

“Stranded on the Shores of History?” Monuments and (Art-)Historical Awareness

Jakub Stejskal¹

Department of Art History and Theory, Faculty of Fine Arts, Brno University of Technology,

jakub.bulvas.stejskal@vut.cz

(accepted, not copy-edited version, forthcoming in *History and Theory*)

I. Introduction

It is a widely accepted claim that experiencing the sensuous qualities of material things from the past can contribute to our understanding of history. Relics of the past can serve as effective props for imagining what it was like to live and act among such objects; and witnessing their wear and tear can make the pastness of history more palpable.² We mine these things for vivid experiences of history and historicity as if against their will; they are passive conveyors of such “experientiality” because, after all, this was not their original

¹ I presented an early version of this essay at the British Society of Aesthetics Workshop on the Aesthetics of Public Art at King’s College London in November 2022 and I thank its participants for a stimulating discussion. I also extend my thanks to Ancuta Mortu, Mark Windsor, and this journal’s anonymous referee for their valuable feedback. This work was supported by the Grant Agency of Masaryk University, MASH JUNIOR – MUNI Award in Science and Humanities, MUNI/J/0006/2021.

²See, for example, Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Levine (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1991), 42–56; Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Things: In Touch with the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Mark Windsor, “Imagining the Past of the Present,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (2025), 268–87.

purpose.³ But can the sensuous presence of past things communicate with us in an active register? Can past agents influence our historical awareness by designing objects' appearances and sending them to us down the stream of time? We know they have certainly tried: by raising monuments intended to keep their legacy alive for posterity. Their appearance is meant to communicate the relevance of a person, an event, or an idea they celebrate or mourn. How do they achieve this? And what sort of historical awareness do they engage?

Any effort at tackling these questions is bound quickly to run up against prevalent skepticism about the efficacy of monuments. Rather than sustaining a legacy, monuments are often seen as massive failures of historical imagination, that is, of the ability to conceive of the implications of the passage of time. The failure of those who raise them – let us call them “monumentalists” – is supposed to rest in the futile hope that their legacy can be immortalized in material form. Monuments are meant to commemorate whatever or whomever – an event, an idea, a person – and to do so in perpetuity. But, the skeptical narrative has it, with the passage of time the inevitable happens: the monument recedes into the lived background, at best a useful orientation point in an urban environment, at worst ignored completely, a ruin in the making. In the end, monuments attest to the inevitable flow of history that drowns everything and everyone under its waves.⁴

³On history's experientiality, see Jonas Grethlein, “Experientiality and ‘Narrative

Reference,’ With Thanks to Thucydides,” *History and Theory* 49, no. 3 (2010), 315–35.

⁴The *locus classicus* of this sentiment is Robert Musil, “Monuments” (1927), in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, transl. Peter Wortsman (Brooklyn: Archipelago, 2006), 64–68. Comp. Joseph Leo Koerner, “On Monuments,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*

Particularly in the wake of the debates and controversies surrounding Holocaust memorials in Germany and elsewhere, the moral of the skeptical narrative about the efficacy of monuments has often been taken to imply that the work of remembering and commemoration cannot be bestowed on a material object; instead it ought to be a collective labor a community must undertake and which must be reflected in its educational and cultural practices and policies. If a conscientious polity requires monuments at all, then only such that take the form of “counter-monuments” explicitly flouting the conventions of monumentality – “figurativism, durability, grandeur and glorification”⁵ – in favor of artistic practices that actively engage the public in acts of facing up to their common (and not necessarily respectable) past.⁶

A celebrated example of such a counter-monument is the *Mahnmal gegen Faschismus* (*Monument against Fascism*) designed by Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz and raised in 1986 in Hamburg’s district of Harburg.⁷ Local residents and visitors were invited to

67/68 (2016/17), 5–20; Andrew M. Shanken, *The Everyday Lives of Memorials* (New York: Zone Books, 2022).

⁵Christopher M. Watts, “Counter-monuments and the Perdurance of Place,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 28, no. 3 (2018), 381.

⁶See James E. Young, “The Counter-monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1992), 267–96; *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁷Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 28–37.

inscribe their names on the four sides of a cuboid column to attest to their vigilance against the extreme right. Once fully covered with engraved signatures and messages, the originally 12-meter-high column was gradually lowered below the ground to make available new surfaces for inscriptions until it disappeared completely in 1993, only its top side remaining visible. As the accompanying text states explicitly, the piece's transitory and participatory nature was to bring home the message that, "in the long run, it is only we ourselves who can stand up against injustice."⁸

The anthropologist Tim Ingold usefully spells out the sentiment behind the counter-monumental narrative. He understands monuments as structures "designed and built to last in perpetuity as a testimony to the endeavor of those who constructed or commissioned them."⁹ But, for Ingold, the very fact that monuments from the deep past invite our marveling at their very existence suggests their failure: they have not managed to keep their legacy alive. If anything, they are testaments to their historical meaning's impermanence: "Like beached whales, they seem to have been left stranded on the shores of history, while time moves on."¹⁰ What the monumentalists do not realize (or perhaps choose to ignore), Ingold asserts, is that a monument speaks not only *for* itself – embodying its message by its appearance – but also *to* itself: it can only express the message in the local idiom that cannot survive the passage of time. As completed artifacts

⁸"The Monument against Fascism", *Esther Shalev-Gerz*,

<https://www.shalev-gerz.net/portfolio/monument-against-fascism/>.

⁹Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 78.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 79.

of history, monuments may endure as relics of the past, but they cannot “perdure,” that is, they cannot maintain and revive their intended relevance against the depredations of history.¹¹

Ingold identifies a paradox at the heart of monument raising. Monuments from the past appear monumental to us not because they make the historical moment they try to encapsulate come alive, but precisely because they have failed in sustaining their original messaging: they strike us as marks of “a bygone if heroic age.”¹² He assumes that this is an embarrassing result for the monumentalist. But I am not convinced. In this essay, I develop an argument to the effect that the monumentalist factors in the perspective under which the monumental structure has lost its immediate intelligibility. In this perspective, a monument is meant to be appreciated for manifesting by its appearance a relevance beyond its immediate context. My strategy is to argue that the fact that ancient monuments strike us as vestiges of “a bygone if heroic age” (as Ingold puts it) is not a proof of the monumentalist’s failure to grasp the unavoidable entropy of historical meaning, but rather of their achievement: to appear monumental even to those without access to much of the relevant context is the effect the monumentalist strives for from the start. My argument defends the rationality behind monumentality by producing an analytic construct called the “monumentalist” – a term that extends to those responsible for monuments’ design and construction, which (depending on the context) may include individual artists, commissioning patrons, construction guilds, or even whole communities. The construct explains that the real motivations and intentions of monumentalists and their intended

¹¹Ibid., 79–80.

