

The Impact of British Culture on the Development of Prussian Neo-Classicism

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In the second half of the 18th century British art and culture became the dominant influence over all Europe. The life-style of the British country-house was copied and artists and patrons alike indulged in Anglomania.

This article traces the British impact on the arts of two generations in the Prussian example and explores the underlying reasons behind the enthusiasm for British art and culture of the period.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1770s, Berlin had lost its place among the cultural centres of central Europe that it had occupied during the 1740s and 50s as a capital of Rococo. Yet within the span of only ten years, after the death of Frederick II in 1786, Berlin and Potsdam became a centre of a new style - Neo-Classicism - and artists like Langhans and Schadow created icons of neo-classicist architecture or sculpture. In these few years, the foundations were laid for Berlin to become one of the leading metropolises of international classicism in the 1820s and 30s. Without doubt this new style was British; it was the style of the Adams', of Wyatt and Holland, of Chippendale and Wedgwood, and of Capability Brown. Yet why did princes, patrons and artists alike fall for the charms of British culture in the second half of the 18th century?

British art, unlike the French that had dominated for a century prior, was not a royal or courtly culture, but that of an educated and rich set of landowners, nobles and bourgeois alike. This country-house culture had developed as a culture of opposition, opposition of the newly formed upper middle-class against all tendencies of absolutism. It was the culture of a "liberal concept of the world."¹ The core of the country-house opposition around Lord Burlington developed a complex system of liberal ideals, pointed against the court and against absolutist France.

Based on the theoretical writings of Pope, Borlینگbroke and especially Shaftesbury, the country-house culture formed a complex ideology in which the arts played a central part. Shaftesbury linked the standard of artistic production in a society directly to the standards of the political system when he said "Nothing is so natural, so congenial to the liberal arts, as the reigning liberty and high spirit of the people."²

Thus, art-patronage and correct taste became directly linked to freedom and prosperity³ and British art could become a language of opposition for all those who felt suppressed by absolutism on the continent. The less political freedom there was for them, the more the forms of British art, as such, became means of expressing opposition. Thus, the courts of Crown-Princes, exiled Kings or powerless minor German princes, became centres of Anglophilia and liberal ideas.

PRUSSIA AND FREDERICK THE GREAT

Let us look at the Prussian example in more detail to understand how this process developed.

The young Frederick, later called the Great, heir to an economically and culturally insignificant but militarily potent European power, had long suffered under the strict rule of his father. Thus, Frederick was an easy target to Anglophilia and indeed, England became in many respects the land of his dreams. He expressed this in a poem from 1739, when he was still Crown-Prince:

*On Freedom: The free spirit, honoured in England / In London at home, in Berlin a terror (...) /
He it is, from where comes all your great progress! (...) / O, home of freedom, over-happy land /
Where Art, spirit and truth is blooming....⁴*

It is obvious from this poem that Frederick understood freedom, as expressed in the British political system, in Shaftesbury's sense as the basis for the progress of the arts, sciences and the Enlightenment in Britain. Yet how did the Prussian crown prince come to know English philosophy on that level? It is, strangely enough, Frederick's Francophilia that opened the way for his enthusiasm for British culture. It is one of the truisms about Frederick the Great that he adored everything French and that he spoke and wrote better French than German; that he had mostly French artists and scientists at his court and academy. All this is true, but needs differentiation. He loved the French language, French literature and philosophy but hated and despised the French state; its governmental system with its courtiers and mistresses.⁵

The French things he loved were the opposition of France, notably the Enlightenment and its philosophers. It was his idol Voltaire, who had travelled in Britain during the 1720s and had aligned with the ideas of Borlینگbroke and Locke in developing his ideal of an enlightened monarchy, who opened young Frederick's eyes for the British ideals in politics and art.⁶ And it was not mere coincidence that Voltaire was talking about Liberalism to Frederick. Studying the sources, it becomes quite clear that Frederick was the target of a deliberate

act of propaganda from liberal circles in Europe. The progressive minds on the continent and in Britain had set out to use Frederick, the young, genial and easily impressed heir to one of the larger thrones of Europe, to realize a dream: the reign of a Patriot King! When his father Frederick William I lay mortally ill in 1740, Voltaire made sure Frederick understood what enlightened minds in all of Europe expected. He wrote in a letter:

*A philosopher reigns: ah! The century in which we are,
wanted it without doubt and did not dare to hope it;
My prince is worthy to rule the people.
He will enlighten them!*⁷

The reign of a philosopher - a *roi philosophe*, a patriot king, that was the ideal of the English country-house set. Hating absolutism, yet wary of and mistrusting the English parliamentarianism, the enlightened elite hoped for the rule of a king who shared their values. Such a king would be powerful enough not to fear the loss of power (the source of all corruption in democracy), yet be educated enough not to misuse this power for his personal advantage.⁸ And Frederick of Prussia was to be the first living example. The most demonstrative and most universally understood sign of Frederick's convictions, after his accession to the throne in 1740, were again the forms of the buildings he erected. The building of the Opera House in Berlin (Fig. 1A), in purest Palladian forms, heralded the reign of a *roi philosophe* throughout Europe. The source for its façade, as built by Knobelsdorff from 1740 on, was the design for Wanstead/Essex, as published in Colen Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus* in 1714 as a prototypical expression of the Palladian villa (Fig. 1B).⁹

