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Deutsche Bundesbank: Regional office in Hesse

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Approaching from Taunusanlage, visitors to the Bundesbank's Frankfurt Regional Office somewhat unexpectedly encounter an interesting ensemble of buildings grouped around an inner courtyard. These are a former branch of the Reichsbank dating back to the 1920s, two 19th century villas and a post-modern office building that is outstanding for its architectural quality and the works of art that are integrated into the building. Located at the heart of Frankfurt's financial district, the Regional Office in Hesse performs important regional central bank services and monitors credit institutions throughout the state of Hesse. Another part of the ensemble is a Bundesbank branch; this is where cash deliveries are critically checked for authenticity and further usability before being returned to circulation. This new building was planned in the early 1980s to perform these different tasks. The specifications addressed to the submitting architects required them to design 'a functional yet beautiful building which is not intimidating, cold or snobbish and is attractive to work in'. In parallel with the architectural planning, a concept was developed for the art that would be integrated into the building, based on the chain of association that reads: 'Frankfurt - Goethe - Money'.

In a publication to mark the opening of the new building in 1988, Dr Alfred Härtl, President of the Land Central Bank, as it was then called, wrote, 'All of this blends together in the second part of Goethe's famous tragedy Faust. In Act One, Goethe has Mephistopheles make paper money for the cash-strapped emperor. What is more, no German-language drama holds such depth of thought or beauty of imagery.' Dr Härtl went on to write that, 'All the art we have had created for the new building is intended to encourage contemplation about mankind, the human spirit and nature, not only as portrayed by Goethe in the 18th century but also in terms of our world today.'



Regional office in Hesse, Taunusanlage, Frankfurt am Main, exterior façade of the new building

Architecture and art

The Bundesbank's Regional Office in Hesse is located between Frankfurt's railway station district and downtown Frankfurt. After the Second World War, this spot was home first to the Bundesbank predecessor, the Bank Deutscher Länder, then to the Bundesbank's headquarters. Today, visitors will find an ensemble of four buildings here: the former branch of the Reichsbank of 1929-32 - which is a listed building, a post-modern office building and two villas from the 19th century.

The villas and the historic façade of the former Reichsbank building are visible from the street. Behind these buildings a semi-public square, Taunusplatz, affords a view of the main office building. This new building, into which the Bank moved in 1988 and designed jointly by Jourdan, Müller, Albrecht and Berghof, Landes, Rang, is an award-winning example of outstanding architecture. True to the post-modern architectural concept that emerged in the 1980s, the architects draw on the repertoire

of architectural history to cite elements ranging from the Renaissance to Art Nouveau which they combine, at both a general and a detailed level, to create a unique formal language. The design is based on clearly defined lines and axes, symmetric structures and carefully chosen geometric forms.

Whereas most of the commercial banks that dominate Frankfurt's skyline take the form of high-rise buildings, the Bundesbank opted instead for a low-rise construction with an arched glass roof. The ground plan references the salient features of typical urban architecture: along both sides of a roofed 'street', eight 'houses' are positioned which in turn enclose a total of six inner garden courtyards. Gables, façade recesses and arcade openings take their cue from structures in the adjacent railway station district. The outer façade has a light sandstone facing and features brass-cased windows and differently shaped glass oriels, presenting a lively interplay of materiality and transparency.



The four buildings of the regional office in Hesse: the old buildings in the foreground, with the former Reichsbank's Frankfurt head branch (middle) flanked by the two villas and with the new building behind it



A view of the interior of the central hall with the arched roof

Inside, the heart of the building is the long, three-storey-high hall with an arched double layer glass roof. Visually, this hall is reminiscent of early shopping arcades and railway stations. Bathed in light and dotted with tables and chairs as well as indoor plants, it offers space to sit down and talk or relax. The Bank's staff and visitors can access the individual 'houses' behind the galleries on either side of the hall via a broad stairway and connecting bridges.

Inside the hall, the sandstone casing in front of the arcades evokes the façade. The openings to the gallery on the third storey have alternating shapes: rectangular with metal arcs spanning them, and geometrically tiered. In between, eighteen large reproductions of gold and silver coins from the former territories of the present-day state of Hesse and the city of Frankfurt have been inserted into the wall surface – reminders of Hesse's history and its mints, and the importance of the free imperial city of Frankfurt.

The arcade openings are also highly detailed, and underline the spatial impact of the interior façade, as do the walls behind the galleries, which are finished in contrasting light-green and red-brown stucco lustro. The supports have angular cladding and are referenced by blue and green mock supports with brass trimmings. Their capitals are matched, yet feature different brass embellishments, decorative drilled holes and colour elements. The floor covering, interspersed with strips of light-coloured marble and blue and green areas of tiles, serves to emphasise the layout of the hall.

The new building is not alone in displaying a variety of high-quality materials expertly fashioned by skilful and intricate workmanship: during the construction phase, renovation work was also carried out on the neoclassical Reichsbank branch building and on one of the historic villas. Thus, references may be discovered here, too. The architects' twin aim was to make each individual building a unique design in

contemporary style while simultaneously interconnecting the exteriors and interiors of all three buildings through stylistic cross-allusions.

At the suggestion of Professor Adolf Hüttel, the Vice-President of the former Land Central Bank in Hesse, the artistic features in the building's interior adhere to an overall concept. Following the classical model, the composition here comprises sculptures, paintings, mosaics and a water basin, each sharing a common theme: 'Frankfurt – Goethe – Money'. For Frankfurt, where Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was born in 1749, was a leading banking centre even then. Thus, it is probably no coincidence that, in *Faust*, Goethe's most important drama, the creation of paper money is one of the key scenes. On the other hand, one of a central bank's tasks is to bring notes and coins into circulation and control the money creation activity of banks.

