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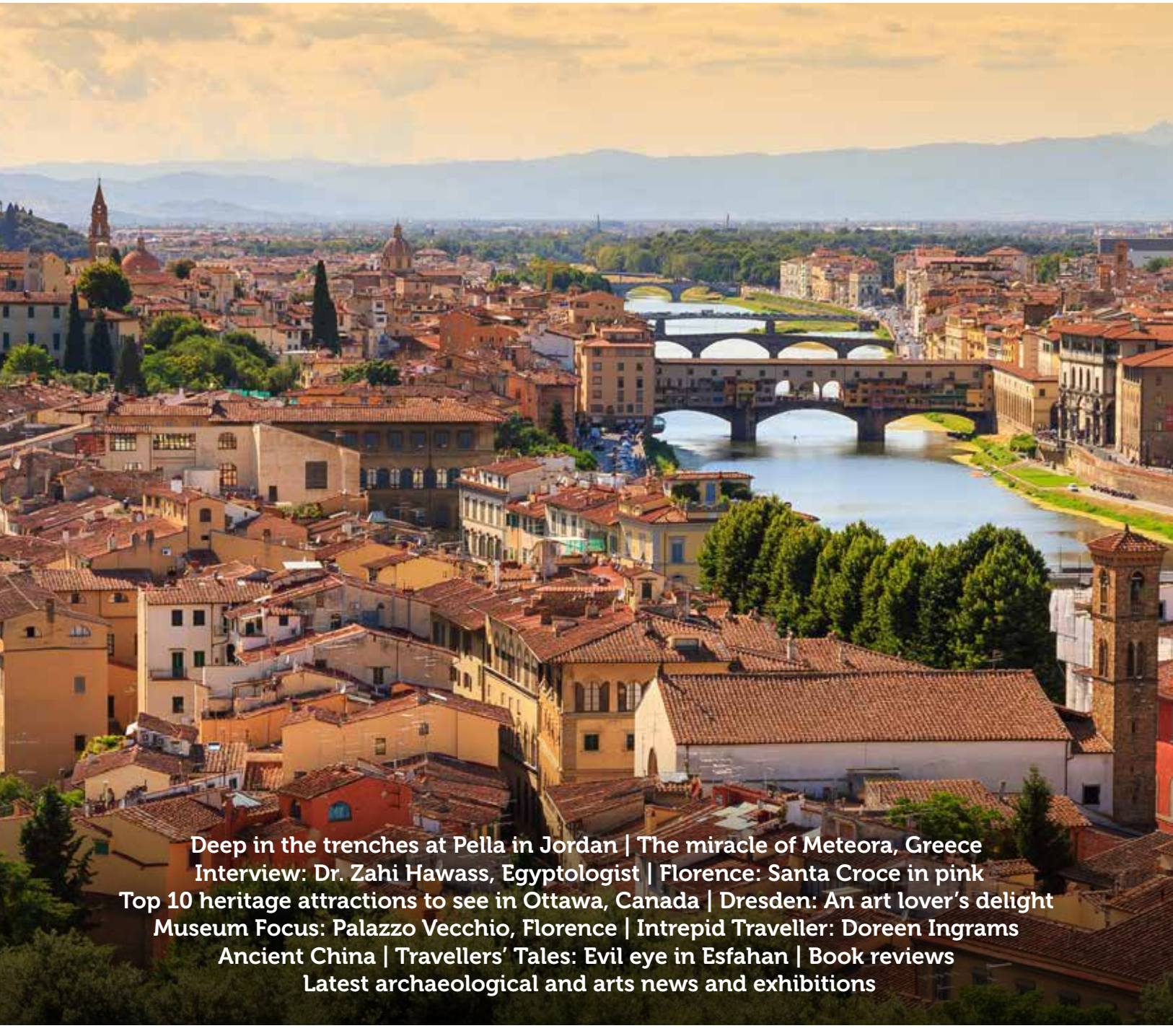

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Dresden

An art lover's delight

Known for being destroyed during World War II, Dresden is a city that has literally risen from the ashes. But it always had a history full of art and culture, as historian **Tom Duncan** explains

The year was 1747 and Europe was almost at the end of the War of the Austrian Succession (1740 – 1748). Italy had long been emptied of "Grand Tourists" discouraged from travelling in Europe due to the unsettled conditions. Not unnaturally, this was a disaster for those artists who made a living from providing visitors with paintings, particularly the newly fashionable *vedute* or view paintings commissioned by visitors, particularly to Venice and Rome.