As Voltaire was the philosophical influence on Frederick, so was the Italian Count Algarotti in matters of architecture and art. Like Voltaire, he was an international figure and had spent some years in England in the 1720s, where he became a devoted Burlingtonian. In his case we have direct proof of his determination to make the Prussian court the continental branch of Chiswick and to fight back the French and Baroque influence. In a letter to Lord Burlington of 1751 he writes:

*"Now it rests with you to show his Majesty (Frederick II) that you are
in this country the restorer of true architecture."¹⁰*

In consequence of the Palladian propaganda, a number of Palladian and Burlington designs were copied as fronts for Potsdam houses.

Yet it is also true that Frederick, in his personal sphere, always preferred the light Rococo designs to Palladian grandeur. It seems that while he understood Palladianism as the proper style for the official representative buildings of the court and the state, in his private rooms he thought it justified to enjoy a more relaxed style. This shows that he was far from being a puppet of his Palladian counsellors and kept an independent mind.

After the Seven Years' War, Frederick's idealism and belief in the concept of a *roi philosophe* weakened and gave way to the bitter and cynical mood that dominated the last twenty years of his life.¹¹ In these last years, he dropped all active interest in recent artistic developments. Palladian designs did not occur anymore and in preference he cultivated the Rococo of the 1740s up to the late 1770s; by that time an amazing anachronism.¹²

THE AGE OF FREDERICK WILLIAM II

The first wave of British influence on Prussia, deliberately directed by a group of interested anglophiles, faded away together with the dream of a patriot king.

As is the rule with all opposition, English liberalism gained in the same degree of importance to Frederick's opponents as he lost interest in it during the last decades of his reign, i.e. from 1765 to 1786. Arguably, all centres of the new anglophile and bourgeois culture in Germany in the last quarter of the 18th century, developed more or less in opposition to the aging Frederick II. There was, first of all, the court of the powerless Prince Franz von Anhalt-Dessau, who is famous for starting German anglomania in the late 1760s. His territory being traditionally dependent on the powerful neighbour Prussia, Frederick had forced him to marry an unloved princess after Franz had left the Prussian Army against Frederick's wish. After extensive travel in Italy and England, Franz returned into his native principedom determined to form this territory - not larger than a good sized British country estate - into a model of freedom, taste, prosperity and humanity by creating in Wörlitz a veritable English country house and the first consequent English Park on the continent - all by way of a shining example against Potsdam and Berlin.¹³



Figure 1A.



Figure 1B.



Figure 2.



Figure 3A.

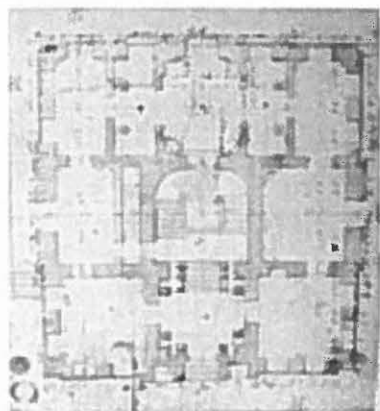


Figure 3B.

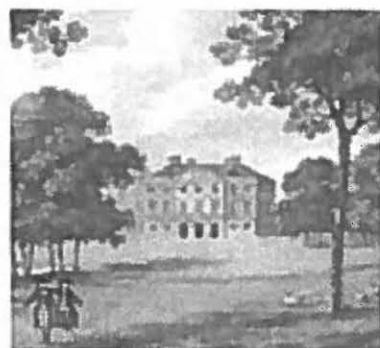


Figure 4A.

Just as Frederick had been in his day, his successor, Frederick William, was drawn towards the opposition by the Kings rude and cruel behaviour. The Princes Henry and Ferdinand, both strongly interested in English art, influenced him as well as a growing number of officials and suggested that reforms were highly necessary. But Frederick William had also quite personal reasons for despising the old and embracing the new English ways of society. As a young man he had fallen in love with a middle-class girl, whom he educated and taught and with whom he developed a deep, lifelong love and friendship, and with whom he had five children. Yet Frederick II forced the crown prince to marry some politically-desirable princess. Because in Britain, marriage between aristocrats and middle-class women had been common for a long time, Britain appeared for Frederick William as the land of 'hope and 'free love'. The reality is, in England, money had simply replaced birth as the separating force between lovers. Yet in the idealized version of English novels that spread across the continent since the 1750s (e.g. Richardson's *Pemela*), England became understood in Europe as the land of triumphant love and human equality.¹⁴ Together with his lover, Wilhelmine, he therefore developed, from the 1760s on, a deep and passionate Anglophilia.

