

RUDOLF
VON ALT
AND HIS TIME

WATERCOLORS FROM THE PRINCELY
COLLECTIONS OF LIECHTENSTEIN

Exhibition Facts

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| Press conference | 15 February 2019 10 am |
| Opening | 15 February 2019 6.30 pm |
| Duration | 16 February – 10 June 2019 |
| Venue | Tietze Galleries |
| Curators | Dr Johann Kräftner, Director LIECHTENSTEIN. The Princely Collections, Vaduz–Vienna Laura Ritter, ALBERTINA |
| Works | 90 |
| Audio guides | German, English, Italian & Russian |
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| Opening Hours | Daily 10 am – 6 pm Wednesdays & Fridays 10 am – 9pm |
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Rudolf von Alt and his Time

Watercolors from the Princely Collections of Liechtenstein

16 February – 10 June 2019

This presentation, which is the second part of the celebratory exhibition marking the Principality of Liechtenstein's Tricentennial, is devoted to the Viennese watercolor from the Biedermeier era to realism.

Nearly 100 of the most beautiful watercolors point to the vast knowledge underlying the princely collecting passion while providing a correspondingly overview of the watercolor artistry of this era.

In the Viennese tradition of watercolor painting, the spontaneous handling of light and coloration plays a central role, conveying an intensity and presence that can hardly be achieved in other media. One sees this in how the brilliant magnificence of aristocratic home decor is reflected by Rudolf von Alt in his depictions of the Viennese Liechtenstein palaces' representative interiors that that the family commissioned from over a period of several decades. The Princely Family maintained numerous estates outside of Vienna, as well—and Alt's incomparably lively impressions of the palaces of Valtice and Lednice along with their respective environs now provide us with important reminders of a bygone world full of beauty and opulence.

In the context of this exceptionally multifaceted era of Austrian artistic creativity, Viennese portraiture is of overriding significance: Moritz Michael Daffinger's representative portraits of the Liechtensteins and other members of Viennese society impress the viewer alongside Peter Fendi's quick watercolor sketches of the Princely Family.

As an exemplary overview of only the finest works on paper, this exhibition at the ALBERTINA Museum illustrates the exceptional diversity to be found in the graphic art collection of a princely family that, as a side-effect of its extensive artistic patronage, was constantly surrounded by watercolors and watercolorists in their everyday lives.

Wall Texts

Introduction

It is primarily for their monumental works by Rubens that the House of Liechtenstein's art collections are known around the globe. Alongside the ALBERTINA Museum, the Princely Collections in fact also conserve the finest and most significant holdings of watercolors from the Viennese Biedermeier. The nineteenth century was one of the most prospering periods in the princely dynasty's long history: the climate of political détente following the Congress of Vienna in 1815 entailed an economically strong position that enabled the princes to commission works from the leading artists of their day.

The epoch's most important collector was Prince Alois II (1796–1858), who together with his wife, Princess Franziska (1813–1881), became an essential driving force behind Viennese Biedermeier art. His patronage culminated in the interiors by Rudolf von Alt (1812–1905) who, as a sensitive chronicler, documented the stately style employed for the decoration of the princely palaces and masterfully rendered the textures of stucco, wall coverings, chandeliers, and precious furniture.

On the other hand, Peter Fendi (1796–1842), a declared genre painter, devoted himself to the intimate everyday life of the princely couple's children, capturing them with unparalleled lightness and vivacity while they were absorbed in their play or their studies. Joseph Hoger (1801–1877) worked as a drawing teacher for the Liechtensteins' offspring and accompanied Alois II on his travels. Under Prince Johann II (1840–1929) it came to generous donations to institutions at home and abroad: not only museums in Vienna owe their comprehensive Biedermeier holdings to his collection, which comprised several hundreds of works by Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, Friedrich Gauermann, and Friedrich von Amerling.

In recent decades, Prince Franz Josef II (1906–1989) and particularly Prince Hans-Adam II (born in 1945) have succeeded in making numerous important purchases in this field: a great connoisseur, Prince Hans-Adam II acquires substantial groups of masterpieces by Rudolf von Alt and his contemporaries. Today the Liechtenstein collections comprise more than 1,000 works by the best watercolorists of the nineteenth-century.

Princely Splendors

In the early nineteenth century, "portrayals of rooms" became a fashionable genre in Viennese society. The glamorous splendor of aristocratic domesticity is reflected in the stately interiors of the Liechtenstein palaces Rudolf von Alt (1812–1905) depicted over the decades at the family's request. The artist had broken free from the frontal "peep-box" perspective that had previously been common, preferring a vantage point in a corner of the room instead, which allowed for broader glimpses and vistas. The sunlight, falling in through the tall windows, creates subtle reflections on chandeliers, polished furniture, and glossy parquet flooring, demonstrating Alt's great virtuosity in the depiction of space, light, and materiality

His interior views of the residences on Herrengasse and Bankgasse, in which figures are mostly absent, exhibit the extraordinary wealth of these domiciles of the high aristocracy.

