

Monuments of physicians in Vienna What do they teach us and how?

Monumenti di medici a Vienna Come e cosa ci insegnano?

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This contribution follows Luca Borghi's introducing question if material memories are really so important and focuses on their multilevel importance. It explores the historical context of the "making of" and reveals their original intentions and meanings. The discussed research objects have been the monuments for Gerard van Swieten, the personal physician of Empress Maria Theresa, the physiologist Wilhelm von Brücke, the surgeon Theodor Billroth, and the gynaecologist Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis. Stepping out from a first art historical analysis of these sculptures the Author shows how much we can learn from diligent cultural-historical studies of material memories in relation to their cultural, institutional, and political context. E.g., the comparison of two different busts for van Swieten makes comprehensible how much the used artistic style is subordinated to the intended message of a monument. Moreover, as memorial settings are erected essentially by established forces, a closer investigation of the circumstances of the Billroth monument from 1944 uncovers the political strategy of National Socialist German Workers' Party-affiliated doctors at the General Hospital in Vienna.

Key words: History of art, arts and politics, communication, Vienna, Gerard van Swieten, Wilhelm von Brücke, Theodor Billroth, Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis

Questo contributo parte dalla domanda di Luca Borghi se le memorie materiali siano davvero così importanti e cerca di metterne in evidenza l'importanza su diversi livelli. S'intende esplorare il contesto storico della loro realizzazione per svelarne intenzioni e significati originari. Gli oggetti di ricerca qui discussi sono i monumenti a Gerard van Swieten, medico personale dell'Imperatrice Maria Teresa, al fisiologo Wilhelm von Brücke, al chirurgo Theodor Billroth, e al ginecologo Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis. Attraverso una prima analisi di tipo storico-artistico di queste sculture, viene mostrato quanto si possa imparare, a partire da uno studio storico-culturale diligente di tali memorie materiali, in relazione al contesto culturale, istituzionale e politico. Ad esempio, il confronto tra due differenti busti di van Swieten rende evidente quanto la scelta di uno stile artistico sia subordinata al messaggio da veicolare attraverso il monumento. E dato che i "memoriali" sono eretti essenzialmente dalle forze al potere, un'attenta ricerca sulle circostanze in cui nacque il monumento di Billroth del 1944 rivelano la strategia politica dei medici affiliati al Partito Nazionalsocialista Tedesco dei Lavoratori nell'Ospedale Generale di Vienna.

Parole chiave: Storia dell'arte, arte e politica, comunicazione, Vienna, Gerard van Swieten, Wilhelm von Brücke, Theodor Billroth, Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis

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“*Are material memories really so important?*” is the rhetorical question Luca Borghi, editor of this volume, poses in his contribution, thereby opening the mind for this and further questions throughout this publication. In this contribution, I will show a handful of monuments and portraits of physicians in Vienna explaining which significance and function these images had at their time and moreover can still have today. The insights gained from a detailed viewing and analysis of individual monuments often go far beyond a mere educational surplus in the history of medicine and recognition of the depicted as historical persons of note.

Vienna has many and manifold extant *material memories* of medical history, as HIMETOP (and others) demonstrate well¹. They take the form of monuments, tombs and paintings, as well as including the famous architectural designs of numerous hospitals, not least Josef Hoffmann’s sanatorium and Otto Wagner’s clinic at Steinhof. Excepting the famous architectural works and a handful of renowned paintings, like Gustav Klimt’s University of Vienna Ceiling Paintings, (also known as the Faculty Paintings), however, they share the fate of all monuments as described by writer Robert Musil: “*The most notable thing about monuments, you see, is that one does not notice them. There is nothing in the world quite as invisible as a monument*” (Musil 1962, p. 62).

This very lack of monuments conspicuousness incites me in this contribution to direct my gaze to the monuments and three-dimensional images of physicians, investigating *monuments* as a form of communication. My aim is to illuminate the sculptures from a perspective that goes beyond art history and therewith the historical context of ages and artists, in order to perceive in them more than the mere illustration of a history of medicine. Indeed, I will consider them fully as representations of the history of a discipline, a means of communication by their commissioner and institution as well as, and not least, a means of political propaganda.

Having at hand these selected examples, I will illuminate how a close treatment of such material memories can foster our understanding of historic social circumstances, going beyond the history of medicine alone.

