

The Unique Story of the Kupferstichkabinett–Berlin

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief history of the Kupferstichkabinett–Berlin and its collections during the events of World War II, the partition of Germany, the Berlin Wall years, the country’s reunification, and today. It then discusses the treatment and mounting of a large-scale contemporary drawing in the collection, executed on burnt tracing paper by German artist Frank Dornseif.

INTRODUCTION

In 2005, I worked with Irene Brückle at the Kupferstichkabinett–Berlin, the largest museum of prints and drawings in Germany. I found that learning about the history of the museum informed my understanding of the country, of Berlin as a capital city, and of the collections at the Kupferstichkabinett.

The Kupferstichkabinett has over fifty-five thousand drawings and six hundred thousand prints, from Old Masters to contemporary art, and lends, on average, three thousand artworks each year. The strengths of the Kupferstichkabinett collection are early Italian, German, and Dutch Old Master drawings and prints, illuminated manuscripts, illustrated books, and the woodblock and printing plate collection. The museum has a small staff of five curators, several graduate assistants, five conservators, three collections storage workers, two study room attendants, and gallery guards. I was the first year-long conservation intern, and the first American to work there.

HISTORY OF THE KUPFERSTICHKABINETT

The word “Kupferstichkabinett” refers to a collection of prints and drawings, but the term originally meant the elegant salons known as “cabinets of engravings” in aristocratic homes of the Baroque period. Berlin’s Kupferstichkabinett began in 1831 in the Royal Museum, now the Old Museum. It was the first of five museums built between 1830 and 1930 on the Museum Island in the middle of the River Spree. The other four museums are the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, now the Bode Museum; the Pergamon Museum; the National Gallery, now the Old National Gallery; and the New Museum, in ruins and currently under reconstruction. Shortly after the rooms of the Kupferstichkabinett opened in 1831, the collections began to outgrow their space. They expanded to Monbijou Castle and then into the New Museum. Eventually, the drawing collection was separated from the print collection and housed in the newly built National Gallery, and then moved to the Crown Prince Palace.

Soon after the final museum on the Island was finished—the Pergamon Museum—in 1936, the National Socialists rose to power in Germany. In 1937 the Nazis confiscated almost seven hundred modern prints and 370 drawings from Berlin’s Kupferstichkabinett, although curators managed to save fifty important pieces by switching them with “lesser” works by the same artists. Today one still finds catalog cards with *beschlagenahmt*, “confiscated,” handwritten on them and dated 1937. Some of these artworks were eventually returned to the museum or reacquired by the curators, but most were lost. Artworks taken from thirty-two German museums were exhibited in the Degenerate Art show in Munich in 1937.

On the eve of war in 1939, the collections were moved to storage locations in and around Berlin for protection, such as the basements of the New Museum, the Crown Prince Palace, the State Bank, anti-aircraft bunkers, and even a salt mine in Kaiseroda outside of Berlin. To lessen the risk of losing entire collections, odd- and even- num-

Presented at the Book & Paper Group/ICOM-CC Graphic Documents Joint Session, AIC 35th Annual Meeting, April 16–20, 2007, Richmond, Virginia. Received for publication Fall 2007.

bered portfolios were often separated into different repositories. Between 1943 and 1945 Berlin was heavily bombed. The New Museum was hit and the main entry destroyed; the State Mint and Crown Prince Palace were also destroyed. The most valuable works in the anti-aircraft bunkers were moved to the salt mine and a potassium mine outside Berlin. The National Gallery was bombed and damaged by hand grenades. As the Soviet Army advanced, the German Army ordered a “scorched earth” retreat. Even art and cultural artifacts were to be destroyed so the Bolsheviks would not have them. Planning for this eventuality, soldiers had placed explosives in the mines along with the crated artworks. Mine workers were ordered to blow them up, but either out of concern for the art, or for their future livelihoods, they did not comply. One anti-aircraft bunker in Berlin was set afire and bombed by the SS as they pulled back, and most of the artworks stored inside were destroyed.

In April 1945 American troops took over the storage sites outside Berlin. The salt mine in Kaiseroda was in the territory occupied by the British Army; the Allies evacuated other sites to central collecting points so the Soviets would not take the art as spoils of war. By May 1945 the Red Army had taken the artworks from the area they occupied and sent them by special transport to the Soviet Union. Although it couldn’t have been known at the time, the majority of the Kupferstichkabinett collection survived the war years unscathed, even if the museum buildings did not. The art “casualties” included most of the reference library, many illustrated books, 850 large-format works, Dutch prints, and German and Dutch Old Master drawings. To put this into perspective, about forty percent of the homes and apartment buildings in Berlin were destroyed in the war.

