

Ex Oriente – Isaac and the White Elephant



Ex Oriente is the title of a temporary major cultural exhibition in the historic heart of the city of Aachen / Germany inaugurated by the German president.

Main focus was the ambassador travel of a delegate by famous Europe-founder emperor Karl, to the Khalif of Bagdad in the 8th century. Highly sensitive, precious and also very valuable exponents arrived from all over the world, representing the three religions Christianity, Islam and Jewism.

Main point of the exhibition design was to create an aesthetically attractive design without superposing on the exponents. Special circumstances made planning a challenge: The exhibition took place in different spacial parts, being completely historical building substance. The whole area, except the dome treasury, never were meant to be exhibition space, which resulted in climatic problems such as light and humidity, which had to be solved, to protect the precious exponents. Furthermore the exhibition design answers the budget with a design which is reduced to the max: A basic design idea which was consequently followed.

Entering the exhibition, the world of ancient Bagdad welcomes visitors. A green wall with five pieces, screens and a picture, attached to it, symbolizes Islam, as green is its known colour and '5' associates the five pillars of Islam.

The coronation-hall is divided into two parts: first the bazaar, second the palace. Especially here there was the intention not to create a Disney-fun-park-lookalike-surrounding, but a very reduced frame. By the time of Karl, there was the dynasty of the Abbassides ruling Bagdad. Their traditional colour used to be black. Simple modular black boxes, positioned in different angles, creates an impression of a bazaar and clearly separated areas for several shops like textile, jewelry, spices and so on, light and shadow. Light and shadow were changing throughout the areas and several themes were presented in

a clearly fixed way.

The palace itself uses a layout-fragment of historical Bagdad, well-known as the circular city. Outside-walls interrupted by reflecting mirrors, make people feel controlled from the inside. Contrasting the black of the wall, stucco-exponents are dramatically lighted and a huge carpet symbolizes royal gardens. Entering the palace there's gold as colour of luxury and power. Showcases are free standing in the circular space but stringent leading towards a fixed centre point inside the cubic palace itself. Walls here are again thicker and higher than all others, to demonstrate the absolute power. Lights are heading towards the centre point on the ceiling, which means connecting world and religious power. The very interior of the cube is shimmering gold, integrating elephant-statues and a chess-game.

Throughout the exhibition, visitors would find information screens between the showcases. Contrasting historic exponents such as medieval bibles, textiles, ceramic, bones with their certain showcase-conditions, visitors would be 'disturbed' by modern art by today's artist.

The cloister integrates jewish culture exponents – its colour appears to be blue. Several contemporary modern art pieces – as in the other parts of the exhibition – are integrated, dealing here with jewish diaspora and other cultural topics.

The following dome-treasury integrates some more valuable exponents.

Being the cultural heart of Aachen e.g. European heritage around the throne of Karl, the cathedral, integrates Christianity. It leads to the final part of the exhibition, where travelling is over – the ambassador bringing Harun's presents, returned to Aachen. The elephant has reached its final destination. By the way – he was one of Harun's presents to Karl – that's why he leads way through the exhibition.

- + Client: City of Aachen
- + Design: 100% interior Sylvia Leydecke
- + Photography: Karin Hessmann
- + Country: Germany





