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***The Camposanto in Pisa* by Leo von Klenze: The Encounter between a Classicist and an Islamic Artwork**

Abstract The article deals with the painting *The Camposanto in Pisa*, by the classicist Leo von Klenze, which contains the Pisa Griffin—an Islamic artwork with a cross-cultural itinerary and one of the most discussed objects of Islamic metalwork due to its uncertain provenance and function. To understand Klenze's perception of the unique medieval griffin, the chapter concentrates on the manner of depiction in terms of style and composition. Thus, the painting and its analysis also give an idea of the reception of a mysterious Islamic artwork, through a Western and neoclassicist lens in 1858.

Keywords Encounter, Reception, Spolia, Pisa Griffin, Leo von Klenze

In 1858, the famous neoclassicist architect Leo von Klenze (1784–1864) painted his imposing view of the Camposanto in Pisa. Showing the west wing of the Camposanto (completed 1358, Piazza del Duomo, Pisa), the painting provides an accurate rendering of the architecture and part of the collection it housed, even including a visiting mother and child. Its impressive attention to detail and range of colors are characteristic of Klenze's painterly oeuvre. This particular painting, however, warrants a closer look, as it is a document of the history of the reception of a unique medieval object with a cross-cultural biography and itinerary: the Pisa Griffin.

One of a row of exhibited objects, the Pisa Griffin is depicted at the bottom left. An object of Islamic manufacture presumably created in the eleventh century and featuring an Arabic inscription, the bronze griffin is striking in appearance due to its size, monumental posture, and rich decoration. The latter is divided into well-defined zones of scales, stylized feathers, and ornaments. On account of its uncertain provenance and function, the Pisa Griffin is one of the most discussed objects of Islamic metalwork (Dodds 1992, 216–218).

The mysterious griffin has been linked to many places of origin, including Fatimid Egypt, Fatimid North Africa, Sicily, and Iran. In the eleventh century, Pisa rose to become a very powerful republic, wielding great maritime power and maintaining trade networks throughout the Mediterranean world. As a result, any provenance of the griffin is conceivable and at the same time controversially discussed based on stylistic analysis or, alternatively, on inscriptions at Pisa Cathedral. Most likely it was made in Al-Andalus (Islamic Spain) as a decoration for a fountain and taken by the Pisans as a spoil of war on an expedition to the Balearic Islands (1113–1115) (Dodds 1992, 216–218). In Pisa, it was then put on display as a trophy like so many other spolia (► **Spolia**) and placed prominently on top of a small column rising from the gable above the apse of Pisa Cathedral (nowadays, it is replaced by a replica). More recent studies have called its function as fountain decoration in question, suggesting instead that the griffin was designed to emit noises through its mouth and hollow inside (Contadini, Camber, and Northover 2002; Contadini 2012). Doubts have also been raised about its identification as a war trophy; instead, a Christian interpretation by the Pisans reflecting local cultural beliefs has been proposed (Balafrej 2012).

In 1828, after centuries on top of the cathedral, the bronze griffin was removed and placed in the Camposanto, the fourth and last building raised on Piazza del Duomo, in the location of an older burial ground said to contain holy earth and used as a depository and exhibition hall. There one could find sarcophagi, sculptures, spolia, vases, epigraphs, frescoes, and other artworks from different periods and cultures.

Leo von Klenze prominently included the unique and mysterious griffin sculpture in his painting of *The Camposanto in Pisa*, a decision that is quite remarkable for an artist with such strong neoclassicist leanings. Working as the court architect of King Ludwig I of Bavaria, Klenze had designed,



Figure 1: Leo von Klenze, *The Camposanto in Pisa*, 1858, oil on canvas, 103.5 × 130.5 cm. Die Pinakotheken, München.