When he finally became king, all was ready. Within a month he called the artists, who had silently cultivated the new style at the outskirts of Prussia, to Berlin. Thus, a more-or-less fully developed style was implanted into the Prussian capital and it quickly grew there to the highest standards.¹⁵

The most demonstrative sign of the new times, and thus the new aesthetic, was the redecoration of Frederick the Great's bedroom in his sanctity, Sans Souci. Soon after his death, Erdmannsdorff, the chief architect of Franz von Anhalt-Dessau, was called to Berlin to change Frederick's bedroom into one of the first neo-classicist interiors at the Prussian court (Fig. 2).¹⁶

As one example of the new lifestyle, let us look at the private residence Frederick William built for himself as a refuge from the formal palace in Berlin. This residence was neither *palais* nor *hotel*; it was a *country house* in form as well as in function. The king himself called it simply 'the new house'.

Built between 1787-1790, it is basically a red brick cube on the surrounding green of an English landscaped garden (Fig. 3A).¹⁷ The exterior looks not very British at first, yet that is only decorum; in function and layout it is distinctly British. This becomes obvious when compared to, the so very typically English, if not famous, country house, namely Wolterton Hall/Norfolk built by Thomas Ripley for Horace Walpole in the 1720s (Fig. 4A).¹⁸

Both houses show a ground plan with a circuit of rooms around the central, top-lit staircase, a pattern that had developed in England in the 1720s (compare the floorplans of Marmorpalais Fig. 3B and Wolterton Fig. 4B). Also of importance is the differentiation between the private living quarters at the ground floor, and the set of state rooms for entertaining on the *piano nobile* which is found in both houses. The Palladian aesthetic ideal, of a free geometrical form on the green surface of the lawn, led to the separation from the service wings. Thus, in Wolterton, as in Potsdam, the kitchens were consequently connected to the main house by an underground passage.

The concert room upstairs, designed by Langhans, with its two screens at either end to better the proportions (Fig. 5A) reminds us strongly of rooms by Wyatt or Adam from the 1760s Langhans saw during his journey to Britain in 1775 (e.g. the Dining Room of Landsdowne House, London 1765 by R. Adam, Fig. 5B). The numerous imported Wedgwood ceramics all decorating the mantelpieces, the furniture designed after Sheraton catalogues and also the books in the library, complete the picture of a medium-sized English country house.¹⁹

In it the king wanted to live free from etiquette as a well-to-do landowner would. He enjoyed walking with his dogs in the garden for hours in plain, middle-class dress rather than uniform. He took care of the plants in the garden and dined with a little circle of friends in a humble style.²⁰

CONCLUSION

So what lays behind such Anglomania as it was found in Prussia in the second half of the 18th century? The most obvious thing is that Britain was simply the most advanced and wealthy country of the time, and that it offered the ideal alternative to all those that were dissatisfied with the way things were going on the continent. The progress Britain had achieved in economical, technical and educational terms in its Augustan Age was simply stunning to continental visitors. For example, the speed and comfort of a coach journey from London to

say, York, was incredible to any other European.

Yet that does not explain why it was British art rather than engineering that was copied most ardently on the continent. Amazingly most Prussian artists were sent out to England by their patrons to study canal-building, iron-casting and cloth-spinning, yet, they came back with pictures and designs for gardens and country houses, i.e. with the image of a seemingly perfect style of living!

We have seen that the English country house culture was developed as a culture of opposition in England itself against the court. Thus the country house was an image, the projection of an ideal, a utopia of a liberal, prosperous, cultured and harmonic world. It was a political statement; a picture, not so much a reality.²¹

On the continent, it could even more successfully serve as a counter-image to the absolutist courts, as the country-house idea was implanted to the continent truthfully to the form but into totally different social and economic circumstances. Thus, an English park in Germany has always been something very different from the 'original' in Britain. The vast green spaces of an English park, with its clumps of trees, in Britain always had an economic purpose of grazing sheep or cattle whereas in Germany these parklands were artificially created and maintained without ever having any economic purpose at all. And thus, in a way, a German-English landscape is an even more artificial picture and expression of an ideal than any English counterpart.

But arguably these islands of a new beauty had to be created first as a promise to what the new times would achieve. Only then, economic, agricultural, technical and even social change after English models became possible. Thus British art came first and in its wake the bourgeois world of the 19th century.

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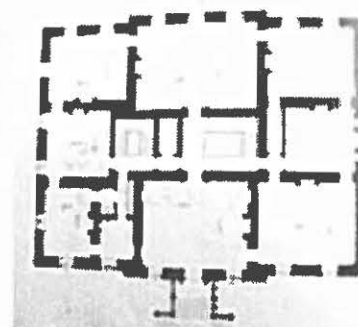


Figure 4B.



Figure 5A.

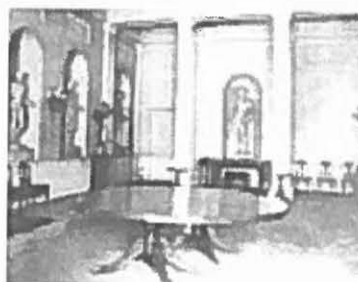


Figure 5B.