

RUBENS_{TO} MAKART

LIECHTENSTEIN. THE PRINCELY
COLLECTIONS

Content

Exhibition Facts

Press Release

Introduction

Wall Texts (Selection)

Exhibition Facts

Press conference	15 February 2019 10 am
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Curators	Dr Johann Kräftner, Director LIECHTENSTEIN. The Princely Collections, Vaduz–Vienna Laura Ritter, ALBERTINA
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Audio guides	German, English, Italian & Russian
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Rubens to Makart

Liechtenstein. The Princely Collections

16 February – 10 June 2019

On the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the founding of the Principality of Liechtenstein in 2019, the ALBERTINA Museum is presenting a comprehensive selection of the most outstanding works from the Princely Collections under the title *From Rubens to Makart*. The museum is also devoting a simultaneous, separate jubilee exhibition to the Viennese watercolor, an important and central category of works within the Princely Collections, in an exhibition entitled *Rudolf von Alt and his Time*.

Five Centuries of Art History

Well over 100 of the most important paintings and sculptures from the exquisite collection of this family, rich in tradition like few others in Europe, span an impressive range from the Early Renaissance in Italy to the Baroque period, from Viennese Biedermeier to the historicism of the Makart era. Iconic works such as Antico's *Bust of Marcus Aurelius*, which was acquired for the Princely Collections just recently, the life-size bronze sculptures of Adrian de Vries, and Peter Paul Rubens's famous *Venus in Front of the Mirror* are the focus of an exhibition that amounts to a veritable promenade through five centuries of art history.

A Private Collecting Passion of The Highest Order

The documentation of the Liechtenstein Princes' continuous and passionate collecting activities goes back over 400 years—a period during which outstanding personalities and their individual artistic tastes gradually gave rise to a private collection that remains unparalleled to this day. And as a city in which the princely family maintained a permanent residence until 1938, Vienna is of exceptional significance: under Prince Johann Adam Andreas I, who acquired numerous masterpieces of the Flemish Baroque, the collection was presented on the second bel étage of the newly built Liechtenstein City Palace on Bankgasse (formerly known as Schenkenstraße) beginning in 1705. In 1810, Prince Johann I of Liechtenstein made his masterpieces accessible to the Viennese public for the first time at the family's Garden Palace in the Rossau neighborhood.

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During the Second World War, the family transferred its residence—and thus also its collections—to the Principality of Liechtenstein. Ever since then, the official home of the Princely Collections has been in Vaduz. Selected works are permanently displayed in the galleries of the Liechtenstein Garden Palace and City Palace in Vienna, however, and these can be viewed by the general public as part of guided tours.

Recontextualization

This exhibition presents the Princely Collections' greatest treasures, providing an exemplary impression of their formidable richness. In contrast to the permanent presentation at the Liechtenstein family's two Viennese palaces, within which these works can be experienced more or less in their traditional context, one of the central intentions of this exhibition lies in their recontextualization: the reduced setting of the ALBERTINA Museum, with its modern spaces, makes possible a fresh look at the masterpieces on exhibit. In lieu of art-historical stringency, the primary objective here has been to arrive at a form of presentation determined by aesthetic considerations. And it is thus that, through alternative groupings and/or deliberate isolation, these paintings and sculptures now tell entirely different stories.

Introduction

The House of Liechtenstein's magnificent art collections rank among the most important and largest private collections in the world, comparable only to those of the British royal family. They comprise imposing sculptures and paintings of the Renaissance and the Baroque by Adrian de Vries, Rubens, and van Dyck, superb works by the Italian and French artists Giambologna, Canaletto, and Hyacinthe Rigaud, masterpieces of the Viennese Biedermeier by Amerling and Waldmüller, as well as exquisite paintings of the Makart era.

The House of Liechtenstein, originally an Austrian noble dynasty, had held vast possessions in Lower Austria and Moravia since the Middle Ages. In 1599, Karl I von Liechtenstein converted from the Protestant faith to Catholicism. In 1608 he received the title of hereditary prince and thus laid the foundation for the rise of the House of Liechtenstein.

In the early eighteenth century the collections, conserved in the princely family's diverse castles and palaces, were transferred to the City Palace in Vienna. Three hundred years ago, in 1719, Emperor Charles VI elevated the neighboring estates of Vaduz and Schellenberg to the status of Imperial Principality: Liechtenstein became a sovereign state within the Holy Roman Empire. From 1807 onward, Johann I von Liechtenstein had the extensive picture gallery transferred from the Viennese City Palace to the Summer Palace outside the town walls. In 1810, five years after Duke Albert, the ALBERTINA's founder, the House of Liechtenstein likewise made its collections accessible to the public.

