DDR. These meetings remain among my most vivid memories of 1989-90: in them we could see individuals trying to come to terms with radical re-evaluations of their pasts and serious challenges to their futures.

Since I had just finished a book (*German History, 1770-1866* appeared in December 1989) about the creation of the first united German nation-state, the reopening of the German question had particular significance for me. As I watched the German future take on a new shape, I realized that the German past would also have to be altered. Over the past several years, I had written a series of essays on the role of the nation in German history and historiography, which tried to show that the nation, often as-

sumed to be a natural and stable historical phenomenon, is a highly problematic and often contingent product of particular historical circumstances. I tried to rethink the significance of 1989 for this view in an essay entitled *Zukünftige Vergangenheit*, which I wrote early in 1990. This essay provided the basis for lectures that I delivered at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena and the Humboldt University in Berlin. It will appear in a collection of essays on historical memories and historical museums. At the same time, I wrote a brief piece (published in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*) on nationalism as a political force. On the basis of responses to that article, I am thinking about writing a short book about nationalism's strengths and limitations.

One reason why I could enjoy the unique opportunities offered by Berlin this year was that I am in the first stages of a new project. For the first time in many years, I did not have to measure the success of my sabbatical in terms of how much I had written. Instead, I could read widely and generally in an area I had just begun to define: the political, social, and cultural origins and significance of art museums in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Kolleg is an ideal place for this kind of work. The library provided an uninterrupted stream of books. With five other fellows, I participated in a discussion group which ranged over problems of aesthetics, art history, and cultural theory and thus provided a rich context for my own research. I also had a chance to meet with scholars in Berlin with similar interests and to talk to the staff of the new German Historical Museum. Even more important was the opportunity to visit and to examine closely the museums about which I was reading. Finally, the criticisms and suggestions that I received at the Fellows' Colloquium helped me to clarify my thoughts and to uncover the weaknesses in my *Problemstellung*. By the time I gave a lecture on my subject at the Free University (June 1990), I felt that I had a rather firm foundation on which to build.

I do not, however, want to make the evolution of my ideas seem too neat and unilinear. There were times when I considered abandoning the project completely; for much of the year, I read about problems only indirectly related to the Museum's origins and development. Now, after ten months' reading and thinking, I am ready to start doing what I said I would do from the start. This is not the first time that I have had the feeling at the end of something that I finally know enough to begin it properly.