¹²Ibid., 78.

audiences do not have to suffer from naivety about the prospects of keeping a legacy alive in perpetuity. On the contrary, the model represents them (and their implied audiences) as possessing an awareness that allows them to appreciate whether or how a monument succeeds in manifesting visually a transcendent relevance. On the understanding that I defend here, any object produced or repurposed to manifest visibly a significance outside of its historical context is a monument.

II. Monuments' Monumentality

When the architect and archaeologist Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy (1755–1849) remarked that the monument is “constructed either to perpetuate the memory of memorable things, or conceived, erected or placed in such a way as to become an instrument of embellishment and magnificence in cities,”¹³ he was correct to associate the two purposes with monuments, but wrong to perceive them as mutually exclusive: the commemorative function of monuments is served by their magnificence. Yet the disjunction is not completely off the mark, for there is a tension between the purpose to commemorate and to glorify.

Monuments are indeed typically assigned or ascribed the two functions: (i) to glorify, that is, to communicate publicly and visibly a sense of importance or relevance associated with an event, a person, or an idea;¹⁴ and (ii) to keep the legacy of the event, person, or idea

¹³Quoted in Françoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, trans. Lauren O'Connell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.

¹⁴See Sandra Shapshay, “What Is the Monumental?,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 79, no. 2 (2021), 145–60.

alive for posterity.¹⁵ The former speaks to the status of monuments as works of public art; the latter to their role as means of commemoration. Arguably, what makes artworks public is not so much that they occupy public spaces (as, for example, any art displayed in a gallery does), but rather that they engage social groups by expressing or appealing to values (to be) embraced by them qua social groups.¹⁶ Monuments and memorials are probably the most notorious examples of public art so understood: they make it possible for a public to commemorate an idea, an event, or a person.¹⁷ At the same time, the commemorative feature complicates their status as public art. As monuments, they are meant to appeal to distant future audiences. As works of public art, they address themselves to their contemporaries. They are therefore neither mere topical interventions nor mere messages in the bottle or time capsules. But if public art addresses a specific social group, how can it do so in perpetuity? In other words, how can monuments as public art retain any relevance across vast stretches of time? Ingold thinks they cannot and it is the folly and hubris of the monumentalist to intend to achieve this.

¹⁵See Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin” (1903), transl. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirado, *Oppositions*, no. 25 (1982), 21; Arthur C. Danto, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” *The Nation*, no. 241 (1985), 52.

¹⁶Hilde Hein, *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2006); Kalle Puolakka, “Public Art and Dewey’s Democratic Experience: The Case of John Adams’s *On the Transmigration of Souls*,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 4 (2016), 371–81.

¹⁷Noël Carroll, “Art and Recollection,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 2 (2005), 1–12; C. Thi Nguyen, “Monuments as Commitments: How Art Speaks to Groups and How Groups Think in Art,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 100, no. 4 (2019), 971–94.

If the ultimate goal of the monumentalist were to raise structures that use a local visual idiom in order to secure the legacy they are supposed to embody in perpetuity, then Ingold's assessment would be correct: No matter how grandiose and durable the monument, it cannot make a memory it tries to encapsulate impervious to the dent of time. But that is not the only, and possibly not even the main goal characterizing the monumentalist's endeavor.

Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Neo-Gothic, cast-iron *Nationaldenkmal für die Befreiungskriege* (1821; figs 1, 2) in Berlin's Viktoriapark commemorates the fallen Prussian soldiers who fought against Napoleon. The roughly twenty meters tall, tabernacle-like monument follows the ground plan of a cross, which gives it twelve sides altogether. Every side bears a plaque and a bewinged genius statue marking an important battle. Furthermore, the twelve genii are meant each to resemble a dignitary (a general, a royal family member, or, in one case, the Russian czar). Inaugurated in 1821 at the top of a hill that would subsequently be called Kreuzberg (a name later bestowed on the surrounding Berlin borough), the monument is a much more modest descendant of Schinkel's original plan to build a Neo-Gothic *Denkmals- or Befreiungsdom*, a 'Cathedral-Monument' or 'Liberation Cathedral', at Leipziger Platz, one of Berlin's most central squares.¹⁸ The successful military campaign against Napoleon in 1813, culminating in a decisive victory at the Battle of Leipzig, brought

¹⁸Erik Forssman, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel: Bauwerke and Baugedanken* (Munich: Schnell und Steiner, 1981), 78; John Edward Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 137–40; Barry Bergdoll, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel: An*

with it a great wave of patriotic fervor and nationalistic sentiment that expressed itself in calls for commemoration in the form of monuments.¹⁹ The Romantics – and, for a time and to a limited extent, Schinkel – regarded the Gothic as the most organic expression of that sentiment.²⁰ But already by the time he was commissioned to design the monument by Friedrich Wilhelm III, in 1817, Schinkel suggested a neoclassical, rather than a Gothic, column. Yet the Prussian court (most likely the crown prince Friedrich Willhelm) insisted on the Gothic style, regarded as more patriotic.²¹ The association between German culture

Architecture for Prussia (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 40–42.

¹⁹On the incompatible monarchist and populist motivations fueling these calls and their impact on the construction of monuments (including the Kreuzberg monument), see Thomas Nipperdey, “Nationalidee und Nationaldenkmal in Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Gesellschaft, Kultur, Theorie: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur neueren Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 133–73; Christopher Clark, “The Wars of Liberation in Prussian Memory: Reflections on the Memorialization of War in Early Nineteenth-Century Germany,” *Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 3 (1996), 550–76.

²⁰On Schinkel’s relation to Gothic architecture, see Georg Friedrich Koch, “Karl Friedrich Schinkel und die Architektur des Mittelalters: Die Studien auf der ersten Italienreise und ihre Auswirkungen,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 29, no. 3 (1966), 177–222; on his relation to the Romantics, see Forssman, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel*, 62–64.

²¹Toews, *Becoming Historical*, 139; Peter Bloch, Sibylle Einholz, and Jutta von Simson, eds., *Ethos und Pathos: Die Berliner Bildhauerschule 1786–1914; Ausstellungskatalog* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen, 1990), 313; Helmut Börsch-Supan and Lucius Grisebach,

and the Gothic would remain strong throughout the nineteenth century, as is perhaps best attested by the project for the completion of the Cologne cathedral (1842–1880). The completion was to symbolize the cultural and political unity of Catholic and Protestant Germans under the leadership of the Prussian king (and later the German kaiser).²² It had been originally planned by Schinkel who also took inspiration from the cathedral in designing the *Nationaldenkmal*.²³

eds., *Karl Friedrich Schinkel: Architektur Malerei Kunstgewerbe* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen, 1981), 144.