Antonio Canaletto (1697 – 1768), the most famous living painter of views, was already in London, where he would work from 1746 to 1756 (with brief periods spent back in Venice). His nephew, student and eventual peer as a painter, Bernardo Bellotto (1720 – 1780), also left Italy but headed in a different direction. In 1748 he accepted an invitation from one of Europe's genuine 'connoisseur' rulers, Frederick-Augustus II, Elector of Saxony, to work in Dresden, capturing the beauties of his capital city. It was an arrangement which both men came to regard as a total success and no doubt so too have many others, as his paintings of the city and the surrounding landscapes have inspired art lovers ever since.

What drew Bellotto to Saxony and its capital, Dresden? The House of Wettin ruled Saxony for centuries, one of the seven German princely houses that enjoyed the hereditary right to elect the Holy Roman Emperors – a privilege conferred in 1423 when they were created Dukes of Saxony. The family had come to prominence in the tenth century and hailed from the town of Wettin in Saxony-Anhalt, hence their name. By the fifteenth century they had settled at Wittenberg, where they would become powerful rulers, including protectors of Martin Luther.

The Wettin family ruled various parts of northern Germany in Medieval times. They acquired territories that included the eastern March (the Ostmark), the March of Meissen, the Landgrave of Thuringia and most importantly, the Duchy of Saxony.

In 1485 the family divided into two ruling branches, a situation given legal status by the Treaty of Leipzig concluded following various territorial disputes after the death of Elector Frederick II in 1464. The Ernestine branch was henceforth based at Wittenberg, while the Albertine branch, originally based at Meissen, eventually made Dresden their capital where they remained for several centuries.

The senior, Ernestine, branch played a predominant role in the Protestant reformation (for instance in its protection of Martin Luther), and it produced several cadet branches, particularly the Saxe-Coburg and Gotha line based

Previous pages: View of the old city of Dresden along the River Elbe

Above: Dresden in 1521

Above: Frederick Augustus I, Elector of Saxony, King Augustus II of Poland, known as 'Augustus the Strong', c.1718

Right: Bernardo Bellotto, detail of Self-portrait as Venetian ambassador. *National Museum in Warsaw*

in Thuringia. This is the branch of the family that provided several nineteenth-century monarchies ruling Belgium, Portugal, Bulgaria and the United Kingdom, through the marriage of the young Queen Victoria to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha.

The Albertine branch, while originally less prominent, ruled most of Saxony and would eventually play a significant role in Polish history. The Habsburg Holy Roman Emperors preferred this Albertine branch of the family and in 1547 the Wettin's right to participate in the election of new Emperors was transferred from the Ernestine to the Albertine branch, where it remained until 1806. This is what conferred such importance on this branch of the family, leading to the development of Dresden as a fine capital, suitable for displays of royal pageantry and munificence, a must for all middle and upper level dynasties in previous centuries.

By the time Bellotto arrived in Dresden, he found a remarkable state ruled in a most unusual way. By that date, the ruler was a Catholic, yet his ancestors, until a generation before, had been one of the firmest supporters of the Reformation and had given Martin Luther aid and comfort. Almost everyone in Saxony was firmly Lutheran but the very few Catholics who lived there had no civil or political rights whatsoever. So, we have to ask, why did Bellotto move to Dresden? The answer lies in a combination of magnetism and opportunism.

The Saxon lands were ruled at the turn of the seventeenth century by a charismatic leader, Frederick-Augustus I, known as 'Augustus the Strong'. He was both hereditary Elector of Saxony and the elected King of Poland. Poland had an unusual system by which from 1659 its hereditary princes elected their monarchs until the country ceased to exist when partitioned for the third and final time in 1797. If a foreign candidate seemed likely to keep the usual enemy, Russia, at bay, then an outsider was elected. Such a candidate was Augustus the Strong, one of the great generals of his time. To gain this second role, the Lutheran

(Image: Deutsche Fotothek, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Elector converted to Catholicism, an astonishing decision given his family's history.

