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WORLD MONUMENTS FUND AND ÖSTERREICHISCHE GALERIE BELVEDERE CELEBRATE COMPLETION OF CONSERVATION PROJECT AT UPPER BELVEDERE PALACE, VIENNA

World Monuments fund and the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere recently announced the completion of a €425,000 conservation project at the Upper Belvedere Palace in Vienna, Austria. Over two years conservators addressed the needs of the ground floor hall or *sala terrena* and grand staircase of the palace.

The Upper Belvedere Palace was designed by Johann Lucas von Hildebrandt for Prince Eugene of Savoy and completed in 1723. Originally, the *sala terrena* was built as a large flat-arched space with open arcades to the garden, but in the winter of 1732–1733 structural problems required its replacement with nine bay vaults buttressed by four structural telamons. Hildebrandt ingeniously planned the grand staircase to take advantage of the ground floor, linking garden and castle together. The scenes from the life of Alexander the Great lining the staircase were meant to inspire visitors to contemplate the virtuous deeds of Prince Eugene. The decorative plasterwork of the Upper Belvedere was executed by Santino Bussi (1664–1736), the leading stucco artist of his generation. His most representative pieces are the staircase reliefs, completed in 1723.

The imperial art collection was moved to the Upper Belvedere after 1776. The grand staircase and the *sala terrena* were enclosed with glass doors at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century the main entrance was relocated from the south side to face the garden, reducing the visual impact of the grand staircase. Bomb damage during the Second World War followed by inadequate restorations affected the artistic integrity of the space for decades.

In November 2009 the project to conserve the interior to its original appearance began. Conservators from the studio of Thomas Mahr and Christian Gurner carried out exhaustive studies and worked closely with the Austrian Bundesdenkmalamt (federal monuments office). Their studies showed that the original *sala terrena*—including the meticulously moulded ceiling, the ornamental walls, and the massive sand-lime brick telamons—had a brilliant white hue, not the two-toned finish many previously assumed. Tests on the stone of the grand staircase revealed traces of Venetian White, an oil colour prized in classical Antiquity for its opacity and its semi-

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gloss sheen resembling marble. The conservators' studies confirmed the theory that Hildebrandt and his patron, Prince Eugene of Savoy, sought to distinguish themselves from the secular architecture of their day, whose stucco work was typically colourful. After removing the layers of dust and dirt, the conservators applied a new coat of lime wash. They then coated the putti carrying the lanterns with white lead to approximate the original grand staircase, which according to historical documents had a white lime finish.

World Monuments Fund

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Press Inquiries:

Ben Haley, World Monuments Fund, +1 646-424-9582, bhaley@wmf.org.