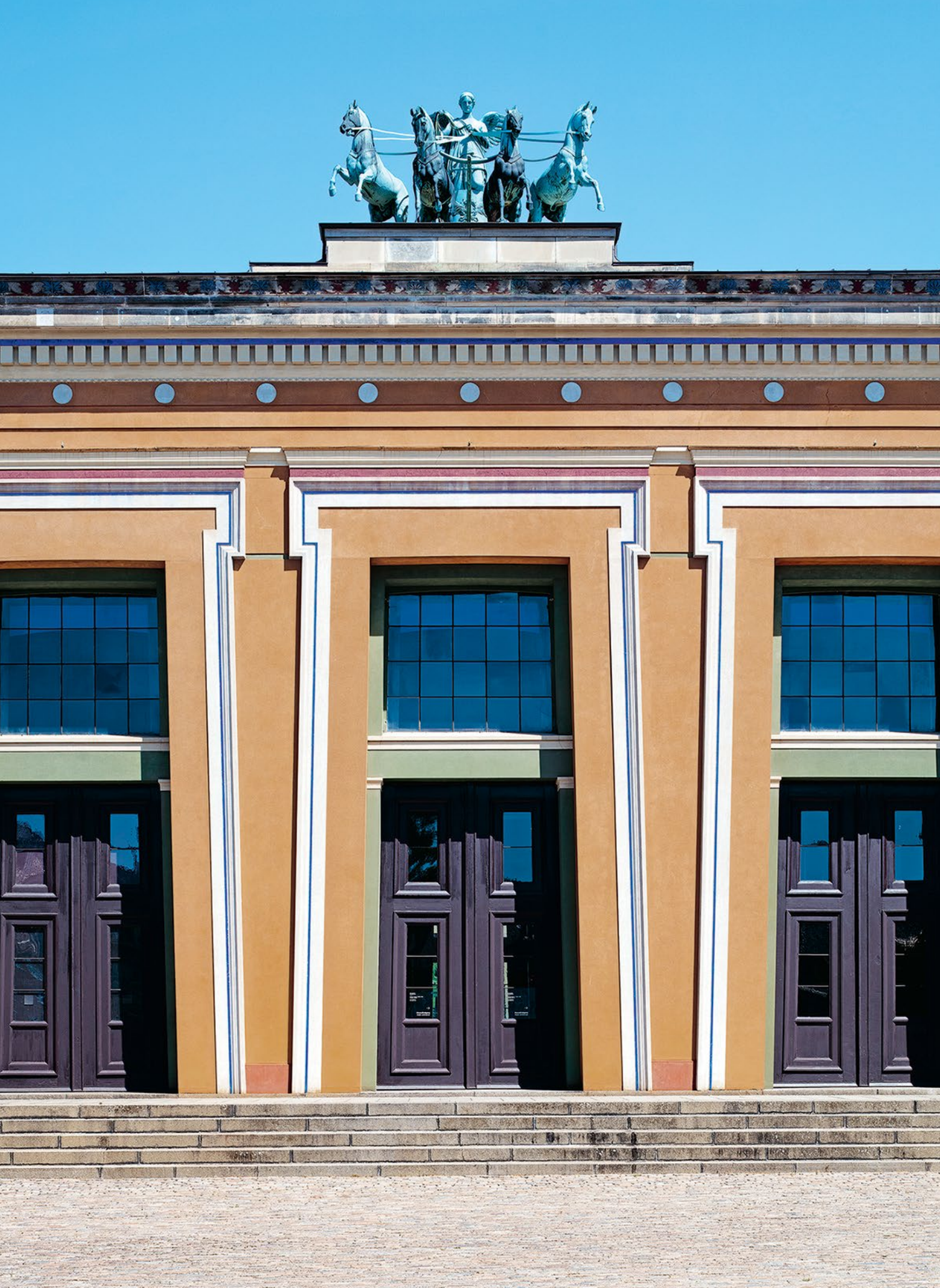


"The door! The door is an entire cosmos opened ajar."[1]

ARRIVAL

The Thorvaldsen Museum takes its name from by far the most celebrated of Danish sculptors: Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844). Each and every aspect of Thorvaldsen's long and international career is represented in the hundreds of plaster and marble sculptures housed in the Museum. The majority of these works were produced in Rome, Thorvaldsen's adopted city, and shipped to Copenhagen in several consignments as plans for the future museum took shape.

The Thorvaldsen Museum, seen from the forecourt.

