

ARCHAEOLOGICAL THEATRE



Visiting the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen [\[Link\]](#). What an experience of archaeological theatre! [\[Link\]](#)



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I discovered the work of Danish neo-classical sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770 – 1844) at the Museum of Classical Archaeology in Cambridge in 1977, when its collection of plaster casts of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture was still housed in my college Peterhouse. Classical antiquity on the doorstep! His restorations of the marble statuary from the temple of Aphaia on Aegina stood out, because they looked so clean and fresh.

The sculptures had been found by a party of young classical enthusiasts in 1811 – including Charles Robert Cockerell, an English architect on the Grand Tour (he later designed the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford), and the Prussian aristocrat Otto Magnus von Stackelberg, painter and antiquarian. They shipped the fragments out and they were bought by Ludwig, Crown Prince (later King) of Bavaria. He was realizing his dream of Munich as a new northern Athens and wanted the sculptures as a display of his acknowledgement of the perfection of Greek antiquity.

They look so clean and fresh because Ludwig commissioned Bertel Thorvaldsen, at the time the foremost Rome-based neoclassical sculptor, to restore the statues. Thorvaldsen seamlessly added new pieces to the sculpture fragments, posed them, may even have taken his chisel to the original marble. You can't see the joins. They look as if Thorvaldsen himself might have made them, as a kind of experiment in his neoclassical style.

And, in the dim northern light of the museum in Cambridge – they looked so grey.



Thorvaldsen in the Museum of Classical Archaeology 1977.

Thorvaldsen's own neoclassical sculptures were also monochrome. Bronze. Marble. Like the pure glistening white of Canova's earlier work.

Ancient sculptures were painted in bright colors.

Thorvaldsen returned as an art celebrity to Denmark in 1838. He bequeathed his works to a new kind of museum, one devoted to a personality – himself. He endowed a gift to build and support its foundation. Helped by public subscription, the museum opened in 1848.

In extraordinary contrast, the architect Michael Gottlieb Binesbøll designed a *palace of color* as the home for Thorvaldsen's work.



The architecture of courtyard, corridors, chambers, halls, affords an extraordinary experience of color-and-place, color-out-of-space, in that museological performance of walking amongst a collection. Architectural spaces as active mediation.













There's a bust by Thorvaldsen of Byron in the museum. Another irony.

Here are some lines from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812-1818) (Canto XV)

“Cold is the heart, fair Greece, that looks on thee,
Nor feels as lovers o'er the dust they loved;
Dull is the eye that will not weep to see
Thy walls defaced, thy mouldering shrines removed
By British hands, which it had best behov'd
To guard those relics ne'er to be restored.
Curst be the hour when their isle they roved,
And once again thy hapless bosom gored,
And snatch'd thy shrinking Gods to northern climes
abhorr'd!”



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LORD BYRON