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## Rethinking the Museum. What Turns a Museum Visit into a Lasting Experience?<sup>1</sup>

So I have brought a catalogue. It's a gift for Zelfira but if any of you want to have a look, I will give it to you — if you allow. “Masterpieces of the Belvedere” [1]. Maybe with this book I can initially point out a certain conflict we find ourselves in. Because I myself came from the school of theory which is related to institutional critique, today I would much question the concept of the masterpiece, but this is a kind of a compromise to call this catalogue of our collection “masterpieces” of the Belvedere. This is a kind of conflict spanning our entire work. And I will provide you an insight about how we deal with it.

The Belvedere has actually three venues: the Upper Belvedere, the Lower Belvedere and our contemporary venue Belvedere 21. Because this is supposed to be a brief talk of about, as you know, 20 minutes, I will concentrate on the Upper Belvedere where we show our permanent collection. I came to the Belvedere almost two years ago, in the beginning of 2017. With my fantastic team we took on the huge task to reorganize within the first year our entire collection at the Upper Belvedere.

I will start with a few photos in case some of you don't know about the Belvedere to give you a few sights of what it is. It is a baroque palace completed in the 1723 by Prince Eugene of Savoy. And we have, as I said, two buildings: the Upper Belvedere — this one — and the Lower Belvedere both situated within a big park. This is what the Belvedere is world-famous for. In 2017 the Belvedere had been the most visited museum in Austria. And I don't say this to shine here especially, I'm saying this because this is at the same time a huge advantage, something we are very proud of, we feel very responsible for our audience to provide them a good and lasting museum experience, but it can also be a burden.

You should know that the structure of our audience is very specific: we have 90% of tourists coming to the upper Belvedere and only 10% of local audience. So who is our audience, who are these people? Again the largest group of these visitors, this year we expect 1.5 million visitors and it might not seem so impressive to you but for our small palace it's a quite significant number and again this is the largest number of museum visitors in Austria. So the largest group comes from South Korea, the second largest group comes from Italy and this goes on with visitors from all over the world. So we have to be aware that our largest audience comes

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<sup>1</sup> Transcript of the lecture at the “Challenges in Displaying Modern and Contemporary Art Collections” session of the Eighth international conference “Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art”, New Tretyakov (Krymsky Val 10), The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow on October 5, 2018.

from completely different culture backgrounds. In the press conference I have already come up with this notion: how much we have to be aware of this background of visitors. Because till today much too often we use phrases like “us”, “us” speaking to “you”. But who are these “us”? And who is this “you”? And this “you” is actually very, very numerous and diverse. The Belvedere, the full name is Austrian Gallery Belvedere. The collection comes from the imperial collections from the house of Habsburg, but our contemporary museum, I mean the Belvedere museum as you find it today, goes back to the modern gallery in 1903. From this founding moment the dedication of the museum had been to present Austrian art in the international context. And basically this is what we have been doing until today. Now think that many visitors who come to the Belvedere come to our institution as a landmark. Some might not even know that this building houses a museum. Others only know one thing: that this is the museum where you can find Gustav Klimt’s famous painting “The Kiss”. “The Kiss” is the Belvedere’s “Mona Lisa”, that it is for the Louvre. And when we started thinking about rearranging the collection, our driving questions were how do we get our visitors to engage more with the entire collection, with the motivations of the artists working in Vienna around 1900 to provide them with experiences and ideas to change the situation where they might probably leave the museum with a smartphone photograph of “The Kiss” and just having to tell the friends and the family “I have seen “The Kiss”. We wanted to give them other stories, other ideas to take with them.

When you see “The Kiss” today – and it is now exactly one year that we have been in the “MeToo” experience and debate – you might shine a very different light than it’s usually shone on this image or how it’s usually discussed. It could be discussed for example in context of gender relations, because it’s obviously an image of male domination over women. So what we have just been doing is to introduce gender specific guided tours, but that’s maybe at this point only a footnote. Tours are conducted with a man educator who discusses the images and the collection and the gender related aspects deconstructing our male representations.

When I began my job there was no text around whatsoever, there were very sparse labels coming with the paintings or sculptures, giving no information beyond the name of the artist, the title of the artwork and the year. We have developed three text components and brought them into the gallery. It starts with the labels. What we have added, what we find very important, is where the artwork comes from and when it was acquired. So this gives you an insight into the institutional history. It’s very interesting to see that, for example, Klimt’s “The Kiss” had been acquired almost at the same year when it was painted, so the museum was acting very contemporary from very early on. And of course in Austria we also have to face the history of acquisitions during the Nazi time, during the Second World War, this being a very active topic in provenance research. And as you probably know there have been some spectacular restitutions of Gustav Klimt’s and other’s paintings during last two decades.