Behind the building's impressively singular façade, there are also thousands of other artworks and display pieces: in all, more than 25,000 objects spanning close to 4,000 years of culture and art. Some of the objects are rather small, others of a considerable size. Some are made of precious metal and rare types of stone, others of clay, textile or paper. Every single one is fascinating, and many are unique: paintings, Egyptian urns, drawings, Greek vases, coins and medals, clay, bronze and glass utility articles used in Antiquity, rare books in their original vellum bindings, prints of topographical views of towns and countries, maps and much, much more. The list is long, the range extensive.

Alongside his work as sculptor, restorer and consultant in matters of art and archaeology, Thorvaldsen was quite the collector, but we have only limited knowledge about how he used his collections. We can draw a series of motivic parallels between a number of the objects and his own reliefs and statues, and we know that he occasionally allowed visitors access to selected parts of his collections. Thorvaldsen also promoted a number of young artists by purchasing their works, and continued to do so to the end of his life; in old age, having returned to his home town of Copenhagen, he would attend the annual exhibitions at Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi (the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts) and was so enthusiastic about some of the younger exhibitors – female and male alike – that he continued to buy new works for his collection.

The Thorvaldsen Museum opened in 1848. Today it receives approximately 75,000 visitors annually from all over the world. The public seems fascinated by the story of a Copenhagen youth who went to Rome and achieved international fame, and also by the Museum's special exhibitions and new exhibits. However, it is not only Thorvaldsen's life and works and collections that engross and inspire the public – the actual building in which his universe is housed does so too.

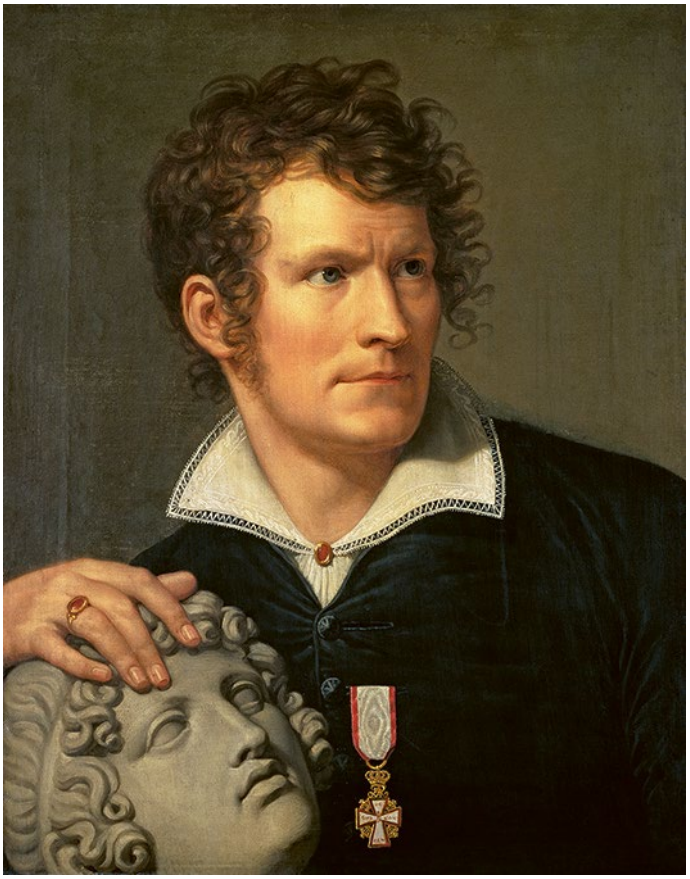
Considered purely as architecture, the Thorvaldsen Museum is quite exceptional. There is nothing like it anywhere else in Denmark or the rest of the world, and this uniqueness is one of many reasons that the building is listed as a protected national monument. It was the first purpose-built museum in Denmark – open and accessible to all – and was thus in its day representative of a wider cultural and political movement. The French Revolution (1789–1799) had ushered in public access to royal collections, while the preceding decades had seen extensive art collections in Oxford, Rome and London being opened up to the public, and during the 1820s large new museums were built in Munich and Berlin.

The Thorvaldsen Museum was designed by architect Michael Gottlieb Bindesbøll (1800–1856). It was his first major design project, and his approach to the building was of course inspired by the many conversations he had had with Thorvaldsen – discussions that took place when Bindesbøll, then a newly-qualified architect, had visited Rome in 1834 and again in 1836–1838.

Thorvaldsen and Bindesbøll both took a keen interest in the new archaeological studies of the day, and both had met a number of the German architects and patrons behind projects in Bavaria and Prussia – which had a direct bearing on the designs for the museum building in Copenhagen and its interior exhibition space.

