

CHAMBER OF ART AND CURIOSITIES FROM AMBRAS CASTLE

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Abstract

Ambras Castle is the only subdivision of the Museum for Art-History that is situated outside of Vienna. Ferdinand II converted the medieval castle into the present Renaissance castle where he founded a cabinet of wonders and curiosities. The cabinet contains collections of what people considered marvels or oddities, several portraits of people who attracted attention at that time: giants and dwarfs, people with hirsutism and others. This is where the Painting of a Disabled Man has been hanging and shown since the late 16th century. Presumably this man was included in the category of “natural jesters”. Yet one may well assume that the objects in the cabinets of wonders stood for a variety of meanings and served quite diverse interests: the self representation of power over “jesters”; the presentation of God’s power as the creator of nature; or represent the emerging interest in a systematic knowledge.

Keywords: Ambras Castle, paintings, cabinet of wonders, hirsutism, disabled

Ambras Castle is situated on a hill in the vicinity of a small village close to Innsbruck, and is one of the most important sights the city. It is the only subdivision of the Museum for Art-History in Vienna that is situated outside of Vienna. Its historical and cultural significance

is linked to the personality of Archduke Ferdinand II (1529-1595), an open minded prince and a promoter of the arts and sciences. He converted the medieval castle into the present Renaissance castle where he founded the famous Ambras collections, a cabinet of wonders and curiosities, still situated and shown in the same rooms as it has been in the 16th century.

The cabinets of wonders were collections of what people considered marvels or oddities at that time. There are several portraits of people who attracted attention at that time. The lives of some of these people are partly very well documented like that of Petrus Gonsalvus (Pedro Gonzalez) as well as other people who displayed an extreme form of hirsutism, also called Ambras syndrome in 1933 in reference to its depiction at this collection (Figure 1).

There is also a painting of Gregor Baci (Baksa Márk), a Hungarian hussar, who apparently survived for one year after a piercing injury with a lance to his face; the injury occurred during a jousting tournament or while fighting the Ottoman Turks; finally he died probably by sepsis (Figure 2).

For us, Romanians, the Ambras Castle is important for the Vlad the Impeller’s depiction that was painted about one century after his reign and represents one of his earliest portraits. Unfortunately, it is intended not only to show him as a ruler but also to be a “psychogram of evil”.



Figure 1. Anonymous, Petrus Gonsalvus, the hairy man, oil on canvas, about 1580, Ambras Castle, Innsbruck, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (Museum of Art History)



Figure 2. Anonymous, Portrait of Gregor Baci, oil on canvas, 16th century, Ambras Castle, Innsbruck, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (Museum of Art History)



Figure 3. Painting of a man with a disability, oil on canvas, 3rd quarter of the 16th century, Ambras Castle, Innsbruck, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (Museum of Art History)

This is where the Painting of a Disabled Man (Figure 3) has been hanging and shown since the late 16th century. In the Ambras collection it was first mentioned in 1666. Many visitors must have seen it when they walked through the cabinet of wonders, but no closer or scientific attention has ever been paid to it.

The painting of a naked man lying on his stomach on a dark green cloth, which rests on a table or pedestal, is one of the few preserved paintings of that time, which

shows a person with a disability. The limp and deformed body is painted in an entirely realistic style. As there are only a few clothes left, it is difficult to determine the man's social status. The ruff he wears is an item that was developed in Spanish fashion. In the end of the 16th century it used to be an accessory of courtly fashion, but soon it became a piece of clothing which was worn by officials as well. The red cap was worn by young princes, scholars, artists and jesters alike.

The picture is divided into two separate parts: The “dressed” head shown in the upright position forms the contrast to the “naked” body, lying on the table. The intelligent, vivid look is in contradiction to the immovability and powerlessness of the body. In addition, the self-confidence, which is expressed in his look, does not harmonize with the helpless position of his body. But it is exactly this ambiguity which today makes the charm of the painting. The painting did not always look like that, in the past; the body of the man with a disability had been covered by a sheet of red paper. If a patron wished to see more, he or she could lift it and take a direct look at the naked body. A strip of black paper can still be seen from the right shoulder down to his buttocks. The strip shows pieces of red paper, but as no other signs of red paper are visible it probably was hanging loose over the body [1].

Presumably this man was included in the category of ‘natural jesters’ who were factored into performances of courtly self-representation. ‘Giants’, ‘midgets’, and ‘hairy men’ were considered wonders of nature. The representation of these human wonders was ‘equivalent’ to the portraits of the prince, and they were exhibited alongside the princely paintings in the same gallery. In this way, Archduke Ferdinand II presented himself as a world ruler over his world of wonders [2]. Jesters served to amuse the prince and the spectators. The jokers faked their foolishness and interacted with the public accordingly [3]. The natural fools, on the other hand, were in and of themselves simply a cause for laughter. The depiction of natural fools points to a perception of ‘naturalness’ and ‘human wonders’. Indeed, they might well have become a valuable piece of property in curiosities’ cabinets, and worth being put under special protection [2].

According to Rauch [1], portraits like the one of the man with a disability are not to be counted among the depictions of persons with prophetic meaning: “*These ‘monsters’...do not fall under the category of omens; rather, they constituted a source of study, of amusement, and of esthetic pleasure.*” In this context, Rauch also points to grotesque paintings in contemporary banquet halls, in which a host of monsters and part-human, part-animal

creatures are depicted. “*Looking at the monsters, and depending on the circumstances, the early-modern observers thus felt amusement, admiration, distraction or horror, but above all, wondrousness. This amazement, particularly in the context of the cabinets of wonders, served as a stimulus for investigation, as an original act of insight, as an impetus to unveil the secret*” [1]. Yet one may well assume that the objects in the cabinets of wonders stood for a variety of meanings and served quite diverse interests [4]: one possible meaning results from the context of the self-representation of power over “jesters”; another one is to be searched for in the context of the era of the Counter Reformation, in specific religious motives—certainly in the presentation of God’s power as the creator of nature. Maybe they served also to remind the person watching the Cabinet that there was no limit to what God could do. The idea was that man was God’s greatest creation and so there were many wonders and varieties in man, just as there was in the rest of creation. But perhaps also in the theme of the “Imitation of Christ”, the deformed and, according to religious projections, “suffering” body of the man with a disability possibly serving as a trigger for special associations. A third motive could be the emerging interest in a systematic knowledge.

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