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Exploring Museological Approaches in Palace Museums: An
Exemplary Study of Versailles and Schönbrunn

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Abstract

Originally built as royal residences and centres of courtly life, many Baroque palaces have since transitioned into "palace museums," where they now serve the dual purpose of preserving architectural heritage and educating contemporary audiences. This thesis examines two prominent examples—Versailles and Schönbrunn—tracing their evolution from symbols of absolutist power to public museums. Through a comparative analysis of their exhibition strategies, this research explores the complexities of curating historical interiors, the challenges of balancing historical authenticity with contemporary relevance, and the narratives these spaces perpetuate. By critically analysing how material culture is presented within these palace museums, the study reveals how these institutions construct and communicate historical narratives, shaping public perceptions of European aristocracy and its cultural legacy. This investigation contributes to the broader discourse on palace museums, emphasising their unique role within museology and their significance in preserving and interpreting cultural heritage in modern democratic societies.

Ursprünglich als königliche Residenzen und als Regierungssitze erbaut, haben viele Barockpaläste inzwischen den Wandel zu „Palastmuseen“ vollzogen, in denen sie nun die doppelte Rolle als Bewahrer architektonischen Erbes und als Bildungsstätten für zeitgenössische Besucher erfüllen. Diese Masterarbeit untersucht zwei prominente Beispiele—Versailles und Schönbrunn—und verfolgt ihre Entwicklung von Symbolen absolutistischer Macht zu öffentlichen Museen. Durch eine vergleichende Analyse ihrer Ausstellungsstrategien beleuchtet diese Forschung die Komplexität der Präsentation historischer Innenräume, die Herausforderungen, historische Authentizität mit zeitgenössischer Relevanz in Einklang zu bringen, und die Narrative, die diese Räume perpetuieren. Durch die kritische Analyse der Darstellung von Materialkultur innerhalb dieser Palastmuseen wird aufgezeigt, wie diese Institutionen historische Narrative konstruieren und kommunizieren und damit die öffentliche Wahrnehmung des europäischen Adels und seines kulturellen Erbes prägen. Diese Untersuchung trägt zur breiteren Diskussion über Palastmuseen bei und hebt ihre einzigartige Rolle innerhalb der Museologie sowie ihre Bedeutung bei der Bewahrung und Interpretation kulturellen Erbes in modernen demokratischen Gesellschaften hervor.

Initialement conçus comme des résidences royales et des espaces de cour, certains palais baroques ont évolué pour devenir des « musées de palais », où ils remplissent désormais un double rôle de préservation du patrimoine architectural et d'éducation des publics contemporains. Cette thèse se concentre sur deux exemples emblématiques, Versailles et Schönbrunn, en explorant leur histoire et leur utilisation, de bâtiments symbolisant le pouvoir absolutiste à des musées publics. À travers une analyse comparative de leurs stratégies d'exposition, cette recherche examine les complexités de la muséographie des intérieurs historiques, les défis liés à

l'équilibre entre authenticité historique et pertinence contemporaine, ainsi que les récits que ces espaces perpétuent. En examinant de manière critique la présentation de la culture matérielle au sein de ces musées de palais, cette étude cherche à révéler comment ces institutions construisent et communiquent des récits historiques, façonnant ainsi la perception publique de l'aristocratie européenne et de son héritage culturel. Cette investigation contribue au discours plus large sur les musées de palais, mettant en lumière leur position unique au sein de la muséologie et leur rôle dans la préservation et l'interprétation du patrimoine culturel dans les sociétés démocratiques modernes.

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Exploring Museological Approaches in Palace Museums: An Exemplary Study of Versailles and Schönbrunn

1. Introduction

Baroque palaces, an architectural omnipresence across Europe, stand as enduring symbols of grandeur and cultural heritage, each telling a story of political ambition and artistic achievement. Charlottenburg Palace in Berlin¹, begun in 1695 as the summer retreat for Prussian kings, exemplifies the era's opulence. Meanwhile, the Palace of Venaria Reale in Turin² commissioned in 1679 by Carlo Emanuele II of Savoy, showcases the Baroque's exuberance under architect Amedeo di Castellamonte. The Peterhof Palace in Russia³ was erected at the beginning of the eighteenth century under Tsar Peter the Great and is still renowned today for its magnificent gardens and spectacular water fountains. Another important example is Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna⁴, which served as a grand summer residence for the Habsburgs from 1696 onwards.

Influenced by the grandeur of Versailles⁵, which intended to embody the political absolutism of Louis XIV, all the following palaces reflect both homage and innovation in Baroque architecture and garden design ranging from direct imitations to national interpretations.⁶ Originally conceived as architectural symbols of wealth and power, these baroque palaces served as courts and were prestigious homes of royalty and aristocracy across Europe. Constructed in the cultural context of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the

¹ See image 1.1.

² See image 1.2.

³ See image 1.3.

⁴ See image 1.4.

⁵ See image 1.5.

⁶ Heidegger 2015, p. 88ff.

intention of glorifying or representing the respective ruler, these aforementioned palaces have largely been preserved to this day, although their political context has changed.⁷

Owned by more recently established democratic states, today many of these architectural structures and their surrounding gardens serve the public as museums and important historical heritage sites that preserve national and cultural patrimony and offer visitors a glimpse into their rich histories, luxurious interiors, and significant cultural legacies.⁸ As museums and cultural landmarks, they bridge their past with contemporary appreciation, offering visitors insights into their former roles as symbols of power while preserving their architectural legacy for future generations. As a result, the edifices have completely changed their function: from palace to museum; from political representation to historical mediation; from residential space to visitor attraction.

The palaces functioning as museums today are thus conflicted between their material embodiment of a past political system and their new purpose of communicating historical information to a contemporary audience—a duality requiring careful curation and interpretation to honour their legacy while making their history relevant and engaging for contemporary visitors. One of the main challenges lies in balancing the preservation of their historical and architectural significance with their function as accessible, educational spaces for the public.⁹

This is where the concept of “palace museums” can be introduced, encapsulating a unique category within the realm of cultural institutions, presenting the architecture, gardens, and furniture of grand residences with the educational mission of museums. The term palace museum

⁷ Ideas based on Appadurai 1986, which explores how commodities (and by extension, the materials used in the construction of these palaces) acquire cultural significance through their historical and social contexts.

⁸ In addition to their role as museums and historical sites, many of these structures also have other functions, f.ex. they continue to serve official functions. The Palace of Versailles is used as a venue for political assemblies, including meetings of the Senate and Assembly. The baroque palace in Mannheim is used as a university building. Diverse other examples of reuse of palaces exist.

⁹ See also Museum definition of ICOM, Chapter 3.3.

will be used throughout this thesis meaning profane baroque residential architecture designed to showcase wealth and power, which typically served as the home of royalty and also as a court.¹⁰ Today, these spaces have been converted into a museum, showcasing their historical architecture, interiors that are to be understood as holistic compositions of art (*Gesamtkunstwerke*)¹¹, furnishings, and collections of art, artefacts and personal effects. These objects are the foundation of the palace museum's exhibits.

Palace museums stand distinct from conventional art galleries, history museums, or ethnological institutions due to their dual role as repositories of both material culture and architectural heritage. Unlike art galleries focused primarily on paintings, etchings, sculptures etc. palace museums preserve entire buildings and interiors as historical artefacts. Unlike history museums, focused on specific periods or themes in history, palace museums encompass a broader narrative that integrates architectural splendour with cultural artefacts and the personal histories of former inhabitants. Unlike ethnological institutions, focused on the study and preservation of cultural artefacts and practices of specific ethnic groups or societies, palace museums blend the tangible aspects of royal life—such as lavish interiors, art collections, and personal objects—with the intangible, offering insights into courtly rituals, political intrigue, and etiquette or societal norms of past eras.

The transition from royal residence to museum involves complex challenges, as well as offering manifold opportunities. Palace museums must carefully balance their roles as custodians of historical authenticity and educators for a contemporary audience, as they offer a unique blend of architectural preservation, curatorial scholarship, and public engagement, providing immersive experiences that transcend traditional museum displays. These spaces can influence

¹⁰ This definition is the author's own conceptualization for the purposes of this thesis.

¹¹ Roughly translated as "total work of art" or "synthesis of the arts"

how we see ourselves in relation to the past and how we understand our cultural heritage. The process of curating these interiors involves a blend of historical facts and interpretative fiction, an interplay that can enrich our understanding of history but can also lead to the creation of restrictive or enigmatic versions of the past.¹²

However, while palace museums are inherently different from art galleries, history museums, or ethnological museums, and despite ongoing scholarly debates and reframing of these museum “genres,” palace museums have generally received less attention in art historical and museographical scholarship. Discerning and critically assessing this interplay is crucial to understanding how historical narratives are constructed and the implications they have for our perception of history, because the way we interpret and present historical interiors like those of baroque palaces contributes to the construction of contemporary social and cultural identity.¹³

Scholarship around furniture and decorative arts has evolved, yet palace museums have occupied a peripheral position within European museum studies. This is surprising because palace museums enjoy immense popularity: tourists crowd in droves to experience their historical interiors, making them some of the most visited cultural spaces. Schönbrunn, for example, was visited by 4.255.000 tourists in 2019.¹⁴ Each year, up to ten million tourists visit the palace in Versailles.¹⁵

¹² Curatorial measures will vary significantly depending on the spaces: sometimes an entire room is reconstructed, individual elements are added or restored, or, in some cases, nothing at all can be altered. For example, at the Château de Chantilly, once owned by the Duc d'Aumale, the Duke's will expressly forbids any changes to the interiors. This restriction leaves curators with limited options, often focusing their efforts on research, education, and communication through publications. Since they cannot modify the displays, they primarily produce informational materials, which are either laid out for visitors or, when permitted, attached to the walls. For this thesis we have chosen to engage with two palace museums that have similar liberty in their curatorial approaches.

¹³ Lord 2006; Hooper-Greenhill 1992.

¹⁴ Wien Besucherzahlen, 2024.

¹⁵ “With nearly 10 million visitors every year, Versailles is one of the most visited historic sites in the world”, Visitors to Versailles 1682-1789 2024.

This master's thesis aims to explore the distinctive characteristics of palace museums, examining how they interpret and present their collections within the context of their architectural settings. By delving into their unique challenges and curatorial methodologies, this thesis seeks to contribute to the understanding and appreciation of palace museums as vital contributors to both cultural heritage preservation and public education.

1.1. Versailles and Schönbrunn and the Goal of this Thesis

Grown out of an interest to fill this desideratum in research by analysing palace museums and their different curatorial practices, the following work will concentrate on the two most important palace museums in France and Austria: the Château de Versailles and Schloss Schönbrunn. They fundamentally share a similar history, as well as similar objects of mediation, however they have different approaches in their museum structures. Intersecting the research areas of art history, material culture studies, and museology, this thesis pays particular attention to the objects and interiors displayed, because they are primary sources for exhibitions and make up the collections of palace museums, directly influencing the construction of historical narratives. Its exemplary analysis approach aims to uncover the intricacies of how eighteenth century materiality is presented in palace museums and how the tensions between their historical significance and modern-day function as educational spaces are navigated.

Initially, this thesis aimed to explore palace museums in a comprehensive manner, intending to identify broader trends within this genre. However, due to limitations in space and scope, the focus has been refined to an in-depth analysis of two specific case studies, allowing for a more detailed examination of individual examples. Aiming to discuss how eighteenth century profane materiality is conveyed in these palace museums by describing, analysing and comparing the exhibition concepts of Versailles and Schönbrunn, this approach reveals

differences and similarities. Given our emphasis on the material and narrative dimensions of palace museums in general, it is imperative to examine palaces sharing historical contexts, notably their significance during the eighteenth century.

Looking at both the Château de Versailles¹⁶ and the Schloss Schönbrunn¹⁷ as case studies is of interest for several reasons. Versailles and Schönbrunn both stand as quintessential exemplars of enduring monarchical grandeur and as potent symbols of absolutist authority and cultural patronage. These palatial spaces, steeped in historical significance, epitomise sovereign opulence and artistic enrichment. Schönbrunn, with its intricate historical tapestry and profound cultural resonance, stands as a vital complement to the splendour of Versailles.

The choice of these two palaces was deliberate, as they have a common chronological and political origin: Versailles (built from 1661 onwards) and Schönbrunn (built from 1742 onwards) were both prime examples of absolutist architecture. Previous hunting lodges were expanded to become residences for important European courts, created with similar designs and comparable royal aims. Schönbrunn, like Versailles for France, historically played a significant role in the centralization of power and the representation of imperial authority in Austria. Since their construction, both palaces have undergone significant changes and have served various historical, cultural and political purposes, before finally ending up as public museums today and considered one of the most important tourist attractions in each respective country. Today they respectively function as one of Frances and Austria's most visited tourist attractions,¹⁸ making them essential sites for understanding the broader tendencies of palace museums and good comparative examples.

¹⁶ Our comparison is limited to the later baroque iteration of Versailles; we will be, unless specifically mentioned, putting aside the preceding hunting lodge of 1623 until 1634, as well as Louis XIII construction until 1661.

¹⁷ Equally so for the palace of Schönbrunn, we will focus on the edifice from 1742 onwards.

¹⁸ “With nearly 10 million visitors every year, Versailles is one of the most visited historic sites in the world”, Visitors to Versailles 1682-1789 2024; Schönbrunn had 4.255.000 visitors in 2019, Wien Besucherzahlen, 2024.

However, despite their similarities, their exhibition strategies diverge, reflecting the complex history and political context of France and Austria and the different approaches that museums can take when deciding how to present objects, furniture, interiors and imperial heritage. We emphasise the importance of understanding both the similarities that arise from their shared historical, culturally distinct and political contexts and the differences that result from their unique characteristics, offering insights into the contemporary perception of the decisive periods of history.

An examination of Schönbrunn's exhibition paradigms, juxtaposed with those of Versailles, promises to unveil different and converging perspectives on prevailing narratives. This critical analysis holds the potential to reveal more nuanced and inclusive portrayals of palace museums, thus contributing to a broader discourse on how such institutions embody and communicate historical and cultural values. By expanding the scope of this dialogue, this thesis hopes to pave the way for a more critical and multi-dimensional understanding of the role and significance of palace museums within the context of both historical and contemporary cultural discourse.

1.2. It's Essential! The Public Understanding and the Historical Myth

As previously mentioned, the two museums of Versailles and Schönbrunn do not share a homogeneous exhibition philosophy whose creation, entire history and different functionalities could be briefly presented. Since their construction, each country and time period has used the respective buildings with their own intentions. As the thesis reveals the changes in the perception of history and the real implications for the physical space relating to the heritage site of the Palace of Versailles and the Palace of Schönbrunn, we must ask ourselves what museal role these

buildings take on today and how they interact with the public. Today, both structures stand before the challenge to unify their double function as a palace and as a museum.

Examining the interiors of Versailles and Schönbrunn critically is essential because these spaces do more than just display historical objects and materiality; they shape contemporary perspectives on history, inform public understanding, and uphold specific narratives and myths. Luxury furniture in palace museums like Versailles and Schönbrunn offers more than just a glimpse into the aesthetic preferences of European aristocracy. These objects are imbued with rich, complex narratives that encompass the histories of craftsmanship, global trade, and socio-economic inequalities.¹⁹ By uncovering and presenting these hidden narratives, museums can provide a more comprehensive and critical understanding of history. Besides enhancing the educational value of exhibitions, this approach also promotes a deeper understanding of the intricate links between material culture and historical processes.

We would like to look at and analyse how and why the baroque interiors of the palaces Versailles and Schönbrunn manage to communicate questions of social context, representation, and reception, as well as the particular role played by decorative objects in the construction of visual and cultural meaning.²⁰ As Hellman put it “it is too easy to assume, perhaps, that the refined elegance and apparently unpolemical nature of eighteenth century adornment indicate a poverty of meaning, and that the gilded trappings of elite leisure rendered [the ornamental and luxurious aspects associated with the leisure of the elite] an unproblematically delightful condition”.²¹ It is also too easy to assume, perhaps, that the isolated presentation of the objects, devoid of contextualisation and critique is sufficient communication with the visitor.

¹⁹ See f.ex. Pallot 1989.

²⁰ Hellmann 1999, p. 4.

²¹ Hellmann 1999, p. 4.

These palatial interiors are powerful tools in educating the public about history. The narratives they present become part of the collective memory and understanding of historical events and lifestyles. If these narratives are accepted uncritically, they can perpetuate simplistic or even misleading views of the past. A critical approach helps us see the narratives of palace museums for what they are and encourages a more reflective and informed engagement with history, as well as ensuring that the public receives a more nuanced and accurate understanding of history, acknowledging the complexities and multiple perspectives that existed.

Palace museums rely on objects, furniture, wall panelling, and general interiors as the foundation of their exhibitions. However, these elements are not just any objects; they are of course specifically those that belonged to the historical furnishings of the palace. A particular challenge arises from the fact that a palace often had multiple historical settings over time. Should curators choose the earliest known furnishings or perhaps the most significant? When choosing the furnishing, what do the curators try to tell the visitors about the time, what information is presented? Delving into the mechanisms of cultural heritage preservation and representation at Versailles Schönbrunn not only enriches our understanding of these institutions but also provides pivotal insights into contemporary value systems and modern interpretative frameworks of historical legacies.²²

We understand the Cultural heritage presented at Palace Museums to be both a conscious and unconscious engagement with the past and is never an impartial narratives, but instead exposes a perception, a political account, and an instrumentalization of the past.²³ The exhibition serves as a mirror reflecting modern values and contemporary viewpoints, highlighting the inherent subjectivity in how history is preserved, communicated, and perceived. Understanding

²² Appadurai 1986.

²³ Appadurai 1986.

how this cultural heritage is preserved, how it is communicated to the visitors, and why certain narratives persist while other perspectives are lost, gives us valuable insight into a modern value system, as well as a contemporary perspective on the past.

The interiors of palace museums, including the case studies Versailles and Schönbrunn are curated based on contemporary interpretations of the past. Every selection of objects, every design choice, and every aspect of their presentation is influenced by current knowledge, values, and aesthetic preferences. This means that what visitors see is not a pure, untouched slice of history, but a version of history filtered through contemporary lenses.

As we will expand upon, these curated spaces uphold specific narratives and myths about the past, often blending history with interpretative fiction. By presenting a romanticised view of elite lifestyles, they influence how we construct social and cultural identities. A critical approach ensures a more nuanced and accurate engagement with history, revealing the complexities and biases that inform these displays. In this way, analysing these interiors helps deconstruct myths and provides a deeper understanding of our heritage and its representation in modern times, while also asking ourselves how we should bring historically preserved spaces that do not retain the original dimensions of the agency etc. to the new public? How can we understand them as upholding a myth? More importantly, how do we engage these rooms—and visitors—in new ways? Exploring these questions can open new avenues for appreciating and interpreting palace museums in modern times.