Every single element of the building and its decoration, inside and out, is like an echo of Thorvaldsen's life and career in Rome – and beyond. Bindesbøll's design provided Thorvaldsen's plaster and marble sculptures with a bespoke setting. Before working on the museum project, Bindesbøll had travelled in Germany, France, Italy, Greece and Turkey, and he sketched what he saw, in either pencil or watercolours. He became well acquainted with the architecture and art of Antiquity and the Renaissance. During his travels he also became conversant with some of the most recent archaeological finds, and he followed the ongoing discussion about the use of colour in the temples and sculptures of the ancient world. One hot topic was the extent of the painting: had entire temples been painted or just selected areas of the building? What were the preferred colours? Were the colours as intense as some archaeologists and architects maintained?

When he started work on the museum to house Thorvaldsen's works and collections, Bindesbøll was a young man with very little practical experience as an architect. However, with his attitude, his open and observant approach to the history of buildings and his eclectic mix of qualifications for the job, Bindesbøll worked with exceptional confidence and a good helping of enthusiasm for experimentation. This is especially apparent when comparing his projects and buildings with those of his contemporaries in Denmark and its



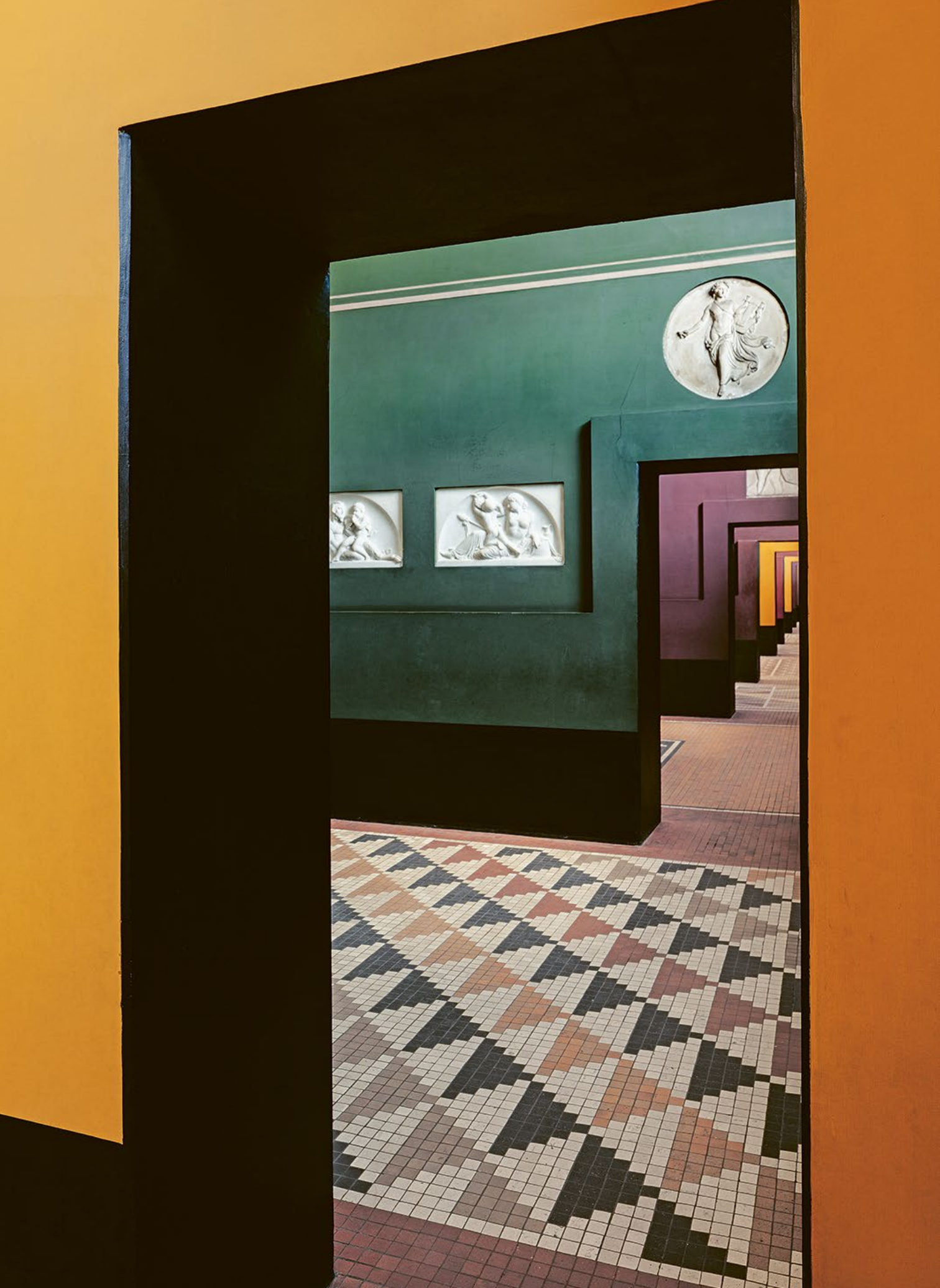
Rudolph Suhrlandt, *Portrait of Thorvaldsen*, 1810.