A year earlier Prince Johann I von Liechtenstein had fought side by side with Generalissimo Archduke Carl in the Battle of Aspern (1809). He had this first victory over Napoleon's troops captured in a monumental painting by Johann Peter Krafft (now on view in the ALBERTINA's staterooms as a permanent loan from the Princely Collections).

In the nineteenth century, Prince Alois II and his son, Johann II, became the most prominent patrons and collectors of Viennese Biedermeier art. Hundreds of paintings by Waldmüller, Fendi, Amerling, and Rudolf von Alt in today's Viennese collections go back to Johann II's donations.

The House of Liechtenstein's collections survived the First World War and the downfall of the Habsburg monarchy unscathed. In the final weeks of the Second World War, they were relocated from Vienna to the neutral Principality of Liechtenstein for reasons of safety. In days of economic hardship and dispossessions following Europe's division into East and West, many paintings were sold, including key works by Leonardo, Canaletto, and Rubens. Only under Prince Hans-Adam II von und zu Liechtenstein has the family's art collection begun to grow again substantially.

Exhibiting the most beautiful and important masterpieces from the Princely Collections, the ALBERTINA Museum is celebrating the Principality's 300th anniversary in the palace of Duke Albert and Archduke Carl, both of whom once maintained such close relations with the House of Liechtenstein.

Wall Texts (Selection)

Naddo Ceccarelli

In addition to images of the Madonna, the Ecce Homo motif became a key theme of Christian art starting in the Trecento. In their depictions of *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, both Naddo Ceccarelli (active c. 1330–60) and Marco Palmezzano (1459–1539) have succeeded in depicting Jesus's silent suffering in a most unique fashion. The two paintings represent highlights of religious art from the Princely Collections. The figure of the dead Savior is shown in the pose of a half-length figure standing in a sarcophagus that is also typical of icon painting. The unnatural posture illustrates the divinity of Christ, who died as a human. A devotional painting from fifteenth-century Ferrara was equally intended to arouse sympathy and compassion in the viewer. The Redeemer wears the coronation robe and crown of thorns, his facial features expressing silent, introverted grief rather than suffering. This type of image in which the figure of Christ is removed from any narrative context is referred to as Christ in Repose.

Antico

The medalist, goldsmith, and sculptor Pier Jacopo Alari-Bonacolsi (c. 1455–1528) was Mantua's leading sculptor at the time. His nickname "Antico" testifies to his profound knowledge of the classical world. This Bust of a Youth, which dates from around 1520, was probably commissioned by Isabella d'Este. The young man turns his head slightly to the side, and his eyes gaze down into the void, as if in introspection. His pensiveness is combined with a hint of melancholy, yet his expression is wakeful and eloquent. The lavishly curled hair lends the head a strong sculptural appeal. Despite the alternation of smoothly polished surfaces, protruding forms, and linear accents, Antico infuses the bust with the greatest sense of coherence. In hardly any other work did the artist succeed in conveying such a subtle psychologizing consolidation of the sitter.

This magnificent sculpture of Marcus Aurelius is one of most spectacular responses of the Italian Renaissance to antiquity. The Roman emperor was famous for his wisdom and in the sixteenth century was celebrated as the author of the *Meditations*. Pier Jacopo Alari-Bonacolsi, nicknamed "Antico" (c. 1455–1528), has created an entirely new image here, one that represents the experienced ruler at the height of his powers, but still in the vigor of full manhood. The gilding suggests that it must have been an exceptionally costly commission. The papal court in Rome would seem the most likely context for such a splendid and luxurious object as the *Bust of Marcus Aurelius*.

Quentin Massys

The painting *The Tax Collectors* was executed in Antwerp during the financial crisis of the 1520s. In the very city that, as a cradle of capitalism, had rapidly developed into Europe's most important commercial hub, Quentin Massys (1466–1530) addressed the perils of avarice and cupidity. The text of the book in the foreground indicates the occupations of the two individuals portrayed: the bespectacled man in the red turban records receipts from the preceding months in his function as municipal treasurer; his colleague, who looks out of the picture at the viewer, is responsible for the actual collection of the levies and subsequently delivers the treasures to his superior. With unparalleled virtuosity as to the description of tiniest details, Massys has depicted a theme that oscillates between moralizing message and genre scene.