²²See Michael Lewis, *The Politics of the German Gothic Revival: August Reichensperger* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

²³Carl Friedrich Schinkel, *Sammlung architektonischer Entwürfe* (Berlin: Ernst & Korn, 1858), vol. of explanatory notes, n.p. [4].



Fig. 1. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, National Monument for the Liberation Wars, 1821, Viktoriapark, Berlin. Photo: Jörg Zägel, 2012, CC BY-SA 3.0, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Berlin, Kreuzberg, Viktoriapark, Nationaldenkma I, Ostseite.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Berlin,_Kreuzberg,_Viktoriapark,_Nationaldenkma_I,_Ostseite.jpg).

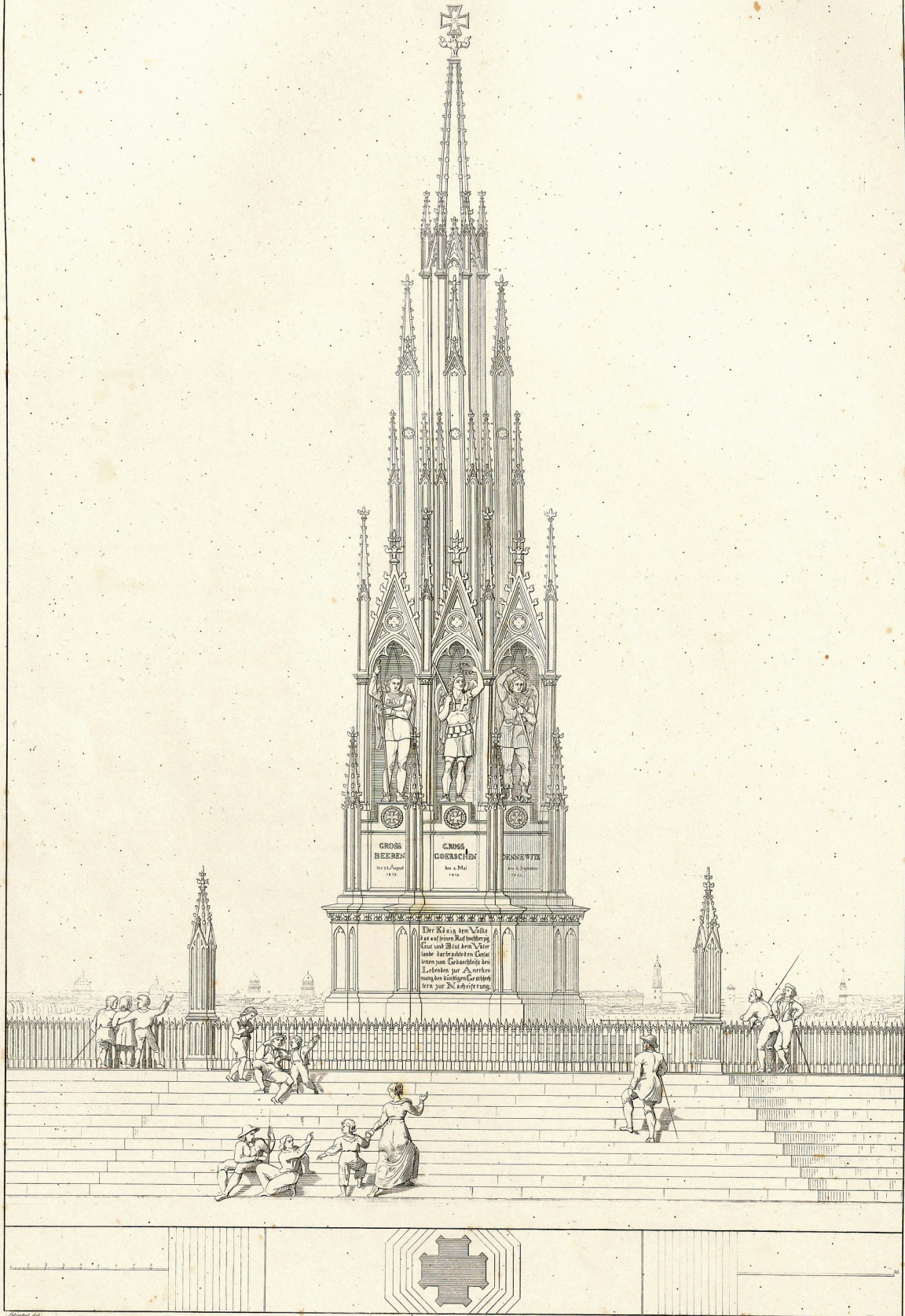


Fig. 2. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, *Das Kriegesdenkmal in gegossenem Eisen auf dem Kreuzberg bei Berlin*, engraved by Eduard Mauch, plate 22 from Carl Friedrich Schinkel, *Sammlung architektonischer Entwürfe* (Berlin: Ernst & Korn, 1858), plate vol. 1. Public domain.

Many, perhaps the majority, of today's visitors to the park, a popular recreation site, will struggle to decipher what the monument commemorates. Many of the battlefield names will hardly sound familiar to the passers-by and the allegorical meanings of the genii as well as their resemblances to actual historical figures will equally be lost on them. Yet I wager that its monumentality will be evident to most. Particularly, its large scale, its Neo-Gothic style, and the use of cast iron serve the structure's monumental function well. While hardly anyone today will recognize in the choice of iron a symbol of the general population's wartime sacrifices,²⁴ the material's durability ensures the monument's longevity and thus connotes the lasting legacy of its meaning (even if that meaning itself remains obscure to most). And while the Teutonic and Christian allusions of a Gothic style may not be as evident as they once were, it will likely continue to strike many as appropriately monumental. As a canonized, time-proven visual idiom, it highlights the ambition to provide the monument's relevance with perennial character.

It is nevertheless fair to say that today, the Kreuzberg monument sustains only a semblance of its intended historical relevance rather than maintaining it fully. So, is Ingold right that it is therefore a complete failure with regard to its intended function? Not if we avoid lumping together the monument's sustaining the relevance of what it commemorates

²⁴Börsch-Supan and Grisebach, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel*, 143.

– the legacy of Prussian sacrifices on the battlefields – and its manifesting a lasting relevance by its appearance – in short, its appearing monumental. The distinction between actually sustaining a legacy and manifesting its transcendent nature underscores an important, yet little remarked-upon feature of monuments that can be explained neither by their status as public art nor by their commemorative function. The pyramids, the ziggurats, the obelisks, the mounted statues are meant to appear “larger than life” because their legacy is supposed to transcend the here and now. The mission of the monumentalist is thus not just to keep a legacy meaningful beyond its immediate context, that is, to raise a durable structure adequate to the task. It is also to find an appropriate visual idiom that would manifest the legacy’s transcendent nature. In other words, monuments are meant to be appreciated for visually manifesting their relevance in a manner that outlasts their immediate context.