By critically examining the exhibition structure and the narratives it promotes, we can further unearth alternative perspectives that offer a more nuanced and inclusive portrayal of palace museums and its significance in shaping the trajectory of European history. In challenging the mythic idealisation in palace spaces and advocating for a more politically conscious

contextualization, we aim to enrich our understanding of the past and dismantle the hegemonic narratives that have shaped our perception of history.

Analysing these interiors reveals how present-day concerns and biases influence our interpretation of historical periods. Far from being a random presentation of artefacts, they are curated to tell specific stories, often reinforcing certain myths about the grandeur, elegance, and power of the elites who inhabited these spaces. Presenting these spaces as timeless and unchanging, these narratives can obscure the social, political, and economic realities of the periods they represent, such as the inequalities and conflicts that existed alongside the splendour. Critical analysis allows us to deconstruct these myths and understand the broader historical context.

1.3. Research Question

Exploring palace museums' role in its wider discursive and historical context and critically reflecting on predominant narratives and typologies associated with them, this thesis contemplates on contemporary attempts to retell monarchical stories at Versailles and Schönbrunn – within museum spaces through interiors and furniture – and attempts to critically challenge long established European stereotypes of monarchy. The aim is to promote a discussion of palaces and royal spaces from a more critical, historically reflexive and democratic position that questions class normativity and the museum idealisation of European absolutist monarchy and nobility.

As this thesis examines the different approaches in palace museum through the lens of the two case studies of Versailles and Schönbrunn, the research question therefore is: *How do the exhibition strategies of Versailles and Schönbrunn, showcasing objects from two significant*

European courts in the eighteenth century, differ and converge in their museological approaches?

This overarching question is refined through the following subsidiary questions: What narratives do palace museums perpetuate? How are the spaces and the (semi-)mobile objects within them contextualised differently and presented to the visitor? What priorities do the individual museums set? What alternative contextualization could be realised?

This investigation begins to close an existing lacuna in museological research on palace museums, where previous research has neglected discussion around the genre of palace museums. Furthermore, neither a direct analysis of these two palace museums nor a comparative research between Versailles and Schönbrunn has yet been carried out. The analysis of the two museums' narratives opens up the possibility of gaining deeper insights into narratives of palace museums in general, as well as their role in contemporary, democratic societies.

1.4. Methodology

A multi-faceted approach was employed in the research methodology, based on a comprehensive literature review that unifies existing scholarship in the fields of museology, art history and materiality²⁴ in order to critically analyse the most significant theories relevant to the specificities of museological presentation of palace museums. Equally fundamental is an in-depth case study description of the exhibition spaces of Versailles and Schönbrunn as well as the subsequent analysis. This includes a thorough examination of their historical and political origins, focusing on shared characteristics and their contemporary role as tourist attractions and

²⁴ In this thesis, the study of materiality refers to the significance and implications of the physical materials used in creating artworks, including choice of materials, the techniques and processes, tactility and sensory experience, historical and cultural significance and the material symbolism. While we have not found an all encompassing definition in literature, we invite the reader towards further exploration such as Björkvall/Karlsson 2011.

palace museums, with the aim of understanding the contextual background that shapes their respective museological approaches.

Research into the material culture, such as furniture, porcelain, decorative arts and personal possessions of kings and courtiers at Versailles and Schönbrunn, also completes the analysis. Most crucially, the research extends to site visits to Versailles and Schönbrunn for direct observation of the exhibition spaces and (semi-)mobile objects. Documentation of the exhibition spaces, emphasising visual elements and tactile dimensions, aims to capture the immersive aspects of the museological presentation and provide a first-hand understanding of the visitor experience. Personally analysing the objects and exhibition strategies at Versailles, this thesis will attempt to articulate the implicit communication of materiality achieved through direct engagement with material culture, as object studies will focus on specific (semi-)mobile objects in the museums.

In conclusion, we will attempt to analyse broader narratives of palace museums through the case studies of Versailles and Schönbrunn. Critically examining the interiors of Versailles and Schönbrunn is worthwhile because it allows us to see beyond the surface and question underlying narratives and assumptions, not only enriching our understanding of history but also helping ensure that the stories we tell about the past are as accurate, inclusive, and reflective of reality as possible. Lastly, we will be suggesting possible alternative contextualizations. By doing so, we can consider these historic interiors not only as vestiges of a bygone era, but also as active agents in an ongoing dialog between past and present.

2. Literature Review

The scholarship used for this thesis can be broken down in five categories. Firstly, art historical and architecture scholars have illuminated the Baroque palace as tangible expressions

of monarchical identity and power. Secondly, the significance of interiors and furniture from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries has been analysed through material culture studies, revealing how these elements narrate multifaceted stories of society, culture, and economy. Thirdly, studies focusing on the interiors of Versailles and Schönbrunn through an art historical lens have provided insights into their role in shaping cultural and political identities. Fourthly, the concept of period rooms has been explored, particularly in anglo-saxon literature, showcasing how reconstructed historical spaces offer immersive experiences that transport visitors to different eras. Lastly, museum theory and museology have evolved to encompass new methodologies in curating museums, aiming to engage contemporary audiences while reflecting diverse cultural perspectives.

2.1. Delectable Architecture: Baroque Palaces

The architectural marvels of Baroque palaces have been the subject of extensive research, which focuses on the architectural embodiment of absolutism.²⁵ A particular emphasis is laid on the palace of Versailles, which since the reign of Louis XIV, has long been recognized as a powerful symbol of monarchical authority and magnificence. Publications such as Jean-Marie Pérouse de Montclos' *Versailles*, Catherine Pégards *Versailles: The Great and Hidden Splendors of the Sun King's Palace* and Mathieu da Vinha and Raphaël Massons *Versailles: Histoire, Dictionnaire et Anthologie* explore how the architecture, layout, and interior design of Versailles were deliberately crafted to project the grandeur and absolutist structure of the French monarchy.²⁶

These works discuss how the opulent design and grand scale of Versailles were intended to impress and assert the dominance of Louis XIV over his court and subjects, as well as his

²⁵ Auzépy/Cornette 2003; Hoffmann 2002.

²⁶ d'Archimbaud 2001; Pégard 2017; da Vinha/Masson 2020.

ambition to centralise authority and impose royal control. For example, Peter Burke and Chandra Mukerji argue that the castle's construction, overseen by prominent architects such as Louis Le Vau (1612–1670) and Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1646–1708), along with landscaper André Le Nôtre (1613–1700), aimed not only to house the court but also to function as a visual representation of the King's dominance over courtiers and subjects alike.²⁷ Nicholas d'Archimbaud, Chandra Mukerji and Benjamin Heidegger's thesis contributes significantly to this scholarly discourse by expanding the analysis of Versailles beyond its architectural and interior elements to include the gardens as integral components of Louis XIV's symbolic agenda.²⁸

Likewise, Scholars such as Renate Wagner-Rieger in *Schönbrunn: The Glorification of the Habsburgs* and Monica Kurzel-Runtscheiner in *Schönbrunn Palace* explore how the Schönbrunn's architecture, interior design, and extensive gardens were meticulously planned to symbolise the grandeur and authority of the Habsburg dynasty, as well as their imperial ambitions and identity, reinforcing their dynastic legitimacy and political authority.²⁹ Christoph Wagner and Ilse Krumpöck discuss how the palace complex, initially designed by architects Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach (1656–1723) and expanded under Empress Maria Theresa (1717–1780), served not only as a royal residence but also as a symbol of imperial power and cultural patronage by conveying wealth and authority.³⁰

2.2. Interiors and Decorative Arts

There is an emergent body of scholarship on interiors and decorative arts, that goes beyond the art historical appreciation, visual appealingness and the objects patronage, that is to

²⁷ Burke 1992; Mukerji 1997.

²⁸ d'Archimbaud 2001; Mukerji 1997; Heidegger 2015.

²⁹ Wagner-Rieger 1992 ; Kurzel-Runtscheiner 2012.

³⁰ Wagner 2011; Krumpöck 2009; Nowak 1997.

say furniture is increasingly viewed not merely as objects of aesthetic appreciation but as significant reflections of broader historical themes. Such scholarship on decorative arts is diverse, focusing for example on the cultural mechanics of interiors and furniture and the economic dimensions of the objects materiality.

The scholarship of Jean-Marcel Humbert, Pierre Verlet, and Bill Pallot provides important context on the influence of ancient Egyptian art and culture on Western art, particularly during the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries, but more significant for this thesis is their exploration of the intricate social and technological network underlying the design, production and use of furniture in noble households in the second half of the eighteenth century.³¹

Scholars such as David Hancock in *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* and Jennifer Anderson in *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* examine how the production and consumption of luxury furniture during this period were intertwined with global trade networks, labour exploitation, and colonial economies.³² By examining interiors, exploring furniture and the materials used as both artefacts of luxury and symbols of colonial power dynamics, scholars like Hancock and Anderson provide critical insights into the social, economic, and ethical dimensions of material culture in the eighteenth century.

These scholars in particular highlight the centrality of mahogany and other exotic woods imported from colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Americas to European furniture-making, illustrating how these materials symbolised wealth and power while obscuring the exploitative labour practices involved in their extraction and processing. A greater body of research has also

³¹ Humbert/Pantazzi/Ziegler 1994; Pallot 1989; Verlet 1967.

³² Hancock 1995; Anderson 2012.

appeared as historians of consumer culture have discussed the effects of the production and circulation of goods in the early modern period.³³ These historical studies highlight how the growth of global trade routes enabled the exchange of raw materials and manufactured goods that were indispensable for the production of luxury furniture.

Therefore, scholarship shows that investigating furniture from the eighteenth century can shed light on the complex interplay between global exchange, labour exploitation and the construction of European luxury, ideas that will be taken into serious consideration in this master thesis. Recent research has established that the opulence of European interior design in this period was largely due to the economic and human costs incurred by the distant colonies and the marginalised workers.

In particular, researchers have looked at the history of labour in eighteenth century furniture making, showing how the pursuit of unparalleled luxury in European spaces was often supported by outsourced and unequal workforce practices. Caitlin Rosenthal and Emma Hart add that the transatlantic slave trade and indentured servitude provided the cheap labor necessary for the production of luxury goods, including furniture.³⁴

Secondly, there is theoretical precedent for approaching interiors and decorative arts alike as an indicator of cultural conventions and as social actors.. Previously, the world of decorative objects from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has not always attracted art historians focused on visual manifestations of major cultural preoccupations.³⁵ This scholarship often focuses on the distribution and acquisition of objects, rather than their manipulation and effects within their intended interiors. This is crucial to the emphasis on material goods as powerful signifiers, but it locates that importance primarily in the conditions that determine the

³³ Hellman 1999.

³⁴ Rosenthal 2018; Hart 2010.

³⁵ Hellman 1999, p. 3.

distribution and acquisition of things, not in those that determine the manipulation and visual, spatial, or social impact of those things in the interior spaces for which they were intended.³⁶

Mimi Hellman's work has also been particularly important in the context of redefining the importance of decorative arts of the eighteenth century, as it emphasises the active role of furniture and interiors in shaping social interactions and cultural narratives.³⁷ According to her theory of the *work of leisure*, “elite social personae” were produced, demarcated and reproduced through the employment of luxury furniture.³⁸ Mimi Hellman’s research delves into the interplay between luxury furniture and elite consumers in eighteenth century France, positing that decorative objects were more than mere commodities; they were social actors in elite leisure activities, thus outlining a theoretical framework and at the same time demonstrating the importance of different chair forms to the inner environment. Because these objects facilitated distinct activities while enforcing social norms and structuring behaviour through specific codes of conduct, Hellman emphasises that elite leisure, while seemingly natural and effortless, was a learned conduct that was integral to cultural, political, and epistemological systems. As tools of visual and kinetic consumption, interiors and furniture shaped social interactions and elite identities through a catalogue of visual, corporeal, and social practices.

2.3. About the Interiors of Versailles and Schönbrunn

There is a wealth of authors arguing the self-fashioning of monarchs through the interiors of their palaces, such as Tony Spawforth, who provides an extensive history of the Palace of Versailles and delves into how Louis XIV and his successors used architecture and interior design to project power and control.³⁹ In Addition, Susan Taylor-Leduc's book

³⁶ Hellman 1999.

³⁷ Hellman 1999 ; Hellman 2010.

³⁸ Hellman, 1999.

³⁹ Spawforth 2008.

Marie-Antoinette's Legacy: The Politics of French Garden Patronage and Picturesque Design, 1775-1867 provides an in-depth examination of the expression of Marie-Antoinette's own personal power through the landscaping of the gardens of the Petit Trianon.⁴⁰ *Marie-Antoinette and the Petit Trianon at Versailles* by Martin Chapman provides a complete historical background to the palace together with an essential introduction to the manner in which the Queen approached the furnishings and other elements of her extensive decorative projects in the 1770s and 1780s.⁴¹

Recent publications, notably Elfriede Iby and Anna Mader-Kratky's *Schönbrunn. Die kaiserliche Sommerresidenz*, provide extensive insights into the various phases of the furnishings at Schönbrunn, offering detailed information on the palace's interior design evolution.⁴² In *Empress Maria Theresa and the Politics of Habsburg Imperial Art*, Michael Yonan examines the role of material culture—"paintings, architecture, porcelain, garden sculpture, and decorative objects"⁴³—played in forging Maria Theresas monarchical identity. Schönbrunn Palace plays a central role in Michael Yonan's examination of Maria Theresa's representation through materiality, as he delves into how the architectural and decorative choices at Schönbrunn reflect and construct Maria Theresa's monarchical identity.⁴⁴

2.4. Period Rooms

In English-speaking literature, there is much contested discussion around "period rooms", spaces that aim to create an effect of immersion, cohesion and delectable aesthetic, primarily through the careful selection and arrangement of historical objects from a similar geographical

⁴⁰ Taylor-Leduc 2022.

⁴¹ Chapman 2007.

⁴² Iby/Mader-Kratky 2023.

⁴³ Yonan 2011, abstract.

⁴⁴ Yonan 2011.

origin and timeframe.⁴⁵ Although, as Trevor Keeble has observed, there is still “no cohesive body of writing on the subject of the period room”, for this thesis we take into consideration these contested discussions and wish to transpose some arguments onto palace museums.⁴⁶

One main critique is that period rooms are implicitly based on an art-historical practice that assumes the presence of a uniform and authentic period style. Daniel Brewer’s essay *(Re)constructing an Eighteenth century Interior: The Value of Interiority on Display* proposes a comparative method for tackling these problems in the spaces of the French period. He argues that by carefully reconstructing these interiors, scholars and curators can better understand the concept of “interiority”—the ways in which spaces were designed to reflect personal identity, social status, and cultural values and suggests that these reconstructions allow for a deeper engagement with the material culture of the eighteenth century, revealing how interior spaces were used to construct and convey individual and collective identities.⁴⁷

Literature on museums in historic houses provides further information on the development of period rooms. Despite their different physical contexts, Franklin Vagnone and Deborah Ryan’s *The Anarchist’s Guide to Historic House Museums* creates a shared vocabulary between different spaces in which historic interiors and furnishings are presented.⁴⁸ Their consideration on the “period of interpretation” is essential for understanding how period rooms are structured and designed to captivate the viewer.

⁴⁵ “A period room is a display combining architectural components, pieces of furniture, and decorative objects organised to evoke—and in some rare cases recreate—an interior, very often domestic and dating from a past era.” Marchand 2019, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Keeble 2007.

⁴⁷ Brewer 2010.

⁴⁸ Vagnone/Ryan/Cothren 2015.

2.5. Museum Theory and Palace Museums

Museum theory, or museology, encompasses a multifaceted academic discipline that scrutinises the development, functions, and societal roles of museums. Already in 1930 Theodore Low's *The Museum as a Social Instrument* emphasises the societal roles of museums, reinforcing their function as educational institutions crucial to public education and lifelong learning.⁴⁹ He argues that museums should be active agents in disseminating knowledge, making complex subjects accessible and engaging to diverse audiences, ideas that formed the foundation for both this thesis and for museum theory. Literature on museum theory has evolved significantly, as early studies primarily focused on the institutional history (see Kenneth Hudson, *Museums of Influence*) and collection management (see Gary Edson and David Dean, *The Handbook for Museums*).⁵⁰

Contemporary museology literature expands to include critical perspectives on the museum's role as a cultural mediator and an agent of social change, with contributions from scholars such as Tony Bennett, whose work explores the museum's power dynamics and social functions, and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, who examines the educational role of museums and their impact on knowledge production and audience engagement.⁵¹ Their studies underscore the evolving responsibilities of museums in addressing social issues and fostering inclusive narratives. This thesis builds on these scholars, believing that museums should continuously strive to create more engaging, inclusive, and politically conscious educational content. By understanding public museums as democratic institutions that serve all communities, their role in promoting diverse and equitable public discourse is affirmed.

⁴⁹ Low 1930.

⁵⁰ Hudson 1987; Edson/Dean 1996; these ideas are found in much scholarship, another example is Waidacher 2005.

⁵¹ Bennett 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 1992.

Authors like Richard Sandell examine the evolving role of museums in addressing social inequality and their broader social responsibilities. Sandell introduces a framework suggesting that museums can tackle social inequality and disadvantage at three levels: individual, community, and societal. He asserts that museums carry a social responsibility to tackle inequality through their collections and exhibitions, not just through outreach and education.⁵²

However, despite these rich historical narratives about palace museums and tensions rising from their opposing functions as palaces and museums, it is clear that this genre of museum has not yet received sufficient scholarly analysis. Despite extensive research into aforementioned individual aspects, significant gaps remain in scholarship regarding museological evaluation on palace museums in general, as well as critical and comprehensive museum reviews of Versailles and Schönbrunn. This master's thesis aims to address these gaps in literature by providing a thorough review and analysis of the exhibitions and the interpretative frameworks presented at Versailles and Schönbrunn, as well as discussing what prominent research and what narratives are neglected in the exhibition spaces. By exploring these two palaces through an exemplary lens, this study seeks to contribute to scholarship in museum theory and museology, offering insights into what is, what could and what should be presented in palace museums, and how these institutions can effectively communicate interesting, pioneering and educational historical narratives to the public.

⁵² Sandell 2002.

3. Theoretical Groundwork

3.1. Baroque Profane Architecture and Interiors

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the court of Louis XIV of France set the standard for aristocratic life throughout Europe and the opulence of Versailles became a model for other European monarchs to emulate. At the core such Baroque profane architecture lies the concentration on a central, grandiose design that reflects the absolutist world view, placing the king at the centre of political power.⁵³ Emblematic of the era's emphasis on nobility and absolutist monarchy, Baroque palaces of the seventeenth and eighteenth century are edifices that were not merely residences or courts, but potent symbols of power and prestige, reflecting the political and social order of the time.