among other buildings, the Glyptothek and Alte Pinakothek in Munich, the New Hermitage in St. Petersburg and also developed the exhibition and display concepts of those museums (Lieb and Hufnagl 1979; Von Buttlar 1999). In light of those classical interests, it was common at the time for architects, painters, and art collectors to take the “Grand Tour” to be exposed to and draw inspiration from the cultural legacy of classical antiquity and the Renaissance. Leo von Klenze visited Italy several times to study classical architecture, making countless sketches and drawings he would subsequently use in architectural designs or paintings. Around 1854, he visited the Camposanto and its collection in Pisa (Lieb and Hufnagl 1979; Von Buttlar 1999). His detailed depiction of the wooden roof construction, the traceried cloister arcades, and the floor and his precise rendering of the perspective in his 1858 painting testify to his passion for architecture. His use of colors and of the light entering through the Gothic windows on the right bespeaks his painterly concerns. Based on his work as a curator, he was also interested in the collection and its display; this is how the Pisa Griffin must have caught his attention.

Hence, the painting provides a record not just of the Camposanto’s collection, but also of Klenze’s encounter with the unique medieval griffin and, by extension, the meeting of different historical, geographical, temporal, cross-cultural, and aesthetic categories. This essay aims to discuss those various encounters by analyzing compositional and stylistic elements of Klenze’s painting that are linked to his notions of an ideal exhibition space and his aesthetic thinking, in order to illustrate how he perceived what to him was an outlandish object (► **Exoticism**) and how he made sense of it in terms of his more canonical interests (► **Canon**).

Of course, the painting does not tell us anything about Klenze’s thoughts and feelings upon seeing the griffin for the first time. Did he touch it and immediately make a sketch of it, or did he initially, perhaps, fail to notice it? The painting does not reflect his immediate reaction, but rather an extended reception, as it is a deliberate artistic realization that involved translating the object into a new medium and integrating it into a new composition.

What the painting does tell us is that Klenze was particularly interested in the Pisa Griffin. An analysis of his painting style and choice of composition clearly shows that the striking bronze sculpture had made a strong impression on the painter, so much so that he placed the griffin in a prominent position. Though shown at the lower left, Klenze uses light and proportion as compositional elements to highlight the sculpture. With the vase just to the left of it being in the shadow, the illuminated griffin appears all the more prominent and, as a result, bigger than the other objects. Especially relative to the space as a whole and the two figures on the right, it is obvious that Klenze scaled up the griffin whose actual height is just about one meter, or 3.2 feet. The bronze griffin also contrasts strongly with the marble sculptures beyond it in terms of material and color, making the griffin the most conspicuous object in the room. Furthermore, in iconographic

terms, the griffin stands out as a mythic creature among mostly Christian, antique, and profane sculptures. Its illumination and increased size create a monumental effect.

As a whole, Klenze's painting of *The Camposanto in Pisa* alludes to several object biographies, since a number of the items on display are clearly recognizable: In front of the back wall and in the row of exhibited objects on the left, for instance, are marble sculptures by Pisano and Lorenzo Bartolini, several reliefs, and vases aside from the bronze griffin. The back wall itself features a fresco by Piero di Puccio showing Christ as a *syndesmos* figure holding the cosmos which, at the same time, is his body. To the right of it are Old Testament frescoes by Benozzo Gozzoli. On the left wall we also see marble grave slabs and epigraphs as well as additional frescoes, some alcoves, and parts of the chain of the port of Pisa. Easily identifiable as the northern part of the west wing, the depicted section of the Camposanto includes closely observed architectural elements. While this suggests a sense of actuality, we realize upon closer examination that Klenze, in fact, rearranged the objects for his painting. More precisely, he left out objects that were actually located in this part of the west wing and added objects from other locations in the Camposanto. Thus, the bronze griffin is shown in a location different from its actual place of display among a number of objects lined up in the east gallery (Baracchini 1993). The fact that Klenze included it in his painting thus points to his particular interest in the object and its particular function as part of the painting's aesthetic message.