Constantin Hansen, *Portrait of Bindesbøll*, 1849.

neighbouring countries. As an architect and designer, he wanted to create new, remarkable and original interplays between space and surface, colour and ornamentation, texture and light and rhythm.

Throughout his career Bindesbøll remained inquisitive, imaginative and visionary. He was prodigiously hard-working and incredibly productive: the list of buildings and architectural complexes he saw to completion is long, spans many genres and covers just about the whole of Denmark, including the former Danish duchies of Schleswig and Holstein (Danish: Slesvig and Holsten) in the southern part of the Jylland (Jutland) peninsula, now northern Germany.

In addition to his particularly good eye for and ability to define an overall motif, to vary the details within that theme and apply it serially, Bindesbøll had a willingness to copy and expand, vary and colour patterns to a staggering degree in order to define the Thorvaldsen Museum 'look'. Another consequence of his working methods, his aspiration to find innovative solutions and his almost exuberant joy in visual narration, was his untiring addition of new elements to the museum project – and as work progressed, he would happily change elements that had already been approved and were already underway.

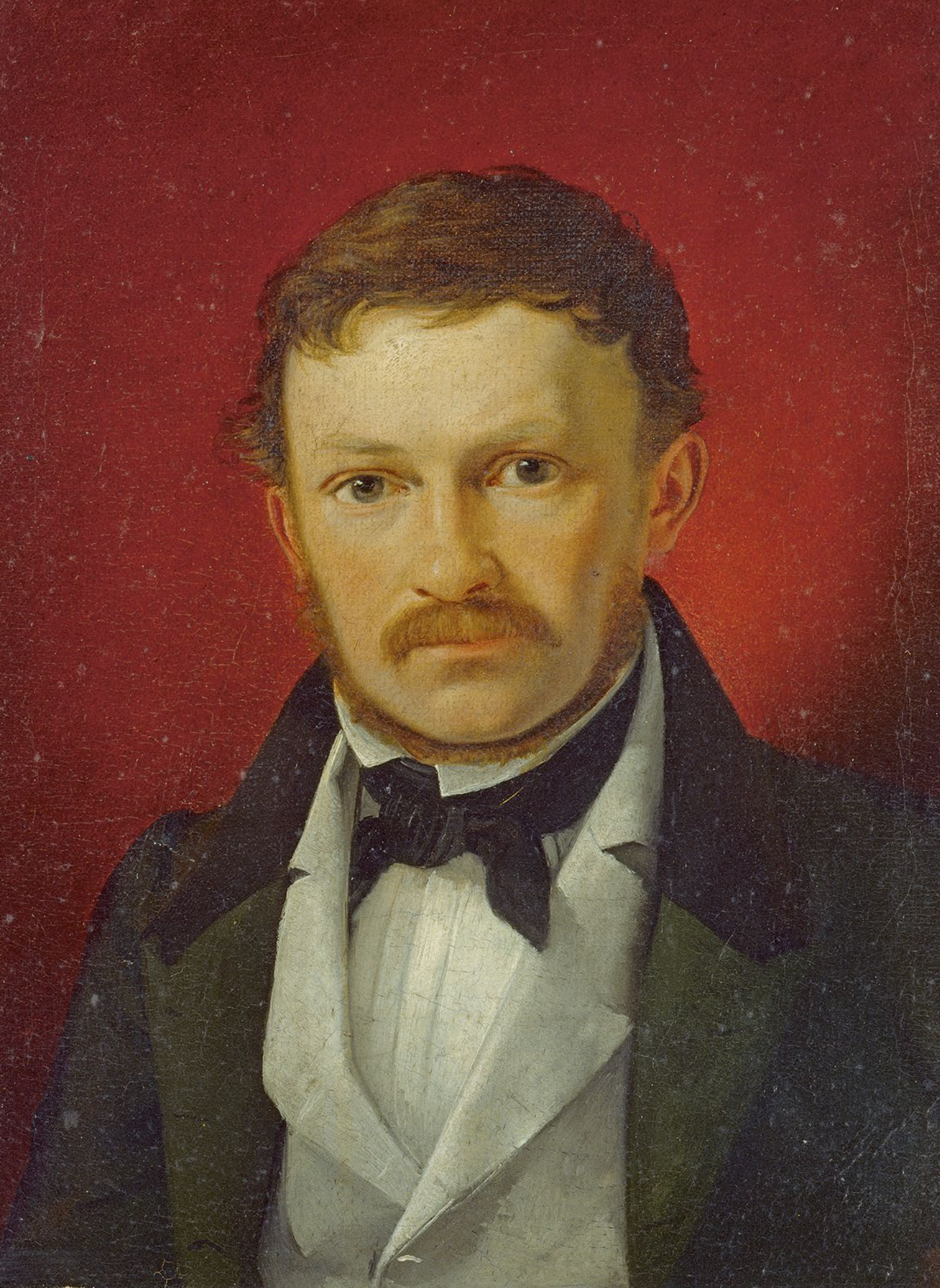


Looking from Room 11 towards Room 1, ground floor.

Construction work started in 1840, and eight years later the building was ready to open its doors to the public. At the time of opening, however, decoration of the Museum was still far from complete. It would take many years to finish all the ceilings, but the collections were installed and Thorvaldsen had been laid to rest in his grave in the inner courtyard.

During the early years of its existence, the monumental building with its saturation of colour and decoration was on the receiving end of much criticism – derision, even. Later, however, successive generations of architects and designers, plus a public with an interest in the arts, have time and again sought and found inspiration in the building and its abundant wealth of colour and decoration. Few other historic buildings in Denmark have been scrutinized and studied to such an extent as the Thorvaldsen Museum – it has been analysed, measured, drawn, painted, described and photographed. Bindesbøll's most outstanding work has lost neither its relevance nor its immediacy.