Luxurious interiors, much like the architectural structures, were essential to the elite experience in the homes of the privileged during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and even more so at two courts of Europe's most important monarchies (Versailles and Schönbrunn).⁵⁴ These interiors were filled with objects made from expensive materials, featuring a wide range of designs and intricate craftsmanship. Examples of this lavishness include richly upholstered armchairs with carved, ornate frames; cabinets featuring exotic woods and lacquer panels adorned with gleaming bronze fittings; and coffee services and figurines made of fragile porcelain.⁵⁵ These interiors were not only a physical reality but also a prevalent theme in paintings and prints, as well as being fictionalised in novels, letters, memoirs, and portrayed on stage.⁵⁶

⁵³ Heidegger 2015.

⁵⁴ Helmann 1999, p. 455-456.

⁵⁵ Helmann 1999, p. 455-456.

⁵⁶ Helmann 1999, p. 455-456.

Ultimately, the architecture and furniture of these palaces were meticulously designed to create and reinforce the semiotics of the royal body.⁵⁷ Every element—from the imposing scale of the buildings to the elaborate details of the furnishings—helped to reinforce the image of the monarch as a central, almost divine figure of power and authority. This self-fashioning was not merely for personal vanity but was intended to solidify and display the monarch's role in the political and social hierarchy. The entire ensemble—architecture, interiors, and their artistic representations—worked in concert to craft a narrative of supremacy and grandeur that underscored the monarch's absolute authority and the societal order they embodied. As such, palace museums offer a more immersive experience by presenting objects within their original architectural and historical contexts, providing a more holistic understanding of the period.

3.2. Architecture and Interiors as Museum Spaces: the Period Room and the Palace Museum

This expression of imperial self-fashioning has largely become obsolete in contemporary contexts. Scholarship has delved into the performative and social dimensions of luxurious decoration during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century, arguing that furniture and interiors played a crucial role in the social and political dynamics of elite life.⁵⁸ By building upon literature examining the intersection between luxurious decoration, theatricality, and social dynamics, the following thesis provides a compelling exploration of how these ideas are presented or not presented within museum settings. Using the conception of material representation and the agency of furniture, the implications for contemporary museum exhibitions will be discussed. Furthermore, the interplay between history and fiction in museum

⁵⁷ Lajer-Burcharth/Söntgen 2016, p.7.

⁵⁸ Hellman 1999, p. 3.

displays shifts the focus from merely preserving the past to understanding how societies construct their identities through historical interpretation.

As these objects and spaces transition from their original functions to become museum exhibitions, their roles and significance shift dramatically. The grand interiors and meticulously curated furniture now serve as artefacts for public display and historical interpretation, reflecting a broader evolution in their function and meaning and giving them a new mission. Museums adopt various methods to showcase these objects, from complete period rooms that recreate historical environments to standalone displays of individual pieces within historical contexts. Period rooms, historical homes, and palace museums use these interiors and furnishings as windows into the past rather than as active symbols of contemporary power.

As we have already mentioned, period rooms in art museums are among the most popular displays due to their cohesiveness and immersive format. The main aim of period rooms is to present decorative arts within a holistic environment, which is one possible reason for the popularity of both period rooms and palace museums is that, unlike other museums where individual objects are often removed from their context and presented in "white cube" exhibitions, they provide an integrated experience. The rooms constitute an overall ensemble in which the exhibited objects are placed in their former historical setting and the visitor is completely immersed in the historical atmosphere.

However, they have been condemned for their lack of flexibility, doubtful authenticity⁵⁹ and the fact that they are, in essence, museum-made objects, presented as a former interior.⁶⁰ A key debate revolves around the tension between authenticity and interpretive representation. This

⁵⁹ "often seen as a threat to the value and authority of museum collections", Marchand 2019.

⁶⁰ Hellman 1999, p. 464-467.

is due to the fact that period rooms often feature a combination of original artefacts and reproductions, and frequently showcase objects that were never originally displayed together in the same space.⁶¹ Critics argue that these rooms can sometimes present a romanticised or simplified version of history, which may distort the realities of the past.⁶²

Period rooms can also raise issues of cultural sensitivity and representation. For example, rooms that depict historical domestic settings might reflect the social norms and inequalities of their time, such as gender roles and class distinctions. There's an ongoing discussion about how to present these aspects in a way that acknowledges and critically examines historical injustices without reinforcing outdated stereotypes.⁶³ Modern scholarship understands the interpretation of objects and events from previous centuries as always informed by current concerns, because our understanding evolves with advancements in knowledge and changes in what we consider relevant and worthy of interest in the present. This is interesting, because in conclusion, as period rooms are constructions of reality, they refer to both the past and the present.

This discussion is relevant to this thesis because the objectives and debates surrounding period rooms often can be applied to the exhibitions in palace museums. Both period rooms and palace museums showcase decorative arts within a historical context, making many of the arguments found in period room literature applicable to the presentation and interpretation of rooms in palace museums. It is indeed uncommon for a historic interior in a palace museum to be completely preserved in its original state without undergoing some form of transformation. Therefore, palace museums also retain the tension between authenticity and interpretive

⁶¹ Take as an example the period rooms in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, see O'Neill 1996.

⁶² Weil 2002.

⁶³ Sandell 2002.

representation, as well as issues of cultural sensitivity and representation, which plays a role in the museumification of these spaces.

At the same time however, unlike period rooms, palace museums are not transposed spaces, void of political narratives, but rather they are historical spaces, *lieux de memoire*, previously serving as centres of political power, cultural patronage, and social gatherings, shaping the course of history in their respective regions. As such, palace museums often have a rich and complex historical narrative that extends beyond mere visual appreciation of interior design and decoration. Furthermore, in contrast to period rooms, palace museums maintain a direct connection between objects and the location of the original spaces. Period rooms typically involve recreations or interpretations of historical interiors, often focusing on specific design elements or themes, which may not always reflect the actual historical use or context. Palace museums, on the other hand, preserve and exhibit the original rooms and their contents, offering a direct encounter with the historical environment.

Embedded in the objects and in the architecture, palace museums embody the cultural symbolism of power, wealth, and identity associated with particular ruling elites or dynasties, but also entire histories of nations, of politics, of exchange. As they encapsulate broader narratives of national and regional histories, these edifices often bear witness to significant historical events, which shaped the political and cultural landscapes of entire nations. The architecture and objects in palace museums can thus provide a microcosm of larger historical processes, including political shifts, economic changes, and cultural interactions. As such palace museums play a pivotal role in shaping national or regional identities, functioning as iconic landmarks and cultural treasures that attract both tourists and scholars. Because of this, even more so than with period rooms, representation or interpretation within palace museums should be approached with

a high degree of cultural sensitivity. The narratives presented in these spaces must be handled thoughtfully to respect the diverse perspectives and historical experiences they embody.

3.3. It's the Curator's Choice

*"A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment."*⁶⁴

The ICOM definition of a museum highlights the diverse goals museums strive to achieve, such as acquiring, preserving, researching, and displaying objects and presenting knowledge to both enlighten and captivate the public. Curators play a vital role in this process, balancing the preservation and interpretation of cultural artefacts. They are responsible for communicating historical context, incorporating both their own research and external scholarship to enhance public understanding. In addition to safeguarding objects, curators conduct thorough research to provide historical and scholarly context, which informs the development of exhibitions and educational programs. By designing exhibition narratives, curators choose themes and interpretive strategies that create stories, shaping how visitors interact with and comprehend the museum's collection.⁶⁵

State museums, which the palace museums we are looking at both are, often receive directives from state authorities regarding their educational focus, which typically reflects the objects in their collections. These directives guide museums in shaping their exhibits and educational programs to align with state priorities or historical themes deemed important. Palace museums usually are asked to preserve and promote the heritage of the former royal residence, to

⁶⁴ ICOM Museum definition 2024.

⁶⁵ Also discussed in scholarship, such as Waidacher 1996.

provide public access to its collections and history, and to foster education and cultural enrichment.⁶⁶ At the same time however, in many ways each museum and all objects presented in museums contain a multitude of narratives that museum curators can then choose from and decide to present to the public. The focus of the narratives presented in museums and the focus on educational demand are therefore a choice, to some extent made by the curators and to some extent made by the state.

As democratic institutions, the palace museums of Versailles and Schönbrunn have a profound responsibility to communicate diverse and inclusive narratives. They serve not only as custodians of historical artefacts but also as educational platforms crucial to public learning and engagement. From a museological standpoint, museums should actively disseminate knowledge in ways that are accessible and engaging to a broad audience, reflecting their role as cultural mediators and agents of social change. The responsibility to address social issues and promote equitable discourse is central to the museum's mission.⁶⁷ By understanding public museums as institutions that serve all communities, their role in fostering inclusive and politically conscious educational content is reinforced, affirming their importance in promoting diverse perspectives and advancing public understanding of history and culture.

It seems understudied that palace museums are, in fact, museum-created constructs. This means that while palace museums are rich with objects of historical and cultural significance, they are also products of modern curation and interpretation. The transformation of these historic palaces into museums involves a complex process of selection, arrangement, and narrative framing, all influenced by contemporary perspectives and practices. Palace museum curators must choose items such as wood panelling, fireplaces, floors, chairs, tables, vases and tapestries

⁶⁶ Schönbrunn Group Mission 2024.

⁶⁷ As emphasised by contemporary museology literature and the work presented in the chapter for scholarship, including Bennett 1995 and Sandell 2002.

and assemble them into something that looks like a bedroom, living room or other built environment that the museum decides to exhibit.⁶⁸

Furthermore, these rooms usually were in constant reinvention and restructuring to accommodate newer social functions, tastes and styles. Curators must make a choice of what to present, in what capacity and in which combination to meet certain narratives in the galleries and restore or recreate certain components that have not been preserved.⁶⁹ Although the ensemble formed almost never survives all the way to its exhibition by the museum, it should seem as coherent as possible for the presented space to be convincing to the audience.⁷⁰

Recognising this process and foregrounding it in research means, according to Marchinad, moving from a view of the museum palace as a means of defining and trapping past societies in time to a view of these exhibitions as a means of better understanding how a society conceives its own identity through its notion of history.⁷¹ This prompts questions regarding how societies approach, interpret, and display the past, including what is shown, what is hidden, and why.⁷² Engaging with the process of creating historical spaces offers new perspectives on their current value.

Insisting on absolute authenticity and disregarding the interplay between history and fiction in the modern palace museum undermines the significance of interpreting historical facts and falsely assumes that fiction exists in isolation, unaffected by external influences.⁷³ In the case of Versailles and Schönbrunn, the meeting of history and fiction takes place in the production process, in its staging to evoke everyday activities, and in the protagonists who are introduced to

⁶⁸ Marchand 2019.

⁶⁹ Marchand 2019.

⁷⁰ Marchand 2019.

⁷¹ Marchand 2019 and backed on ideas presented by Appadurai 1986.

⁷² Marchand 2019.

⁷³ Marchand 2019; Hellman 1999, p. 3.

the viewers.⁷⁴ It is crucial to be aware of the fictionalisation within the spaces and to consider how curators fashion these displays because ignoring the blend of history and fiction overlooks their combined role in the thought process through which individuals—curator, interpreter, or visitor—understand the past.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Marchand 2019.

⁷⁵ Marchand 2019.

4. Opulence and Omission in Versailles

The beginning of the seventeenth century in France was significantly influenced by centralization efforts, paving the way for an absolutist worldview and creating the basis for the autocracy of Louis XIV (1638-1715).⁷⁶ Political instrumentalization of art and media meant that the construction of Versailles was an expression of Louis XIV's power, where the palace not only represented the king, but also played a central role in absolutist propaganda through its architecture and ideological significance, staging royal power as a divine reflection.⁷⁷

Historiographers (*les historiographes du roi*), such as André Félibien, were already documenting and describing the creation and development of the complex during Louis XIV's lifetime, highlighting its function as both a palace and a stage for royal spectacle.⁷⁸ This absolutist narrative of the *ancien régime* carefully constructed through architecture, decorative arts, and courtly rituals, has fascinated historians and art historians alike, prompting extensive analysis into its cultural, political, and social significance. Subsequently, Versailles's role as a metaphor for imperial power has been a central theme in historical, art historical studies and, as we will show in this chapter, remains as such in the museological approaches of today.

However, Versailles' highly complex building history, shaped by many creators, necessitates recognizing not "one" homogeneous palace space but "several" Versailles in a constant state of (re)construction, demolition or (re)interpretation.⁷⁹ This means Versailles underwent multiple construction phases and involved numerous architects, along with constant renovations, redecorations, expansions, destruction, and restoration, as well as various

⁷⁶ Heidegger 2015, p. 24.

⁷⁷ Heidegger 2015, p. 40.

⁷⁸ Félibien 1674.

⁷⁹ Heidegger 2015, p. 33.

interpretations and uses of the edifice. Versailles has long ceased to serve as the sovereign seat of France's court or to fulfil its primordial function as a manifestation of political philosophy.

Today, Versailles is a contemporary museum, a testament to its evolving legacy, where its usage and interpretation have continually changed, often dependent on the prevailing government and societal context. This metamorphosis reflects a shift from its role as a symbol of monarchical power to a multifaceted institution that now embodies historical scholarship, cultural heritage, and public engagement. By analysing the utilisation of its architecture as a museum in modern times, this chapter intends to illustrate the complexity of the issues surrounding the presentation of Versailles to the public.

Because the central inquiry of our thesis is: *What narrative do the Palace Museums Versailles and Schönbrunn articulate to their contemporary audience, and what narratives could they aspire to convey?*, this chapter embarks on an intricate exploration of the Palace Museum of Versailles, initially unravelling its historical tapestry and the deliberate messages inscribed in its material grandeur, before interrogating the evolution of historical perceptions surrounding this site and their consequential impact on the physical museum space.

Meaning, the analysis will firstly describe and examine the permanent exhibition, probing into how Versailles curates its objects and interiors for the public eye. Subsequently, we will scrutinise the conspicuous absences within the exhibition to then contemplate alternative narratives that could potentially redefine and enrich the museum.

4.1. History of Versailles

The history of Versailles begins at the end of 1623 with the construction of a small hunting lodge under Louis XIII (1601-1643), fit for habitation from 1624 onwards.⁸⁰ Louis XIV

⁸⁰ Louis XIII and the Origins of Versailles 2024.

(1638-1715) decided to extend the edifice with monumental architecture of grandiose proportions, highly elaborate iconographic program, endless and clearly structured gardens, thereby developing Versailles into an aristocratic and political melting pot of the French nation from 1661 onwards.⁸¹ The expansion included the addition of the Hall of Mirrors, the Grand Apartments, and the King's and Queen's State Apartment as well as elaborate gardens designed by André le Nôtre (1613-1700). The king moved his court and the principal seat of government from Paris to the Palace of Versailles in 1682, making it the centre of political power in France until the French Revolution.⁸²

The entire area was adapted in shape and orientation to the course of the sun and the *grands appartements* were thematically dedicated to the planets and the world of the Roman gods.⁸³ With the transfer of the seat of government to Versailles, the heroic deeds and omnipotence of Louis XIV (1710–1774) set the iconographic tone and made Versailles a symbol of the ruler.⁸⁴ The royal cult developed into the *religion royale*, which unfolded on the stage of Versailles and allowed the people at court to become part of a highly constructed reality.⁸⁵

During Louis XV's reign, Versailles saw significant developments and renovations, including the notable addition of the Petit Trianon (1762–1768) and the Royal Opera House, built to celebrate the marriage of the future Louis XVI (1754–1793) and Marie Antoinette by 1770. Several interior renovations were undertaken of the king's private apartment to modernise the palace, enhancing both its comfort and aesthetic appeal, including refurbishing the king's private apartments, adding new furnishings.⁸⁶ The redecorations included elaborate stucco work, pastel colours, and intricate wood carvings, hallmarks of the Rococo style. New pieces of

⁸¹ Heidegger 2015, p. 91.

⁸² The Reign of Louis XV (1715-1774) 2024.

⁸³ Heidegger 2015, p. 91.

⁸⁴ Heidegger 2015, p. 91.

⁸⁵ Heidegger 2015, p. 91.

⁸⁶ Spawforth 2010.

furniture were commissioned from renowned craftsmen, such as Jean-François Oeben (1721-1763) and Jean-Henri Riesener (1734-1806) who were known for their exquisite marquetry, innovative designs and expensive furniture. In addition to the luxurious furnishings, the palace received a modernised heating system to ensure a more even and comfortable temperature throughout the palace, especially in the king's private chambers, as well as better lighting through the introduction of more windows, better chandeliers and wall lights.

Louis XVI's reign at Versailles was characterised by a focus on intellectual pursuits and domestic improvements, reflecting impacts of the Enlightenment.⁸⁷ Marie Antoinette enhanced the Petit Trianon, creating the English Garden and the rustic Hameau de la Reine.⁸⁸ The Belvedere and Grotto were added as picturesque retreats in her garden, while the Temple of Love, built in 1778, showcased the neoclassical style.⁸⁹ The interiors of Versailles shifted from Rococo to Neoclassical, which favoured symmetry, straight lines, and classical motifs such as columns, friezes, and pediments. The bright and elaborate colours of Rococo gave way to softer, more subdued tones, often inspired by classical antiquity. Versailles was further modernised for comfort with improved heating, including the introduction of more efficient fireplaces and stoves, advances in lighting technology, including the use of oil lamps and more extensive use of windows, and ventilation, to maintain fresh air and reduce dampness.

By the late eighteenth century, France was facing severe financial difficulties due to costly wars, including involvement in the American Revolution, an exuberant lifestyle at the French court and inefficient tax systems.⁹⁰ The royal family's perceived opulence and excessive expenditures on lavish renovations and luxuries at Versailles exacerbated public resentment. The

⁸⁷ The Reign of Louis XV (1715-1774) 2024.

⁸⁸ Spawforth 2010.

⁸⁹ Spawforth 2010.

