

Monkeys in Human Guise: The Singeries of the Monkey Guild

08.06. – 29.08.2021

The *Zunft zum Affen* (Monkey Guild) is one of the oldest former crafts associations in the city of Bern and has a small but fine collection of what are known as singeries. These comic and satiric genre scenes of monkeys aping human behaviour tell amusing stories while also imparting moral messages to the viewer. On the occasion of the 700th anniversary of the guild, the paintings are exhibited at Kunstmuseum Bern.

The *Zunft zum Affen* – then and now

Around the year 1321, masters and artisans employed in the stonemason, stone cutter, bricklayer, and quarryman trades in Bern united to form a brotherhood of stone workers, the forerunner of today's *Zunft zum Affen*. It thereafter oversaw the training, working hours, and working conditions of its members as well as assuming responsibility for the care of their relatives. Together with other guilds, it also increasingly participated over the centuries in guard duties and military service in both the city and its lands. As builders of walls, towers, gates, residential buildings, and not only the city hall, but also the Cathedral, members of the guild played, for centuries, a crucial role in the shaping of Bern's cityscape. The city's masonry tradition is closely linked to the history of the *Zunft zum Affen*.

Today, as a civil corporation, the guild is a statutory body with its own legal capacity. It is no longer active as a professional or trade organization. Rather, it has become established as a "community of people" under Canton of Bern law alongside the communities situated on the city's lands and other types of community. It encompasses any members of the Civic Community of Bern (Burgergemeinde) who also have the eligibility (known as "Stubenrecht") of the *Zunft zum Affen*, providing, among other services, social welfare for them. In addition, the guild awards grants for training purposes and is involved culturally in the area of both stone arts and handicrafts. The guild obtains the funds for such endeavors from the management of its assets, consisting mainly of real estate.

The Origins of *Zunft zum Affen*

The *Zunftgesellschaft zum Affen* seems to have taken its name from the house sign of its first guild house, which it acquired before 1389 (no.1 Kramgasse). The animal would, for two reasons, appear to be very appropriate for stone handicrafts: not only because in the spirit of the aphorism from the Middle Ages "ars simia naturae" (art apes nature)

the monkey became a metaphor for the artist, but also because rough stone that is at the beginning of every piece of work has been referred to, in German, by stonemasons as *Aff* (colloquial for *Affe*, i.e. monkey or ape) since the Middle Ages.

The eponymous house sign, a stone monkey, was removed during the course of the Helvetic Revolution in 1798 and not replaced for many years. In 1832 the first guild house at no.1 Kramgasse was sold and the property at no. 5 Kramgasse was acquired. Since then, the guild hall has been located on the first floor. In 1919 the guild house finally acquired a house sign once again: a sculpture of a striding monkey wearing a beret, shouldering a stone ax, and carrying a ruler. It was made by the wood sculptor Hans Huggler-Wyss from Brienz based on a splendid drinking vessel from 1698, which is kept in the Bernisches Historisches Museum.

The guild's emblem is also part of the guild hall's decorations, including coats of arms and chandeliers featuring monkeys, two wooden monkey sculptures, and nine paintings of monkeys, so-called singeries, that all adorn the magnificent guild hall.

Singerie – A Parodying Genre

Singerie (from French for "mimicking," i.e. "aping") is a category of painting that emerged from Flemish genre painting at the end of the 16th century. Instead of people, it is rather fashionably dressed monkeys who populate village festivals, opulent feasts, and domestic scenes. This increases the comical-satirical character of the moralizing imagery, addressing such sinful behavior as drunkenness, quarreling, vanity, and procuring.

The copper engraver Pieter van der Borcht created the first such humorous parodies around 1575 in a series of prints that were quickly distributed and became an inspiration for other artists. David Teniers the Younger (1610–1690) is regarded as the main representative of the genre, who, together with his younger brother Abraham (1629–1670), further developed the genre, creating successful pictorial formulas that found favor among a wide audience because of the work's entertaining character. The Tenier brothers' motifs were extensively replicated in Flemish painting of the era, exerting an influence into the following centuries.

