



Installation shot, Room 1809-1914

Photo: Wolfgang Thaler

## “360<sup>GRAZ</sup> | Die Stadt von allen Zeiten”: The City in All Times - from All Perspectives

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### A New Permanent Collection on Display at the GrazMuseum, Austria

Historical exhibitions “tell us” about the history of countries, regions or cities, on the basis of preserved relics of the majority culture. They “familiarise” us with specific aspects of the history of a place. This was also our task when conceiving a new permanent display at the Graz Museum. We determined early on, however, that the job should not be carried out in a naive manner, that we could not simply disregard the hegemonic aspect of our collections, with their consequent serious gaps in the contexts of Jewish and Protestant history, as well as of women’s history and social history more generally.

We could not count on the exhibits’ ability to speak for themselves; or edit out the history of the exhibits as they made their way from the city into the museum.

City museums suffer quite often from the “historical disease”, as Nietzsche would put it<sup>1</sup>—those “excesses of the ‘historical sense’” that deprive people of<sup>2</sup> the “plastic force” by means of which they can shape the present. Where, then, can we find room for the critical use of history in the face of the predominating comfortable ambience that history has acquired in contemporary culture? →

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### Three Questions

1. Does our cluelessness in reconstructing our historical museums stem from our knowledge that there is no way back to the historicism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with its rigid grid of questions focusing on the state and political elites? We cannot return to a clear-cut “eternal” picture of the past. With Jacob Burckhardt, “history” dissolved in the “historical”, and the global continuum of history was broken open. Yet Lucien Febvre’s response to the challenge of historicism stands as a guide to the opportunities that face regional/local museums today: “For my part”, writes Febvre, “I’ve only known one method, one alone, for really understanding and locating la *grande* histoire. And that is first to master in all its development the history of a region, or of a province.”<sup>3</sup>
2. Have we found adequate answers to the challenge of late 20<sup>th</sup> century “deconstructivist” ideas about the science of history in our museal practice? How do we respond to Foucault’s “discontinuity”, to the gaps and cuts that appear as we hand down historical knowledge, to the blank spaces and absences in historical explanation?
3. How does a regional or civic historical museum - by collecting, preserving and presenting evidence of the past - manage to fend off what filmmaker Alexander Kluge calls *The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time*?<sup>4</sup> How do we work against the disappearance of the real, of the original, by means of convincing contextualization - and how do we give knowledge, which has become placeless, a real place once again?

### Polyphony of History

As a result of the discussions that followed these preliminary questions, the 115 exhibits of “360<sup>GRAZ</sup>” are arranged in very different manner from the usual gallery presentation, and from permanent exhibitions in (cultural) historical museums in particular, with regard to both form and content. The unambiguous walk through history, guided by one authorial narrator (from the audio guide) who enjoys a panoramic view on everything, is replaced here by the visitor’s free choice to find his own reading of the polyphonic history of Graz.



Installation shot, Room 1809-1914

Photo: Wolfgang Thaler



Guided tour through the exhibition

Photo: Maryam Mohammadi

Visitors to the museum can follow any one of multiple paths. They can choose, for example, between focusing on a specific period, such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is presented from many perspectives, or walking through the history of Graz along a multi-part and dynamically conceived path highlighting the Morphology of the City’s Development (designed by Joachim Hainzl and Rainer Rosegger), or another (featuring photographs by Wolfgang Thaler) showing the Political Physiognomy of the City. Finally, the exhibition can be viewed by following specific longitudinal focal points.

### Four Longitudinal Focal Points

“360<sup>GRAZ</sup>” does not yield to the pressure of the hegemonic focus of traditional museum collections. Instead, we have tried to fill or illustrate the gaps and blank spaces of both material and historiographical tradition with regard to gender history, the history of the so-called “lower classes,” and the behaviour of mainstream culture vis-à-vis the “other”, or strangers.