For us, Augustus' claim to fame lies in his role as a great patron of the arts. He began the transformation of Dresden and founded the famous porcelain works at Meissen. He and his successors built or altered some remarkable country palaces at Pillnitz, Moritzburg and Gross-Sedlitz. He collected magnificent works of art – all aspects of which can be seen in the city's wonderful museums, treasuries and in the palaces which dot the surrounding countryside.

Augustus' son, Frederick-Augustus II, who was also elected King of Poland as Augustus III, continued his father's lavish patronage of the arts, inviting Bellotto to Dresden. Thus, the artist memorably captured the city's evolution in a series of limpid paintings and these mostly remain in the city's Gemäldegalerie.

When Bellotto left Venice he knew that his native city, indeed anywhere in Italy, could not provide enough work for both him and his uncle, Canaletto. He had travelled extensively throughout northern and central Italy during the 1740s and when the King-Elector's invitation arrived, it offered a solution to the problem of where he might find suitable employment. He spent almost twenty years in the city, with the exception of an extended period visiting Vienna and Munich when Dresden was besieged by Frederick the Great during the Seven Years' War, 1756 – 1763. Bombarded by the Prussians, the consequent devastation was captured by the artist in several paintings created shortly after his return, a presage of what would engulf the city in 1945.

Bellotto eventually left Dresden for good in 1767, when he stopped off in Warsaw on his way to St Petersburg. It was a journey he never completed as he stayed to capture the Polish capital, just as he had Dresden, and where he eventually died.

Nineteenth-century Dresden

Dresden in the nineteenth century was no less interesting. During the Napoleonic period the

(Image: Joyfull/shutterstock)

Left: View of Dresden in 1945 from the town hall (Rathaus) over the destroyed city.

Above: The stunning Semper Opera House

Wettin dynasty became Kings of Saxony in 1806. Their change of title was a direct consequence of the abolition of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 by Napoleon, when the family's role as 'Electors' was converted into that of Kings, - an 'upgrade' awarded to several other Princely Houses, such as Bavaria. They continued to rule until the revolutions of 1918 which led to the abolition of all the German kingdoms and principalities.

At this time, the city enjoyed a prominent role in the spread of the Neo-classical style in architecture with new public buildings, such as the Semperoper. The 'Opera House' was designed by Gottfried Semper (1803 – 1879) who was given the commission in 1838. Here, some of the greatest names in German Romantic Opera premiered many now famous works, not least Carl Maria von Weber with *Der Freischütz (The Marksman*) and Richard Wagner with *Der Fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*); still frequently performed at the Opera House today.

Re-constructed twice after a fire in 1869, and the bombing of 1945, the exact replica of the original building was reopened on 13th February 1985, forty years to the day after its destruction by the Royal Air Force.

The musical tradition of Dresden is an extensive one, with the boys' choir of the Kreuzkirche existing since the thirteenth century. They perform Vespers every Saturday in the Church of the Holy Cross, a Lutheran church and the largest church building in the Free State of Saxony. In recent times Dresden has taken on an added layer of significance due to its destruction during World War II and its rise, phoenix-like, from the literal ashes and bears remarkable testament to the triumph of human forbearance over adversity. This too, adds a poignant descant to any visit to this city of architecture, art and music.

Exploring the city

The centre of Dresden, the Altstadt, offers a remarkable overview of the city's history. It is full of fine historic buildings, many destroyed during

(Image: By Mikolaj Tomczak/shutterstock)

(Image: CC BY-SA 3.0)

World War II and left derelict for much of the communist period. These have now almost all been fully restored and offer visitors once again a city which its creators, Augustus the Strong and his son, Frederick-Augustus II, would recognise.

The only way to begin to explore the Altstadt is on foot, starting at the ceremonial courtyard of the Zwinger Palace, the work of the fine architect, Matthäus Daniel Poppelmann, commissioned by Augustus the Strong. A 'Zwinger' is effectively a bailey - the space between two walls built for defensive purposes. In contrast, the magnificence of Poppelmann's Baroque courtyard is offset by the severe nineteenth-century appearance of the Semper Gallery wing, designed by Gottfried Semper and constructed from 1847-1854, which closes one long side of this great space.

The Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister (Old Masters' Gallery), housed in Semper's wing, is one of Europe's greatest collections of paintings, and it includes Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, not to mention a truly stunning group of view paintings of Dresden and its surroundings by our friend, Bellotto. There are around 750 paintings collected by Augustus the Strong and Frederick Augustus II and these works were saved for posterity during the war when the museum was closed and the paintings put into storage. When Dresden

Above: The Zwinger Palace includes the Meissen and Oriental Porcelain Collections, and houses the Old Masters' Gallery in the Semper Wing

Left: The Hofkirche at night

Right, top: The Munzgasse in Neumarket

Right, bottom: The Albrechtsburg Castle and Cathedral in Meissen

(Image: Kolossos, CC BY-SA 3.0)

was captured by the Red Army, the pictures were removed to Russia but the majority of the collection was returned to the reconstructed Semper Gallery in 1955.

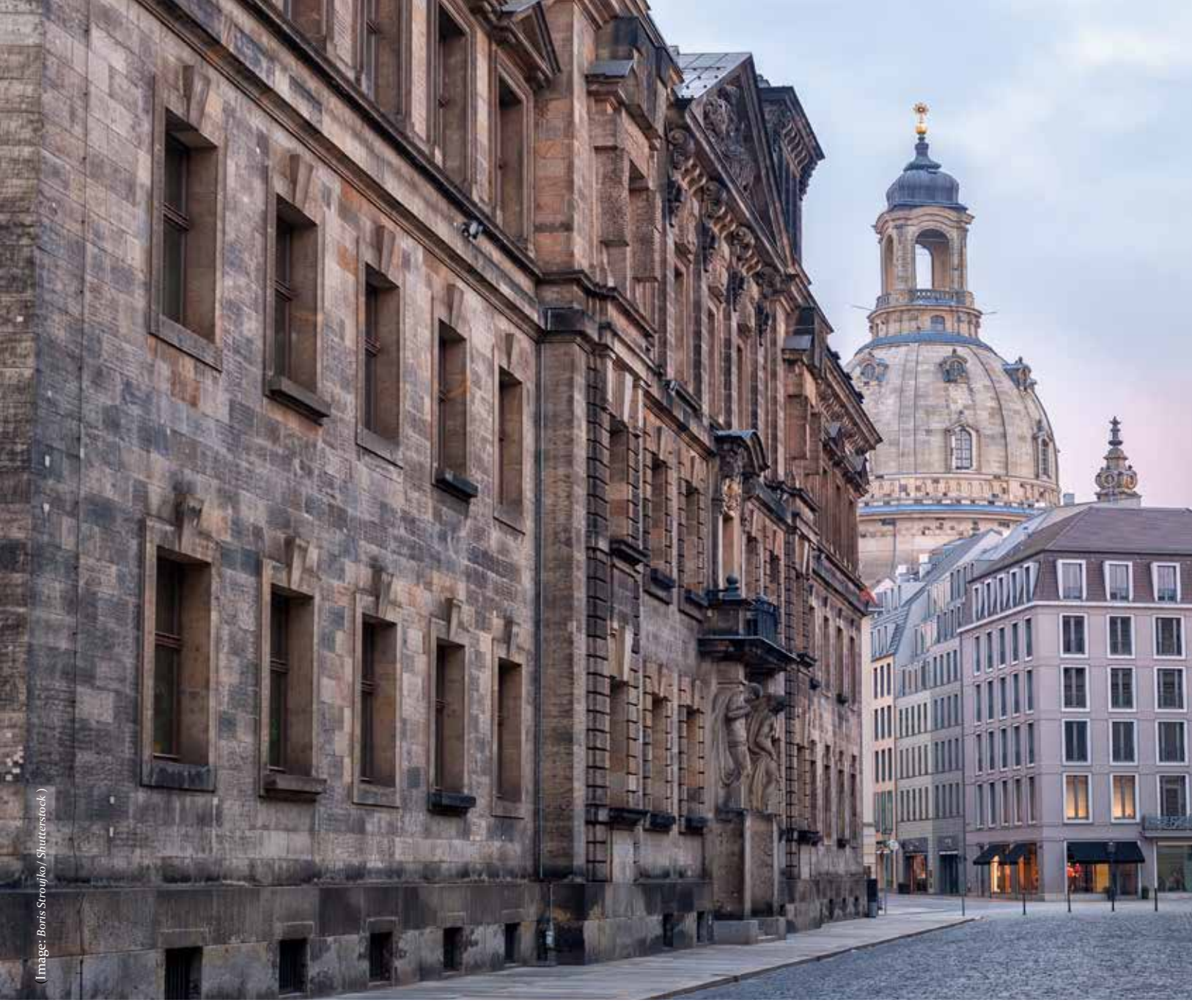
Elsewhere in the Zwinger Palace complex find time to visit the fabulous Collection of Meissen and Oriental Porcelain, the Porzellansammlung, which even if the prospect leaves you cold, persevere due to the quality of both display and contents! There are around 20,000 artefacts – in addition to magnificent pieces of Meissen, there are also fabulous pieces of Chinese and Japanese porcelain. These include the 151 Chinese lidded vases known as the '*Dragoon vases*'. In order to obtain these vessels from Frederik William I (father of Frederick the Great) in 1717, Augustus the Strong offered in exchange a 600-strong 'dragoon' regiment of cavalry!