To manifest visually a relevance is to make something appear relevant, which is not the same as successfully communicating what makes something relevant. The appearance of relevance is not dependent on the latter. The Kreuzberg monument strikes the park-goers as monumental despite their general ignorance of the monument’s meaning. Of course, this is not to claim that the monumentalist has no stake in keeping a legacy alive. They typically do. But it is the goal of making a legacy appear relevant beyond its immediate context that makes their intentions specifically monumental. Contrast this with another effective way of keeping a legacy alive: chronicling an event, idea, or person in writing.²⁵ Doing so does not usually involve designing the medium’s appearance so as to ostentatiously address audiences outside of the immediate context. And it is also for this

²⁵Comp. Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 8–9.

reason that monuments often employ large scale, durable materials, and canonized, archaizing, or classical styles – to stress their “universal” reach.

III. Art-Historical Awareness

My claim, then, is that monuments deliberately engage a particular mode of awareness, one that attends to visible manifestations of relevance-beyond-immediate-context. To attend to such manifestations is to assume an “external attitude” towards the monument: to appreciate how its looks can sustain at least a semblance of relevance beyond local norms and idioms. This is to be contrasted with an “internal attitude” in which one strives to have a suitable experience of the monument as a public artwork in compliance with said norms and idioms. As public art, monuments address a particular, historically situated social group. It follows that an appropriate internal attitude towards the monument requires that one be a member of that group or, at least, that one have enough sources to draw upon to reconstruct to a relevant degree the norms that inform the internal attitude. As such a member (or well-informed outsider), one would be able to appreciate the monument’s symbolism, adequately visualize or imagine its figurative content, register and respond to its particular emotional charge, and appreciate its aesthetic achievements or failures.²⁶ In the case of the Kreuzberg monument, this internal attitude would involve, among other things, the ability to decode the allegories, recognize in the genii the likenesses of the Prussian royals and generals, associate the engraved local names with particular battles,

²⁶For a relevant discussion, see Jonathan Gilmore, “Material, Medium, and Sculptural

Imagination,” in *Philosophy of Sculpture: Historical Problems, Contemporary*

Approaches, ed. Kristin Gjesdal, Fred Rush, and Ingvild Torsen (New York: Routledge, 2021), 149–64.

but also, importantly, feel the monument's expressed patriotism and serenity. An external attitude, on the other hand, does not warrant a suitable experience of the monument as a public artwork. Assuming this attitude, one may be able to adequately describe the technique, medium, format, or general style of the monument, but one would thus not be determining its particular meanings and aspects nor be appropriately touched by its expressive content.

Distinguishing the two attitudes is not meant to isolate two respective states of mind that cannot coexist or intermesh. Rather, it is to help us focus on those aspects of monuments that make them monumental. A public artwork that would not stimulate the external attitude would fail as a monument regardless of how well it articulated its message. Throughout Europe, *Stolpersteine* – cobblestone-shaped brass plates set in pavements and bearing names of Holocaust victims – mark the victims' last places of residence. Some have objected to their installation, claiming that they do not attract the sort of respect and attention appropriate for Holocaust monuments.²⁷ Arguably, at least part of the discontent can be usefully framed in terms of a worry that the *Stolpersteine* do not signal the lasting relevance of what they commemorate; that is, they do not adequately address the external attitude. On the other hand, a monument that would fail to convey its message, but would still attract the external attitude, would not fail completely as a monument. If the Kreuzberg monument succeeded in informing visitors of the wars of liberation, but did not express by its appearance their lasting legacy, it would lack monumentality. But the monument

²⁷Anna Warda, "Ein Kunstdenkmal wirft Fragen auf: Die 'Stolpersteine' zwischen

Anerkennung und Kritik," *zeitgeschichte | online*, March 21, 2017, <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/geschichtskultur/ein-kunstdenkmal-wirft-fragen-auf>.

arguably continues to express by its appearance a lasting legacy, although, paradoxically, hardly anyone today knows or cares what legacy it is supposed to glorify. Notwithstanding, its intended monumentality has not vanished.

The external attitude addressed by the monumentalist is motivated by the effort to glean from artifacts' appearances general signs of their significance that would survive the loss of context. I call this sort of historical awareness *art*-historical because it has traditionally been one of the legitimizing narratives of art history as a scholarly enterprise (a *Wissenschaft*) that it can acquire historically relevant insights from artworks' looks.²⁸ Nevertheless, the term "art-historical awareness" obtains here more of a technical meaning. I do not mean to suggest that the awareness is what characterizes, let alone ought to characterize, all of art historians' scholarship, or that park-goers appreciating the monumentality of the *Nationaldenkmal* are engaged in any scholarly activity. The train of thought is rather as follows: It has been the prerogative of art historians to use their expertise to retrieve information from the visual signals emitted by past artworks. The more ancient the art, the more it becomes difficult for the art historian to maintain an internal attitude, typically assumed by the art critic. This is the case when the artistic and social order surrounding the art has eroded to such an extent that an art historian is called upon to make sense of the art.²⁹ At least until enough context is retrieved (when possible), an external attitude is often the more responsible heuristic – that is, the attitude that attends to

²⁸See Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images: Art and Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

²⁹Christopher S. Wood, *A History of Art History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 23.

visual marks of relevance that are likely to survive the loss of local context. As the subject of such an attitude, the artwork becomes more of an art-historical document rather than an artwork open to a suitable appreciative experience. Accordingly, an historical document becomes of art-historical interest (in the technical sense) when its relevance can be gathered from, or is reflected in, its appearance.³⁰ As such, it is instrumental to an art-historical understanding.³¹

Artworks turn art-historical documents the moment one assumes an external attitude towards them. Within such an attitude, one tries not to rely on acquired sensitivities to the artwork's context-dependent particularities, but one instead looks for general marks of its significance. As suggested, this typically happens under circumstances where one lacks sufficient knowledge of a given artistic culture and its history, which prevents one from having anything like an appropriate appreciative experience of the artwork. Under such circumstances, what Bernard Williams called "relativism of distance" comes into effect. The

³⁰Comp. Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments," 22.

