



The Sculptor's Image around 1800: Bertel Thorvaldsen as a Public Figure (working title)

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Habilitation project.

There are innumerable portraits of the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844) in both visual and written sources. The starting point of this research project is the insight that these portraits do not draw a consistent picture of Thorvaldsen and his personality; on the contrary: the depictions occasionally differ so much that they seem to describe different persons. In my research project I explore the ways in which the public figure 'Thorvaldsen' was created and cultivated by himself and his contemporaries alike. These strategies and practices of image building were often closely linked to specific (interior) spaces: from the sculptor's studios and their various functions to the public character of his private apartments and the establishment of his own museum.

This research project is structured as follows: The first chapter entitled "Socialization and Positioning" explores the myths around Thorvaldsen's ancestry and childhood in Copenhagen, his social and geographical mobility, and his self-image as an artist. The second chapter is titled "Working Technique and Patronage" and investigates the development of the 'modern' artist, Thorvaldsen as an artist-as-entrepreneur, and the concept of creativity. This part focuses on Thorvaldsen's artistic career in Rome. The third chapter is dedicated to "Self and Public Images" and analyzes Thorvaldsen's painted and sculptured self-portraits as well as the numerous visual and written portraits by his contemporaries. The genius cult around Thorvaldsen is at the core of the last chapter, which is titled "Genius and Melancholy" and focuses on the sculptor's triumphal return to Copenhagen in 1838 after having spent more than 40 years in Rome. This part explores the process of planning posthumous fame in the form of Thorvaldsen's own museum (opened in 1848) and his late work, with a particular emphasis on his *Self-Portrait with the Statue of Hope* (1839).

The basis of this research project is formed by artworks (such as sculptures, paintings, drawings, prints, an early photograph, and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Thorvaldsen's Museum) and contemporary texts (including autobiographical statements and biographical descriptions in different types of documents as well as literary adaptations of Thorvaldsen's life and work). I therefore investigate the strategies and practices of image building primarily from an art historical perspective. In so doing, I deliberately use the term 'image' in its ambiguity: in the sense of pictorial



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and written portraits on the one hand and in relation to the construction of a public image on the other. On a broader methodological level, I draw on research and theories concerned with biography, anecdote, habitus (Bourdieu) and self-fashioning (Greenblatt), and the sociology of art and artists.

In sum, all of the above-mentioned topics of this habilitation project are investigated in relation to the construction and cultivation of Thorvaldsen's public image or, in other words, the 'making of Thorvaldsen' as a public figure. This issue has scarcely been addressed in research on Thorvaldsen, but is, I argue, crucial to understanding him as one of the first 'modern' artists.