So here is a visitor reading one of the texts. It has been very important for us to develop these texts together with the art education department and this has raised many conflicts within our team because the curators and art historians used to have a monopoly on writing the texts and publishing the texts for the collection. They are great experienced and very knowing researchers and academics but, I must say, sometimes they don’t really communicate in the best possible way with the audience. So I brought in a very new perspective on how this

text should be written in accessible language and I admit that sometimes I find an anecdote or story more interesting and rewarding for our audience than the usual scientific approach to explain the painting technics or art history relations.

Now this is a very typical photo of a visitor who uses audio-media that we use for communicating in the background. You have the text and you can read it here, but it's bilingual, it's German and English, so you see it's relatively short. This lady has a brochure and an audio guide – so she really wants to learn something. We are always very happy about the visitors who accept our offers.

This is the same gallery, the same room where we also have “The Kiss” and this is an example for the changes we have done. In the earlier installation of the collection all the paintings by Gustav Klimt used to be in one gallery, so it was like a gallery of masterpieces. You could see one Klimt beneath another but you could not see how Klimt was actually positioned, if you want, in his own time. And we wanted to provide the relations to the other artists working in the same time as him. It's also very important for our point of view to bring in the women artists who have long been overseen or neglected. And here for example you see Gustav Klimt's “Sonja Knips”. That's the lady on the right side, the biggest portrait in the pink robe. And next to her is Elena Luksch-Makowsky, another artist who was working in the time of Vienna Secession, actually she was in very good relations with Klimt so we put them next to each other.

But there is one example, one story I briefly want to tell you. There is another artist, whose work you see in the right corner. It's Richard Gerstl, also an artist from the turn of the century, who has gained a lot of attention recently. And he knew Klimt, they knew each other, Richard Gerstl was quite a couple of years younger than Klimt and he very actively detested Klimt. He stated that he never wanted to be exhibited in the same gallery with Gustav Klimt. And what we did, and admittedly it's very provocative, we tell the story in a text on a wall of this gallery and we actually put Gerstl and Klimt next to each other to let the audience to find out why there was such tension between these two artists. And if you ask me I have to say that I find Gerstl in this direct comparison much more modern, even contemporary, than Klimt — but of course this is up to the audience to decide. But I think it brings a little conflict, a little spice in this gallery of so called “masterpieces” that you might want to think about. It's very human at the same time.

I think I have mentioned that our collection spans a huge chronology from the medieval art — at least I mentioned it in the press conference — to the contemporary. At the Upper Belvedere the tour starts with the medieval art and ends with about the World War II, around 1950. We have discussed for a long time about how to present this chronology, whether it should be presented in the chronological way or in some different way. We came up with the solution to stick with the chronology so you could start on the ground floor with the medieval art and end on the second floor with art from around 1950. But we interrupt this chronology with special galleries which are dedicated to one question or subject related to Austrian identity. We wanted to share the ideas and maybe to deconstruct clichés about the Austrian identity for our visitors who probably expect to find the core of Austrian identity at the Belvedere. So this gallery talks about Habsburg dynasty and it includes the representation of the Habsburgs which changes over time and it ends with very crude and very cruel images of the First World War. I won't go into the details of the art galleries. You can just see that all the thematic galleries have painted walls to distinct them from the chronological representation.

Also we added something that had not been at the Belvedere before. We installed a couple of galleries, which present the history of the building from its founding under Prince Eugene in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century till today. We want to explain to our audience where we are actually, what this building is, why there is a museum here and what the history of the collection is like. This is the gallery where we represent the history of the architecture, of the building and of Prince Eugene. Here with the art in the gallery that talks about the contemporary museum Belvedere is the image of the one of its first directors Martin Haberditzl painted by Egon Schiele. We have worked intensely with our archive and research center and in the vitrines we have included many materials from the history of the Belvedere, like correspondence and formal invitation cards. This is an original seat from the modern gallery.

We also have a specific gallery talking about the time of the World War II. We present especially the artists who have been forced to immigrate and to flee from Austria and national-socialism. In the foreground you see a contemporary artwork by Manfred Erjautz. It's a broken body made from a black material, it's of course a metaphor for the broken existence of the artist during that time.

In the back of the gallery in order to introduce the institution we have set up a timeline along which you can walk and see different media. You have video included in this timeline to learn more about the institution. That's another important milestone in the history of the Belvedere. It had also been the site in 1955 where the treaty had been signed according to which Austria was freed and again became a neutral independent state after the Second World War.

And this is the last gallery we are taking you to. It's very contemporary and is like an intersection or intervention. This is an art installation by an American-Swiss artist, Christian Philipp Mueller, who is very well known for his work in institutional critique and conceptual art. He has reconstructed a work he did for a gallery in Vienna in 1993 where he deals with the famous book and the touring exhibition "The Family of Man" organized by Edward Steichen in the 1950s. "The Family of Man" meant to reconcile men and peoples after the time of war in the 1950s and Christian Philip Mueller chose from this book art images of Austrians. And it turns out that even after the war Austria was represented despite being at that moment a heavy industrialized state as a cultural state like in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with rural aspects, music, folk traditions. So everybody can consider and challenge these images of Austria and decide if they are true and why they are so persistent.