⁹⁰ Waldinger 2024, p. 44.

stark contrast between the grandeur of Versailles and the economic struggles of ordinary French citizens became increasingly symbolic of the monarchy's disconnect from the populace. As the monarchy's popularity waned, particularly due to the fiscal policies and extravagant spending, it set the stage for the French Revolution, forcing Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette to abandon Versailles and seek refuge in Paris.⁹¹

On October 6, 1789, the revolutionaries' unrest culminated in the Women's March on Versailles, which led to the court being forced to abandon the palace, marking a dramatic shift in the power dynamics of the French monarchy.⁹² Amid the upheaval of the French Revolution, the palace faced a dramatic turn as 17,000 pieces of furniture and objects from the royal collections were dispersed through revolutionary auctions.⁹³ This reflected the broader trend of dismantling symbols of the *ancien régime*. Yet, Versailles continued to capture public imagination: throughout the first French Revolution, the Consulate, the Empire, and the Restoration, the palace drew visitors who were fascinated by its deserted and often stripped-down interiors, exploring the palace.⁹⁴

In the aftermath of the first French Revolution, Versailles assumed dual roles as both a museum and a repository of collective memory. Contemporary travel accounts and testimonies shed light on how the public perceived this former bastion of royal power.⁹⁵ Napoleon, aware of the image of the palace, preferred Trianon's discretion and ordered the closure of the Versailles museum in 1810, intending to reestablish an imperial residence there.⁹⁶ However, the palace remained open for visitors, showcasing the continued public interest in this historical site.⁹⁷

⁹¹ The Reign of Louis XV (1715-1774) 2024.

⁹² Versailles and the French Revolution 2024.

⁹³ Refurnishing the Royal Apartments 2024.

⁹⁴ Vial 2023, p. 9.

⁹⁵ Vial 2023, p. 2.

⁹⁶ Vial 2023, p. 3.

⁹⁷ Vial 2023, p. 3.

Versailles and the Trianon were first seen as residences in their own right, then as places of remembrance evoking bygone eras, before gradually being envisaged as museums, i.e. places of learning and education.⁹⁸ The story of Versailles modification continues with the ascension to the throne of Louis-Philippe (1773–1850), as *Roi des Français* in 1830, and the subsequent revival of Versailles.⁹⁹ Repurposing Versailles by converting it into a gallery dedicated to showcasing the history of France, known as the *Musée de l'Histoire de France* (Museum of the History of France), intended to propagate French history, spanning from the mediaeval era to the early days of the July Monarchy.¹⁰⁰ Paintings played a central role : through thematic displays, portraits, and depictions of key events, the museum used artworks to create a narrative of France's history. France was politically polarised, with lingering tensions between royalists who supported the old Bourbon monarchy and republicans who sought a more democratic form of government. Louis-Philippe used Versailles, as he sought to foster a sense of national unity and reconciliation among the French people, bridging the divide between various political factions, an approach deeply rooted in his political strategy and the context of his reign.¹⁰¹ His goal was to reframe Versailles as a monument to French history that belonged to all French people, not just the monarchy.

Since becoming a property of the French Republic in 1830, the Palace of Versailles has been maintained to preserve its historical grandeur.¹⁰² Today, it is owned by the French state and managed by the Public Establishment of the Palace, Museum and National Estate of Versailles, a public administrative institution.¹⁰³ Since the beginning of the twentieth century, curators have sought out and identified furniture and objects originating from Versailles or commissioned for

⁹⁸ Vial 2023, p. 8.

⁹⁹ The 19th Century at Versailles 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Lett 2020.

¹⁰¹ The 19th Century at Versailles 2024.

¹⁰² The Palace of Versailles 2024.

¹⁰³ Versailles Public Establishment 2024.

other royal or princely residences, with the aim of acquiring them whenever possible, allowing for the furniture visitors can see in Versailles today.¹⁰⁴

The mission of the Palace of Versailles is to conserve, restore, and enhance this iconic heritage site while promoting its history and cultural significance.¹⁰⁵ As a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1979, the Palace of Versailles showcases an extensive collection of art and historical artefacts, hosting numerous exhibitions and cultural events that underscore its legacy.¹⁰⁶ Versailles remains one of France's most visited and celebrated cultural monuments, attracting millions of visitors each year.¹⁰⁷

4.2. Description of the Current Permanent Exhibition

In this thesis, we present the permanent exhibition of the museum of Versailles as delineated into four distinct sections: The initial segment comprises a corridor-like procession of rooms, offering a preliminary overview that explains to visitors the general historical information relevant to the following sections. The second segment unfolds into an enfilade adorned with eighteenth century masterpieces, notably portraits, complemented by singularly curated furniture and fabric wallpapers. The third section presents the apartments, arranged as “period rooms” to evoke the environments in Versailles of the pre-Revolutionary era. The final segment is the Gallery created under Louis-Philippe.

However, this section will be excluded from our discussion for several reasons. This masters thesis is focused on exploring the presentation of eighteenth century materiality of palace museums, and this Gallery represents a later reutilization of the palace space, diverging from the period-specific details of the eighteenth century, a focus that does not align with the

¹⁰⁴ Refurnishing the Royal Apartments 2024.

¹⁰⁵ The Palace of Versailles 2024.

¹⁰⁶ The Palace of Versailles 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Palace of Versailles: Château de Versailles 2024.

specific aims of our research. Additionally, unlike the other sections of the museum, the Gallery does not primarily showcase period furniture or materials from the eighteenth century. Instead, it reflects a broader historical narrative and aims to present the palace in a different context, which does not align with the specific focus of our research. Additionally, the Gallery's installation marks a significant shift in both architectural approach and curatorial intent and serves as a distinct entity from the earlier sections of the museum. By excluding this part, we maintain a clear focus on the aspects of the palace's history and material culture that are most pertinent to our thesis, specifically those associated with the eighteenth century.

4.2.1. Section One

The exhibition layout of the Palace Museum of Versailles begins by leading visitors through an enfilade of rooms, each furnished in a streamlined, contemporary “museum style.” meaning, this section features a minimalist design with clean lines and open spaces, allowing singular artwork or objects to take centre stage. It's designed to evoke a distinctive atmosphere, ensuring that visitors retain the sense of being within one of the world's most historically significant palaces. Fragmentary hints at royal palace structures, such as gilded frames, minimal stucco on the ceiling, and walls coloured in deep greens or reds, contribute to this ambiance.¹⁰⁸ Each room covers a specific subject and features a wall text (located to the left in the direction of visitor movement) along with the display of several isolated objects.¹⁰⁹ Clear signage and concise information ensure that visitors can easily understand the context.

The first room focuses on the development and architectural history of the hunting lodge transformed into the summer residence of the Sun King in the seventeenth century, using digital

¹⁰⁸ See V 6 & V 8.

¹⁰⁹ See V 1- V 13.

rendering of the construction and a model of the old palace.¹¹⁰ This transformation is presented as highly significant, symbolising the absolutist style of governance that subsequently spread throughout Europe and establishing Versailles as a pioneering example for many other palaces.

The second room, titled *Les Jardins*, delves into the significance of the gardens' intricate design for Louis XIV as well as the importance of their designer, André Le Nôtre (1613-1700).¹¹¹ It also explores how the themes of the sun god Apollo, representing the Sun King, become the central motif in the decor. The third room, titled *Le Grand Domaine Royal*, explains how the royal domain extended beyond the palace and gardens. It emphasises the vast expanse of the *petit parc*, covering over 900 hectares, and includes notable features such as the Lake of the Swiss Guard, the Grand Canal, the Menagerie, and the Trianon, creating the illusion of infinite royal space.¹¹²

The room with the information plaque titled *La Gloire de Dieu et du Roi* aims to convey the ideas of absolutism, the concept of governance at the time of Louis XIV, the construction of Versailles, its monumental scale, and the socio-political reasons behind its opulence. The relationship between the church and the king is also mentioned in this context. The next room, *Louis XV. La métamorphose intérieure*, discusses the transformations by the Sun King's successor in Versailles.¹¹³ Following these themes, the room *La Fin de l'Ancien Régime* discusses the significant changes and historical events at the Palace of Versailles during and after the reign of Louis XVI.¹¹⁴ It covers the invasion and looting of the palace during the French Revolution, its sparse use during the Restoration, its transformation into a museum under Louis-Philippe, and

¹¹⁰ See V 1 & V 2.

¹¹¹ See V 3 & V 4.

¹¹² See V 7 & V 8.

¹¹³ See V 5 & V 6.

¹¹⁴ See V 9.

the subsequent restoration efforts to return the palace to its former state. It also highlights the neoclassical decor and the influence of English garden design during Louis XVI's era.

In the next room, *Les Galeries Historiques de Versailles*, the development of the palace long after the court's departure and its transformation into a museum under Louis-Philippe is briefly highlighted.¹¹⁵ This is emphasised with the red colour of the informational plaque, in contrast to the previously beige and cream-coloured walls and texts. The final room, again adorned in cream colours, is dedicated to the *Versailles Revival*.¹¹⁶ This was a movement referring to the renewed interest and efforts to restore and celebrate the grandeur of the Palace of Versailles, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and characterised by a resurgence in the appreciation of Versailles, leading to extensive restoration projects and the promotion of its legacy.

4.2.2. Section Two

Upon ascending the grand staircase to the first floor, visitors are greeted by an enfilade adorned with oil paintings, sculptures, busts and furniture. Each piece of furniture stands essentially alone, pushed against the walls of the rooms, accompanied by relatively small descriptive plaques detailing their origins, history, creation and a topic, unifying the common presentation of the specific objects.¹¹⁷ The paintings, executed in the styles of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, present portrayals of monarchs, religious figures, Greek mythology, and historical scenes. The artworks are framed by tapestries in rich hues of blue, red, yellow, or green, bestowing a regal atmosphere to the rooms.¹¹⁸ Unlike the previous halls, these chambers

¹¹⁵ See V 10 & V 11.

¹¹⁶ See V 12 & V 13.

¹¹⁷ See V 2.1 - V 2.14.

¹¹⁸ See V 2.1 - V 2.14.

do not focus on the communication of specific historical information; rather, their purpose is to convey a visual impression of the royal family and the noble inhabitants of the palace.

The first room, lined in blue, shows oil paintings, some history paintings, many portraits, including the equestrian by Jean Nocret (1615-1672) of Louis XIV, two marble busts and a wooden chest of draws.¹¹⁹ The second room has red tapestry, many paintings surrounding the theme of the king's first military campaigns, twelve female portraits¹²⁰ and seven pieces of eighteenth century Boulle marquetry, reaquisitioned after revolutionary confiscation. The enfilade continues in similar style: the subsequent red room is similar, showcasing three masterpieces by Boulle,¹²¹ followed by a black coated room with many portraits of male nobles, politicians etc.;¹²² a yellow room presents objects around the title at the turn of the reign: the years of 1690;¹²³ the green room shows some of the redecoration by King Louis-Philippe of the Versailles apartments, particularly the room of Louis XIV etc.¹²⁴

4.2.3. Section Three

After passing through a hall, visitors enter the King's State Apartments, the Hall of Mirrors and the Queen's Apartments.¹²⁵ This makes up the third section and meets the museological expectations of a palace museum: the spaces primarily attempt to convey a strong sense of immersion, transcend simple exhibition of certain objects, but rather orchestrate an evocative time-journey, enrapturing the visitor in the interior. This section comprises the Kings and Queens' apartments, the Hall of Mirrors, the Dauphins' and Dauphines' apartments, and

¹¹⁹ See V 2.6.

¹²⁰ See V 2.8. & V 2.9.

¹²¹ V 2.3.

¹²² V 2.7.

¹²³ V 2.12.

¹²⁴ V 2. 13 & V 2.14.

¹²⁵ V 3.1. - V 3.10

numerous other noble living quarters. Given its scope, it's the largest section, but we can't cover everything in detail.

These are undoubtedly the most significant and eagerly awaited rooms for visitors, as they are visually the most impressive, conveying a strong impact through the displayed materiality, objects, fabrics, and the overall harmony of the interior architecture, without relying heavily on text, as well as being the most propagated and iconic spaces. The focus here is not so much on imparting specific historical information, but rather on leaving visitors with a lasting impression of opulence, grandeur, beauty, and wealth.

The Kings State Apartment contains the Hercules Room, Room of Abundance, Venus Room, Diana Room, Mars Room, Mercury Room and finally the Apollo Room. While we will refrain from delving into an exhaustive description of each room, we will instead outline the overarching themes and characteristics prevalent throughout these spaces. Particular attention will be paid to the Room of Abundance, as its artefacts play a pivotal role in the subsequent section of this chapter and shortly mention the Mercury Room, as it is one of the most important rooms in Versailles.

The rooms retain their names from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Contextual information is minimal; for example, in the Venus Room, only the following is mentioned in French:

*“Entrée principale du Grand Appartement sous Louis XIV. Les soirs de réception, des buffets y étaient dressés, composés de bassins d’argent chargés de fruits et confits.”*¹²⁶

This approach intends to allow visitors to imagine the ceremonies and daily life of court, without overloading them with information. Overall, this section conveys an impression of court life and etiquette, emanating exclusively from the lives of the king and the nobility.

¹²⁶ V 3.3.

The Room of Abundance is the smallest room in the *grands appartements*, it is located on the first floor of the central northern section.¹²⁷ Designed in 1682 by Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1646-1708), it served as an antechamber to Louis XIV's Cabinet des Médailles and features a *trompe-l'œil* ceiling painted by Antoine-René Houasse (1646–1710), depicting royal Magnificence and Magnanimity.¹²⁸ The room's walls are covered in Genoese velvet trimmed with gold, designed by the Tassinari house in Lyon in the mid-20th century.¹²⁹ The décor includes portraits of Louis XIV's descendants and polychrome marble panels. The room houses four richly decorated low cabinets by André-Charles Boulle, featuring bronze inlays and marble commodes from the early eighteenth century, as well as twelve antique sculptures and six bronze pieces.

After exploring several salons, visitors arrive at Louis XVI's bedroom, i.e. the Mercury Room, dominated by a large bed with a dominating canopy and many chairs upholstered in red fabric.¹³⁰ The space is incredibly opulent, adorned with red tapestry and large paintings on the walls, while the ceiling is lavishly decorated with frescoes and gilded stucco. Red drapery covers the windows to protect the objects inside, leaving the room dimly lit and bathed in a red hue. It is also a space that has many interior presentations unified in it. The current bed, installed by Louis-Philippe during Versailles' conversion into a museum, is flanked by two of Louis XIV's cherished paintings: *David Playing the Harp* by Domenico Zampieri (1581–1641) and *Saint John on Patmos*, by Innocenzo Da Imola (c. 1490–1545).¹³¹

¹²⁷ V 3.1 & V 3.2.

¹²⁸ Pégard 2014, p.7.

¹²⁹ Pégard 2014, p. 11.

¹³⁰ The Mercury Room, initially the royal bedchamber in the King's State Apartment, was commonly referred to as the "bedroom." However, the bed was removed in winter to make space for gaming tables. The room featured luxurious elements such as tables, mirrors, and silver andirons, along with intricately crafted chandeliers by the Gobelins, which Louis XIV designated as the Royal Upholstery Manufacture in 1667. King's State Apartment - Apollo Room 2024.

¹³¹ King's State Apartment - Apollo Room 2024.

Passing through the War Room, visitors are led through the Hall of Mirrors, built 1678 till 1684, renowned as the most iconic room in the Palace, originally a vast terrace, replaced with a grand gallery. Stretching 73 metres, it was meant to epitomise France's political, economic, and artistic achievements. Political success is depicted through 30 ceiling compositions by Charles Le Brun (1619-1690), celebrating Louis XIV's early reign and the peace treaties of Nijmegen.¹³² Allegories from Antiquity represent military and diplomatic victories. Artistic triumphs are highlighted by the Rouge de Rance pilasters with gilded bronze capitals in the "French style," featuring national emblems such as the fleur-de-lis and Gallic roosters.¹³³

Crossing the Peace Room, visitors then arrive at the Queens Apartments starting with the Queen's Bedchamber, the Nobles Room, the Royal Table Antechamber and the Queens Guardroom. Like in the apartment of the King, here the objects are left to mainly speak for themselves and the overall impression. The Queen's Apartments mirror the layout of the King's State Apartments and overlook the Midi Parterre and originally maintained a symmetrical layout on the first floor of the Palace, with the King's Apartments on the north side and the queen's on the south. However, under the reign of Louis XIV, this arrangement was altered to incorporate all the rooms surrounding the Marble Courtyard into his personal apartment.¹³⁴ Recreated in the style and with some of the objects from the time just before the first French Revolution, the spaces are furnished in a late period style, emphasising the beauty of the rooms, the harmony of the interior architecture, and the craftsmanship of the furniture, all of which leave a strong impression on visitors.

The Queen's Bedchamber reflects contributions from three generations of queens—ceiling partitions from Maria Theresa, grayscale paintings by Boucher and wood

¹³² Hall of Mirrors 2024.

¹³³ Hall of Mirrors 2024.

¹³⁴ Queen's Apartments 2024.

panelling added for Marie Leszczyńska, and furniture and paintings of her family for Marie Antoinette.¹³⁵ It features Marie Antoinette's jewellery cabinet by Jean Ferdinand Schwerdfeger (1734-1818) and other period-appropriate replacements, with re-woven fabrics from Lyon.¹³⁶ The Nobles Room was redecorated by Marie Antoinette with apple-green damask and modern furniture by Riesener, who used mahogany and gilded bronze decorations. The Queen's Guard Room is the only room with fully preserved seventeenth century decoration; it's the site of an attempted invasion during the French Revolution.¹³⁷

4.2.4. Section Four

The chronological presentation in Versailles resumes after around 100 years with the galleries of Louis-Philippe, Roi des Français. This chronological gap, which covers the period of the first French Revolution and the reign of Napoleon, will strike the attentive and historically aware visitor. This thesis will not delve further into this last section of the palace exhibition, but invites the reader to independent exploration.

4.3. Review of the Permanent Exhibition

In summary, accompanying texts and contextualization play a crucial role in the first section of the exhibition, where each room is thoughtfully paired with concise exhibition texts. These provide visitors with valuable insights into the respective topics and are meticulously designed to help them grasp the historical context. Throughout the sections two and three of the exhibition, the objects largely speak for themselves. Here, some text plaques and audio guides mainly are used to provide additional information about the world view of absolutism alongside the wall or card texts.

¹³⁵ Queen's Apartments 2024.

¹³⁶ Queen's Apartments 2024.

¹³⁷ Queen's Apartments 2024.

From Section One onwards, it's immediately clear that the Versailles exhibition's narrative centres on the *ancien régime*, depicting Versailles primarily as a domain of the nobility and its role as a court. This section is aimed at imparting the foundational knowledge requisite for a profound comprehension of the subsequent rooms. Strategically positioned at the commencement of the tour, it capitalises on the visitors' initial cognitive receptivity. As discussed, the information plaques provided frame Versailles as a material representation of absolutism, focusing mainly on these political ideas as well as on key figures such as Louis XIV, his architects, and later on Louis XV, Louis XVI, and Marie Antoinette. This group's ideals and political understanding, as expressed through art and architecture, are clearly conveyed, explained and contextualised.