³¹Although I ascribe to the term "art-historical" a technical sense, I do think that what I have described in this paragraph covers some of the activities art historians (and archaeologists) have been involved in. Various forms of stylistic analysis, for example, have been used to determine or corroborate the historical significance of artifacts. This requires attention to aspects of their morphology that can betray their significance despite loss of context. For a discussion, see Whitney Davis, "Style and History in Art History," in *Replications: Archaeology, Art History, Psychoanalysis* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 171–98; Jakub Stejskal, "Visual Style Hermeneutics: From Style to Context," *World Art* 11, no. 2 (2021), 201–27.

internal perspective implied by the art does not figure as an accessible option, in the sense that one does not feel warranted to exercise one's critical capabilities without the fear of anachronistic projection: one cannot realistically hope to be able to attune to the art's internal perspective.³² Any kind of understanding about the artwork generated within the external attitude will thus not be the sort that is usually associated with art criticism, which zeroes in on an artwork's intrinsic value and meaning *qua* art.³³

However, the external attitude does not have to be forced on someone by their circumstances. One may also choose to avoid the internal attitude and approach the artwork from the outside, as it were. Indeed, that one entertain the external attitude is what the monumentalist asks of both their present and future audiences. That does not mean that one cannot avail themselves of both attitudes – as one does routinely when one is the

³²Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 160–62. Williams introduces “relativism of distance” in his discussion of moral relativism. I have adopted his argument for the present purposes, taking inspiration from Ted Nannicelli and Andrea Bubenik, “Art, Ethics, and the Relativism of Distance,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 64, no. 3 (2024), 297–316.

³³Wollheim deems inconsequential to our legitimate understandings of visual artworks those historical facts that are not reflected in an appreciative experience. If he is correct, then the external attitude would be characterized by one's inability or unwillingness to establish what facts are to be reflected in such an experience. See Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987); Robert Hopkins, “Painting, History, and Experience,” *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006), 19–35.

monumentalist's contemporary – or that they can be neatly separated in day-to-day appreciative practice. Nor does it mean that those who are not contemporaries of the monumentalist cannot or should not (strive to) assume the internal attitude and engage in critical activities associated with it. Rather, the point is that if one is to appreciate the monument for its monumentality (that is, for its potential to manifest visibly relevance outside of its context), one needs to situate themselves in the position of an observer rather than a participant.³⁴

IV. Monuments as Documents

Monuments such as the Kreuzberg *Nationaldenkmal* are intentional art-historical documents.³⁵ They deliberately address the external attitude in that they aim at manifesting visually a relevance-beyond-immediate-context. To appreciate such manifestations, one needs to be positioned, or imagine oneself being positioned, beyond the immediate context. This position is a case of the external attitude, which looks for visual manifestations of relevance that transcend the here and now. It follows that, in order to appreciate the monumentality of a monument, it should not really matter – at least in principle – what point in time monuments' intended audiences occupy. Whether they are the monumentalist's contemporaries or live in the distant future, they must be equipped

³⁴On the distinction between observer and participant, see Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 111.

³⁵I return to the topic of the un/intentionality of monuments in the last part. See also Lisa Regazzoni, "Unintentional Monuments, or the Materializing of an Open Past," *History and Theory* 61, no. 2 (2022), 242–68.

with the same kind of awareness – namely, the awareness attentive to the monuments’ potential to manifest visibly their relevance outside of their immediate context.

There is an ancient pool and stone monument located near Beyşehir Lake in Konya Province, Central Anatolia. It dates back to the Hittite Empire and has been in use as a source of fresh water ever since. In the Middle Ages, it became a pilgrimage site of a Neo-Platonic Sufi cult of Plato (reinterpreted as a sage and magician from Baghdad) who, according to the legend, used his engineering skills to prevent the stream from flooding the town of Konya (Iconium).³⁶ The same monument dominated the landscape in the thirteenth century BCE when it was raised, during the Seljuk Sultanate of Rûm when it acquired its current name *Eflatûn Pınarı* (‘Plato’s Spring’), and when it was chanced upon by modern Western archaeologists (fig. 3). Its original purpose fifteen centuries ago remains a mystery; for all we know, it may have been reinterpreted many times before the Seljuks’ arrival in the eleventh century CE. What we can feel much more certain about, however, is that it was raised by a monumentalist, that is, by someone attentive to visible manifestations of relevance that transcend immediate context. This relative certainty comes despite the fact that we may not share much with the archaic and medieval occupants of this area. But what we likely share with them is the ability to appreciate those features of the structure that make it monumental – namely, the large carved blocks of stone put together to represent a hierarchically ordered group of humanoid creatures. Arguably, whoever was (or were) the actual monumentalist(s), they wanted to convey to both their contemporaries and future generations this sense of monumentality: that what

³⁶See Ömür Harmanşah, *Place, Memory, and Healing: An Archaeology of Anatolian Rock Monuments* (London: Routledge, 2015), 54–82.

they were raising demonstrated in visible terms the lasting importance of whatever they wanted to glorify. And to appreciate this, one need not be a participant in that practice of glorification. In fact, and as I have argued, part of what it is to be sensitive to monumentality is to position oneself (or be positioned by historical circumstances) as an outsider – an art historian in the technical sense – able to observe the monument’s lasting impact.



Fig. 3. Eflatûn Pınarı, central Anatolia, Hittite, 13th century BCE. Photo: John Henry Haynes, 1887. Public domain.

Monumentalists raise monuments for the art historians (in the technical sense) to catch a semblance of their significance in their visible traits. The monumentalists and the art historians thus share an interest in the “monumentality” of artifacts – that is, in their potential to manifest visibly their relevance outside of their immediate context. Art-historical awareness can therefore be described as the attention to the monumentality of historical documents. It only follows, then, that if the art historian is someone having a mind attentive to the visible manifesting of relevance beyond immediate context, then the monumentalist is an art historian too, only instead of looking backwards, they are oriented towards the future; they deliberately and ostentatiously create objects of and for the art-historical awareness.³⁷

The Kreuzberg monument employs means of visible communication that ostensibly signal its relevance beyond the local idiom. These means must be regarded as basic or universal enough to be comprehensible outside of the monument’s immediate cultural context. Arguably, its size, the material used, and the Neo-Gothic style were meant to satisfy these criteria – as opposed to, say, the statues’ portrayal of dignitaries. The sought-after effect was that the monument’s recipients, regardless whether now or in the distant future, would appreciate these features as visual manifestations of relevance. In other words, they would

³⁷This is not to be confused with another understanding of art’s future-orientedness, one that equates this character with its reception-oriented nature. This approach does focus on how artworks mandate particular attitudes and ways of looking by their design (how they encode an implied viewer), but this is done typically with respect to what I have called the “internal attitude.” See Michael Ann Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

recognize the monumentality of the structure, irrespective of their ability to link it to the war the monument commemorates.