There is a long tradition of scholars’ monuments, reaching back far into antiquity. Pliny the Elder had already noted in his *Naturalis Historia* that the image of authors fulfilled an important function, especially so in libraries: namely to confront the readers in the shape of a concrete figure (Klecker 2010, p. 8). Several images of famous doctors of antiquity, including Hippocrates, are extant for this very reason². In the early modern

age, however, a personal effigy in marble and bronze became the vestige of worldly and clerical nobility as well as exceptional representatives of the military. It was not until the Enlightenment that the civic portrait and likeness was developed with some force (Kanz 1993, p. 11), eventually leading to the much-cited flood of memorials at the end of the 19th century (Hofmann 1906, p. 6, Rüdiger 2015, p. 186). My observations in this contribution therefore set off from a late Baroque bust for a Viennese medic and follow the subsequent development of medics’ memorials in Vienna until the mid-20th century.

Van Swieten

The tradition of scholar portraits and effigies in the sphere of the University of Vienna began fairly late, in line with the surge in popularity of civic portraits across Europe. The heads of the University asked Empress Maria Theresa in the autumn of 1778 to be granted permission to honour deserved professors with portraits in the lecture halls (Natter 1988, pp. 250-1). Until that time, rectors and the current ruler were, with one exception, the only persons represented in the university building. The single exception was the bust of Gerard van Swieten, personal physician to the imperial family, which had been on display in the faculty of medicine auditorium since 1769 (Pötzl-Malikova 2017, p. 37). It had been commissioned by Maria Theresa herself to respected sculptor Franz Xaver Messerschmidt and gifted to the university (Fig. 1). Art historical research has primarily regarded this bust as a monument set by the Empress for personal reasons; it is mostly analysed only with regard to its position in the artist’s oeuvre.

The artist depicted the medic in an *allongé* wig, wearing a fur-lined robe with medals and captured in a dynamic pose, thereby awarding him the primary markers of Baroque rulers in representational effigies. Art historical research on this bust has frequently recurred on the topic of the juxtaposition between the Baroque style movement of the dress and the veristic depiction of the face. It is also highlighted that the pieces created by the sculptor Messerschmidt changed in style in the period following his completion of this effigy (Krapf 2002, p. 158). This is apparent of an undated bust, which also depicts van Swieten and which was also created by Messerschmidt, probably between 1770 and 1772 (Fig. 2). This marble head-and-shoulder piece showing a representation in epic-style nudity abandons social rank, seeking out a portrayal of the personality of the depicted instead. The crass difference between the two portraits is most often explained in art historical literature with the artist’s stylistic development; this reasoning, however, disregards as secondary a potential respect for Van Swieten’s scholarly achievements (Pötzl-Malikova 2017, p. 37).

I am convinced that more attention needs to be paid to the exceptional situation that the physician van Swieten was

¹ See HIMETOP section about Vienna: <http://himetop.wikidot.com/vienna> (last access: 13.08.2017).

² For one, in Pietro Bellori’s collection of effigies of famous philosophers: Bellori P. *Imagines veterum illustrium philosophorum*. Rome: 1685, np. Also as an actual bust, as depicted in Baumeister KA. *Denkmäler des klassischen Altertums: zur Erläuterung des Lebens der Griechen und Römer in Religion, Kunst und Sitte*. Munich: 1885, vol. 1, p. 694.



Figure 1.
Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, memorial bust for the personal physician to the imperial family, Gerard van Swieten, 1769. Current location in the arcaded courtyard of the University of Vienna. Photograph: Armin Plankensteiner, Institute for Art History, University of Vienna.

the only one whose likeness was represented by means of a dedicated bust within the university building. History (of culture) demands that we take a look not only at the artistic conditions surrounding the creation of the bust – style of the artist and contemporary portrait practice – but also at the non-artistic circumstances in which the monument was erected. These circumstances include the social situation of the depicted, the context of the installation of the effigy as well as the intention of the commissioner. They are factors that illuminate the original significance of the memorial and its function. As historian Ludmilla Jordanova has written, “portraits always need to be seen in the physical contexts for which they were made – for example, the public settings, such as institutions, through which they acquired associations and significance” (Jordanova 2000, pp. 25-6).

Let us contrast two aspects of these two effigies: their commission and their placement. The latter, more private image of van Swieten is presumed to have been commissioned most likely for the directors’ room at the imperial library, where van Swieten worked from 1745 until his death. In this location, the likeness was intended only for the eyes of a select circle of potential onlookers. The commissioner is unknown. The Baroque representational effigy, on the other hand, was commissioned by the very highest authority and

placed on public display in the lecture hall of the medical faculty in what was then the main university building. The desire for representation was greater than the Empress’ intention to extend gratitude to her personal physician. When Maria Theresa erected this new main building for the university, she set within it a stately memorial to her most important supporter and advisor in her reform of the university and education. She therefore established here a monument to her personal physician as well as, at the same time, to her very own achievements in educational reform and to her struggle for the secularisation of the university.