In 1948, Germany was segregated into sectors according to the nations that occupied it during the war. The American, British, and French sectors became West Germany, and the area occupied by the Soviet Union became East Germany. Berlin was physically located in the new East Germany, but as the capital of the country, it was also divided between East and West, leaving the Museum Island in the East. Before the partition, the artworks remaining on the Island were divided. Museum workers protested this division of the museums, but prints and drawings were sent to Dahlem Museum in West Berlin and those to stay in the East were housed in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum. In some cases, works in a series were separated between the two museums and remained apart for the next forty years.

The partition of Germany proved unpopular, and in 1961 the government built a wall through Berlin to prevent citizens of East Germany from fleeing to the West. Immediately after the Berlin Wall was built, plans were begun to create a new museum complex in West Berlin,

including a dedicated building for the Kupferstichkabinett. The Culture Forum was planned for Potsdamer Platz, a bombed-out, formerly prosperous area not far from the Brandenburg Gate. This site near the Wall was chosen to be as close to the Museum Island as possible. In fact, the goal of a reunified Germany was written into the West German constitution. Centered around St. Matthew’s Church, the only pre-war building still standing in the area, the Culture Forum would eventually include the Philharmonic Hall, Chamber Music Hall, and City Library by architect Hans Scharoun; the New National Gallery by Mies van der Rohe; and the Museum of Decorative Arts and Crafts by architectural firm Henning, Kendel, Riede. Rolf Gutbrod designed a brick building to hold the Kupferstichkabinett and the art library, which would share an entryway with the sprawling picture gallery. Public reaction against the Decorative Arts Museum and arguments about the overall plan delayed the project for many years. The Kupferstichkabinett was still under construction when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. In 1990 it was decided that the collections in East and West Berlin should be reunited in the new building and the architectural plans were changed to provide an additional storage space and conservation laboratory for the Kupferstichkabinett in the basement of the picture gallery. Even so, when the building finally opened to the public in 1994, the storage areas were already full.

KUPFERSTICHKABINETT TODAY

The Kupferstichkabinett is on the top floor of the new brick building, above the art library. An exhibition gallery for prints and drawings holds three to four shows each year, primarily from the museum’s own collection. In the print and drawing study room, most of the collection is available to the public upon request. In the magazine, the main storage space, rows of cabinets hold prints and drawings mounted and stored upright in Solander boxes (fig. 1). One entire wall of cabinets is devoted solely to the collection of over four thousand drawings and prints by Adolf von Menzel. The Solander boxes used today are updated versions of the original wooden boxes designed for the collection by architect Carl Friedrich Schinkel. The new boxes have orange bookcloth spines to match the faded leather on the older cases. Within the Solander boxes, each drawing is inlaid in a thin board so both sides of the paper are visible, and the board is hinged into a window mat. The corners of each mount are rounded and sanded by hand, and the inventory number and artist’s name are stamped on the front. “First tier” prints are hinged along two sides to a similar mount. “Second tier” prints are hinged along two sides to sturdy handmade paper in a screw-post binding.

The main conservation lab is a spacious room with natural light from windows on a central courtyard (fig. 2). Three workstations run along the windows, and there are

large shared tables in the center. In the laboratory for wet treatment, sinks line the back wall, there is a large suction table, humidity chamber, fume hood, and elephant trunk extraction system. For a recent grant-funded project, the lab had a photographic copy stand custom-made by Manfred Meyer, a conservator and engineer who furnished the lab at the Albertina Museum in Vienna (fig. 3). The artwork to be photographed lies on a velvet-covered slant board with a ledge at the bottom. A digital camera is mounted on an angle so one can comfortably see the view screen and the camera cannot fall on the artwork. It is held in a fixed position, parallel to the slant board, and moves up and down the angled bar. The light fixtures are mount-



Fig. 1. Mounted drawings are housed in Solander boxes, stored upright in locking cabinets



Fig. 2. Main conservation laboratory. Conservators Cordula Severit and Ignatz Wittich pictured.

ed on adjustable arms and have daylight fluorescent and ultraviolet bulbs.

TREATMENT AND MOUNTING OF DORNSEIF *SELF PORTRAIT*

In preparation for treating a large drawing, *Self Portrait in Nepal*, 1987, by the sculptor Frank Dornseif (b. 1948), I visited his home and studio outside Berlin with Irene Brückle, head of conservation, and Udo Schade, conservator of modern art. We spoke with Dornseif about his working methods and the proposed treatment of his drawing.

Dornseif's sculptures are like three-dimensional line drawings in rebar (fig. 4). He begins each work by drawing on paper stapled to the wall of his studio and then he makes multiple tracings of the drawings. The drawing and tracings are layered on the floor and steel bars are laid on the drawn lines. Where the lines intersect, the bars are welded together, burning holes through the paper. This process leaves a lot of dirt on the drawings, which Dornseif considers an integral part of the work and fixes in place with sprayed pastel fixative.