According to the monumentalist logic, those whom the Kreuzberg monument's Neo-Gothic style strikes as monumental despite their inability to associate it immediately with a particular series of historical battles show greater understanding for its monumental mission than those who, like Ingold, would see this as its failure. That is not to deny that the monumentalist's intention to keep the legacy of the fallen Prussian soldiers alive is thus to a large extent frustrated. Faced with the task of raising a structure that is both a public artwork and a deliberate historical document, the monumentalist resorts to such means that allow them to address both their contemporaries and the future audiences by appealing to their art-historical awareness. As long as the Kreuzberg (or Plato's Spring) monument continues to attract this awareness by its visible manifestations of at least a semblance of enduring relevance, then the monumentalist's task cannot be judged a complete failure.

The monumentalist's challenge is to make a monumental artwork that would engage its immediate public while overcoming the local idiom, or, to put the same point differently, to create a public artwork that would speak to future generations while not losing its current topicality. Their solution is to address the public's art-historical awareness. My claim is thus not that, by focusing on the external attitude, the monumentalist eschews aiming at engaging local, context-sensitive tastes and sensitivities that demand the involvement of an appropriately attuned internal attitude. Rather, the argument is that addressing the external attitude is what makes the structure monumental. Nothing prevents the monumentalist

from *also* addressing the internal attitude, as we saw with the *Nationaldenkmal*'s use of context-sensitive features.

V. Neoclassical Monumentality

The distinction between internal and external attitudes helps capture what is constitutive of monumentality: To appreciate visual manifestations of relevance beyond immediate context necessitates the assuming of an external attitude. But the usefulness of the distinction extends beyond isolating necessary features of monumentality *in abstracto*. As advertised at the outset, introducing the monumentalist as an analytic construct is supposed to help shine a light on the motivations and intentions of historical actors who raise monuments. Indeed, the distinction can help us pin down otherwise elusive characteristics of certain historical practices or approaches to monumental art, as I'll demonstrate on the example of neoclassicism.

Neoclassicism is associated with an aesthetic program upholding norms of order, harmony, and simplicity that supposedly governed classical Greek and Roman art.³⁸ This aesthetic program goes hand in hand with an ethical stance that views classical aesthetics as the most appropriate for expressing the moral core of the human soul.³⁹ Towards the end of the eighteenth century, this aesthetico-ethical mission found itself increasingly in tension with the conviction, most famously expressed by Johann Joachim Winckelmann, himself a crucial influence on neoclassical aesthetics, that the possibility of fulfilling art's moral

³⁸Frederick Beiser, *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 69.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 171–75.

mission is dependent on the right political and environmental conditions that obtained in Greek antiquity.⁴⁰ Winckelmannian neoclassicism is thus wedded to reviving or imitating not just the outer form, but also the spirit of classical art that cannot be separated from its classical ethos. To use my terms, what is to be revived is the inner attitude of classical antiquity required for producing highest forms of art. The possibility of such a revival, however, presupposes that the conditions informing the classical internal attitude can be universalized, which is cast in doubt by the stress on environmental and political determinants that permeates Winckelmann's work on the art of Greek antiquity.⁴¹

The distinction between external and internal attitude offers the tools for recognizing a way of alleviating the tension between neoclassical aesthetic universalism and nascent historicism that was taking root especially in Germany at the turn of the century.⁴² The tension results from growing uncertainties surrounding the project of replicating the internal attitude of the ancients.⁴³ One logical option of resolving the tension would be to shift the neoclassicist's perspective from the internal to the external attitude. The solution would be to untie classical style from a particular historical ethos in order to use it as a means of

⁴⁰Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles: Getty, 2006).

⁴¹See Alex Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 23–33.

⁴²See Damian Valdez, *German Philhellenism: The Pathos of the Historical Imagination from Winckelmann to Goethe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 27–56.

⁴³Famously, these uncertainties would lead Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to proclaim the end of art as the expression of “absolute spirit.”

glorification. The style would be still associated with the greatness of its original historical epoch (hence part of its monumental power), but it would no more be treated as efficacious only within a historically and ethically defined community. The goal of the neoclassical artist would then become one of achieving a monumental effect that would not presuppose attuning to the internal attitude of the Hellenic world.

This uncoupling of neoclassicism and the rebirth of the classical ethos is no mere hypothesis; it can help interpret historical developments within neoclassicism. Schinkel's Kreuzberg monument will again serve as an entry point for my argument. This choice may seem strange, given that it represents an instance of a Neo-Gothic monument. Yet the monument is not purely Gothic, as the bewinged genii are done in a classical style (although some are wearing medieval armor).⁴⁴ The hybrid nature of the monument may be the result of a compromise between Schinkel's original vision and the royal commission,⁴⁵ but I would argue that the inclusion of classical statues also rhymes with the architect's lifelong view that the Gothic and the classical can be blended to suit monumental purposes.⁴⁶ This is attested to by the fact that Schinkel's experiments with melding the medieval with the classical did not begin or stop with the Kreuzberg monument. While he is most famous for his neoclassical monumental projects that transformed Berlin's cityscape, Schinkel nevertheless remained open to exploring the potential of the Gothic, although always as if filtered by his classicism. The most famous example of this practice is his

⁴⁴Toews, *Becoming Historical*, 139; Bloch, Einholz, and Simson, *Ethos und Pathos*, 313.

⁴⁵Toews, *Becoming Historical*, 139.

⁴⁶Bergdoll, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel*, 40–41; Forssman, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel*, 67–75, 165–

Friedrichswerder Church (fig. 4). Whereas the structure is clearly Neo-Gothic, it is a stripped-down Gothic that is as if tamed by a classicist spirit.⁴⁷ But perhaps even more striking in this regard is one of Schinkel's last realizations, the Nazareth Church in Berlin's district of Wedding, which combines classical (architrave), Romanesque (portal), and Gothic (rose window) features (fig. 5).⁴⁸

⁴⁷Forssman, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel*, 131.

⁴⁸The church in Wedding is one of four small churches of similar structure in north Berlin designed by Schinkel and completed in 1835; two are neoclassical, but the ones in Wedding and in Moabit (Johanniskirche) can plausibly be viewed as combining classical and medieval features (they are also early examples of what would later be called *Rundbogenstil*). See Forssman, *Karl Friedrich Schinkel*, 164–69.



Fig. 4. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, *Perspektivische Ansicht des Äußeren der Kirche auf dem Werderschen Markt in Berlin*, engraved by Carl Friedrich Thiele, plate 79 from Carl Friedrich Schinkel, *Sammlung architektonischer Entwürfe* (Berlin: Ernst & Korn, 1858), plate vol. 3. Public domain.