Giuseppe Arcimboldo

The heads composed of fish, birds, or mammals by Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527–1593) are based on precise studies of nature. Similar to the poems by the humanist Giovanni Battista Fonteo, who worked at Emperor Maximilian II's court at the same time as the painter, they deal with the four seasons and the four elements in an allegorical manner. One of the artist's typical compositions, Earth has been put together of various indigenous and exotic mammals. Some of the creatures depicted are symbolically associated with the ruling dynasty: the antlers and horns form an imperial crown; the head and skin of a lion symbolize the Kingdom of Bohemia but can also be interpreted as the lion's hide of Hercules from which the Habsburgs derived their descent; the head of a ram on the chest is a metaphor for the Golden Fleece, the dynastic order of the House of Habsburg.

Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem

Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem (1562–1638) portrays Saint Sebastian with a gaze directed hopefully toward heaven and pierced by an arrow in his right side. The painter subtly models the martyr's athletic physique with the raking light falling in from the upper left. Although Cornelisz. himself had never traveled to Italy, the idealized beauty and dynamic monumentality of his figures betray classical examples. In its emotional expressivity and sublime corporeality the figure may well be compared to such ancient models as the Laocoön Group, which had been excavated in Rome in 1506.

Jan Brueghel the Elder

Landscape with the Young Tobias is one of the earliest and at the same time most important landscape paintings by Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625). The scene with Tobias and the angel, set down by the river in the right foreground, can only be made out with difficulty, as the precisely described hustle and bustle of the colorful figures and the fantastic river landscape occupy much of the viewer's attention. According to the apocryphal *Book of Tobit*, Tobias follows the advice of his heavenly travel companion and draws a fish from the water, the gall of which will later cure his father's blindness. The episode is thus inextricably linked to a river, which in Brueghel's painting functions not only as a narrative element but also as an essential compositional component used to open up the space. Rendered with meticulous finesse, the concretely perceptible reality of the scene dissolves in an atmospheric expanse along the stretch of water.

Adrian de Vries

With a pleading gesture of despair and an obviously pained physiognomy, the figure of *Christ in Distress* by Adrian de Vries (1556–1626) directly appeals to the spectator's compassion. The artist was evidently inspired by Albrecht Dürer's woodcut of the seated *Man of Sorrows* on the title page of his *Large Passion* from 1511. In contrast to Dürer's woodcut, however, in de Vries's work Christ is not shown as a tortured man, but rather in idealized physical beauty; the artist has consequently avoided depicting the stigmata or the instruments of the Passion. The tempered expressivity of this extremely carefully executed work makes formal reference to antique sculptures and works by Michelangelo, which de Vries could study in Rome. Exposing his strong, muscular body to the arrows of his tormentors unprotected, Sebastian faces his inevitable fate with humility: bound to a tree, he is depicted as a suffering hero with a melancholy facial expression. The heavy weight of his body seems to rest on his left leg, his raised right arm being a powerful counterpoint. The sculpture's tension resides in the impressive contrast between physical strength and mental resignation. For his works, Adrian de Vries repeatedly harked back to models by Michelangelo, whose psychological and physical heroism would remain influential for a long time to come. After 1610, de Vries's style would become more Baroque, the vibrant sensuousness of his sculptures anticipating seventeenth-century art.

Peter Paul Rubens

The *portrait of Clara Serena Rubens*, dating from around 1616, is one of the most marvelous child portraits in the history of European art. It shows the eldest daughter of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) at the age of five. Rubens has placed the colors with absolute virtuosity in order to achieve a vivacious portrait, with the warm flesh tones standing out against the grayish-green tonality of the picture ground.

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The sketchy and summary execution of the garment creates an effective contrast to the girl's delicately painted face. The portrait was most probably intended for private use and had not been conceived as a work to be sold: through the narrowly cropped view Rubens brings the viewer extremely close to the child, who returns the latter's gaze with an almost touching openness.

With his *Discovery of the Infant Erichthonius*, Peter Paul Rubens chose a rarely depicted subject from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which attests to the painter's profound humanist knowledge when it comes to ancient culture and language of form. A son of Hephaestus and the earth goddess Gaia, Erichthonius was born with snake legs. Athena takes care of the boy and puts him into a basket she subsequently gives to the three daughters of Cecrops, the king of Attica. In his painting Rubens shows the dramatic moment at which Aglauros curiously lifts the container's lid and catches sight of the boy for the first time, as do her two sisters. The classical subject offered the artist a wonderful opportunity to depict figures in the ancient style and in an Arcadian setting elaborately adorned in great detail.

