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Architectural History in Models?

How the Diorama Exhibition at the German Architecture Museum Narrates Human Settlement

Abstract

Heinrich Klotz, the founding director of the *Deutsches Architekturmuseum* (German Architecture Museum, DAM) in Frankfurt am Main, launched the new institution in 1979, driven by the vision to make the museum with its aspirational title a widely visible platform of architectural discourse. While the municipal museum opened in 1984 with large temporary exhibitions, the preparations for Klotz' permanent exhibition, *Geschichte der gebauten Umwelt. Von der Urhütte zum Wolkenkratzer (The History of Architecture. From Primitive Hut to Skyscraper)*, were already in full swing. The core of the models, showcased in display walls, was made in the studio of Ivor and Sigrid Swain, who built eighteen of the twenty-three miniatures. The panels, which have only marginally changed over the years, have an immersive effect through the small figures and painted backgrounds, which present everyday scenes to stimulate the museum visitors' imaginations. After providing an overview of the models from pre- and protohistory of human settling to the present, the article provides insights into the working processes of Klotz as a writer of an idiosyncratic chronology of building history and of the Swains as its model builders. Describing two selected examples and analyzing objects and sources, the author discusses the underlying model of historiography. The dioramas as peripheral media are interpreted as the result of an architecture-historical teaching tradition and Klotz' ambition to literally popularize his personal take on architectural history.

Keywords

Exhibition History, Media Theory, Museum History, Postmodernism, History of Settlement