Klenze's special interest in the bronze griffin is also evidenced by several sketches that show the sculpture from different perspectives (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Klenzeana, IX, 7/36 and IX, 14/12, published in Lieb and Hufnagl 1979, 132, figs. Z 301, Z 302). Yet those sketches differ stylistically from the ones he did of architectural elements such as capitals, temples, or wall decoration. Those he would copy in great detail to create precise drawings, rather than just records of travel memories, and perhaps use them on a later occasion in his architectural designs.

The sketches Klenze made of the griffin indicate that he was interested less in the sculpture's formal aspects of texture and pattern or its Arabic inscription than in its outlandish appearance and unusual subject. The painting, in turn, suggests that Klenze was more concerned with depicting the entire space and the arrangement of objects in it, which contrasts the bronze griffin with ancient and local work, most of it in marble. Clearly, his intention was not to provide a detailed image of the griffin but to show the impact the sculpture had in the space.

At the same time, the inclusion of the bronze griffin in the painting serves to meet what Klenze had described as the two main requirements for an ideal museum space. The first of those was the need to show the development of world culture by including artworks from various periods (Von Buttlar 1999, 121). In this regard, the Pisa Griffin stands for Islamic and medieval handicrafts, thus providing a geographical and historical reference alongside local, ancient, and contemporary artworks. In a way, the

deliberate incorporation of the Pisa Griffin may even be compared to the use of spolia in architectural structures in order to create a historical and cultural reference or a reinterpreted symbol (►**Spolia**).

Klenze's second requirement was the need to create aesthetic variety, so as to offer visitors a better and more comprehensive experience of art (Von Buttlar 1999, 121–123). Accordingly, he focuses mainly on the arrangement and variety of the objects, in order to contrast different aesthetic ideals and, indeed, different approaches to creating material and color contrasts and juxtaposing the familiar and the foreign or “mystic.”

The outlandish appearance of a medieval artwork like the Pisa Griffin fit in well, as the Middle Ages were often described as foreign or “other” (►**Othering**) in the nineteenth-century West (Ganim 2005, 83–107). For all his keen interest in classical antiquity, there was also a place for the Middle Ages or a medieval ideal, including mystical aspects, in Klenze's studies and works.

As indicated earlier, Klenze was interested rather in representing visual otherness and foreignness than in highlighting a specific culture or the Oriental character of an object. His presentation mode is, in fact, quite neutral, with all objects similarly placed on pedestals in a row. The complex decoration of the walls behind the objects in the form of colorful frescoes, grave slabs, epigraphs, and the decorative floor patterns were equally important elements. In this way, the arrangement as a whole allowed for a variety of views and visual experiences, creating an overwhelming impression that would amaze the visitor and thus make him more receptive to art, which was precisely what Klenze imagined an ideal museum ought to achieve (Von Buttlar 1999, 122).

In Klenze's painting as in his exhibition concept, the function of the griffin was not to offer details regarding its biography, provenance, and previous functions, but to present an artwork in its visual otherness. In comparison to the other objects, only the griffin required a greenish color in the painting caused by its metal body. Its appearance is more rigid than that of most marble sculptures and also figures in the frescoes due to the impressive folds in their robes. Even its essence as a mythical animal stands out from other exhibits such as Christian sculptures, for instance a Mary with Child (both headless), the Christian frescoes in the back, and even profane ones such as the Pisan port chain or presented vases. Klenze successfully used the griffin through its visual otherness—of shape, material, treatment—and unique character relative to the other objects and the surrounding space, in order to create a powerful visual impact and aesthetic experience.

To create this idealized exhibition ensemble in his painting, Klenze selected all objects and architectural details he found interesting and important during his visit to the Camposanto. This approach is similar to that of a neoclassicist architect who collects ideas and individual architectural elements in his sketchbook and subsequently incorporates those elements he deems most fitting in the design of a new building. In the same

manner, Klenze moved the griffin from its original location in the east wing to the west wing and added or omitted other objects. In this sense, the griffin with its transcultural itinerary is joined by Klenze as the painter, and, indeed, by the painting as a mobile storage medium in functioning as agents of cultural transfer.

Figure

Fig. 1: © bpk/Bayrische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.

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