As the centuries or even mere decades pass, the context of memorials, as outlined above, will often not be preserved in full, and may no longer be reconstructable. Following historian of medicine Mary E. Fissell, one must ask what the memorial, quite independently of its original purpose, has signified over the course of time. The meaning and purpose of a cultural object are neither necessarily inherent nor enduring: they keep on originating in the ever-new processes of the “making of meaning” (Fissell 2004, p. 365).

After the old university building had been closed in the year 1848 in response to revolutionary activities, the bust of van Swieten had at first been installed in the ceremonial hall



Figure 2.
Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, memorial bust for the personal physician to the imperial family, Gerard van Swieten, 1770/72. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Kunstammer, Inv. No. Kunstammer, 8921.

of the general hospital, *Allgemeines Krankenhaus*. Then, it was eventually placed in the university's new main building on Ringstraße. The original context of its installation, defined as it was by the close connection of commissioner, university reform, university building and the effigy's singularity in being the only scholar's monument within the building, was lost with the move. While the original function of the bust was thereby veiled, the monument was at the same time given a different significance within a new context when it was re-installed.

At the heart of this new main building, we see the professionalization of institutional scholar memorials. While the façade sports oversized statues, portrait medallions and name plates for 128 scholars from antiquity and the modern age, the court of honour within the central arcaded courtyard has become one of the greatest ensembles of university memorial culture: almost 160 scholars are honoured in this space with statues, busts and relief images. The initiators of this court of honour wanted not only to establish an eternal reminder of the deserved professors at this *Alma Mater*, but also to reflect their glory onto the institution itself and moreover sponsor a sense of identification with the institution among staff and students alike (Rüdiger 2013). Gerard van Swieten's university bust was re-erected here during the very first phase of monument installation, in 1889, in order to underline the long tradition enjoyed by this university even in the new building. Numerous new memorials were commissioned at the same time.

This comparison of two van Swieten representations has shown us what noticeably differing meanings a memorial can take on according to where it may be positioned within the wide field of artistic language, meaning style (Baroque dynamic vs Classicist reduced) and typology (stately portrait vs heroic effigy). A memorial will attain further relevance from where its emphasis is placed, as communicated in its iconography. The project *monuments - Das Wiki zu den Denkmälern der Universität Wien*³ documents how the full assembly of monuments in the arcaded courtyard reveals a great breadth of inventive ideas from commissioners and artists alike in how to display in the memorial form the scientific disciplines, some of which were just newly established.

Brücke

Ernst Wilhelm von Brücke was given a monumental memorial, which serves as an impressive example for this use of iconography (Fig. 3). Sculptor Otto König integrated in his work a number of meaningful details in order to provide an insight into the physiologist's wide-ranging scholarly engagement. Among these details, a chameleon reflects Brücke's research on the perception of colour, while a microscope



Figure 3. Otto König, memorial for the physiologist Ernst Wilhelm von Brücke, arcaded courtyard of the University of Vienna, 1894. Photograph: Armin Plankensteiner, Institute for Art History, University of Vienna.

represents his findings in cell physiology. The inventive representation includes one particularly notable detail: Brücke is depicted wearing an academic gown. Emperor Joseph II had abolished the gowns in the year 1784, and they were not re-introduced as official garb until 1927. The artist therefore employed an invented form of clothing in his effigy in reference to the Baroque portraits of the university rectors (Rosenberg 2017), thereby underlining Brücke's exceptional function as rector. When the memorial to Brücke was unveiled in January 1894, it was one of the most notable and noticeable in the entire arcaded courtyard.

The University of Vienna had a vested interest in gaining prominence through the memorials to a number of renowned scholars. Every application for the erection of a memorial was checked and approved by the university Senate. Nevertheless, no cost was to arise to the university from these commissions. It was therefore usual for a collection to be made among the professors and the students when a colleague was to be honoured upon his death. The memorial documents of the exceptionally large monument for Ernst Wilhelm Brücke

³ See: <https://monuments.univie.ac.at/index.php> (last access: 12.08.2017).

reveal that one of its sponsors was surgeon Theodor Billroth⁴. The same Prussian-Austrian surgeon Theodor Billroth had given 500 *gulden* to sculptor Caspar von Zumbusch with the commission to design an oversized bust of him to be placed in the arcaded courtyard after his death. Billroth did so largely in order to avoid the funds being raised from among colleagues, students and relatives. He took this step already in 1892: before the Brücke memorial was erected.⁵ The unveiling of the monumental Brücke memorial in early 1894 therefore instigated a competition that is not documented, but can be discerned from the Billroth monument. Although the surgeon had commissioned an oversized head and shoulders bust in 1892, the sculpture delivered by Zumbusch in 1897 in fact shows an oversized full figure image of Billroth, including aedicule and teaching pulpit (Fig. 4).