Singeries became popular in France in the early 18th century, flourishing in the field of decorative arts in particular. The best known are the frescos by Christophe Huet in Château de Chantilly, as well as Antoine Watteau's painting *The Monkey Sculptor* (around 1710), and Jean Siméon Chardin's *The Monkey Painter* (1740). Even during the 19th century there were still a number of representatives of the genre working mainly in Belgium and France, but also in England and Germany (cf. Gabriel von Max, *Ephemere Schätze* (Ephemeral Treasures), undated, in the exhibition *August Gaul. Modern Animals* on the upper floor). Ultimately the singeries continue to inspire artists to the present day: the

most popular example being Banksy, in whose provocative street art monkeys slipping into the role of humans represent a recurring motif (see for example *Devolved Parliament*, 2009).

The Guild's Paintings of Monkeys

The small group of singeries came into the guild's possession over a period of several centuries through both purchases and gifts. The first pieces to be acquired were probably the two oval canvases, which were obtained in 1777 as "2 Stück Tableaux von Watto [Watteau], die Conversation von Affen vorstellend" (2 tableaux by Watto [Watteau], representing the conversation of monkeys). The paintings are among various acquisitions and renovations that the guild has undertaken since the beginning of the 1770s in order to elevate the furnishings of the guild hall to a level commensurate with the establishment's standing. The last addition is the painting *Karten spielende Affen-Soldaten in der Wachstube* (Monkey Soldiers Playing Cards in the Guardroom), acquired at an auction at Galerie Jürg Stuker in 1981 and attributed to the Bern artist Johannes Dünz (1645–1736).

The painting is consistent with a vocabulary of motifs deriving from the Teniers brothers. The scene which is reproduced in *Affen-Soldaten in der Wachstube* is always similar: in a guardroom featuring a fireplace and weapons, monkey soldiers are playing cards (or a board game), debating and smoking, while a cat is being brought in through the open door. In *Katze beim Affen-Friseur* (Cat at the Monkey Barber's), the cat is having its whiskers styled with a hot iron, looking at itself in a mirror being held up, a motif that has frequently been reproduced. The scene in the background with the monkey being escorted creates a moment of puzzlement, recalling the guardroom imagery. It is possible that the cat is a captain who is disturbed by the arrest while being coiffured in the officers' quarters.

The paintings *Affen-Maler porträtiert Hund* (Monkey Painter Doing a Portrait of a Dog) and *Affen-Maler porträtiert Katzen-Dame* (Monkey Painter Doing a Portrait of a Lady Cat) are based on famous sources: David Tenier's *The Monkey Painter* (circa 1660) was acquired for the collection of the Spanish King Philippe IV (today Museo del Prado, Madrid) together with a large number of other works by the artist – and during the course of the 18th century became the inspiration for the previously mentioned pictorial inventions by Watteau and Chardin. The *Tabakskollegium* (The Tobacco Convocation), a group of monkeys gathering in a cozy room to smoke a pipe in an aristocratic manner, is a replica of a painting by Abraham Teniers (2nd third of the 17th century) that is now kept in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna.

As a parody of the upper classes' custom of playing music together, music-making monkeys or cats amused audiences even during the Teniers' time, especially since it is literally "caterwauling" that is being depicted. The motif continued to be used into the 19th century: *Affenkonzert* (Monkey Concert) by the Alsatian artist Hippolyte de Boug D'Orschwiller (1810–1868), as the "youngest" of the singeries, came into the possession of the guild in 1957 as a gift from Rudolf Christen.

Exhibition

Exhibition Dates: 08.06. – 29.08.2021

Opening Times: Mondays: closed, Tuesdays: 10 am – 9 pm
Wednesdays to Sundays: 10 am – 5 pm

Public Holidays: open on all holidays

Curator: Anne-Christine Strobel

With the support of:



Concurrent Exhibitions

Border Crossings. North and South Korean Art from the Sigg Collection
30.04. – 05.09.2021

August Gaul. Modern Animals
04.06. – 24.10.2021

Kunstmuseum Bern

Hodlerstrasse 12, CH-3011 Bern

T +41 31 328 09 44

info@kunstmuseumbern.ch

