

The National Gallery, Berlin (Dedicated in 1876)

Abstract

The date of the founding of the German Empire [*Reich*], MDCCCLXXI (i.e., 1871), and the words “To German Art” [“Der Deutschen Kunst”] are inscribed in the pediment of the National Gallery in Berlin. In fact, this “temple” to a unified German national art was conceived—and mostly built—before the empire was founded, even though it was not dedicated until the birthday of Kaiser Wilhelm I in March 1876. Built according to plans by Friedrich August Stüler (1800–1865), who, in turn, worked from a sketch by Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, the National Gallery was constructed between 1865 and 1876. (Stüler was a student of another great architect of Berlin’s classical city center, Karl Friedrich Schinkel.) The genesis of the gallery’s collections also predated unification by a considerable margin, having come from an 1861 bequest of 262 nineteenth-century paintings, which the banker Consul Joachim Wagener had begun collecting in 1815. Nevertheless, the intention behind the building of the National Gallery—both before and after 1871 and shared by liberals and artists alike—was to fulfill the state’s duty to display national art, to make it accessible to the public, and to give commissions and recognition to Germany’s greatest living artists. This was the mandate given to the National Gallery’s first director, the art historian Max Jordan, who was succeeded by Hugo von Tschudi in February 1896. Prussia’s clear determination to take the lead in glorifying “German” art was signaled in 1886 when an equestrian statue of Friedrich Wilhelm IV was erected at the top of the double flight of steps leading to the museum’s entrance. Today, this statue and the gallery itself constitute part of Berlin’s famous “Museum Island.” The photograph below dates from 1974.

Source



Source: The Old National Gallery, Berlin. Photograph (1974).

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