Billroth

The effigy illustrates Billroth's endeavours for the institution and the history of medicine in several ways. His entire physical presence shows him as an exemplary teacher lecturing at the pulpit, while the scalpel in his hand denotes his abilities as a surgeon and the drawing of a separated femur represents Billroth's research on osteotomy (Rüdiger 2017). Billroth is the first medic in the arcaded courtyard to be depicted in the monument wearing an antiseptic coat. Although Billroth had long rejected Lister's theory, wearing the coat in an operation theatre had been obligatory since 1878. Memorial typologies had until then included class dress, official garb or a suit for civic persons, even antique-style nudity in head and shoulder pieces. It had until then been entirely unthinkable to be depicted in a work coat. However, the enormous success of antiseptic measures had turned the work coat into the new hallmark of a respected medic's class. This memorial for an innovative and engaged surgeon and academic casts a glow that continues to reflect the glory of the Second Viennese School of Medicine on the institution at the heart of which the monument stands to this day.

A later monument for Billroth, which is located in the large courtyard of the former general hospital, now part of the university campus, has a less honourable history (Fig. 5). It, too, depicts the medic Billroth in his surgeon's coat, but at a much younger age, with a slimmer figure and more dynamic. This statue was ceremonially unveiled in February 1944 on the fiftieth anniversary of Billroth's death. At that time, the "Pan-German Reich" under the regime of the National Socialists was in its fifth year of war. All resources were in very short supply, including those at the general hospital



Figure 4. Caspar von Zumbusch, memorial for the surgeon Theodor Billroth, arcaded courtyard of the University of Vienna, 1897. Photograph: Armin Plankensteiner, Institute for Art History, University of Vienna.

(Grois 1965, p. 204). As a result, the monument was initially made of plaster and was replaced by a marble reproduction in 1949. What, however, was expected at the time of a new monument erected for a surgeon from the previous century?

Historian Thomas Nipperdey has posited that national memorials are erected "essentially by established forces" in order to strengthen or extend power (Nipperdey 1968, p. 531). Nipperdey largely meant forces of the political kind. For the monuments of physicians, it can be equally true that they were erected by established forces: in the case of universities these were the power of the senate, the rectorship and other decision-makers. The installation of a monument during the Second World War must have been based on motivations that went beyond sheer scholarly *memoria*: a motif of propaganda would certainly have been involved. What did the NSDAP-affiliated doctors at the general hospital and the high-ranking representatives of the regime, who were present

⁴ Archiv der Universität Wien, Senat, Artistische Kommission: Fertige Denkmäler A-G (1886-1955), S. 93.13 Brücke, Ernst, Denkmal im Arkadenhof, 1893-1894 (Act).

⁵ Archiv der Universität Wien, Senat S. 87.1.36.



Figure 5. Michael Drobil, memorial statue for Theodor Billroth, large courtyard of the former General Hospital, now Campus of the University of Vienna, 1944 (in plaster)/1949 (in marble). Photograph: René Steyer, Institute for Art History, University of Vienna

at the unveiling, hope to gain from such a monument? How does this monument speak to those who look upon it?

The statue depicts a young and dynamic Billroth. His body is in frontal aspect, while his head is turned to cast an attentive glance to his left side. His hands meet at the height of his right hip, and his fingers appear as if the surgeon is disinfecting his hands. He is apparently performing this disinfection so thoroughly that the muscles of his underarms are clearly visible underneath the rolled-up sleeves of his surgeon's coat. In contrast to the Billroth statue in the arcaded courtyard, this effigy comes across as a three-dimensional snapshot that has arrested the energetic surgeon on his way to the operating theatre. This character of the image as if captured in the moment is emphasised further by the rough treatment of the marble. The circumstances of the installation of this statue – at the general hospital and during the fifth year of war – implies that this monument was not in-

tended to merely provide a *memoria* for the surgeon or even for antiseptics. Instead, it has the appearance of a personified rallying cry at the main entrance of the general hospital. Why, though, was Billroth considered a fitting model for the projection of National Socialist propaganda?