The second chronological frame of the first section continues with Louis-Philippe's museum and the legacy of Versailles after the French Revolution in 1789, but Versailles is not painted as a primary stage for the French Revolution. The philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment that led to the subsequent establishment of the first French Republic receive limited to no attention, as the exhibitions sections last but third room focus is primarily on the regime's conclusion. However, considering the palace's historical context and aiming to provide a concise introduction for visitors unfamiliar with the subject matter, it would be fitting to allocate a room to the socio-political landscape of the time. This addition could offer a deeper understanding of the era, especially for those less well-versed in French history.

In Section Two, visitors are presented with less direct information on the time but are confronted with a more implicit perpetuation of an imperial myth through portraiture, painted depictions of the palace and isolated furniture. In royal households, portraits played a pivotal role in the self-depiction of power, prestige, and genealogy, as well as serving various functions, such

as diplomatic and honorary gifts, engagement presents, or private portraits. They are not merely as decorative elements but as potent symbols of status and power, as they served not only to immortalise the physical appearance of individuals, but also to underscore their societal status, political significance, and the worldview they sought to project.¹³⁸ Particularly in Versailles, portraits were often of exceptional quality, portraying subjects in regal poses, surrounded by symbols of wealth and authority.

The continuation of portraiture within the Versailles exhibition superficially appears an eminently fitting choice, reflecting the pivotal role these depictions played in courtly life. However, by concentrating on portraits, the exhibition risks perpetuating a narrative that disproportionately highlights the nobility as the central actors in history. This focus on royal genealogy—by both cataloguing and presenting the names, faces, and notable actions of the ruling elite—can inadvertently marginalise broader historical contexts and contributions from other societal segments.

These portraits were not merely crafted to accentuate the beauty and elegance of the subjects, but also to underscore their political authority and legitimacy. In the context of Versailles and other royal residences, portraits were utilised to emphasise the dynasty's lineage and the continuity of its rule, while showcasing the splendour and grandeur of the royal court. Thus, these portraits should be understood not only as artistic works, but also as political instruments that served to solidify and disseminate the power and influence of the subjects.

Similar to the paintings displayed in Section Two, the seventeenth- and eighteenth century furniture embodies royal self-representation through its materiality in a more subtle and abstract manner.¹³⁹ This material expression of royal identity is less evident than the bold

¹³⁸ Harris 2012.

¹³⁹ Ideas based on Björkvall/Karlsson 2011.

imagery of portraits but equally potent in conveying the prestige and power of the era's ruling elite. The furniture's elaborate carvings, luxurious fabrics, and sumptuous finishes contribute to an overarching narrative of magnificence and authority, subtly reinforcing the regal image that the monarchy sought to project.¹⁴⁰

The use of primarily French inscriptions on the plaques indicates a lack of effort to make the information accessible to a wider, international audience. This suggests a presumption that only a niche group of visitors—those who are either experts in the field or particularly enthusiastic about the subject and fluent in French—would take the time to read and appreciate the details provided. By not always offering translations, especially in the third section, the exhibition implicitly prioritises these visitors, potentially alienating the general tourist who may not have the language skills to engage with the material fully. This choice reflects an assumption that detailed understanding of the furniture's historical and cultural significance is not essential for the average visitor, thus limiting broader engagement.

The aim of the exhibition strategy for the *grands appartements* (section three) is to maintain the complete interior design as it was just before the French Revolution, striving to provide an immersive experience that offers insight into the historical and cultural context of the time with minimal reliance on textual explanations. Unlike reconstructed "period rooms," these spaces allow visitors to experience the rooms in situ, preserving the spatial relationships and intricate details between the architecture and interiors.

In conclusion, the current Versailles exhibition structure and the presented mediation topics present the palace as a mythic ideal, harbouring only an imperial narrative, somewhat frozen in the time of the *ancien régime*. From its inception as the seat of absolutism to its transformation into a museum of French history under Louis-Philippe, Versailles has evolved

¹⁴⁰ Brewer 2010.

through successive eras. Yet, despite these shifts, the predominant focus remains on the reigns of Louis XIV, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, perpetuating a selective view of history that overlooks class disparities, revolutionary upheavals, and the broader socio-political context of the time. Whether out of habit, bias or simple idleness, it appears to be a loss for history and science to maintain this notion and myth of Versailles without considering an alternative, less royalist contextualisation, be they class discrepancies during the same time, the French Revolution or beyond.

4.4. Additional Contextualization: Versailles, Staging Ground of the First French Revolution of 1789

We have previously asserted that Versailles, in its incarnation as a palace museum, fundamentally imparts its narrative through the medium of its objects. The exhibition presents Versailles as a static symbol of the *ancien régime*. We have also elucidated that, historically, the rooms within Versailles were orchestrated to epitomise the supremacy of the monarchs and were intrinsically linked with the sovereign's corporeal presence from the very dawn of historiography. The resplendent décor and architectural grandeur of the palace were not merely vehicles for reinforcing the royal assertion of authority but were ingeniously designed to magnify the semiotics of the French kings and ruling class. Through a symphony of architectural and decorative opulence, the physical presence and symbolic power of the monarch were exalted, rendering the palace an enduring testament to the art of regal self-representation.

However, to confer upon visitors a more profound comprehension of the furniture and interior design of Versailles, we have already argued it is imperative to transcend mere aristocratic self-representation and the functional use of the rooms. To go beyond the

conventional imperialist discourse, we shall undertake an exploration of additional narratives embodied in some of the pieces of furniture exhibited within the palace. The cultural discourse surrounding the palace should endeavour to contextualise the luxury within broader social and political dynamics. The furniture, made from the most resplendent materials and exemplifying unparalleled craftsmanship, serves not only as a monument to royal affluence and the intricate social hierarchies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also as a product of elaborate socio-economic dynamics.¹⁴¹

In proposing a more comprehensive contextualization of Versailles, it is crucial to recognize that the goal is not to fundamentally alter the established narrative framework of the palace. The grandeur and historical significance of Versailles as currently presented are undeniable and continue to captivate visitors. However, as institutions dedicated to cultural preservation and education, museums bear a significant responsibility to extend beyond mere aesthetic representation and actively engage in the dissemination of knowledge.

Contemporary museum theory emphasises that museums should act as dynamic agents of intellectual engagement, making complex subjects accessible and compelling to diverse audiences. This perspective forms the foundation of this thesis, which aims not to dismantle the existing narrative but to enrich it with a broader interpretive approach. By integrating underexplored narratives related to the palace's furnishings and their socio-economic implications, we seek to provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Versailles, thereby enhancing its role as a venue for both historical insight and cultural reflection.

Ultimately, in 1789 the French Revolution took place and arrived in Versailles in May of 1789, precipitating a transformation of the French political apparatus.¹⁴² This era of profound

¹⁴¹ Pallot 1989 and Goodman/Norberg 2010.

¹⁴² The Departure of the King in 1789 2024.

political, social, and economic upheaval ensnared the Palace of Versailles, positioning it at the very epicentre of this metamorphosis.¹⁴³ In October, the royal family left Versailles marking a pivotal moment in the unfolding of the Revolution.¹⁴⁴ 17,000 pieces of furniture and objects from the royal collections of Versailles were dispersed through revolutionary sales in 1793, emptying the entire palace.¹⁴⁵ Since the early 20th century, curators have acquired furniture and objects from Versailles and other royal palaces to present at the palace museum today.¹⁴⁶ Thus, the Palace of Versailles emerges as a fitting venue to discuss the decadence and inequities of the *ancien régime*. Its opulent objects vividly illustrate these themes, while also shedding light on the French Revolution and the evolving perspectives on the eighteenth century.

By delving into some objects' biographies and social contexts of these furnishings, we propose a possible reconceptualization of part of the palace exhibition, positing that through these artefacts, it becomes possible to engage with and elucidate the epochal turbulence leading to the French Revolution. To illustrate this, we will focus on two exemplary *ébénistes* who crafted some of the notable furniture pieces in the Grand Apartments and whose works are on display: André-Charles Boulle (1642-1732) and Jean-Henri Riesener (1734-1806).

André-Charles Boulle (1642-1732) was a master cabinetmaker under Louis XIV whose innovative designs and exquisite craftsmanship left a lasting mark on the decorative arts.¹⁴⁷ Boulle's furniture, characterised by the intricate marquetry technique that bears his name, combined copper and tortoiseshell to create stunning visual effects. His work also incorporated elaborate bronze mounts, adding both beauty and durability to his pieces. Today, Boulle's masterpieces can be seen at the Palace of Versailles. Rooms such as the Hall of Mirrors, the

¹⁴³ Versailles, the Heart of the French Revolution: The Context 2024.

¹⁴⁴ The Departure of the King in 1789 2024.

¹⁴⁵ Refurnishing the Royal Apartments 2024.

¹⁴⁶ Refurnishing the Royal Apartments 2024.

¹⁴⁷ Cabinetmaker to the king 2024.

King's Grand Apartment, and the Council Chamber feature Boulle's work, showcasing the immense luxury that French royals indulged in. There are two commodes in the Room of Abundance, originally intended for the antechamber and the Bedroom of Louis XIV at Trianon, reacquisitioned after revolutionary confiscation.¹⁴⁸

These pieces are among the most celebrated royal furnishings preserved at Versailles, with their curved cases, two drawers, and console legs, as they exemplify extraordinary Baroque furniture. Their presence in the salon underscores André-Charles Boulle's mastery during Louis XIV's reign, showcasing his exceptional ability to merge functionality with opulence.¹⁴⁹

Boulle's creations, however, came at an exorbitant cost.¹⁵⁰ His luxurious furniture pieces were highly expensive due to the elaborate materials and labour-intensive techniques involved. The lavishness was imperative, as these pieces were emblematic of France itself—mirroring the grandeur of the French court under Louis XIV, the epitome of French luxury and the quintessence of French identity.¹⁵¹ At the same time, this assertion of splendour and extravagance engendered profound socioeconomic disparities, culminating in a stark dichotomy between the aristocracy and the populace, exacerbating the systemic inequalities within French society. A disparity that contributed to the growing discontent of the following years that eventually led to the French Revolution in 1789. The high cost of Boulle's pieces materially underscores the extent to which the monarchy under Louis XIV invested in showcasing its wealth and power, even as the rest of the country struggled with economic hardship.

Similarly, a prime example of opulent furniture is the furniture by cabinetmaker Jean-Henri Riesener (1734-1806). Building on the innovations of Jean-François Oeben

¹⁴⁸ See one of them in V 3.1., background.

¹⁴⁹ Pégard 2014, p.17.

¹⁵⁰ Cabinetmaker to the king 2024.

¹⁵¹ Verlet 1967.

(1721-1763), who had begun the work and was known for his mechanical innovations, Jean-Henri Riesener embarked on his career in the royal service by creating a rolltop desk for Louis XV, which is still part of the collections today.¹⁵² Originally requested in 1760, this desk was outstanding for its innovation, the refinement of its marquetry, the quality of its bronze and, crucially, the originality of its opening and closing mechanism, making it a masterpiece that established Riesener's reputation.¹⁵³ Finished in 1769, it was subsequently overhauled during the French Revolution, when the royal symbols had to be removed.¹⁵⁴ This object could be a wonderful case study to discuss firstly the craftsmanship required to create the object, secondly the extravagance of decoration under the *ancien régime* and thirdly the treatment of these objects during the French Revolution.

Riesener was the most important craftsman for royalty and nobility, but his hefty prices deterred some of his clientele,¹⁵⁵ but Marie Antoinette remained a loyal customer.¹⁵⁶ Riesener provided four corner cupboards for Louis XVI's Games Room and a fine new chest of drawers, for the bedrooms of Versailles in 1775. Straight lines, the bulky design, the heavy and ornate bronze work and the impressive trapezoidal inlays in the centre section characterise the furniture manufacturer's neoclassical style.¹⁵⁷

Riesener created the most elegant and innovative furniture for Marie Antoinette, supplying two corner cabinets and a chest of drawers without marquetry, featuring simple mahogany veneers with refined bronze work for the aristocratic apartments of the Palace of

¹⁵² See V 3.11.

¹⁵³ Jean-Henri Riesener 2024.

¹⁵⁴ Jean-Henri Riesener 2024.

¹⁵⁵ Wealthy individuals like Pierre-Gaspard-Marie Grimod, comte d'Orsay, who initially commissioned a modified version of the King's Desk but might have found subsequent commissions too expensive. Wallace Collection 2024.

¹⁵⁶ Jean-Henri Riesener 2024.

¹⁵⁷ Jean-Henri Riesener 2024.

Versailles.¹⁵⁸ Riesener's works were auctioned off during the French Revolution, and the cabinetmaker repurchased some of them to sell to prosperous foreign clients.¹⁵⁹

The symbolism inherent in the furniture crafted by these master cabinetmakers, while showcasing inherent delectability, also signified the ultimate injustice of the *ancien régime* as well as its downfall. Rather than merely romanticising this beauty, Versailles could frame its opulence within the power dynamics embedded in the furniture itself. Although the Versailles website shortly addresses the court's extravagant expenditure and its role in sparking the French Revolution, the exhibition fails to make this direct contextual link, particularly in relation to the furniture. This oversight misses an opportunity to delve into the intricate connections between opulence and power that these objects represent.

¹⁵⁸ Jean-Henri Riesener 2024.

¹⁵⁹ Jean-Henri Riesener 2024.

5. Fragmented Fantasies in Schönbrunn

5.1. Introduction

The second case study considered in this master's thesis is the palace museum Schloss Schönbrunn in Vienna, Austria, built and remodelled in its present form during the 1740-50s under the reign of Empress Maria Theresa (1717-1780), who was given the residence as a wedding gift from her father Charles VI (1685-1740) and redecorated the palace exterior as it appears today.¹⁶⁰ Empress Maria Theresa's reign was marked by significant political and administrative reforms, efforts to centralise the Habsburg monarchy and a focus on statecraft and cultural patronage.¹⁶¹ Serving as a potent symbol of imperial grandeur and authority during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the palace's architectural and decorative choices were intended to convey the strength and stability of the Habsburg monarchy.¹⁶²

Today, the interiors of Schönbrunn, having undergone successive redecoration by various rulers, present a complex tapestry of historical layers. This chapter endeavours not only to elucidate the overarching history of Schönbrunn but also to furnish a comprehensive exegesis of the current exhibition. Here, the scholarly focus, however, will be principally directed towards the east wing, an area that has meticulously preserved the resplendent interior decorations from the epoch of Maria Theresa.

This chapter aims to demonstrate that the narrative at Schönbrunn is as limiting as that of Versailles, while also shedding light on some neglected dimensions of Schönbrunn's interiors, with an emphasis on the provenance of the materials, the transnational craftsmanship, and the

¹⁶⁰ Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 82.

¹⁶¹ Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 82.

¹⁶² Michael Yonan argues how the materiality of the eighteenth century rooms in Schloss Schönbrunn display the self-actualization and female imperial representation of Maria Theresa in: Yonan 2011.

assembly processes undertaken in Vienna - areas conspicuously absent from both prevailing scholarly discourse and the exhibition space. By scrutinising the information presently offered to visitors at Schönbrunn, we shall uncover the potential for the palace to divulge other stories than those currently told focus on mere patronage or utilitarian function.

While scholarly discourse has extensively explored the imperial self-fashioning evident in Schönbrunn's spaces, and while the exhibition spaces have adeptly communicated the influence of Maria Theresa's patronage on the interior design, there remains a notable paucity of discussion regarding the origins of the materials employed.¹⁶³ Additionally, the roles of the artisans who laboured in foreign lands to procure and craft these materials, as well as the craftsmen who meticulously assembled them within Vienna, have not been adequately addressed. The intricate web of material provenance, cross-border craftsmanship, and local assembly processes remains under-examined, meriting further scholarly attention to fully appreciate the complex narrative behind these interiors.

This chapter begins with an overview of the history of Schönbrunn Palace and a detailed description of its current permanent exhibition. It then provides an in-depth review of the exhibition space before exploring potential alternative contextualizations that could enrich the visitor experience. This includes investigating how incorporating more detailed information, diverse perspectives, and broader historical contexts could enhance understanding and engagement.

Ultimately, the goal is to identify ways in which the presentation can offer a more comprehensive and insightful exploration of Schönbrunn's global connections and historical significance, aligning with the museum's mission to educate and inform visitors. The focus will be on analysing spaces within Schönbrunn that feature non-european, particularly Asian,

¹⁶³ See Chapter 2.3., Iby/Mader-Kratky 2023 ; Iby/Koller 2000 ; Yonan 2011.

artworks and materials, examining how these items are presented and investigating alternative narratives that could be incorporated. By using these objects as a concrete case study, the chapter aims to make the abstract hypothesis of this thesis more tangible and offer insights into the broader trends and challenges faced by Schönbrunn Palace.

5.2. History of Schönbrunn

A preeminent rationale for the selection of this particular case study resides in its stylistic and temporal proximity to the Château de Versailles. While considering Schönbrunn Palace to be the Habsburg response to the Sun King's palace is somewhat simplistic, it nevertheless draws attention to numerous similarities with the Palace of Versailles, suggesting a cultural-political statement and providing evidence of cultural exchange within Europe.¹⁶⁴ Although the ultimate design of Schönbrunn diverged significantly from its initial conceptualization, Versailles functioned as an archetype, emblem, and referential touchstone, imparting inspiration on both a stylistic and aesthetic plane. It is appropriate to consider Versailles as an ideological and political model, as Louis XIV (1638-1715) used art and architecture to showcase his absolute power, which was admired throughout Europe.¹⁶⁵

The origins of Schönbrunn Palace date back to 1696, when Emperor Leopold I (1640-1705) initiated the construction of a hunting lodge on the site.¹⁶⁶ Initially directed by the architect Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach (1656-1723), the project was further expanded under Emperor Joseph I (1678-1711), who commissioned architect Johann Lukas von Hildebrandt (1668-1745) following Leopold I's death in 1705.¹⁶⁷ Schönbrunn underwent

¹⁶⁴ Heidegger 2015, p. 93.

¹⁶⁵ Heidegger 2015, p. 93.