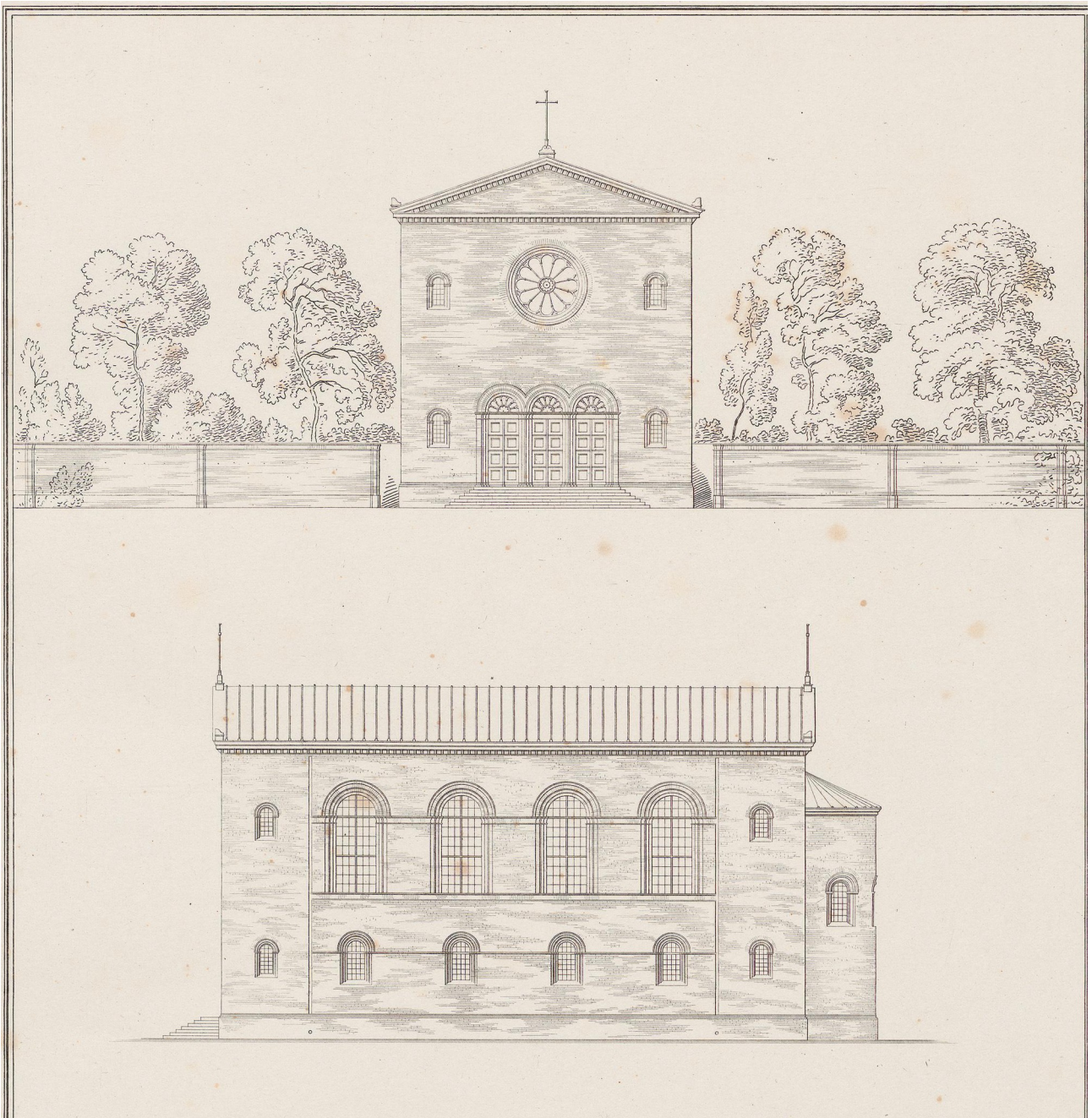


Fig. 5. Karl Friedrich Schinkel, *Kirche auf dem Wedding bei Berlin*, engraved by Theodor Glasbrenner, detail of plate 162 from Carl Friedrich Schinkel, *Sammlung architektonischer Entwürfe* (Berlin: Ernst & Korn, 1858), plate vol. 4. Public domain.

As Erik Forssman argues, even at his most classical, Schinkel was never an adherent of an “imitative classicism” of the Winkelmannian sort. In his mature period, Schinkel is neoclassical in the sense that he sees classical vocabulary as providing one with universal means of expressing the purpose of an architectural structure. But the privileged status of the classical canon should not prevent the architect from trying to perfect the classical idiom or melding it with the medieval, if, that is, the character of the building demands it. Schinkel’s exploration of ways of synthesizing the classical and the medieval was thus guided by an effort to find a universal idiom for expressing the equally universal purpose served by a given type of architecture (for example, religious, educational, or commemorative).⁴⁹

As a monumentalist, Schinkel was aware of the tension between the demands of producing a public artwork and those of raising a monument for the ages – as his written notes attest. In his early Romantic phase, Schinkel’s endorsement of the Gothic (though always tempered by the classical) was closely tied with the desire to produce structures in a style expressive of and addressing the nation in its modern circumstances.⁵⁰ His later general preference for the classical, combined with his openness to drawing on the medieval legacy, reflects a growing conviction that monuments must transcend their

⁴⁹Ibid., 71, 212, 216.

⁵⁰ Christoph von Wolzogen, ed., *Aus Schinkels Nachlaß II: Kritische Edition* (self-pub., 2016), 279–80, https://www.academia.edu/30385789/Aus_Schinkels_Nachla%C3%9F_II_Kritische_Edition.

historical circumstances to stay in touch with what is fundamental and universal to humanity in order to reach “the very summit of its highest flowering.”⁵¹

Schinkel’s monumentalism is, however, strongly informed by the idealist philosophy of his day and its cultural mission of reconciling the universal with the historically contingent. He sees the goal of monumental architecture as, to use my terminology, merging the internal and external attitudes: appreciating its monumentality (that is, what is transcendent and universal about its appearance) would amount to recognizing it as the expression of humanity’s achieving its full potential.⁵² How this goal can be realized in the conditions of modernity is a problem Schinkel never resolved, which partly explains why, despite many years of preparatory work, he ultimately failed at formulating a comprehensive theory of monumental architecture.⁵³

Unburdened by German Idealism’s historical and political ambitions, one is perhaps better placed to recognize that what makes Schinkel’s stylistic adaptations or mutations

⁵¹Ibid., 416. See Alex Potts, “Schinkel’s Architectural Theory,” in *Karl Friedrich Schinkel: A Universal Man*, ed. Michael Snodin (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1991), 53.

The quoted translation is also Potts’s.