Venus in Front of the Mirror is one of the few entirely autograph works by Rubens and considered a masterpiece of his much-admired depiction of skin and flesh. Having just taken a bath, Venus is shown sitting on a dark-red ottoman, having her long, golden hair combed by a servant while turning her back on us. Cupid holds an octagonal mirror up to the goddess of love, which allows her to establish eye contact with the viewer. In contemporary art theory, the motif of the mirror was highly significant: in the competition between painting and sculpture, the depiction of reflections makes it possible to capture multiple views, which is normally a privilege of three-dimensional sculpture.

Anthony van Dyck

This *Saint Jerome* is the earliest large-format religious composition by Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641). The saint is depicted as an aging yet still muscular man emaciated by his existence as a hermit and his acts of penance. Bent over his task and turned away from the viewer, he concentrates entirely on his writing. The red mantle, alluding to his (undocumented) cardinalate, forms an effective visual barrier. In its volume and broad application of the smooth expanse of pigment, it forms a stark contrast to the head, which is almost graphically executed in great detail. Van Dyck has depicted the aged saint entirely without idealization, pairing the naturalism of Caravaggio with the color scheme and technique of Venetian painting.

The picture of *Maria de Tassis* is one of the most ambitious examples in the extensive portrait oeuvre of Anthony van Dyck. Gazing out from the painting, the young woman directly faces the viewer with a friendly but piercing expression. Her attentive features, faint smile, delicately blushed cheeks, and strands of curled hair falling loosely into her face all convey a sense of immediacy and informal liveliness that effectively contrasts with the material luxury of the clothes and jewels depicted.

ALBERTINA

The excessive splendor displayed here reflects the great self-confidence of an exceptionally wealthy Catholic elite in the Southern Netherlands that was loyal to Spain—a social class of which the sitter was undoubtedly a member: The house of Tassis or Taxis became well known with the introduction of a prototypical European postal system in the late fifteenth century.

Jacob Jordaens

Alongside the famous masters Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck, the Antwerp-born Jacob Jordaens (1593–1678) is considered one of the most outstanding painters of the Flemish Baroque. The painting *As the Old Sang, so Pipe the Young* by Jacob Jordaens very directly illustrates a proverb that was widespread in the seventeenth century and according to which the young always follow the example of their parents. As can be seen on the sheet in his hands, the old man at the center is singing the *New Tune from Calloo*, which alludes to the Catholics' victory over the Protestants at Calloo in 1638. Once the religiously motivated political disputes, which had lasted for decades, were settled, the Flemish upper middle class increasingly established itself as a new group of patrons, whose debauched lifestyle Jordaens meant to address here. During his career the artist painted numerous versions of this subject, but there can be no doubt that the Liechtenstein painting is the most complex example.

Jan Jansz. den Uyl

Various luxurious objects and items of food are arranged on a table draped with a dark-green cloth. The hallmark on the neck of the large pewter tankard shows a small owl—"uil" in Dutch—and thus refers to the painting's creator, the Amsterdam-based painter Jan Jansz. den Uyl (1595/96–1639). The ostensibly sober and objective recreation of reality is based on a carefully balanced pictorial construction, despite all putative disorder. The labile positions of many objects—the overturned glass, the bowl tilted to the left, or the plates moved dangerously close to the edge of the table—are reminders of the transience of all secular existence. In the Calvinist context of the painting's genesis, such luxury goods as the glasses or citrus fruit similarly functioned as references to the irrelevance of worldly riches and were broadly understood as symbols of vanitas.

Domenico Guidi

The more-than-life-size bust of *Maria Annunciata* shows the Mother of God in a stricken posture: with her head inclined and her gaze lowered, she places her left hand on her chest as if to protect herself, while in her right hand she holds a book from which she appears to have just been reading.

ALBERTINA

Represented here is the very moment in the Gospel of Luke in which the archangel Gabriel delivers the good message of God to the Virgin: she has been selected to be the mother of his son, Jesus. In all probability there originally existed Gabriel's bust as a pendant. The intensely animated folds of her gown and the fluttering veil not only indicate Mary's startled pulling away at the moment of the angel's appearance, but in a fashion typical of the High Baroque they also lend tension and drama to the sculpture.