¹⁶⁶ Schönbrunn Palace History 2024

¹⁶⁷ Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 48.

significant extension and redesign during the reign of Maria Theresa between 1742 and 1780.¹⁶⁸ Architect Nikolaus Pacassi (1716-1790) remodelled the palace in the Rococo style, laid out the extensive gardens, and added the Gloriette.¹⁶⁹

It became the summer residence of the Habsburg monarchs and hosted significant historical events, such as the Congress of Vienna between 1814 and 1815.¹⁷⁰ Serving as the summer residence of the Habsburgs for over 300 years, the palace played a central role in the cultural and political landscape of the Habsburg Empire. In contrast to Versailles, Schönbrunn remained inhabited until the end of the First World War. The palace underwent its last structural alterations under architect Johann Aman (1765-1834) at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹⁷¹

As this master's thesis focuses on the eighteenth century, we will examine the following three main furnishing phases of the palace: the first being between 1742-49, the second between 1754-65 and the third between 1765-80.¹⁷² This establishes the foundation for the chapter's emphasis on the east wing, which, while prominently associated with Maria Theresa's eighteenth century self-fashioning, also holds less-explored narratives within its interiors. It is important to acknowledge that isolating one wing from a comprehensive ensemble may seem problematic, given the interconnected conception of the palace. Nonetheless, we have chosen to focus on the east wing because it still retains the original eighteenth century interiors implemented by Maria Theresa and has not undergone significant alterations by subsequent rulers. The majority of the furniture displayed at Schönbrunn hails from the nineteenth century, meticulously restored for museum presentation.¹⁷³ Additionally, practical constraints necessitate narrowing our analysis,

¹⁶⁸ Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 84-198.

¹⁶⁹ Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 331.

¹⁷⁰ Schönbrunn Palace History 2024.

¹⁷¹ Schönbrunn Palace History 2024.

¹⁷² Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 84-198.

¹⁷³ Email exchange with Anna Mader-Kratky, 08.07.2024, 11.49.

making the east wing's relatively untouched historical integrity a compelling focal point for our study.

Since becoming the property of the Republic of Austria in 1918, Schönbrunn has since then been preserved in much the same form, including architectural elements and furnishings.¹⁷⁴ Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996, Schönbrunn Palace is an exemplary *Gesamtkunstwerk*, maintaining the integrity of its architecture, palace design, and spatial relationship with the surrounding around 160 hectares of parkland.¹⁷⁵

5.3. Description of the Current Exhibition

Visitors to Schönbrunn can choose between three tours of varying lengths: the "Grand Tour" (60 minutes), the "Imperial Tour" (40 minutes), and the "State Apartments" (25 minutes).¹⁷⁶ Each tour is succinct, offering a brisk progression through a series of rooms that intend to encapsulate the palace's royal history. In stark contrast to Versailles, Schönbrunn eschews delineated sections with diverse museological intents or frameworks. Rather, its permanent exhibition singularly embraces the notion of "period rooms," recreating historical spaces of more or less historical authenticity.

It is important to note from the outset that the exhibition's layout does not follow a chronological progression. Visitors will encounter a diverse array of artefacts and rooms from different periods—such as the eighteenth century Grand and Small Halls, the Porcelain Cabinets, and the Napoleon Room—without a linear historical sequence. This deliberate arrangement reflects a thematic rather than chronological approach, which may contribute to a sense of

¹⁷⁴ Brocza 1998, p. 63-87.

¹⁷⁵ Palace and Gardens of Schönbrunn 2024; Schönbrunn Palace Official Website 2024.

¹⁷⁶ Schönbrunn Tickets and Tours 2024.

disorientation as visitors navigate through the spaces. Understanding this would help mitigate any confusion about the exhibition's structure and better appreciate the curated thematic connections throughout the tour.

Given the extensive number of rooms, addressing each one individually is beyond the scope of this master thesis. Instead, we shall provide a general overview and select a few exemplar rooms for more detailed contemplation, with a particular emphasis on the east wing of Schönbrunn Palace. This section is distinguished by its preservation of the original eighteenth century wall panelling and decorations commissioned by Maria Theresa. These spaces are particularly noteworthy for their materials and objects sourced from distant regions, especially Asia. Our examination will centre on how these elements are communicated to the public, exploring the narratives currently being told and considering alternative narratives that could enhance our understanding of these spaces.

Preliminary information in the form of texts and infographics awaits visitors in the entrance halls before they reach the royal apartments on the first floor. This includes a genealogy of the House of Habsburg, divided into two parts: Part I covering the years 1273-1740, covers the years from the coronation of the first Roman-German king of the Habsburgs, Rudolf I (1273-1291), to the end of the male line of the family. Part II covers the years 1740-1918, continuing from the beginning of Maria Theresa's reign to the end of the Habsburg Monarchy with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Additionally, there is an informative text discussing *Schönbrunn and the end of the Habsburg monarchy*.¹⁷⁷

Upon entering the designated area where visitors present their tickets, ascending the blue staircase, and passing through the Antechamber, the Guards Room, and the Billiards Room, visitors are introduced to their first substantial space: The Audience Chamber, also known as the

¹⁷⁷ See SB. 17 and SB. 18.

"Walnut Room," is distinguished by its nearly square floor plan and the rich walnut wood panelling that envelops its walls.¹⁷⁸ These panels are meticulously divided into sections adorned with golden inlays, creating a segmented and structured aesthetic throughout the room. The walnut wood continues onto the floor, where it is intricately inlaid with other types of wood, adding depth and texture to the space. The white plaster ceilings offer a bright contrast to the warm tones of the wood, infusing the room with a sense of lightness and cheerfulness. This effect is further enhanced by the gilded stucco of the coving, which mirrors the golden accents on the wall panels, creating a harmonious and elegant design.

The walnut panels were originally introduced during the reign of Maria Theresa. Subsequently, the space underwent a transformation under Emperor Franz Joseph I (1830–1916), who incorporated nineteenth century furniture and a chandelier, introducing period-appropriate furniture. This room epitomises Schönbrunn's distinctive amalgamation of epochs, embodying the integration of its eighteenth century origins with the later modifications of the nineteenth century. Visitors are then guided through Franz Joseph I's study, followed by the Ketterl Room, Franz Joseph I's bedroom, the West Terrace Cabinet, the Staircase Cabinet and the shared bedroom of the imperial couple, Franz Joseph I and Elisabeth (1837–1898).

Each of these rooms exhibits a primarily nineteenth century style and showcases exemplary innovations, with the bathrooms and toilet room representing the pinnacle of nineteenth century modernism. Relatively small by royal standards of the time, the rooms used and furnished by Franz Joseph I are famously restrained in its decor, featuring dark wood furniture, practical in design, with minimal ornamentation.¹⁷⁹ The floor of Franz Josef's study features inlays in a dark wood tone, and the lower portion of the walls is distinguished by

¹⁷⁸ See SB. 1

¹⁷⁹ See SB. 2.

white-painted panels, approximately 80 cm in height, adorned with delicate gold inlays. Above these panels, the walls are brown harmonising with the dark floor and sectioned by white stripes accented with gold decorations, introducing a rhythmic pattern to the space. In one corner, the white wall area expands to accommodate a white tiled stove, with a screen positioned in front of it today, displaying photographs of the imperial family. In front of the window recess, which is panelled in white, stands Franz Josef's desk. The walls are lined with various chests of drawers, now adorned with photographs of the Habsburg family. The room is further furnished with oil paintings, tables, and a set of chairs. The accompanying texts, the tour guides and audio guides frequently emphasise Franz Joseph I's "frugal" and hard-working lifestyle.

The tour continues with the Neo-Rococo Reception Salon of Empress Elisabeth, adorned with light, flower-decorated silk wallpaper, a golden mirror, and an armoire featuring a clock.¹⁸⁰ Its use of forms, white and pastel colour scheme, floral patterns, gold decoration, and deeply upholstered armchairs evoke a style reminiscent of the earlier Baroque period, both in overall design and in its decorative and furnishing elements. This stylistic choice was deliberately revived in the nineteenth century, as the Baroque style was perceived as imperial and grand, serving as a deliberate reference to the era of Maria Theresa.¹⁸¹

The rooms up to the Marie Antoinette Room are relatively small and intricate, presenting in particular the furnishings, design and functions of the room under the last imperial couple, Emperor Franz Joseph I and Empress Elisabeth. Preceded by the Salon of the archduchess portraits and the breakfast cabinet, the Yellow Salon exemplifies a space with many different epochs and inhabitants of Schönbrunn, as it has undergone various changes in its history.¹⁸² The wall panelling, in Schönbrunn's characteristic white and gold colour scheme, dates from the

¹⁸⁰ See SB. 14.

¹⁸¹ Email exchange with Anna Mader-Kratky, 08.07.2024, 11.49.

¹⁸² See SB. 15; Yellow Salon at Schönbrunn 2024.

mid-nineteenth century, replacing the colourful Chinese paper and silk wallpapers from the time of Maria Theresa and her successors.¹⁸³ The seating furniture dates back to approximately 1770, displaying forms that bridge the transition from Rococo to Louis Seize styles.¹⁸⁴ The recreated silk fabric covers provide a glimpse into the original textile patterns used during the era of Maria Theresa.¹⁸⁵

The following small balcony room showcases numerous portraits of Maria Theresia and her children, from the studio of the court painter Martin van Meyten.¹⁸⁶ Moving beyond the balcony room, the visitors arrive at the Hall of Mirrors furnished by Maria Theresa. While the stucco decorations and framed mirrors date back to Maria Theresa's era, the presentation fails to clarify that the furniture in this space dates to the nineteenth century. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the reign of Maria Theresa came to be celebrated as the golden age of the Habsburg Monarchy, allowing a revival of Rococo design elements, which became the mandated style for decorating the state rooms of the Viennese court.¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, uncertainties persist regarding the Chinese porcelain vases in this room: were they originally displayed on the floor in the eighteenth century, or were they typically positioned atop custom-made tables or pedestals? Are they eighteenth-century or were they added later? Are they Chinese or are they european-made?

Regrettably, the information provided in the exhibition does not shed light on the origins or intended use of the furniture and porcelain, but rather discusses the story of the six-year-old prodigy Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart performing a concert here for Maria Theresa in 1762. Additionally it is mentioned that during Franz Joseph I's reign, the Hall of Mirrors served as the

¹⁸³ Yellow Salon at Schönbrunn 2024.

¹⁸⁴ Yellow Salon at Schönbrunn 2024.

¹⁸⁵ Yellow Salon at Schönbrunn 2024.

¹⁸⁶ See SB 16.

¹⁸⁷ Hall of Mirrors at Schönbrunn 2024; Email exchange with Anna Mader-Kratky, 08.07.2024, 11.49.

venue for Public Audiences, where every Monday and Thursday, subjects of the empire could seek an audience with the emperor.¹⁸⁸

The following Large Rosa Room, Second Small Rosa Room, First Small Rosa Room, the Large and Small Galleries, the two Chinese Cabinets, Carousel Room, and Ceremony Hall all showcase Maria Theresa's Rococo-style interiors. The three Rosa Rooms derive their name from the artist Joseph Rosa, commissioned by Maria Theresa in the 1760s to create fifteen landscape paintings for the ensemble.¹⁸⁹ While the wall panelling dates back to the eighteenth century, the furniture in these rooms was crafted in the nineteenth century during Franz Joseph I's reign specifically for this space.¹⁹⁰ The information provided focuses on the prominent portrait displayed on the front wall of the Large Rosa Room depicting Francis Stephen of Lorraine (1708-1765), Maria Theresa's husband, renowned for his expertise in finance and his patronage of the sciences.¹⁹¹

Following the Lantern Room, the Great Gallery and the Small Gallery, visitors can view from the threshold the two half-concealed Chinese Cabinets, one which is circular in form and decorated with blue white chinese porcelain and the other which is oval, showcasing multicoloured Japanese porcelain. Both so-called Chinese Cabinets are filled with precious lacquer panels set into white wooden panelling with gilt frames and small console tables, supporting this multitude of porcelain objects from Japan and China.¹⁹² The flooring, crafted from native timbers, stands out for its intricate and detailed inlaid patterns and is from the same era, but the furniture, once again, is not.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ Hall of Mirrors at Schönbrunn 2024; See SB 3 and SB 4.

¹⁸⁹ Large Rosa Room at Schönbrunn 2024.

¹⁹⁰ Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 148.

¹⁹¹ Large Rosa Room at Schönbrunn 2024.

¹⁹² Round Chinese Cabinet at Schönbrunn 2024; See SB 5.

¹⁹³ Round Chinese Cabinet at Schönbrunn 2024.

The cabinets are followed by the Carousel Room, the Hall of ceremonies, both of which are completely devoid of significant furniture. The following Horse Room, which served as a dining area in the nineteenth century, is now arranged with a festively set table, capturing the mid-nineteenth century ambiance as conveyed by the exhibition's descriptive text.

The wall furnishings adorning the rooms in the east wing predominantly hail from the eighteenth century, encompassing treasures such as the Porcelain Cabinets, the Blue Chinese Salon, the Vieux-Laque Room, the Million Room, and the Gobelin Salon. These spaces not only hold exceptional value and historical intrigue, but also serve as poignant material expressions of Maria Theresa herself. They are intimately intertwined with the enduring myths surrounding both the empress and the palace of Schönbrunn, perpetuating the profound legacy of this iconic figure.¹⁹⁴

Currently under restoration, the Blue Chinese Salon contains valuable wallpapers from China, with stucco ceilings and walnut panelling.¹⁹⁵ The blue medallions adorned with scenes of Chinese craftsmanship, depicting activities such as silk and porcelain production, as well as the cultivation of rice and tea, are surrounded by painted floral swags and baskets of flowers.¹⁹⁶ The wallpaper, originally produced in China for export and tailored to Western preferences, exemplifies the fusion of Chinese artistic traditions with European tastes, an integration of original East Asian art objects into the courtly Rococo decors of Schönbrunn during Maria Theresa's era highlighting the reciprocal influences between European and Far Eastern art forms.¹⁹⁷ With the Blue Chinese Salon begins the inner section of Maria Theresa and her husband

¹⁹⁴ Yonan 2011, Chapter 5.

¹⁹⁵ See SB 6 and SB 7.

¹⁹⁶ Blue Chinese Salon at Schönbrunn 2024.

¹⁹⁷ Blue Chinese Salon at Schönbrunn 2024.

Francis Stephen's apartment, featuring particularly valuable furnishings, including the Vieux-Laque Room.¹⁹⁸

Despite its eighteenth century interior, the information provided by the audio guide references pivotal negotiations surrounding the Habsburgs' abdication on 11 November 1918, that were held within these walls, culminating in a declaration by Charles I (1887-1922), the final emperor of Austria, renouncing any further role in state affairs. The subsequent day witnessed the proclamation of the Republic of Austria, signalling the conclusion of Habsburg dominion spanning six centuries but to this day, portraits of Karl and his consort Zita, the last imperial couple of Austria, are placed in this room. There is a notable absence of visual representation or any documentation from this period, such as photographs or images depicting the newly established Austrian government or related events.

The Vieux Laque Room refurbished in 1765 (after Francis Stephen's death in 1765) at Schönbrunn Palace is renowned for its art historical significance and delectability, largely due to its black Chinese lacquer panels, originally produced as screens for the European market, these panels were modified and set into gilded wainscoting, framed by golden Rococo decorations.

Visitors experience a chronological leap upon entering the adjacent Napoleon Room, which underwent several redecorations throughout the nineteenth century. During its restoration in 2007, it was decided to make the different historical decoration phases visible.¹⁹⁹

It is followed by the Porcelain Room and then the Millions Room, the latter of which we will discuss in great depth in the next part of this chapter. After walking through the Goblin Room, the exhibition jumps forward in time, the visitors are presented with Archduchess Sophie's (1805-1872) Study, who resided here in the mid-nineteenth century. Following this, the

¹⁹⁸ See SB 8.

¹⁹⁹ Napoleon Room at Schönbrunn 2024; Roter Salon at Schönbrunn 2024 ; Ostterrassenkabinett at Schönbrunn 2024.

room now referred to as the Red Salon features a design typical of the late period of Emperor Franz Joseph I. The character of the room is defined by the wall panels and seating furniture upholstered in the red silk damask known as "court damask," with the central motif resembling a pineapple. The portraits displayed in this room depict three generations of Habsburg rulers, ranging from Maria Theresa in the eighteenth century to Franz Joseph I in the nineteenth century.

The following East Terrace Cabinet features an illusionistic architecture painted around 1770, depicting a sky populated by playful cherubs in the delicate colours of the Rococo style. The Rich Room showcases Maria Theresa's state bed, a "purely museum presentation" of Maria Theresa's furniture, which was formerly set up in their apartments in the Leopoldine Wing of the Vienna Hofburg, the Habsburg winter palace, but not in Schönbrunn.²⁰⁰ Next is Archduke Franz Karl's Study, adorned with a collection of portraits of Maria Theresa's children. The penultimate room is the relatively empty Salon of Franz Karl, from which you can view the Corner Salon through a glass door, decorated with life-sized portraits of Maria Theresa's children. The Hunting Room concludes the tour of the main floor of the palace, commemorating Schönbrunn's origins as an imperial hunting lodge.

5.4. Review of the Permanent Exhibition

The Schönbrunn Palace tour is marred by an absence of structured narrative, resulting in a fragmented presentation that emphasises broad imperial themes while omitting clear timelines and details about materials, epochs and craftsmanship. The fundamental issue lies in the tour's failure to establish clear chronological and stylistic communication, resulting in a disjointed procession through various monarchic eras without in-depth exploration of specific historical

²⁰⁰ Email exchange with Anna Mader-Kratky, 08.07.2024, 11.49.

epochs. Rather than guiding visitors through a cohesive or educational journey, the tour presents a disconnected array of rooms and artefacts.

This approach to display makes it difficult for visitors to grasp the palace's historical timeline and the evolution of its interiors. For the untrained eye, furniture provides little explanatory information, and the presentation often jumps between different time periods without establishing a cohesive storyline that links rooms and furnishings. References between furnishings from various epochs are self-referential and lack elaboration on their thematic significance.

For instance, as presented above, the Yellow Salon at Schönbrunn Palace illustrates a blend of historical periods. Its mid-nineteenth century wall panelling replaced the earlier Chinese wallpapers from Maria Theresa's time. The seating furniture, dating around 1770, bridges Rococo and Louis Seize styles, while the recreated silk fabrics hint at the original textiles. Notable artworks include Joseph Pierre Lion's portraits and Jean-Étienne Liotard's "Girl with Doll," favoured by Maria Theresa.²⁰¹ However, visitors are primarily guided through the room's historical evolution and the interplay of different eras via an audio guide. However, the room itself lacks detailed information on the creation dates of the objects, the materials used, and the identities of the artisans who crafted the furniture.

While the décor may accurately reflect the palace's final usage period, this approach can limit visitors' ability to fully grasp the broader historical narrative and the social and cultural contexts that influenced the palace's development. Including more detailed information within the room could improve chronological understanding and provide a deeper educational perspective on its historical significance.

²⁰¹ Yellow Salon at Schönbrunn 2024.

The Neo-Rococo Reception Salon of Empress Elisabeth also epitomises this conundrum, as the space is adorned with elements that emulate Rococo aesthetics yet is bereft of clear historical context or museographical elucidation. Visitors are compelled to navigate a bewildering amalgamation of styles and periods without sufficient explanation. This perplexity intensifies as the tour advances: the Hall of Mirrors, attributed to Maria Theresa's era, features nineteenth century furniture added by Franz Joseph I, which creates a dissonance between the displayed decor and its supposed historical provenance. While the furniture was introduced later, the museum's failure to explain this change exacerbates the confusion for visitors.