⁵²On Schinkel’s intellectual sources, see Felix Saure, “‘Refiner of All Human Relations:’ Karl Friedrich Schinkel as an Idealist Theorist,” transl. Philip Stewart, in *The Impact of Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought*, vol. 3, *Aesthetics and Literature*, ed. Nicholas Boyle and Liz Disley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 204–23.

⁵³See Potts, “Schinkel’s Architectural Theory.”

permissible from a monumentalist perspective is that they are not regarded as transgressions against the aesthetico-ethical code that associates classical canon with the highest ethos. The liberties one takes in adapting the classical vocabulary in a neoclassical practice can be justified when one's aim is to tap its potential for signaling in visual terms a transcendent, universal relevance. In short, it is to appreciate classical architecture for its monumental effects, that is, to take an external attitude towards it. This may take the actual form of raising neoclassical monuments or monumental architecture as in the case of Schinkel, but we can also see the attitude at work in the popular eighteenth-century *capricci* – fanciful visions of often illusionary antique ruins by the likes of Giovanni Battista Piranesi or Hubert Robert. These capture a sensitivity that revels in ruinous manifestations of long-lost meaning whose traces survive through ages. Piranesi even went so far as to combine material fragments of different (not necessarily antique) provenience into new “antique” objects that would nevertheless express a coherent classical style.⁵⁴ In this un-Winkelmannian neoclassicism, the revival of antiquity is not faced with the conundrum of reviving or imitating a perhaps inimitable culture. The goal of achieving monumentality from an external perspective makes it possible to revive artistic forms of antiquity without necessarily committing to the revival of its internal attitude.

VI. By Way of Conclusion: Unintentional Monumentality

Much of the discussion so far has been devoted to analyzing the external attitude that the monumentalist assumes in order to address the nature of monuments as both public art

⁵⁴See Caroline van Eck, *Piranesi's Candelabra and the Presence of the Past: Excessive Objects and the Emergence of Style in the Age of Neoclassicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

and deliberate historical documents. Monuments tend to be both public- and future-facing and the monumentalist reconciles the tension by assuming an external attitude and targeting the audiences' art-historical awareness – that is, the attention to the visible sustaining of relevance beyond immediate context. This kind of awareness approaches the monument as an art-historical document, seeking to glean from artifacts' appearances a sense of their significance.

But art-historical awareness can be directed at art-historical documents that are not deliberate in the sense that they are not intended to commemorate an idea, an event, or a person.⁵⁵ Such objects are what Alois Riegl called unintentional or non-deliberate (*ungewollt*) monuments, that is, objects that acquire art-historical relevance because they exemplify by their appearance a particular stage or period in the history of a given culture.⁵⁶ Such structures become monuments *ex post facto* as art-historically relevant manifestations of their times, and they are subject to preservation and restoration as the

⁵⁵It can also be directed at deliberate monuments that are not commemorative – they are not meant to keep a legacy alive, but they still aim at manifesting the transcending nature of their message. This would arguably be the case of many monumental structures whose efficacy is not tied to a linear, diachronic concept of historical time. See Timothy R. Pauketat, “From Memorials to Imaginaries in the Monumentality of Ancient North America,” in *Approaching Monumentality in Archaeology*, ed. James F. Osborne (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 431–46; Jakub Stejskal, “Monumental Origins of Art History: Lessons from Mesopotamia,” *History of Humanities* 9, no. 2 (2024), 377–99.

⁵⁶Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments,” 23.

status of cultural heritage is bestowed upon them. Commenting on this modern phenomenon, Françoise Choay argues that monuments' commemorative role "has progressively diminished in Western societies, tending even toward obliteration."⁵⁷ As she claims, commemoration has been replaced by art-historical or aesthetic purposes: "advanced societies" do not build new commemorative monuments, but rather tend to structures from the past as fine manifestations of past artistic epochs or as aesthetically valuable artworks.⁵⁸ She blames this abandoning of monuments' commemorative function on the technological development of more effective means of conserving the past, namely, printing and photography, and the nascence of the aesthetic age in the West where the supreme goal of art became one of attaining autonomous aesthetic value rather than serving other ends, including that of commemoration.⁵⁹

Choay is correct to remark that the approach of Western societies to monuments has shifted. National and international lists of protected monuments now include many works of architecture that not only were not intended as commemorative monuments, but would have been perceived as unremarkable or even downright ugly in their own time – arguably, this is the case of many industrial structures (factories, docks, mines) that have been added to protected heritage lists. Yet we treat them as monuments and in some cases would not hesitate to call them monumental in the sense that Ingold had in mind when he described the monumentality of failed monuments as resulting from their marking "a

⁵⁷Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, 7.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 8–10.

bygone if heroic age.”⁶⁰ In such cases, we appreciate them for preserving for us the look of a historical period, even if that was never their builders’ intention.

It cannot be denied that there is a difference between attending to intentional and unintentional monumentality. Appreciating the monumentality of the Kreuzberg *Nationaldenkmal* while being unaware of what it was supposed to commemorate is different from appreciating the unintentional monumentality of nineteenth- or twentieth-century mining shaft headframes (fig. 6). The latter structures were not meant to commemorate anything nor were they meant to be perceptible manifestations of transcendent relevance. But the fact that we do not hesitate to see them as such manifestations today – that is, as defunct structures that nevertheless glorify for us their period’s visual culture – makes us into monumentalist ourselves. Perhaps we have lost faith in raising commemorative monuments that would keep a legacy alive for posterity. But the need for receiving and emitting perceptible signals of meaningfulness that defy the flow of time has gone nowhere.

⁶⁰Ingold, *Making*, 78.



Fig. 6. Mining tower, Julius Fučík Mine, 1911, listed as a protected monument since 1997. Petřvald, Moravian-Silesian Region, Czechia. Photo: Michal Klajban, 2012. CC BY-SA 3.0, [https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Petřvald, t%C4%9B%C5%BE_dolu_Fu%C4%8D%C3%ADk_\(1\).JPG](https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soubor:Petřvald,_t%C4%9B%C5%BE_dolu_Fu%C4%8D%C3%ADk_(1).JPG).

At the beginning, I asked: Can past agents influence our historical awareness by designing objects' looks and sending them to us down the stream of time? I have claimed that they can by addressing what I have labeled "art-historical awareness." This mode of historical awareness attends to artifacts' looks in search of visual manifestations of relevance that can survive the loss of context. Monumentalists aim at producing such artifacts, what amounts to intentional art-historical documents, to overcome the tension between the monuments' public-facing nature (that is, their status as public art) and their commemorative function. By visually manifesting a transcendent relevance, monuments ideally appeal to present and distant audiences alike, insofar as these are capable of appreciating the monuments' potential to sustain at least a semblance of relevance beyond their immediate context.