Just across from the Zwinger complex, close to the River Elbe, you will find the extraordinary Hofkirche, the Italianate court chapel built by Frederick Augustus II to serve as a Catholic chapel, much disliked by the city's Lutheran population. Splendidly restored, it contains one of the city's finest organs, the last work of Gottfried Silbermann, still much used for regular recitals.

The city's palaces and museums are no less enticing. The Residenzschloss, or Royal Palace, is a modern recreation of the mostly Renaissance building lived in by the Wettin Electors and Kings over many centuries. Originally a fortress, transformed after 1547 into a Renaissance castle; under Augustus the Strong it was magnificently redesigned with Baroque features, then at the end of the nineteenth century a neo-Renaissance style renovation celebrated the 800-year anniversary of the House of Wettin. Burned to the ground during the night of the bombing of Dresden in 1945, it has since been entirely reconstructed. The quality of the restoration is amazing, as is the justly famed historic Green Vault where can be found, magnificently displayed, some truly astonishing items from the Wettin family's Treasury.

Greatest of these is the extraordinary jewelled treasure of *The Court of the Great Mogul Aureng-Zeb*, a masterpiece of craftsmanship made to represent the Court of Delhi on the birthday of

(Image: Leander Wattig, CC BY 2.0)



(Image: *Boris Stroujko/ Shutterstock*)

Grand Mogul Aureng-Zeb. Made between 1701 – 1708 by Johann Melchior Dinglinger, Augustus the Strong's court jeweller (with help from Dinglinger's brothers, as well as numerous assistants), it comprises 137 gold and enamel figurines encrusted with over 5,000 jewels and is quite simply breathtaking.

A defining feature of Dresden, of course, is its position in a valley on the River Elbe, the valley itself formerly a World Heritage Site, though one contentiously no longer due to unsightly development taking place on its banks. A pleasant trip is to take one of the many boats which ply up and down the River Elbe to Pillnitz where Pöppelmann created a pair of 'mirror' palaces facing each other, dramatically looking out over the river. His inspiration is said to have been Mughal India but the 'orientalising' flavour of the buildings is eclectic. The surrounding park is a delight.

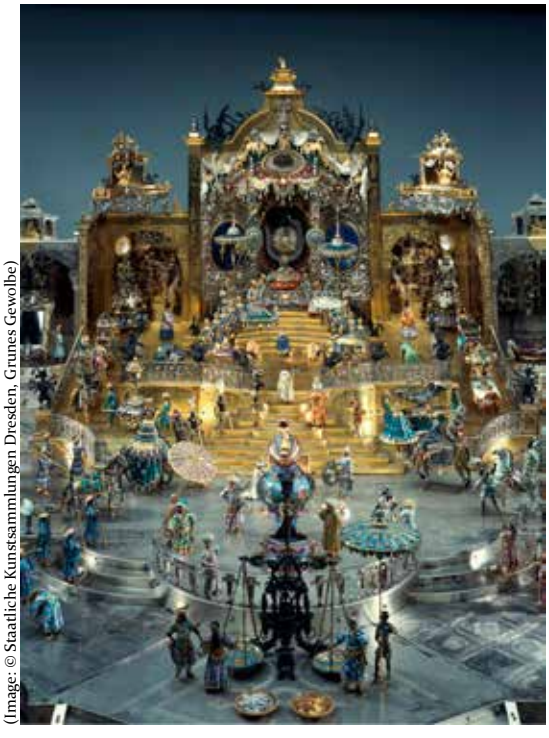
The river is a subject captured by Bellotto in his paintings *Dresden from the Right Bank of the Elbe, above the Augustus Bridge* and *Dresden from the Right Bank of the Elbe, below the Augustus Bridge* painted in 1747 and 1748 respectively. These works were invaluable in the rebuilding of Dresden after the devastation of this wonderful city in the Second World War and can be seen in the Gemäldegalerie.