Two longitudinal focal points deal with hegemonic subjects:

- “The Shape of the City”: the architectural and topographical aspect of city life
  - “The Civic Project”: from the “birth of the citizen” in the medieval city to the “Wutbürger” (i.e. the enraged citizen) of more recent referendums
- They are supplemented by focal points devoted to two non-hegemonic subjects:
- “One’s Own and the Alien”: How have we dealt with “strangers” over the centuries?
  - “The Subtle Differences” (Joachim Hainzl and Eva Taxacher): gender history and social issues.

These four fundamental issues of urban life are consistently presented in all four rooms.

### Four Rooms - Each Dedicated to a Different Period

The particular strengths of the collection lie in the pre-1800 period. However, more recent historical research has highlighted the time after the French Revolution, →

addressing the “long Middle Ages” or antiquity only cursorily. Accordingly, the temporal accent of the new Permanent Collection on Display, “360<sup>GRAZ</sup>”, has shifted significantly towards the *Gründerzeit* (literally ‘Founding Epoch’, i.e. the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when many industrial firms were founded here and elsewhere in Central Europe) and the two World Wars. The periods presented in the four rooms of the Permanent Collection on display are as follows:

*Founding of the city until 1600:* Founding of the city, the social model of the *civitas*, from confessionalization to the expulsion of Protestants.

*1600 to 1809:* Catholic triumph, top-down reform (enlightened absolutism), Napoleon and Graz.

*1809 to 1914:* Styrian reform up to the turn of the century.

*1914 up to the present:* First World War, fascist movements, post-war period.

### The Self-Reflexive Museum

The entire display (designed by “arquitectos” Vienna) is an open offering that reflexively scrutinizes the museum as an institution. By showing rather than telling, the exhibits of the museum, freely distributed across the gallery space, refer both to their own historical contexts and to the museal context of a forever incomplete effort at hegemonic collecting, to an interpretation determined by world views and, last but not least, to the alienating act of presentation and contextualization.

### The Museum’s Object Competence

Each and every exhibit is described from a historic-critical perspective and related to other events, circumstances,

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, (Revised Edition, 2010), Ian Johnston, trans.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche writes that “a person who wanted to feel utterly and only historically would be like someone who had been forced to abstain from sleep or like the beast that is to continue its life only from rumination to constantly repeated rumination.” (*op. cit.* and <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/nietzsche/history.htm>)

<sup>3</sup> Lucien Febvre, quoted in Barnett Singer, *Village Notables in 19<sup>th</sup> Century France: Priests, Mayors, Schoolmasters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p.67.

<sup>4</sup> *The Assault of the Present on the Rest of Time*, a film by Alexander Kluge, 1985.



Installation shot, Room 1600-1809

Photo: Wolfgang Thaler

and developments in order to highlight the context of society as a whole. The objects, including the buildings of the city that still exist today as “witnesses” of their history, are thus re-politicized. The museum thus demonstrates its special object competence by using its exhibits, such as old paintings, not only as sources of pictorial information but also as objects within the concrete environment of the museum. Seeing the backsides and bottom sides of the exhibits, the visitor sometimes glimpses a long history of provenance as significant, in its way, as the stories associated with the objects’ historical origins. ■



**ICOM's 23<sup>rd</sup> General Conference will be held from 10 to 17 August, 2013 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.**

Some 3,000 to 4,000 international participants are expected at this crucial event for ICOM, for its members and for the international museum community. It provides a platform for museum professionals from different regions and cultures to share and exchange on their expertise and experience.

In 2009, ICOM members confirmed their confidence in Brazil by selecting Rio de Janeiro as the location of the General Conference in 2013 and look forward to discovering and exploring the cultural delights the city, its surroundings and Brazil as a whole have to offer.

Participants will debate around the theme **Museums (memory + creativity) = social change**.

Registration is now open on the conference website: [rio2013.icom.museum](http://rio2013.icom.museum)