Sebastiano Ricci

The paintings *The Rape of the Sabine Women* and *The Battle of the Romans and Sabines* have been conceived as companion pieces and rank among the most monumental and impressive compositions by the Venetian history painter Sebastiano Ricci (1659–1734). They illustrate a central episode in the Roman founding myth: in the newly founded city of Rome settled a mainly male population so that there was a lack of marriageable women. Romulus invited the Sabines, who lived in the surrounding countryside, to attend a festive banquet, in the course of which armed Roman troops abducted their women so as to ensure the Eternal City future. The Sabines swore vengeance and called for a battle to retaliate. However, the Sabine women, fearing not only for their brothers and fathers but also for their now-husbands and sons, interposed themselves between the battle lines and brought the conflict, which was eventually settled by merging the two regions under a dual government, to an end.

Giovanni Toschini

The monumental marble bust of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus fascinates with the expressive emotion of the internally agitated thinker, who turns to the right with facial features almost distorted with pain and a plaintively open mouth. The protruding eyebrows, the wrinkles on the forehead and the corners of his eyes, and the tears running down his cheeks intensify the expressive effect. The sweepingly curved cloak that envelops the head at the rear further illustrates the figure's intense inner experience. That the philosopher is turned to the side suggests that there was originally a second bust, which must certainly have been the laughing Democritus. The pair is often complemented by a globe as a symbol of human life, which is wept over by the one and mocked by the other.

Canaletto

The Italian vedutist and landscape painter Giovanni Antonio Canal (1697–1768), known as Canaletto, acquired fame with numerous painted views of his native city Venice: his almost photorealist depictions were created with the aid of a camera obscura. His *The Cannaregio Canal* offers a picturesque vista of the lagoon city: several boats and figures animate the scenery, which is bathed in warm light. Lying in the shade, the bridge in the middle ground forms a spatial separation between the gleaming palazzi in the foreground and the houses of the ghetto, which are represented in slightly darker colors. *The Piazza San Marco in Venice* shows the prominent motif of the square Canaletto captured time and again from various perspectives. Starting out from the Palazzo Ducale, here it extends from today's Biblioteca Marciana and the Procuratie Nuove. Stalls and colorful staffage figures enliven the scene and give it an everyday atmosphere.

Hyacinthe Rigaud

To document the glorious moment of his appointment as Knight of the Order of the Golden Fleece, Joseph Wenzel I von Liechtenstein commissioned the epoch's most famous portraitist, Hyacinthe Rigaud (1659–1743). The artist, who was already eighty-one years old at the time, has depicted the prince frontally and as a full-length figure, wearing the prestigious collar around his neck. In terms of composition type, the picture is an official state portrait. Against the backdrop of an imaginary palace, the sitter is depicted in a majestic pose, surrounded by huge stone pillars and pompous, cloud-like draperies. In its impressively tactile reproduction of the shimmering fabrics and the marble floor, the painting evidences Rigaud's exceptional realism and high precision as a painter.

Franz Anton von Scheidel & Bauer Brothers

As an illustrator, Franz Anton von Scheidel (1731–1801) documented the newly gained insights and discoveries of the Swedish scientist Carl von Linné. The drawings in Scheidel's *Album of 80 Watercolors of Fishes* or in his *Album of 100 Watercolors of Birds* identify the artist not only as a keen observer of nature but also as a skillful colorist. Among the probably most impressive scientific illustrations by his hand is the series *Conches in Watercolor* after Johann Carl Megerle von Mühlfeld, which comprises more than 200 sheets. The artist delved into the wealth of color and form of the various shells and snails, studying them with remarkable precision. Rendering their diversified surface textures in his virtuoso watercolor technique, he has lent the conches a three-dimensional and tactile quality through a most refined description using hard shadows. These depictions seem to be the last documents of a now-lost cabinet of natural curiosities compiled under Prince Johann I von Liechtenstein as collector and Megerle von Mühlfeld as scientific consultant.