If taking time outside the city, a further excursion to Moritzburg would delight anyone. Here the original ducal hunting lodge of 1542 was almost completely replaced by the present magnificent palace for Augustus the Strong, designed by Pöppelmann. After a wander through its delightful grounds, why not return to Dresden

Above: Street in the Aldstadt

Right: Detail of the exquisite The Court of the Great Mogul Aureng-Zeb *by court jeweller Johann Melchior Dinglinger*

"In recent times Dresden has taken on an added layer of significance due to its destruction during World War II and its rise, phoenix-like, from the literal ashes"



(Image: © Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Grunes Gewolbe)

using the Lossnitztalbahn, a charming narrow-gauge railway.

Finally, no trip to Dresden should exclude a day trip to the delightful town of Meissen. It has a well-preserved and fine Medieval centre and not far away is the famous Meissen Porcelain Museum and Factory. The importation of porcelain from China by the European ruling houses had been known since the early thirteenth century, so Augustus the Strong commissioned research into the secrets of its manufacture. This was successful, and the first porcelain was made in 1710 under Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus and then Johann Friedrich Böttger – with the first white porcelain produced finally in 1713.

The laboratory to create this porcelain was housed in the late-Gothic Albrechtsburg Castle in Meissen (the former residence of the House of Wettin, regarded as the first castle to be used as a royal residence in the German speaking world) in 1710, which can be visited as a museum today. Production of the porcelain then moved to the present site in the Triebisch Valley in the 1860s, which can also be visited for fascinating guided tours to include the demonstration workshop.

All in all, Dresden and its surroundings truly do offer visitors of all types a remarkable range of buildings, collections and charming excursions, seen through the prism of Bellotto's eye.

CICERONI TRAVEL

You can discover the delights of Dresden with Tom Duncan and discover Bellotto's city this Christmas. For more information see **www.ciceroni.co.uk**

Getting there

Flying

Dresden has an international airport but few airlines fly directly from either Europe or the rest of the world. The only airline to fly direct from the UK is CityJet. Airlines that fly to Dresden (via other city hubs) include British Airways, Lufthansa, KLM, Air Berlin, and Germanwings.

Visas

As a member of the European Union and the Schengen Zone, citizens of the EU do not need visas to visit Germany. Visitors from many other countries, including the USA, Australia and New Zealand, can visit for up to three months within a six-month period without a visa. For more information consult the German Embassy in your country.

Getting around

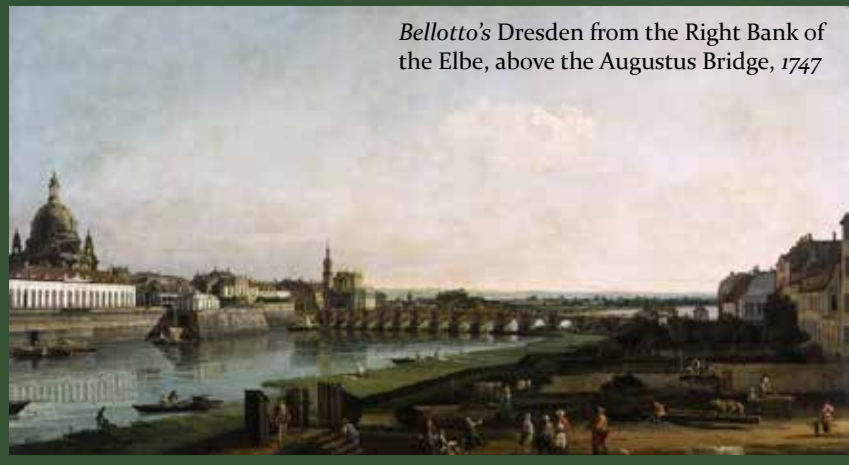
Dresden is an easy city to get around with a large number of bus and tram routes.