After the sculpture is completed, the drawings are framed and sold as independent artworks. Dornseif would prefer that they be displayed unframed on a white wall, but he is concerned that the passage of viewers and air movement in a gallery would damage the works. He usu-



Fig. 3. Digital photography copy stand constructed by Dipl. -Ing. Manfred Meyer (Graz, Austria) as a custom design for the Kupferstichkabinett; conservation intern Josephine Werthman pictured.



Fig. 4. Installation view of *Self Portrait*, 1992, unpainted rebar and black marker on cream wove paper with burnt holes. Collection Berlinische Galerie.

ally mounts the pieces by stapling them to a white, rigid support and then frames them with Plexiglas.

Self Portrait In Nepal, 1987, is a tracing in black marker on three vertical sheets of transparent paper held together with brown plastic tape. Because of its size (slightly larger than 3 x 2 m) and the cost of large-format Plexiglas, the drawing was originally glazed with two joined Plexiglas panels. While in storage, the Plexiglas broke and the drawing was dismantled and rolled around a tube for temporary storage.

The drawing was too large to be unrolled in the conservation lab, so a basement storage space for framed oversized works became a temporary workshop. The first step was to design a rigid mount for the drawing that could also function as a worktable to unroll, examine, and treat the drawing. To keep the mount as light as possible while providing rigid support, six honeycomb paperboard panels were glued to a wooden lattice with Lascaux AC22 synthetic dispersion adhesive (fig. 5).

When the drawing was unrolled for the first time (fig. 6), it was clear that many of the tape carriers were no longer adhered. Dornseif had drawn over the tapes in some areas so it was decided that they all must be retained. The tracing paper around the tape was often crumpled and torn. The edges of the burnt holes were lifting, curling, and folded. Sharp, horizontal creases probably resulted from an impact while the piece was rolled in storage.

The creases were lightly wetted with deionized water applied with a fine brush and then quickly weighted between smooth mat boards. The tears were repaired with *sekishu shi* Japanese paper (31 gm²) and BEVA film applied with a heated spatula through silicon-coated polyester film (fig. 7). To readhere the lifting tape, BEVA film was inserted between the tape carrier and the paper surface.



Fig. 5. Constructing mount of paper honeycomb panels glued to a wooden lattice.



Fig. 6. Unrolling the drawing for the first time. Conservators Udo Schade and Irene Brückle pictured.



Fig. 7. Applying BEVA and Japanese paper repairs with heated spatula.

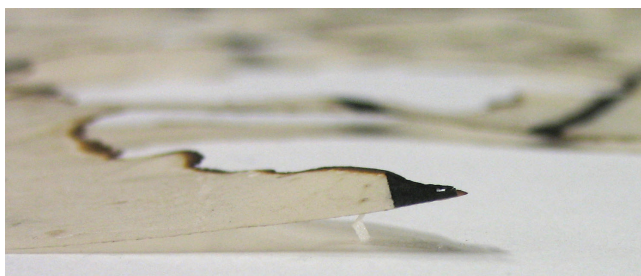


Fig. 8. Side view of small Japanese paper bridges.

Mounted and framed, the piece will have to be turned on its side to leave the storage space. To securely mount the drawing, large Japanese paper hinges were adhered with BEVA film where they would be the least noticeable, behind the tapes and drawn lines along the top and one side of the drawing. Slits slightly wider than the hinges were cut in the honeycomb panels; the hinges were pulled through the slits and adhered on the back of the mount.

To protect the fragile burnt edges of the drawing while preserving their dimensional quality, small bridges of Japanese paper were attached with BEVA film (fig. 8). The bridges are nearly invisible when viewing the drawing. According to Dornseif's wishes, the drawing was framed without glazing, though the frame rabbet is deep enough that glazing can be added later. Finally, the drawing was lifted upright and can be seen as it was intended (fig. 9).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am extremely grateful to Irene Brückle for encouraging my desire to work in Germany, supervising my internship year, and making this experience so wonderful. Thanks to Dr. Heinz-Thomas Schulze Altcapenberg, director of the Kupferstichkabinett, for welcoming their first year-long conservation intern. Conservators Renate Fricke, Eva Glück, Udo Schade, Cordula Severit, Reinhardt "Ignatz" Wittich, and all of my colleagues at the Kupferstichkabinett were extremely patient with my halting German. Artists Frank Dornseif and Elke Judith Wagner welcomed us into their home and studio and were very generous with their time. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Buffalo State College Foundation supported my internship year. The Leo and Karen Gutmann Foundation generously funded my German language study in Berlin.

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Fig. 9. Frank Dornseif's *Self Portrait in Nepal*, 1987, after treatment and mounting. Black marker, yellow oil stick, studio dirt, and packing tape on tracing paper with burnt holes, 3.23 x 2.48 m. Collection Kupferstichkabinett-Berlin (LB 68-1992).

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