Shortly after his accession to power in 1836, Alois II von Liechtenstein and his family moved from the primogenitor's palace on Herrengasse to the Rasumofsky Palace in the Landstrasse district. The prince had the former residence of the Russian ambassador Andrey Rasumofsky, which he had initially only rented, renovated in next to no time.

He eventually purchased it and resided there until the modernization of the palace on Bankgasse was completed. In their watercolors, Rudolf von Alt and Josef Höger (1801–1877) documented the temporary domicile, which was surrounded by a vast English landscape garden.

From City to Countryside

As early as the 1760s, the Vienna Academy required from artists to draw "in full light", i.e. before nature. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, painters and draftsmen continued to pour into the countryside from the cities, leaving their studios for fields, forests, and mountains. As a consequence, the alpine lands became an important source of motifs, with Salzburg and the Salzkammergut as places artists and their patrons alike had yearned to visit since Romanticism. On their journeys, leading watercolorists like Joseph Höger (1801–1877) and Rudolf von Alt (1812–1905) created typical and idealized views of Austrian scenery and its most prominent landmarks.

In line with the practice of noblemen hiring watercolorists to document their expeditions in the form of pictures, Alois II von Liechtenstein set out on a journey to Salzburg and Upper Austria shortly after his accession to power in 1836 in the company of Joseph Höger. His series Views of the Salzkammergut made during this journey comprises cleverly chosen vistas of towns such as Traunkirchen and Bad Ischl, as well as picturesque lakesides, mountain pastures, and glaciers. Sketches made in situ like *House on a Lake*, which is only partially colored, tell us about the genesis of these marvelous documents of how the world was experienced through the medium of drawing. Rudolf von Alt also went to Salzburg early in his career, revisiting this region as a source of inspiration time and again, until his old age. He frequently employed the highly immediate technique of "pure" watercolor for his sketches made en plein air.

The Palaces of Lednice and Valtice

Throughout the decades, Rudolf von Alt (1812–1905) documented important princely building projects: his works not only trace the modifications of the Viennese palaces, but also the reconstructions of the castles of Lednice and Valtice in Southern Moravia, which had been in the possession of the Liechtenstein family since the late thirteenth century and been rebuilt and enlarged several times.

By the year 1858 Lednice Palace presented itself in the English style of Gothic Revival. Alt had captured the magnificent estate before its adaptation in the form of a graceful and gauzy watercolor that also represents an important document in terms of architectural history. The palm house, built in the context of the palace's reconstruction, was one of the earliest cast-iron structures in Europe and served to cultivate exotic plants. As a pictorial motif it offered the artist a welcome opportunity to exhibit his great skills: he devised a complex system of glimpses and openings, of glossy reflections in the glass and atmospherically condensed moods of light.

Such works as Alt's depictions of the Blue and Yellow Drawing Rooms at Valtice Palace attest to the affluent grandeur of the interior decoration: wall coverings and curtains made of colored silk shine in bright daylight, flickering open fire and splendid furniture are reflected in smoothly polished parquet flooring. These incomparably vivid impressions of the palaces, which are no longer owned by the Liechtenstein family today, are precious memories of a past world full of beauty and opulence.

A New Intimacy

The most sought-after miniaturist and portraitist of his time, Moritz Michael Daffinger (1790–1849) worked for the upper classes and the higher nobility. From 1832 onward, Melanie von Metternich, the chancellor's third wife, commissioned the artist to portray the guests they received at their house in watercolor: the pictures, frequently signed by the sitters themselves, show important protagonists of the national and international political scenes, including Alois II von Liechtenstein and his second cousin, Karl Franz Anton.

The Liechtenstein portraits by Peter Fendi (1796–1842) show Alois II, his most important patron, the latter's wife Franziska, and their children in their domestic environment. These very private portrayals render the princes and princesses in a manner that is usually reserved for depictions of middle class everyday life. They give the impression of an entirely unprecedented approachability and an intimacy hitherto unknown in aristocratic contexts. Fendi captured the princely offspring in swift snapshots during their play or studies, conveying a sense of great ease and vivacity thanks to delicate washes and translucently shimmering colors.

Josef Kriehuber (1800–1876), an extremely diligent artist, likewise portrayed Alois II and his entourage: in likenesses that always stress the sitters' individuality and at the same time flatter them through idealization, the artist depicted the prince in almost shockingly ordinary scenes, for example as a father with his daughter Marie Franziska on his lap.