Four artists were commissioned to depict scenes from *Faust Part Two*, which



Entrance rotunda with paintings: Siegfried Rischar, 'The creation of paper money', 1987, oil on canvas

deals with issues such as the importance of the monetary system in the state, the creation of paper money and the calamitous consequences of uncontrolled growth in money supply. For their partly room-related installations, Horst Gläser, Siegfried Rischar, Karl-Henning Seemann and Willi Schmidt portrayed their own individual take on these issues. A freestanding, bifurcated staircase of sandstone leads up into the three-storey-hall. The Bank's decision-makers chose to place the marble statue 'Helen' by the sculptor Willi Schmidt at the first stair head. Their humorous intention was probably to make staff members passing the voluptuous Helen on the way to their desks experience a sensation akin to the 'strength that leads to keen activity' that Faust felt on meeting the heroine.

On the walls at either side of the spacious entrance rotunda there are two painted friezes, each 13 metres in length, by Siegfried Rischar. Goethe's drama inspired Rischar's motifs in the eight panels that portray the 'Creation of paper money'. However, the artist deploys his own pictorial language, adding fantasy elements to figures in the tragedy.

The hall to the left of the entrance rotunda contains cashiers' desks and is also open to the public. Here we see two pairs of



Horst Gläser, 'Wall and water basin', 1985-87, mosaic © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020

bronze figures by Karl-Henning Seemann, which represent two scenes from Faust Part Two. In one, Mephistopheles the devil, disguised as a fool, persuades the emperor to introduce paper money; the other shows Pluto, the god of wealth, with one of the women from the populace voicing her criticism. Seemann models his larger-than-life-sized sculptures closely on Goethe's text, while at the same time taking the



The central hall: a detail of the interior façade

proportions of the architectural surroundings into consideration.

There is more artwork with motifs from Goethe's Faust on the end wall – which is just over five meters high – of the roofed inner courtyard. Here, Horst Gläser created a colourful mosaic comprising 29 fan-shaped ginkgo tree-leaves with various animals, people and hybrid creatures from Greek mythology. The water basin in



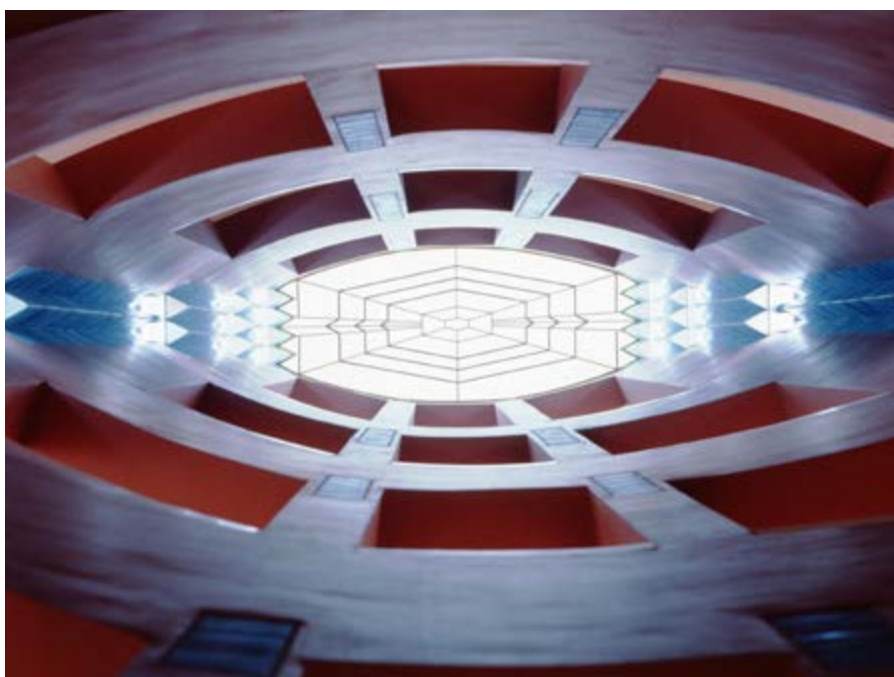
Staircase with statue: Willi Schmidt, 'Helen', 1987, marble



Historischer Saal (historical room)



Statues in the hall containing the cashiers' desks: Karl-Henning Seemann, 'Mephistopheles persuades the Emperor', 1987, bronze
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020



Looking up at the glass ceiling in the central hall of the new building



Notenbanksaal (conference room) with replica lamps and furniture



Looking into one of the six inner courtyards

front of this work shows, outlined in gold mosaic tiles, some ancient Greek and Roman gods and demi-gods, such as Neptune with his team of horses, Leda in the swan's embrace, and Nereid, who falls in love with Chiron.

The building of the former Reichsbank branch still contains the Notenbanksaal, the conference room in which the Central Bank Council, the policy-making body of the Bank Deutscher Länder, convened between 1948 and 1957. At a massive table in this stark and sober room, the policy course was plotted by which the D-Mark became a stable currency that was cherished at home and respected abroad. Under the Bundesbank Act of 26 July 1957, the Bank Deutscher Länder was replaced by the Deutsche Bundesbank. The Bundesbank continued to use this

conference room for its own Central Bank Council meetings until it relocated its headquarters to the north-west of Frankfurt in 1972. The furnishings of the old conference room (Notenbanksaal) have been preserved in honour of the historical significance of this room to the German monetary system.

By contrast, the design of the Historischer Saal or historical room is in keeping with the late 1920s, when the former Reichsbank building was planned and constructed. On the walls, geometric areas of blue, yellow, red and grey reflect Constructivism, an art movement of that time, and the Concrete Art of Theo von Doesburg. The lamps and furniture also date from that period or are faithfully reconstructed replicas. ●

Author Profiles

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