Weather

Temperatures range from below 0 degrees centigrade in winter to 25 degrees in summer. Winter usually lasts from November to March, and the warmer weather lasts from May to September.

Further information

Dresden offers a one, two or three day Welcome Card that allows entry to the State Art Collections (over 14 museums but not the Green Vault nor Museum of Decorative Arts), which can also be combined with prepaid travel on trams, buses, rail and ferries. See **http://www.dresden.de/en/tourism/dresden-welcome-cards.php** for further information.



Bellotto's Dresden from the Right Bank of the Elbe, above the Augustus Bridge, *1747*

Essentials

Time difference: GMT + 2

Language: German is the official language of the country, although English is widely spoken.

Electrical Current/ Plugs: 220 - 240v/ Hz. The plugs are two round prongs.

Religion: The majority of the population are non religious, with 29% Roman Catholic, and 27% belonging to the Evangelical Church.

Water: Tap water is safe to drink in Germany

Politics: The Federal Republic of Germany is a federal parliamentary republic with 16 states and a Chancellor and President.

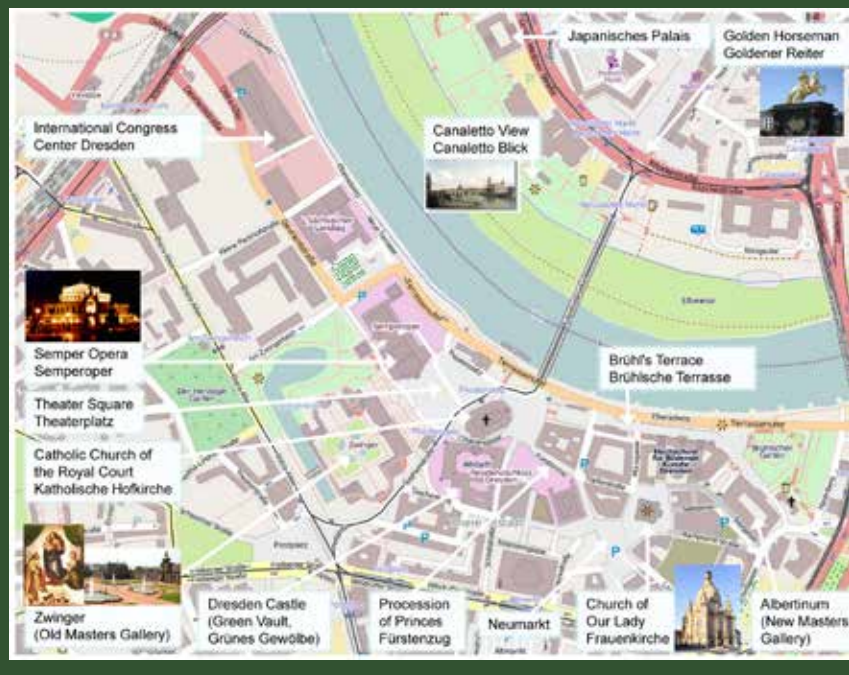
Money

Currency: The currency in Germany is the Euro (EUR; symbol €) = 100 cents. Notes are in denominations of €500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10 and 5. Coins are in denominations of €2 and 1, and 50, 20, 10, 5, 2 and 1 cents.

ATM's, banks and currency exchange units are plentiful in Dresden.

For more information please visit **www.dresden.de**

Below: Map of Dresden showing its main tourist attractions



(Image: Wisniowy, GFDL)

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BELLOTTO'S EYE:
DRESDEN AT CHRISTMAS

SATURDAY 23 - WEDNESDAY 28 DECEMBER 2017
WITH TOM DUNCAN

Enjoy Dresden in its Christmas livery at a gentle pace with time to explore independently

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Discover the insatiable patronage of the art-mad Electors of Saxony

See some amazing pictures & the world's finest collection of Meissen porcelain

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Dresden, The Frauenkirche Dome

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