

# The Way to Happiness. The Bern Tablet of Cebes and Baroque Imagery

03.09. – 28.11.2021

The Baroque remains an important presence in Bern's cityscape. Buildings such as the Käfigturm, the Kornhaus, and the Béatrice-von-Wattenwyl-Haus, as well as the imagery adorning the Zytglogge tower, testify to the artistic diversity of the period. The 17<sup>th</sup> century in Bern was marked by contrasting dynamics. The city and republic expanded its area of influence, enjoying decades of considerable economic affluence. As in other cities, foreign trade, the sciences and arts extended the opportunities and horizons in various areas of life such as consumption, education, and culture, at least for the more affluent sections of the population. But this was contrasted by a system of strict religious values and harsh social conventions. The municipalities' religious courts oversaw compliance with codes of moral discipline. Art and visual culture likewise contributed to this societal regulation. Such an internalizing of norms, an effective means of asserting power, regulated social coexistence as well as individual behavior, shaping the values of society as a whole. The exhibition traces the contradictions in Baroque attitudes to life, ranging from wealth and spiritual values to pleasures and prohibitions.

The exhibition is centered around the so-called *Tablet of Cebes* by the Bern artist Joseph Plepp (1595–1642). It depicts the course of a human life in allegorical form: confronted not only with their own desires and opinions but also with the capriciousness of fate (*Fortuna*), man can only discover true happiness through education and with the assistance of the virtues.

The painting was created in 1633 and hung in Bern's Theological College since 1689 for over two centuries, before entering the collection of Kunstmuseum Bern in 1903. The imagery is based on a copperplate engraving by the Dutch artist Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617), which in turn refers to a philosophical text from ancient Greece, the *Kebetos Pinax* (*Tablet of Cebes*, 1<sup>st</sup> century AD). The text, describing a mysterious votive image in a temple dedicated to Chronos, was well known across Europe during the early modern era. The ancient guide to a happy life was regarded as an ethical model which comfortably complied with Christian faith. In employing reason, man was to not only arrive at virtuous behavior, but also find faith along the route. Quotations from the text of *Kebetos Pinax* will accompany visitors through the exhibition. It leads into both the material world of fashion, trade, and everyday needs, as well as into the Baroque mindset, including its ideals and values, always pursuing the question: what is important in life?

## Room 1: The Gifts of Fortuna – Abundance and Transience in the Bern Baroque

The sense of class, power, and wealth of the Bernese elite is reflected in 17<sup>th</sup> century painting and printmaking, albeit in a cautious manner. Anyone who had been favored by "good fortune" had portraits made of themselves and their family. Bern's upper class likewise demonstrated its affluence in still lifes and cityscapes. The wealth of the city was highly dependent on income from agriculture.

The still life genre, which had already established itself elsewhere, above all in the Netherlands, arrived in Switzerland during the 1630s. Joseph Plepp, the painter of the *Cebes Tablet*, was the first to create still lifes featuring fruit and small meals (*Still Life with Grapes, Melon and Quinces and Still Life with Fruit, Cheese and Wine Glass, Still Life with Cherries and Raspberries*). Albrecht Kauw (1616–1682), representative of the second generation of still life painters, presented the "blessing of the land" in all its variety (*Still Life with Salmon, Still Life with Cock and Hen, Still Life with Cheese and Plaited Loaf, Still Life with Fishes and Seated Girl*), while flowers were added as a subject in Johannes Dünz's (1645–1736) seasonal still lifes (*Spring* and *Winter*). The focus is unambiguously upon the products of nature, including only an occasional glimpse of a precious damask table cloth or a painted faience jug integrated into the composition. These paintings, however, are not so much an expression of boastful, proud patricians and landowners, but they rather convey the impression of marvelling interest in the gifts of Fortuna, and an attempt to at least capture them in painting.

An inebriated banquet such as the one depicted by Hans Jakob Dünz in the *Sketch for a window pane for the Guild of the merchants* (1630), and the exuberant procession to church, accompanied by music in the *Peasant Wedding* (1670) attributed to Albrecht Kauw, are depictions of life being lived to the full that have been infused with irony. Presumably the reality more closely resembled the *Table Manners* (1645) in the engraving by Conrad Meyer (1618–1689). It was only with difficulty that contemporaries could escape the confines of moral codes and sumptuary laws. The first printed mandate concerning clothing in Bern appeared in 1627 and called for "moderation in clothing and the relinquishing of courtly ways and pomp in the city and the country." Regulations included the height and monetary value of "Brämikappen", fur hats as depicted in the *Portrait of an Elegant Bernese Lady*, attributed to Joseph Plepp (1620). Anyone who failed to adhere to such regulations was put in the so-called "Pfaffenloch" at Bern's religious court.