The Pathos of Everyday Life

Peter Fendi (1796–1842) is considered the inventor of Viennese genre painting. His watercolors and paintings predominantly narrate episodes from the life of ordinary people and showcase sentimental scenes or moments of religious devotion intended to touch the viewers emotionally or arouse their sympathy. However, his mostly small-sized pictures had little to do with the reality of life at the time but rather complied with the stereotypical ideas of his patrons, which in addition to the princely Liechtenstein family included other members of the Viennese high nobility and the imperial household. Sensitive milieu studies, Fendi's compositions always tend to emphasize the pathos of everyday life and seek to arouse deep emotions within the small and seemingly irrelevant. In his final years the artist gathered a number of students around him who were almost like family to him. Carl Schindler (1821–1842), who was profoundly influenced by his teacher in terms of both motif and style, proved particularly talented. Like Fendi, Schindler preferred the "pure" watercolor and largely did entirely without body color: he employed heavily diluted pigments, generously applying washes one next to the other or as transparent, overlapping glazes. The white tone of the paper was deliberately made use of as a dynamizing element in areas that had been left vacant.

A Changing City

During a career lasting almost eight decades, Rudolf von Alt (1812–1905) witnessed the rapid changes in the Viennese cityscape, documenting them in his art in manifold ways. He conceived his first Viennese motifs in the early 1830s: subtly described facades, a great sense of detail from staffage figures to rooftops, and glaring sunlight characterize the typical Biedermeier veduta, which would be developed and refined in the years to come. In addition to his popular interiors of castles and noble palaces, the artist also painted inferior views of public buildings: his view into the staircase of the old court opera, today's Vienna State Opera, conveys an atmospherically condensed impression of culturally advanced amusement during the 1870s. Daring perspectival foreshortening, subtly nuanced colors, and a brilliant technique combining generous washes and delicate brushwork make these works on paper masterpieces of watercolor art. Like his brother Franz Alt (1824–1914), the artist devoted himself to Vienna's familiar places and magnificent buildings until the end of his life: Saint Stephen's Cathedral was a particularly cherished motif, which, by his own account, he "drew" more than a hundred times from both inside and outside.

Yearning for Distant Places

Almost all artists of the Viennese Biedermeier traveled extensively: the great demand for views of foreign countries made it necessary for them to constantly broaden their repertoires of motifs. Until the middle of the nineteenth century such undertakings were largely tackled with carriages or on foot, which was extremely strenuous and exposed travelers to unstable weather conditions and the constant danger of assaults.

As its supplies were easy to transport, the watercolor offered itself as an ideal technique for sketching while on the road. Studies that were spontaneously carried out in situ and which continue to impress us because of their immediacy were mostly not regarded as final works of art but served as preliminary materials for the finished works on paper or canvas made in the studios during the winter months.

As early as the late 1820s, Rudolf von Alt (1812–1905) began going on journeys, initially accompanied by his father Jakob Alt (1789–1872), later also traveling by himself. Throughout his career he periodically visited the monarchy's most charming regions and towns, as well as those of neighboring countries. In his early period his portrayals of vedute and landscapes complied with the traditional canon of motifs considered worth depicting; especially Italian views were highly coveted amongst collectors. Starting in the 1860s, the artist also dealt with more unusual subject matter, which he translated into large formats using a more liberal and generous application of color. Many of these outstanding depictions from Alt's journeys were acquired for the Liechtenstein collections by the ruling prince Hans-Adam II.

Alpine Worlds

From the very outset of his career, Thomas Ender (1793–1875), a master of the watercolor technique, was promoted by members of the higher nobility: Emperor Franz I, Prince Klemens Wenzel Lothar of Metternich and, above all, Archduke Johann would be important clients and patrons of his art throughout his life.

As early as the late 1820s, Ender repeatedly traveled to the province of Salzburg and to East, South, and North Tyrol at the archduke's request, documenting charming cultivated landscapes and impressive mountain scenery on extensive hiking tours, some of which resembled pioneering expeditions. The artist was particularly fascinated by the Pasterze, a glacier at the foot of Mount Grossglockner, which he captured from different perspectives in numerous versions in both watercolor and oil. Time and again he dealt with man's impotence in the view of God's overwhelming Creation.

Given a general interest in the experience of nature emerging in those days, Ender's depictions of glaciers marked a highlight in the field of landscape art thanks to their compelling precision in the rendering of topography: his nuanced depictions of the various surface textures of snow and ice and of the morphological peculiarities of rocks and the vegetation were unique in their realism at the time. Ender's imposing mountain panoramas have essentially influenced the perception of the Austrian Alps as a tourist attraction and today are valuable documents for both historians and glaciologists.