Generations of restoration architects, conservators and craftspeople have since carried on the work, and in 1941 Bindesbøll's building was listed as a protected national monument. The job of preservation and restoration follows the principles defined by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in relation to historical buildings and monuments. This safeguards the integrity of Thorvaldsen Museum's historical authenticity, atmosphere and aesthetic quality, right down to the tiniest detail. It is no exaggeration to say that the visitor has much to look forward to when stepping over the threshold and setting off to explore this *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the heart of Copenhagen.



BINDESBØLL: "... SO MANY MUSEUMS"

Ditlev Blunck, *Portrait of Bindesbøll*, 1837.

From the mid–1700s onwards, Rome became a critically important destination for artists, art collectors and archaeologists. The city's history, its monuments and art collections provided a wealth of inspiration and specimens to study. This was also true of Naples with its nearby ancient cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii, excavation sites since 1738 and 1748, respectively.[2] Compared to Rome, Naples was even a modern metropolis with an economy allowing for new builds, and many of the villas and other buildings constructed around 1800 were heavily inspired by the architectural idiom, proportions, patterns and colours of Classical Antiquity.[3]

Thorvaldsen was one of the many artists who travelled to Italy. He lived and made a career in Rome, and he was equally at home in the Scandinavian-German art community as in the city's international circles. A man like Thorvaldsen, having finished his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen, could look forward to a three-year funded stay in the South – conditional on having been awarded the Academy's prestigious Gold Medal, which gave access to a substantial travel scholarship. The honour and money were accompanied by a number of obligations, to which the recipients generally adhered. Very few infringed the terms of their contract with the Academy or risked damaging their relationship with the authorities in the arts sector back home.

Having led a hitherto sheltered existence in the relatively very small Copenhagen, life in the South was not always easy. Mostly the artists had no family, teachers, masters or Academy mentors at hand to help them. They had to stand on their own two feet, and thus establishing and nurturing close friendships with colleagues was of particular importance.

The actual journey southwards, and lengthy trips to ancient sights in Campania and Sicily, involved numerous challenges and occasionally even direct danger. Unsurprisingly, in Thorvaldsen's extant personal effects we find two pistols. Inadequate sanitation, poor hygiene and infectious diseases were also a constant threat. The cholera epidemic, which struck Rome in 1837, had an impact on everything and everyone. Life in the South claimed its victims, also among the many visiting artists and art enthusiasts; northern