## Room 2: Temptations and Conflicts – between Vices and Virtues

Along its path through life, man is confronted with a variety of temptations and decisions. The rather abstract problems of moral conduct – unlike the material temptations of earthly goods – are depicted by use of allegory

and personification. What was described in the ancient Greek Cebes text as a confrontation with "opinions," "desires," and "lusts" is, in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, transformed into a struggle between virtues and vices. The requirement that people should do what is morally right is visualized in impressive compositions, which negotiate both individual behavior and the values necessary for social coexistence. How is man supposed to address conflicts, temptations, and powerful emotions?

If in previous centuries saints as the hermit Anthony had served as role models for resolute fortitude in the face of diabolical temptations (Niklaus Manuel, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 1518–1520), in the work of 17<sup>th</sup> century Swiss artists the virtues are allegorically embodied by young women as for example in Joseph Werner's *The Triumph of Virtue over Envy* (1668) and Rudolf Meyer's *Series of Virtues* (1676). Within Christianity's moral codex, as well as in any canon of virtues and vices, it usually seems quite clear what is good and what bad. But how are we to make the morally correct decision if in the wake of a catastrophe – as the Biblical scene of Lot and his daughters demonstrates – the continued existence of one's own people can only be assured by seducing one's own father? (Jacob de Baecker, *Lot and his Daughters*, around 1580).

Small paintings that were often meant for the private realm, as well as prints and books (Conrad Meyer, *Children's Games*, undated, *Le Théâtre moral de la vie humaine*, 1678), invite a personal, intimate involvement and contemplation. They prompted viewers to reflect upon their own behavior, and had a didactic function for the strictly disciplined society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Even though our ideas of what constitutes right and wrong may have shifted, such imagery still seems to appeal to us as viewers today. As individuals we must find moral and ethical categories for our own actions, in order to finally achieve true happiness.

### Room 3: The Tablet of Cebes and the Path to True Knowledge

The challenges along the path of life and the objective of achieving salvation (*salus*) provide the principal subject matter for the *Tablet of Cebes*. As they enter life, children receive knowledge of what is necessary for a good life from Genius beside the door. But immediately thereafter, Deception pours them a drink making them forget everything once again. In life, people are received by "Opinions" and "Desires." As if under a spell they stand in the circle of Fortuna, the personified force of fortune and fate, eager to snatch her splendid gifts. The blind figure scatters wealth, offices, and even children at random among the people. But fate is fickle. Seduced by extravagance, insatiability, and other vices, man can fall a long way, being forced into robbery and murder. A gateway into the second circle of life offers a way out of such behavior. This is where education and the sciences dwell. But they, too, are more pretense than reality and do not lead to true knowledge. Only a few find their way to the latter. They take the steep ascent and, in embracing such virtues as Persistence and Abstinence, reach the seat of wisdom and salvation.

When Joseph Plepp created the monumental painting around 1633, he could surmise that many of its viewers would be familiar with the ancient Greek text that lies at the root of its complex imagery. It probably fulfilled two functions at Bern's Theological College, where it hung from 1689: it assisted in the study of Greek, while also being a moral call to strive for

reason, virtue, and wisdom. But it also harbors ambivalence. The depictions of vices and debauchery as well as the fascinating figure of Fortuna attract the eye and are more impressively staged than the rather inconspicuous realms of education and wisdom. The composition also exudes a delight in visualizing the confusing and the reprehensible.

The conveying of values through imagery is also evident in other large-scale paintings. The *Allegory of Justice* by Joseph Werner (1662) provided an imposing model for Bern's City Council, his *Allegory of the Healing Art* (1690) was intended to prise those who devoted themselves to the care of the sick at the city's hospitals and pharmacies. The various depictions of wisdom, truth, and science, produced not for public spaces but for private contemplation and reflection, appear more abstract. They offer views of clouds and fantastic temples, stressing that such concepts belong to the realm of the sublime.

## Exhibition

**Exhibition Dates:** 03.09. – 28.11.2021

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

**Public Holidays:** open on all holidays

**Curators:** Annette Kranen and Urte Krass in collaboration with students, Institute of Art History at the University of Bern

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## Concurrent Exhibitions

**August Gaul. Modern Animals**  
04.06. – 24.10.2021

**Meret Oppenheim. My Exhibition**  
22.10.2021 – 13.02.2022