The Blue Chinese Salon, while retaining its historical interiors, introduces references to disparate events such as the Habsburgs' 1918 abdication. While these abrupt temporal shifts are partly necessitated by the extensive changes made to Schönbrunn Palace during subsequent rulers, especially Franz Joseph I's reign, and resulted in a conglomeration of multiple layered time periods visible within one room, the overall lack of descriptive clarity still hampers visitors' understanding of the palace's evolution.

This amalgamation of disparate styles and temporal allusions impedes the visitor's grasp of the palace's evolutionary trajectory and the contextual significance imbued within each chamber. Improving the clarity and structural coherence of the tour will enhance the visitor experience by providing a more seamless narrative that emphasises Schönbrunn's deep historical continuum and cultural significance.

This could be rectified by introducing a comprehensive system of informative signage for the furniture and artefacts, detailing each item with critical data such as creation dates, materials, and the identities of the artisans responsible. By embedding these elements within the exhibition, visitors will be provided with an indispensable framework for understanding the chronological

and stylistic evolution of the palace's interiors. Such a measure would not only rectify the prevailing narrative disjunction but also bestow upon visitors a more coherent and enriching experience, thus bridging the temporal gaps that currently obfuscate the palace's historical continuum.

A solution to this issue is the introduction of a comprehensive system of informative signage for the furniture and artefacts, detailing critical data such as creation dates, materials, and the identities of the artisans responsible. Without these explanatory labels, visitors are left to navigate the collection without any clear sense of how each item fits into the broader historical narrative of the palace. However, this approach has been successfully implemented in the second section of the Palace of Versailles exhibition, demonstrating its practicality and effectiveness. Furthermore, such signage is also a common practice in galleries worldwide, making it a reasonable and achievable enhancement for Schönbrunn Palace.

Secondly, while delineating the royal family's residence and daily activities, the presentation egregiously neglects other profound aspects of its historical narrative and confines itself to depicting Schönbrunn as a luxurious palace, thus failing to acknowledge the broader implications of the furnishings within. The Habsburgs were not merely a grand family but sovereign rulers whose authority was intricately woven into the palace's opulent interiors.

The exhibition's narrative focuses heavily on the biographies of figures like Maria Theresa and Franz Stephan but overlooks the broader societal and political changes during their reigns. So while figures like Maria Theresa, Franz Joseph I, and Elisabeth are detailed, the display misses an opportunity to examine social dynamics and cultural transformations of the time. This narrow perspective limits visitors' comprehension of the multifaceted historical and

cultural evolution of the palace, reducing their overall understanding of the Habsburg dynasty's impact on European and global history.

The exhibition's oversight is particularly glaring in its omission of the fact that the furniture and artefacts were not mere symbols of personal wealth, but also integral representations of imperial power. These objects were crafted from rare and expensive materials, sourced through complex trade networks and economic policies that underscored the Habsburgs' extensive influence.²⁰² The luxurious materials used in the furnishings are emblematic of the grandeur and authority of the Habsburg dynasty, reflecting their ability to command resources across Europe and beyond.

Furthermore, the craftsmanship involved in creating these exquisite pieces was a product of intricate social hierarchies and power structures. The artisans who fashioned these objects operated within a framework of patronage and social stratification that was crucial to the palace's magnificence. This contextual dimension—encompassing the economic, political, and social factors—remains conspicuously absent from the exhibition.

To remedy this omission, the exhibition could transcend its superficial depiction and provide a nuanced exploration of how Schönbrunn Palace and its furnishings embody both royal self-representation and the intricate socio-economic dynamics of the period. By integrating detailed explanations of the materials, trade, and craftsmanship, the presentation would offer visitors a more profound understanding of Schönbrunn's historical and cultural significance, linking its interiors to the broader imperial context that enabled their creation.

²⁰² We will discuss this in further detail with more concrete examples in the following chapter 5.5.

5.5. Additional Contextualization: Schönbrunn's East Wing and Global Trade in the Eighteenth Century

Having discussed the broader challenges faced by the Schönbrunn Palace tour—namely, its fragmented narrative and lack of contextual depth—we will now shift focus and constructively propose alternative contextualizations to a particularly rich and distinctive segment of the palace: the East Wing. However, in contemplating potential augmentations to Schönbrunn's exhibition approach, it is imperative to acknowledge that the intent is not to radically displace the established narrative structure. The palace's inherent allure are indisputable, and its existing presentations undoubtedly captivate visitors. However, as institutions of cultural preservation and education, museums are imbued with a profound obligation to transcend mere aesthetic presentation and assume a more proactive role in the dissemination of knowledge.²⁰³

Contemporary museological theory posits that museums should serve as dynamic agents of intellectual engagement, tasked with rendering complex subjects both accessible and compelling to a heterogeneous audience. This ethos forms the very bedrock of this thesis and underpins modern museological discourse and therefore is not a matter of entirely dismantling the palace's existing narrative framework but rather of augmenting it with a more expansive interpretive approach. The rich corpus of scholarly work on Schönbrunn's furnishings reveals a multitude of underexplored and inadequately represented narratives. These latent storylines, if woven into the existing framework, could offer a more nuanced and profound understanding of the palace's collection.

²⁰³ See Chapter 2.5.

This East Wing of Schönbrunn stands distinct from the rest of the palace due to its exceptional and diverse collection of artefacts sourced from Asia and South America. Additionally, the minimal restyling of these spaces since Maria Theresa's time provides a rare opportunity to explore a more focused historical context. Unlike other sections of the palace that span multiple epochs, the East Wing's relatively consistent eighteenth century design in certain rooms allows for a clearer examination of the period's cultural and artistic dynamics without the complexity of overlapping eras.

Specifically, the East Wing of Schönbrunn boasts an impressive array of spaces adorned with objects and materials sourced from diverse regions such as China, Japan, the Mughal Empire, and other parts of Asia and South America.²⁰⁴ The visitor's first encounter with this extensive collection occurs at the two Chinese Cabinets, which feature exquisite Chinese lacquer and porcelain from both China and Japan. The Blue Chinese Salon showcases intricately designed paper imported from China, while the Vieux-Laque Room is distinguished by its elegant lacquer panels, also originating from China. The Millions Room, initially referred to as the *Spiegelzimmer*, was reappointed in the 1760s with sumptuous rosewood panelling and collages of Mughal miniatures. Going forward, we will focus on these four spaces to explore how and why they serve as compelling examples for discussing contextualizations beyond mere imperial narratives in Schönbrunn.

Because Maria Theresa harboured a penchant for anything "from the Indies," a term she used to denote valuable and prestigious objects from East Asia, Schönbrunn's east wing is sumptuously decorated with such objects and materials.²⁰⁵ In her endeavour to embellish and

²⁰⁴ Micaela Kranich discusses the significance of material opulence, including lacquer panels, chinoiserie, and wood panelling, in the context of Austrian noble interiors during the Rococo period. See Kranich 2023, p. 268-287.

²⁰⁵ Maria Theresa in a letter to Prince Joseph Wenzel Lichtenstein, 1753: "Rien au monde, tous les diamants ne me son rien, mais ce qui vient des Indes, surtout le laque et même la tapisserie sont les seules choses qui me font plaisir." Arneth, A. Ritter von (ed.), *Briefe der Kaiserin Maria Theresia an ihre Kinder und Freunde*, vol. 4, Wien

furnish Schönbrunn Palace, she imported a plethora of items from China, Japan, India, and other countries. These items—for instance lacquerware, porcelain, precious woods, paper—exhibited diverse styles but were uniformly categorised under the term "indianisch," with no differentiation based on their specific countries of origin.

This amalgamation of diverse objects under a singular term might be attributed to the common route of their arrival in Europe. Most of these treasures were transported by the Dutch East India Company (V.O.C.) via maritime routes. The V.O.C., which dominated trade between Europe and East Asia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, shipped a vast array of goods that were esteemed as luxurious and exotic in Europe. These goods, arriving en masse through the V.O.C., were collected and displayed as symbols of wealth and cultural sophistication.²⁰⁶

These elaborate decorations not only reflect her taste for East Asian art, but also underscore the influence and far-reaching connections of the Habsburg monarchy. Michael Yonan's key work examines how Schönbrunn's material culture—spanning paintings, architecture, porcelain, and decorative objects—reflects and shapes Maria Theresa's monarchical identity.²⁰⁷ Yonan also argues that the Vieux-Laque Room, with its Asian lacquered panels and family portraits, symbolically connected the Habsburgs to a broader cultural and political landscape.²⁰⁸ From his perspective, the Millions Room served as a symbol of imperial power and cultural sophistication, as the room's decoration highlighted the empress's aesthetic and political choices, using art to associate the Habsburgs with a mythical Asia while asserting their unique identity.

1881, p. 304–305. Translates as : Nothing in the world, not even diamonds mean anything to me, but that which comes from the Indies, above all lacquerware and even tapestries, are the only things which give me pleasure

²⁰⁶ Needs source. Also need to find out if the objects at SB are actually through this trade route?

²⁰⁷ Yonan 2011, Chapter 1.

²⁰⁸ Yonan 2011, Chapter 5.

Although Yonan's analysis provides significant insight into how these spaces contributed to Maria Theresa's self-representation, this scholarship, as well as much other scholarship on these spaces, primarily focus on their role in constructing her monarchical image.²⁰⁹

5.5.1. Chinese Cabinets

The Oval and Round Chinese Cabinets, positioned opposite each other and located adjacent to the Small Gallery were transformed during the second phase of the renovation (1755–60), with their current appearance: white-painted boiserie, and delicate, gilded rocailles and lacquer panels.²¹⁰ These panels, created using the maki-e technique where gold is dissolved into the lacquer, showcase a range of subjects including architecture, landscapes, Chinese mythology, and genre scenes.²¹¹ The rooms feature an array of porcelain figures, vases, and vessels, the Round Cabinets blue-white porcelain is from China, the Oval Cabinets porcelain features colourful porcelain from Japan and Vienna (Du Paquier).²¹² The cabinet's decor is completed by ormolu Rococo chandeliers, adorned with enamel floral decorations from the same period and an intricately patterned floor.

While the Chinese Cabinets in Schönbrunn are undeniably remarkable in their aesthetic appeal and historical significance, there is a notable gap in the visitor experience concerning the comprehensive understanding of their components and historical context. The current interpretive materials provide basic information about the Chinese origins of the objects and their European adaptations. At the same time, the story of this Chinese Cabinet opens the door to a myriad of broader discussions, both of Art Historical and of Anthropological nature, which could

²⁰⁹ f.ex. Iby/Mader-Kratky 2023.

²¹⁰ Iby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 161.

²¹¹ Iby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 158.

²¹² Email exchange with Anna Mader-Kratky, 08.07.2024, 11.49.

enrich the visitor experience with insights into historical context, cultural exchange, and global trade.

Firstly, the display should provide detailed information about the materials presented. While visitors are informed that the cabinets feature Chinese lacquer and porcelain from China and Japan, there is an opportunity to delve deeper into the intricate processes involved in creating these materials. For instance, the fascinating technique of Chinese lacquer, known for its elaborate layering and meticulous craftsmanship, could be highlighted.

This would not only enhance appreciation of the material's aesthetic qualities but also its historical and cultural significance. Similarly, a thorough exploration of the provenance and craftsmanship of the porcelain could be helpful to enhance the visitor experience and educational value. By detailing the intricate processes and artistic traditions behind these exquisite pieces, visitors can gain a deeper understanding of the artistic exchanges that shaped the period.

Providing insights into the global trade routes that brought these materials to Europe, as well as the reasons for their adaptation into European interiors, would enrich visitors' understanding of the historical and cultural exchanges reflected in the cabinets. Enhancing the interpretive materials with interactive elements, such as virtual reconstructions of the lacquer panels as paravents, or detailed diagrams showing the assembly process, could greatly improve visitor engagement and comprehension. These approaches would illuminate the interconnectedness of different cultures, European perspectives on the East, and, if a critical approach were chosen, curators could discuss the broader impacts of global trade and its lasting effect on later centuries.²¹³

While the current descriptions highlight the aesthetic features of the cabinets—such as the inlay of lacquer panels and the decorative porcelain—the broader European historical context

²¹³ More on this idea in the discussion of the Millions Room, Chapter 5.5.4..

is absent too. For instance, visitors learn that lacquer panels were originally designed as paravents and later repurposed, but there is no discussion of the significance of this transformation or the implications for understanding their historical use. Because the lacquer itself is brittle, the cutting process is particularly challenging: each panel had to be carefully removed from its original frame and trimmed to fit the new design.

This required skillful artisans in Vienna, capable of creating the cohesive interior we see in Schönbrunn today. Therefore, and because the process of integrating these disparate elements into a cohesive design within Vienna is a crucial aspect of the cabinets' history, the role of the Viennese artisans who were responsible for assembling these foreign objects could be discussed. Insights into how these European craftsmen adapted and assembled the foreign materials would provide a richer narrative and appreciation of their skill.

5.5.2. Blue Chinese Salon

Similarly, the Blue Chinese Salon at Schönbrunn is celebrated for its visually striking wallpaper, which showcases blue medallions depicting scenes of Chinese craftsmanship, such as silk and porcelain production, as well as the cultivation of rice and tea. This wallpaper, created in China for export and tailored to Western tastes, exemplifies the intersection of Chinese artistic traditions with European preferences.²¹⁴ The room's historical significance is further highlighted by its role in the events leading to the end of Habsburg rule, underscoring a pivotal moment in Austrian history. However, while the current interpretation provides valuable context regarding the room's aesthetic and its significance within Austrian history, numerous pivotal aspects remain for further exploration, enabling the unfolding of narratives that transcend the imperial perspective.

²¹⁴ Blue Chinese Salon at Schönbrunn 2024.

For instance, since the wallpaper features intricate depictions of Chinese craftsmanship and daily life, it presents an excellent opportunity to elucidate both the iconography used in these scenes and the professions depicted. Introducing detailed explanatory plaques or interactive digital displays that delve into the iconography of the wallpaper, including the meanings of specific motifs and their significance in Chinese art, would greatly enhance visitors' understanding and appreciation. Understanding the symbolism and significance of these motifs in Chinese culture would offer deeper insights into their artistic and cultural meaning and would allow for discussions on labour and representation of labour, as well as the methods and significance of papermaking in China. Providing information on how the wallpaper was produced, including the traditional techniques and materials used, would enhance appreciation for the craftsmanship behind these export goods.

It would also be fascinating to delve into the reasons behind Europeans' attraction to Chinese objects and aesthetics, because understanding the cultural and historical context that fueled this fascination can provide deeper insights into the era's tastes and preferences. This exploration could reveal how Chinese art and design elements were perceived as symbols of exoticism, sophistication, and status within European aristocracy.

Moreover, examining how this fascination influenced European interior design would illuminate the cross-cultural exchanges that shaped artistic trends. This could include discussions on how Chinese motifs, materials, and techniques were integrated into European decorative arts. By presenting and discussing how Chinese designs were adapted and reinterpreted in European interiors through the example of the Blue Chinese Salon, visitors can gain a richer appreciation of the global influences that shaped European art and culture during this period. This could for

example be done through temporary exhibitions, adding labels or informative plaques, adding this information to the audio guide or through educational films.

5.5.3. *Vieux-Laque Room*

The Vieux-Laque Room at Schönbrunn, known for its elegant black and gold lacquer panels, is a notable example of the interplay between European and Chinese artistic traditions. The room's layout is meticulously organised along seven axes both in length and breadth. In the longitudinal direction, one axis prominently features a portrait of Francis Stephen, while the other axes are composed of intricately inlaid Chinese lacquer panels. In the transverse direction, the room's seven axes are symmetrically arranged, including two prominent portraits on either side of the room. To the right is the double portrait of their eldest sons, Joseph (1741-1790) and Leopold (1747-1792), with Joseph depicted holding a copy of Montesquieu's "The Spirit of the Laws," reflecting his Enlightenment ideals. The third painting features Leopold's wife Ludovica with their children, including the future emperor Franz II (I) (1768-1835), symbolising the enduring legacy of the House of Habsburg-Lorraine. Additionally, there are two doors on either side, and the remaining four axes are adorned with slender lacquer panels.

While the room's transformation into a memorial for Franz I Stephan by Maria Theresa and its architectural significance are well documented in scholarship²¹⁵ and communicated in the exhibition space, a deeper exploration of the lacquer panels is warranted. Though the room also contains beautifully crafted furniture and includes wonderful parquet flooring, visitors are not provided with specific information regarding their origins or creation dates.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Yonan 2011.

²¹⁶ This observation is based on the colouration of the woods and the historical practice of importing various exotic woods in the eighteenth century to achieve more colourful variations and intricate patterns. However, I have not yet found specific sources to confirm this practice in detail.

The exquisite craftsmanship of Chinese artisans is seen in these lacquer panels. Originally created in China as large screens or paravents, these panels were later imported to Europe, much like the items in the Chinese Cabinets and the Blue Chinese Salon. Similarly, this provides an excellent opportunity to delve into a discussion on the production of lacquer in China. These materials would allow the illumination of intricate Chinese techniques and artistry involved in the creation of the lacquer; an examination of the trade between China and Austria in the eighteenth century; a critical analysis of the European nobility's perception of Chinese objects which could uncover layers of fascination, exoticism, and status associated with these imports.

Like with the Chinese Cabinets, the metamorphosis from their paravent forms to the exquisite wall panels observed today necessitated an extraordinary degree of skill and precision. This sophisticated operation was both labour-intensive and exquisitely delicate, demanding expertise to avert any potential cracking or compromise of the lacquer. Thus, it could be equally interesting to delve into the contributions of the European artisans who engaged with these foreign materials, underscoring their refined artistry.

There is an intriguing aspect regarding the possibility that some of the lacquer panels may not be exclusively of Chinese origin. Based on stylistic observations and current research in other palaces with lacquer panels, it is plausible that certain panels could have been added or modified in Vienna.²¹⁷ This is particularly evident in the areas beneath the portraits, where the floral motifs exhibit a distinctly different stylistic approach—circular and curved, typical of European Baroque design. This hypothesis stems from variations in stylistic elements that suggest some panels might have been created or altered locally to better suit European tastes or to complement the existing design. This theory aligns with common practices of the period,

²¹⁷ These are the author's own ideas. Compare SB. 8 and SB. 9.

where imported art objects were often adapted to fit local aesthetic preferences.²¹⁸ Although current literature does not definitively confirm or refute this notion, and because there is no material information provided in the exhibition space, this possibility remains an area for further scholarly investigation. To enhance the exhibition, incorporating detailed text panels or interactive displays that explain the potential modifications and the historical context would engage visitors and encourage deeper exploration.