A work closely related to the history of the House of Liechtenstein is the sumptuous fourteen-volume tome *Liber regni vegetabilis* (Book of the Plant Kingdom, also known as Hortus Botanicus), assembled over a period of more than thirty years. On 2,748 pages, the compilation contains illustrations of some 3,100 different species of plants. The book's initiator was the physician and monk Norbert Boccius from the convent of the Brothers Hospitallers at Valtice. Boccius had close ties with the Liechtenstein family and from 1799 on gave the work to them in successive installments. Most of the illustrations are by the hand of the Valtice-born brothers Joseph Anton (1756–1831), Franz Andreas (1758–1840), and Ferdinand Lukas Bauer (1760–1826). They likely began working on this large-scale project shortly after 1770, when they were only ten, twelve, and fourteen years old—a fact that earned the brothers the reputation of being "child prodigies" during their own lifetime.

Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller

Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1793–1865) was not only remarkably successful as a portraitist and genre painter but also as a landscapist and, above all, painter of still lifes. In this discipline the artist benefited from his profound training as a miniaturist: especially his depictions of flowers were admired for their freshness, brilliant colors, and virtuoso rendition of details. Waldmüller mostly arranges his compositions against black backdrops, thereby achieving an effective coloristic contrast to the sheen of the pieces of fruit and blossoms, the gleam of the silver, or the dull white of the vases. The artist skillfully sets the matte and waxy surface of the flowers against the hard, metallic luster of the vessels and dishes. In his compositions, Waldmüller has depicted an innumerable diversity of richly nuanced textures. The result is an impressive play of light and shadow, of reflection and opacity.

In 1829 Waldmüller traveled to the Salzkammergut for the first time. His painting *View of Lake Altaussee and the Dachstein* betrays the wonderful idiosyncrasy with which the artist has interpreted the Biedermeier landscape. The imposing mountainscape is practically devoid of humans: only in the middle ground can we see a handful of houses along a strip of dense forest, against which the sunlit mountain massif and the sparkling blue lake are sublimely set off. Waldmüller knew how to lend his *View of the Dachstein with Lake Hallstatt* an outstanding presence and virtually palpable luminosity through his intense pleinairism. In the history of Austrian painting, the picture is considered a milestone on the way to modernism, due to its enhanced and almost Impressionist atmosphere.

Friedrich von Amerling

Alongside Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, Friedrich von Amerling (1803–1887) was the leading Austrian portraitist of the nineteenth century. A keen observer, he used his talent not only for pure character studies but also documented the self-image of his sitters as members of

ALBERTINA

the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie in a most unique fashion. This outstanding painting in the Princely Collections shows the melancholy face of a girl delicately modeled by means of light. Both the black veil the artist has skillfully draped over her hair and shoulders and the book of music in her hand identify the depicted as a praying widow. Her brownish green eyes, gently looking to the left, avoid direct contact with the viewer and give the impression of deep introspection.

Friedrich Gauermann

Friedrich Gauermann (1807–1862) established a new naturalistic Viennese landscape school by abandoning the genre of vedute animated with figures and instead leaning on seventeenth-century Netherlandish painting. Over the years he accumulated sketches made from nature, which were then amalgamated in the studio to create ever-new compositions. He masterfully understood how to combine different ambiances to form a coherent and convincing whole. Gauermann renders each and every element of a scene in jewel-like colors and an almost photorealist sharpness. The signed painting *The Harvest Wagon* with its impressive rendering of a thundery sky is regarded as one of the artist's absolute masterpieces.

Hans Makart

With a prayer book in her lap and a rosary in her hands, the elegant lady in this painting by Hans Makart (1840–1884) appears to be completely lost in thought. What is particularly striking is the great freedom and spontaneity with which the tonal brown foreground of the picture has been executed. Since a completely identical costume photograph related to this work exists, it is probably not an ordinary portrait but rather the painted likeness of a role in a play: Makart was frequently involved in the organization and decoration of semi-private theater performances and tableaux vivants reenacting various works of the visual arts with living people. The costume of the woman depicted leads back to the Elizabethan age or to the epoch of Charles V, which Makart likewise studied intensively.

This outstanding masterpiece shows the Egyptian queen Cleopatra at the moment of her death, sitting upright, alone, staring into oblivion. Hans Makart has depicted the pharaoh on the verge of her demise, brought about by the bite of a snake, in a sensuous nakedness that can hardly be surpassed in its immediacy. The complexion and the textural details of the fabrics and draperies lavishly enveloping the body have been rendered with equal refinement. The famous Burgtheater actress Charlotte Wolter posed for the painting. The picture shows the artist at the height of his creative powers. Receptive to all currents of contemporary painting in Europe, he opened the door to the final phase of Viennese painting in the nineteenth century.