

Monkeys in Human Guise: The Singeries of the Zunft zum Affen

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The Zunft zum Affen, or Monkey Guild, one of the oldest former craft societies in the city of Bern, has a small collection of so-called 'singeries'. These comical and satirical genre scenes of monkeys in human form tell amusing stories while also sending moral messages to the viewer. To coincide with the guild's 700-year jubilee the paintings are being shown as a complement to the exhibition *August Gaul. Modern Animals* in the Kunstmuseum Bern.



The Monkey Guild has existed since 1321, when masters and apprentices of the craft of stonemasonry, stone-carving, bricklaying and stone-breaking got together to form a fraternity of stoneworkers. The stoneworking craft tradition of the city of Bern is closely connected with the history of the 'Monkeys'. As builders of walls, towers, gates, dwellings, the town hall and the cathedral, members of the society shaped the fabric of the city of Bern for centuries as they continue to do. Today, as what is known as a 'civil corporation', it is comparable to a small parish, which – above all in the social sphere – accordingly assumes similar tasks.

The Monkey Guild Society seems to have taken its name from the sign marking its first guild house at 1 Kramgasse, which it had bought before 1389. The new owners probably saw the term 'zem Affen' (at the sign of the Monkey) as quite appropriate: the artist, an imitator of nature and the environment, was known as 'God's monkey' even in early Christian times. Furthermore, at the start of any stone crafting there is the so-called 'Aff', or 'monkey': the uncarved stone. The stone monkey was removed from the façade in 1798 during the Helvetic Revolution, and not replaced for a long time. In 1832 a new guild house was bought at 5 Kramgasse, where the guildhall remains to this day. In 1919 the guild house was finally given a new sign: the sculpture of a striding monkey with a beret, a shouldered pick-axe and a measuring-stock. It was made by the Brienz wood sculptor Hans Huggler-Wyss on the model of a festive drinking vessel from 1698 which is kept in Bern Historical Museum. The guild's emblem is also a theme in the guildhall: coats of arms and chandeliers decorated with monkeys, two wooden monkey sculptures and nine 'singeries' decorate the grand banqueting hall.

The 'singerie' (Fr. literally 'monkey trick') developed out of Flemish genre painting in the late 16th century. Human beings are replaced by clothed monkeys, who populate village festivals, pubs and feasts or carry out domestic activities. With that, the moralistic nature of the depictions, dealing with sinful types of behaviour such as drunkenness, quarrelling or coupling, is moved into the field of comical satire. The 'singeries' of the Monkey Guild are being shown in the Kunstmuseum Bern as a complement to the exhibition *August Gaul. Modern Animals*.