5.5.4. *Millions Room*

The Millions Room, an audience chamber adorned with precious wood panelling, rococo boiserie, and Mughal paintings, was constructed during the third phase of furnishing between 1765 and 1780.²¹⁹ It was a spatial creation originally developed earlier (1752-55) for the Belvedere Palace, which was relocated to Schönbrunn in 1767.²²⁰ It earned its name from the purported cost: after the fall of the monarchy, it was falsely said to have cost 1 million guilders.²²¹ This designation reflects the room's lavish opulence, adorned with valuable materials and exquisite craftsmanship. Richly decorated with tropical wood and Indo-Persian manuscripts, the Millions Room symbolises the extravagant lifestyle and immense financial investment of the Habsburg imperial family in Schönbrunn.

The room features expensive tropical wood, also known as "Königsholz," a type of rosewood likely imported from South America, probably Brazil.²²² In the boiserie, 60 differently shaped picture cartouches with Indo-Persian artworks are inlaid and arranged axially, dividing the walls into vertical fields.²²³ They are surrounded by luxurious and highly dynamic golden

²¹⁸ See for example the Chinese Cabinet in Palazzo Reale, Turin, Italy.

²¹⁹ See SB 10, SB 11, SB 12, SB 13.

²²⁰ Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 245.

²²¹ Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 209.

²²² Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 485.

²²³ SB 11 and SB 12.

rocaille decorations, a style characteristic of the 1750s, which extends beyond the gilded frames, intertwining the cartouches vertically and with the side frames, creating a net-like overlay on the walls and doors.²²⁴ This systematic arrangement is disrupted solely by the fireplace, a remnant from a previous furnishing phase, along with a faux chest of drawers and a console table topped with mirrors. The vaulted ceiling showcases a wide decorative band above the gilded cornice, embellished with intricate corner rocailles and a gilded lattice design.

Standing out for both its exquisite boiserie and its remarkable pictorial adornments, making it a prime example of artistic and exotic Rococo design, the room features vibrant and grisaille-style collages crafted from watercolour Indo-Persian manuscripts. These manuscripts, which colourfully and cohesively depict the courtly life of Mughal emperors (Indian rulers of Persian descent), were created in the libraries and workshops of the Mughal courts during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²²⁵ Brought to Europe by the Dutch East India Company, they quickly became sought after by collectors.²²⁶

As before, exploring the material origins of the objects themselves would allow the exhibition to go beyond the narrative of royal self-fashioning, patronage or imperial agency. The tropical wood used in the Millions Room was known as "Königsholz," and offers a compelling entry point into discussions about global trade routes and the rise of eighteenth century slavery. The use of such exotic materials not only reflects aesthetic preferences but also signifies economic and social hierarchies associated with colonial trade and luxury consumption.²²⁷ As these commodities like tropical woods circulated through global networks, they embodied cultural meanings and social status, because the choice of materials reflects not only aesthetic

²²⁴ Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 209.

²²⁵ See SB 12 and SB 13.

²²⁶ Ilby/Mader-Kratky 2023, p. 212.

²²⁷ These ideas are built on Anderson 2012.

preferences but also economic and social hierarchies tied to colonial trade and luxury consumption.²²⁸ The Millions Room provides a tangible example of how these materials were sourced from distant countries, processed, and integrated into European aristocratic settings, highlighting the interconnectedness of global economies and cultural exchanges in the eighteenth century.²²⁹

²²⁸ Ideas based on Appadurai 1986.

²²⁹ Ideas based on Appadurai 1986.

6. The Exhibition at Versailles, Schönbrunn and other Palace Museums

In the introduction of this thesis, we posed the question: *How do the exhibition strategies of Versailles and Schönbrunn, showcasing artefacts from two prominent European courts of the eighteenth century, differ and converge in their museological approaches?* Through description, analysis, and review, the previous chapters have illuminated both the similarities and divergences in the museological approaches of Versailles and Schönbrunn.

Firstly, let us pinpoint their similarities. Both palace museums place a strong emphasis on imperial narratives, centering their exhibits around royal patrons and the political contexts of their eras. They elucidate the workings of the court and present furniture through the lens of royal self-fashioning, thereby underscoring the monarchs' significance and their influence on the palatial design and utilisation.

The exhibitions both showcase masterpieces of eighteenth century art, literature, and music through the lens of royal patrons. In this sense, the current exhibition structures at Versailles and Schönbrunn reflect a traditional narrative centred around the glorification of royal opulence and power, largely neglecting critical engagement with the broader historical, social, and political contexts of the time. By perpetuating a mythic idealisation of the baroque palace as a static symbol of imperialism, devoid of deeper political consciousness or alternative contextualizations, the exhibitions fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the palace's complex history.

Most palace museums work with similar objects: they present interiors with furniture, different fabrics, boiserie, the staging of which matters. In palaces like Versailles and Schönbrunn furniture plays a crucial role in completing the interiors, acting as essential props in the grand theatre of court life, as these pieces dictated movement, implied agency, and projected

the social status of their owners, often telling us more about the lives of those who interacted with it than portraits or paintings because these objects were used, touched, and integrated into daily life. Today, they remain as tangible witnesses to everyday activities and social hierarchies of the past.²³⁰

Versailles' grand collection of decorative arts, including all the objects presented the Hall of Mirrors, the King's State Apartment, and the Queens Apartments, is presented through a lens that accentuates royal splendour and the grandeur of the French monarchy. These rooms are adorned with elaborate furnishings, exquisite tapestries, and magnificent artworks, all meticulously curated to highlight the opulence and artistic achievements of Louis XIV's court. While the visual magnificence and imperial significance of these objects are prominently showcased, there is often less emphasis on the materials, craftsmanship, and historical contexts that influenced their creation. For example, the intricate details of the palace's French Rococo furniture and the lavish use of gilded mouldings symbolise more than royal extravagance—they also reflect the broader artistic trends and technological innovations of the time. The presentation at Versailles, while impressive in its display of imperial magnificence, tends to focus on the splendour of the monarchy rather than the broader cultural and historical influences that contributed to the palace's design and decoration.

Schönbrunn's east wing's impressive collection of objects from China, Japan, the Mughal Empire, and South America is framed predominantly through an imperial lens. The Chinese Cabinets, Blue Chinese Salon, Vieux-Laqué Room, and Millions Room are celebrated for their visual splendour and imperial associations, yet this focus neglects critical details about the materials, craftsmanship, and historical contexts of these objects, sidelining the significant global exchanges that shaped the palace's opulence. For instance, the exquisite Chinese lacquer and

²³⁰ based on Goodman/Norberg 2010.

porcelain, the intricate Japanese paper, and the exotic Mughal artworks represent far more than symbols of imperial wealth. They are artefacts of complex global trade routes and intercultural exchanges that played a crucial role in shaping European art and design.

Both palaces show visitors paintings, portraits in particular. Like in Versailles, Schönbrunn shows many royal portraits, which not only serve as visual records of individual monarchs and their contributions, but also encapsulate the symbolic power and cultural heritage of the dynasties they represent. Portraits give visitors a face and a name for royals, giving the royals some agency, individuality that the artisans, servants do not receive. This extensive display of portraits in the permanent exhibitions at both palace museums is a continuation of the imperial myth by perpetuating the grandeur, legitimacy, and continuity of the respective royal lineages. By prominently featuring these images, the palaces reinforce the narrative of rulers as primary and even singular actors in the palace.

In terms of presentation, both museums (primarily) employ period room-style displays to contextualise their objects, thus creating immersive environments rather than isolating individual items in a "white-cube" setting. This method of staging objects within their architectural contexts surpasses the conventional "period room approach", offering visitors a holistic experience of the interiors. By integrating objects within their original settings, both Versailles and Schönbrunn provide a richer sense of historical immersion and an engaging visitor experience. Such displays cater to the typical expectations of palace museums, where the seamless integration of architecture and artefacts enhances storytelling and fosters a deeper understanding of historical contexts. This approach not only aligns with visitor expectations but is also considered essential for a truly captivating palace museum experience.

While scholarship on furniture and interiors has evolved beyond the simplistic royal narratives into a more critical way of thinking, critical contextualisation and alternative, non-imperial narratives the interiors and decorative objects displayed in Versailles and Schönbrunn remain presented through criteria such as style, technique, authorship, and patronage, as favoured by traditional museology. This museological approach, while effective in highlighting the aesthetic and technical brilliance of the artefacts, as well as the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of palace interiors, falls short in conveying the social and economic contexts in which these luxury objects were created.

The immersive experience aimed at visitors often overlooks the rich, nuanced narratives of the social dynamics and daily lives of those who inhabited these spaces, but also the socio-economic structures of people, craftsmen, tradesmen, slaves and lower-class people who were also involved in the existence of the object. As we have discussed the exhibition of both Versailles and Schönbrunn so far, this chapter explores themes missing from the current exhibition strategies and how a more critical and contextual approach can enhance the understanding of these historical sites.

There are also differences in the strategies and structures employed at Versailles and Schönbrunn. Versailles employs a methodical organisation with distinct sections, each aiming to convey information with a different museological approach. The sections include an exploration of the imperial historical context, a showcase of portraits and selected furniture, a section with "period rooms" and a dedicated section for the Gallery of Louis-Philippe. This structured approach aligns with the educational goals of modern museums, particularly in the first section, which aims to provide general historical information about the time when the palace was built, underscoring Versailles' dedication to delivering a diverse and thorough educational experience.

The palace's narrative is clearly structured, with most rooms featuring thematic explanations and detailed plaques that discuss the history of individual objects. This method enhances visitors' comprehension and ensures a cohesive educational journey. Versailles could offer clarity and educational value through its well-organised narrative and informative plaques. The thematic focus of each room, along with detailed explanations, helps visitors grasp the historical significance of the objects and their role within the broader palace narrative.

In contrast, Schönbrunn eschews a formal exhibition structure, resulting in a more unilateral and fragmented presentation by presenting its rooms as they were just before the palace became a museum. This method emphasises an alleged authenticity of the palace as a living space, rather than an educational exhibit. The “period rooms” at Schönbrunn keep explanatory plaques and textual information at a minimum, focusing instead on maintaining the original ambiance of the palace after the fall of the monarchy. The absence of a coherent storyline and the limited number of explanatory plaques make it difficult for visitors to follow the palace's historical timeline and understand the evolution of its interiors.

This issue, discussed in detail in Chapter 5.4 on the permanent exhibition review, is exacerbated by the reliance on audio guides in certain areas, such as the Yellow Salon. The audio guides fall short of providing comprehensive details about the creation dates, materials, and artisans behind the furniture, leading to a less cohesive and informative experience compared to Versailles. Conversely, Schönbrunn faces challenges due to its lack of a clear storyline and insufficient communication about individual objects. This can lead to confusion and a fragmented visitor experience.

By presenting these spaces as static and unchanging, Versailles and Schönbrunn risk perpetuating myths about the grandeur and elegance of the elites who inhabited them, obscuring

the social, political, and economic realities of the time. Critical analysis can deconstruct these myths, providing a more accurate and complex view of history.

Therefore, both museums could benefit from incorporating new narratives and alternative perspectives into their exhibition spaces. By doing so, they could make the educational experience more democratic and aligned with contemporary scholarship. Introducing detailed signage on craftsmanship, on economic factors or on trade, could enhance visitors' understanding of the chronological and stylistic evolution of the palace's interiors. Furthermore, expanding the narrative to include broader social dynamics, cultural transformations, and the socio-economic context of the period would provide a more comprehensive and enriching visitor experience.

By addressing these points, Schönbrunn could rectify its current narrative disjunction and offer a more coherent and educational journey through the palace's history. Enhancing the clarity and structural coherence of its tour would elevate the visitor experience and provide a deeper understanding of Schönbrunn's historical continuum and cultural significance. Similarly, while Versailles already succeeds in some areas, continuing to diversify its narratives and integrating more inclusive perspectives would further enrich its educational offerings and ensure that the museum remains relevant and engaging for contemporary audiences.

In conclusion, while both Versailles and Schönbrunn share commonalities in their focus on imperial narratives and immersive presentations, their differences in exhibition structure, clarity, and communication highlight areas where each museum can improve. By adopting more democratic and contemporary approaches to their narratives, both museums can enhance their educational value.

Despite all of this, both palace museums continue to captivate visitors, drawing crowds who are undeniably impacted by the visual splendour of seventeenth- to nineteenth century

interiors.²³¹ While the beauty and craftsmanship of this furniture are universally appreciated and implicitly understood, scholarship has aimed to delve deeper than mere aesthetics, seeking to situate these interiors within the social and cultural contexts they inhabited and helped define, emphasising the interactions between people and objects that made these spaces meaningful.²³²

7. Conclusion

In this master thesis, we explored the exhibition strategies of Versailles and Schönbrunn, revealing both convergences and divergences in their museological approaches. Versailles employs a segmented, thematic presentation that enhances visitors' understanding through detailed explanatory plaques and a structured narrative. In contrast, Schönbrunn's fragmented presentation and reliance on audio guides somewhat hinder a comprehensive understanding of its historical context and the significance of singular objects.²³³

It has been shown that both museums predominantly present imperial narratives, focusing on the grandeur and political significance of their royal patrons. This approach, while reflective of the historical context and opulence of these palaces, does not align with contemporary expectations of museum practice. We have further retained that the distinct exhibition strategies of Versailles and Schönbrunn not only shape visitors' experiences but also influence their understanding of history and the significance of the artefacts on display. Versailles' cohesive and detailed approach facilitates a richer educational experience, while Schönbrunn's fragmented presentation may lead to a less comprehensive grasp of its historical context. These findings

²³¹ This seems evident by the high numbers of visitors of both Versailles and Schönbrunn.

²³² Hellman 1999.

²³³ Statement based on the scholarship of Brandl 2011.

highlight the critical role of narrative structure and contextual information in enhancing museum effectiveness.

Visitors receive a presentation of aesthetic beauty but lack a comprehensive understanding of the creation processes, artisan roles, and global trade routes that brought these objects to Schönbrunn. In the context of Schönbrunn Palace, deepening visitors' understanding of specific objects and rooms extends beyond mere appreciation of aesthetic grandeur. By broadening the interpretive scope to include international exchanges, visitors gain vital insights into how imperial identities were not only constructed but also influenced by global interactions. By concentrating solely on imperial narratives, Versailles and Schönbrunn may miss opportunities to engage with contemporary museum expectations that advocate for a more democratic and inclusive approach to historical interpretation. This thesis highlights the need for palace museums to evolve beyond traditional imperial-centric displays and embrace the principles of modern museology, which advocate for an enriching and comprehensive educational experience that resonates with a wide array of visitors.

As discussed in the literature review, chapter 2.5., modern museums are increasingly seen as active agents in the dissemination of knowledge, tasked with making complex topics accessible and engaging for a diverse audience. Museological theory emphasises the importance of inclusivity and educational outreach, encouraging museums to present a broader range of perspectives and contexts.

Contemporary interpretations should seek to provide a more nuanced understanding, shedding light on the complexities and contradictions inherent in the monarchy's rule. Alternative contextualizations, such as we proposed for Versailles i.e. the impact of the French Revolution, and broader societal and political contexts, and as we proposed for Schönbrunn i.e.

the impact of global trade and craftsmanship could enrich visitors' understanding of the objects in the palaces and their significance. By offering a more inclusive portrayal of the palace, shedding light on the lives of different social classes, political tensions, cultural influences, global connections, and evolving historical memory, palace museums can go beyond their current limitations. While acknowledging the magnificence of royal courts, historians and curators should also interrogate the inequalities and injustices that underpinned monarchical rule. Discussions might touch upon issues such as the exploitation of peasantry, rigid social hierarchies, and the suppression of dissent.

While modern scholarship on furniture and interiors seeks to contextualise these objects within broader social and cultural frameworks, the displays at Versailles and Schönbrunn largely maintain traditional museological criteria focused on delectability, visitor immersion, and patronage. We have shown that there is great research that visitors are not learning about, that is not displayed or communicated and this presents a lost opportunity for Versailles and Schönbrunn. Though effective in showcasing the aesthetic brilliance of the artefacts, this approach falls short in conveying the socio-economic contexts in which these luxury objects were created. The immersive “period room” settings often overlook the nuanced narratives of the people who also created these objects, including craftsmen, servants, and lower-class individuals.

All heritage sites have the role of recognizing and enhancing history to benefit present and future generations and celebrating human history which contributed to shaping the world as we know it today. Historically, baroque palaces were ultimately intended to visualise the absolutist claim to rule and order. Through its grand architecture, lavish furnishings, and rich historical tapestry, Versailles and Schönbrunn epitomise the mythic ideal of royal magnificence and prestige. It seems to be simply assumed that baroque palaces have always been and will

always remain a symbol of this royal power – but whether this must continue to be communicated to the public and whether a revision of the two-dimensional narrative would be possible is ignored.

While this thesis offers a detailed presentation of Versailles and Schönbrunn, it is important to note that our attempt at discussing overarching tendencies of palace museums is limited by the scope of available space within this thesis and the subjective nature of museum interpretation. Future research could explore how evolving museological practices and technological advancements influence the presentation of historical artefacts in palace museums more generally. Additionally, a comparative study involving other European palaces could further elucidate how different institutions balance more diverse historical narratives with visitor engagement.

In this thesis, we have proposed alternative contextualizations beyond the traditional imperial narrative for both palaces, proposed to be site-specific and relevant to the exhibition objects and interiors at each location. For instance, at Versailles, we proposed addressing themes of wealth and social inequalities that are evident in the palace's material interiors. This could involve exploring the lives of the artisans, servants, and lower-class individuals who contributed to the creation and maintenance of the palace's lavish spaces. By doing so, the exhibition would not only showcase the luxury and grandeur of the past but also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the social and economic dynamics at play. At Schönbrunn, we suggest highlighting the global connections represented by imported Asian objects such as lacquer, paper and porcelain. This approach can reveal the broader trade networks and cultural exchanges that influenced European art and design.

However, it is important to note that these proposed contextualizations are merely exemplary suggestions. They are not intended to be the only possible interpretations, or to replace the current exhibition in its entirety. In this way, the portrayal of eighteenth-century objects in exhibitions and cultural discourse serves as a window into a bygone era, inviting audiences to explore both its allure and its contradictions. By engaging with the complexities of the past, these presentations could encourage critical reflection on the enduring legacies of monarchy, revolution, and nation-building in contemporary society. There are numerous other ways to reinterpret and present the histories of these palaces. The goal of this thesis is to inspire a more critical and inclusive approach to museum exhibitions that goes beyond the glorification of royal opulence, offering visitors a richer and more nuanced understanding of history.

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