Thank you, this was my tour. Thank you very much for your attention.

## References

1. Grabner S.; Lechner G.; Husslein-Arco A. *Masterpieces of the Belvedere*. Vienne, Belvedere Publ., 2014. 360 p.

**Title.** Rethinking the Museum. What Turns a Museum Visit into a Lasting Experience?

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**Abstract.** Since March 2018 the Belvedere is presenting its world-famous collection in a completely new display. Visitors can enjoy over eight hundred years of Austrian art history in addition to displays about the history of the palace and museum and rooms devoted to the subject of Austria and its identity. The new presentation integrates historic, modern and contemporary works to spark inspiring dialogues. The Belvedere's collection encompasses some 15,000 masterpieces from eight centuries of art history. Around

420 of these works can be seen in the redisplay at the Upper Belvedere. This new arrangement and design sheds fresh light on works by world-famous artists including Rueland Frueauf the Elder, Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, Gustav Klimt, Erika Giovanna Klien, Egon Schiele, Helene Funke, and Oskar Kokoschka.

The concept phase faced the challenge of accommodating the needs of both tourists and the local audience. While the first group has a limited amount of time available, the aim is to inspire the second to keep coming back. The museum's response was to devise a clear structure, understandable connections, and accessible, succinct exhibition texts. The foremost aim of the new presentation is that the visitors take new experiences and knowledge with them from the Belvedere and can then tell others about it. They are the museum's best ambassadors. The displays on the ground floor shed light on the history of the Belvedere, introduce Prince Eugene, and offer an insight into the museum archives. Accessible and concise wall texts and object descriptions provide information about the art-historical and thematic rooms while a new signage system assists orientation around the museum. Artworks from the Middle Ages to the end of the Second World War are at the heart of the presentation. This chronology is interrupted by a contemporary intervention, the large installation *The Family of Austrians* (1993/2018) by Christian Philipp Müller. A further four thematic rooms intersperse the chronological journey through the eras. These rooms address questions about Austria, its history, and identity. *Carlone Contemporary*, a series of interventions, accompanies the redisplay of the collection at the Upper Belvedere. The interventions are shown in the Carlone Hall on the ground floor and make a reference to the mythological frescoes. In six-month rotations, artists present works that engage with the Baroque pictorial program in the frescoed hall.

**Keywords:** Belvedere, collection, museum exhibition

**Название статьи.** Переосмысляя музей. Благодаря чему впечатление от посещения музея остаётся с нами надолго?

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**Аннотация.** С марта 2018 г. галерея Бельведер представляет совершенно новую концепцию экспонирования своей всемирно известной коллекции. Посетители музея могут насладиться более чем 800-летней историей австрийского искусства, а также посетить экспозиции, посвящённые истории дворца и музея, и залы, рассказывающие об Австрии и её национальной идентичности. Новый формат создаёт возможность для выстраивания увлекательного диалога между историческими и современными работами. Коллекция Бельведера насчитывает более 15 000 шедевров, охватывающих восемь веков истории искусства. Около 420 из этих работ можно увидеть в обновлённой экспозиции в Верхнем Бельведере. Новая развеска и дизайн помогают иначе взглянуть на произведения знаменитых художников, таких как Рюланд Фрюауф Старший, Франц Ксавер Мессершмидт, Фердинанд Георг Вальдмюллер, Густав Климт, Эрика Джованна Кляйн, Эгон Шиле, Элен Функе и Оскар Кокошка. На этапе разработки концепции требовалось учесть потребности как туристов, так и местных посетителей: первые ограничены по времени, а вторых хотелось вдохновить, чтобы они приходили снова. Задачей музея было разработать чёткую структуру, понятные связи и доступные, но ёмкие экспликации. Главная задача новой экспозиции — помочь посетителям получить в галерее Бельведер как можно больше новых впечатлений и знаний, которыми они потом поделятся с другими. Посетители — лучшие посланники музея. Экспозиция первого этажа знакомит с историей Бельведера, рассказывает о принце Евгении Савойском и даёт представление о музейных архивах. Ёмкие и доступные экспликации и этикетки сообщают информацию о художественно-исторических и тематических залах, а новая система указателей помогает лучше ориентироваться в музее. В основе экспозиции — произведения искусства от Средневековья до конца Второй мировой войны. Хронология нарушается интервенцией современного искусства — большой инсталляцией «Семья австрийцев» (1993/2018) Кристиана Филиппа Мюллера. Следующие четыре тематических зала продолжают хронологическое путешествие сквозь века и посвящены Австрии, её истории и специфике. Серия интервенций современного искусства (*Carlone Contemporary*) дополняет новую экспозицию в Верхнем Бельведере. Они располагаются в пространстве *Carlone Hall* на первом этаже и перекликаются с мифологическими фресками. Каждые шесть месяцев художники представляют работы, которые взаимодействуют с барочной росписью зала.

**Ключевые слова:** галерея Бельведер, коллекция, музейная экспозиция