The national socialist propaganda organ *Der Völkische Beobachter* covered the anniversary of Billroth's death and the unveiling of the monument in several articles, including such publications as would reach the entire Reich. They celebrated Billroth as an "exemplary officer of sanitation" and "carer for the community and this, moreover, at wartime"⁶. As early as January 1944, the *Wiener Medizinischen Wochenschrift* published an article that was even more direct⁷. Titled *Billroth als Kriegschirurg während des Sommers 1870 (War surgeon Billroth during the summer of 1870)*, the four-page article stressed Billroth's "unshrinking", "energetic" scientific curiosity as well as his commitment in the military hospitals during the Franco-German war and his "unusual empathy". In conclusion, the author sums up that these exceptional qualities "can serve as guiding lights for our modern surgery"⁸. The dynamism, posture and rolled-up sleeves of the statue communicate an aim to evoke energy and drive. In doing so, the statue is an appeal to the war-weary doctors to show drive and empathy to their patients even under conditions made miserable by supply shortfalls and destruction. The underlying ideological agreement, however, was never explicitly stated in 1944: Billroth had fostered antisemitic sentiments in the opinions he voiced in his article "Über das Lehren und Lernen der medicinischen Wissenschaften an den Universitäten der deutschen Nation von 1875" ("On teaching and learning medical sciences at the universities of the German nation in 1875"), thereby offering himself up as an ideal choice for the projection of National Socialist propaganda. This fact was well known to the audience even fifty years after the medic's death. The initiator of the monument, Leopold Schönbauer, had been the head of the First Surgical Clinic since 1939 and later on joined the NSDAP as a member. His career continued seamlessly after the end of the war and when he unveiled the marble version of the Billroth statue in 1949, he did so in his position as the director of the General Hospital (Arias 2015, p. 324).

Sammelweis

If monuments are instigated by the powers of the time, doctors without an established lobby will not have a monument. Consequently, they are missing from our own, current-

⁶ See *Völkischer Beobachter*, Year 1944, No. 37, Wiener Ausgabe, Sunday, February 6, 1944, p. 8.

⁷ von Frisch O. *Billroth als Kriegschirurg während des Sommers 1870*. In: *Wiener Medizinische Wochenschrift*. 1944, vol. 98, No. 3/4, pp. 27-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*

day look at the history of physicians' monuments from a medical history point of view. While some medics were not honoured at all, others were honoured only after great delay. An important example for the latter category is the effigy of Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis.

Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis (1818-1865) was subject to great conflicts at the University of Vienna, and had to confront ample ignorance among his colleagues regarding his theory on the cause of childbed fever (Nuland 2003). As a result, he was not given a monument in the arcaded courtyard at the University of Vienna for a long time. It was not until the centenary of Semmelweis' death that an application for a monument was submitted to the senate and approved. The relief created by sculptor Alfred Hrdlicka was unveiled in the arcaded courtyard in 1967 (Fig. 6). Despite of the rough treatment of the marble, the gynaecologist's facial expression is clearly discernible. The style of the effigy not only reflects modern sculptural art but also seems particularly fitting for this belated monument. It does not show a flattering ideal representation of the admired scholar who is honoured shortly after his death. Instead, the monument itself expresses the difficulties Semmelweis faced during his time in Vienna and gives a voice to the scandal that his important discovery of antiseptic methods, which he achieved at the University of Vienna, was for such a long time not recognized at this very place in a fitting monument.

The Semmelweis relief was not the last monument to be erected in the arcaded courtyard, but it did mark the end of an era of frequent, flood-like extensions to this group of memorials. The post-war generation took a sceptical view of the cult-like adoration of persons, so that only few monuments were added after the 1970s (Engel 2017). It was not until 2016 that the first monument for a female physician was included in the collection, honouring psychologist Charlotte Bühler.

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These few examples from the large collection of Viennese *material memories* show how much we can learn from a diligent cultural-historical study of the apparently invisible monuments with regard to their cultural, institutional and political situation. Research of these contexts absolutely must make them visible. It is this feat which makes projects like the large-scale HIMETOP⁹ as well as *monuments - Das Wiki zu den Denkmälern der Universität Wien* so exemplary: they create visibility for the monuments, collect the fundamental information on these memorials and create the basis for interdisciplinary research. In the Viennese context, it is also important to stress the work of the *Josephinum - Sammlungen der Medizinischen Universität Wien*. This collection will make available to the public the medic portraits in its



Figure 6. Alfred Hrdlicka, memorial relief for the gynaecologist Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis, arcaded courtyard of the University of Vienna, 1966/67. Photograph: René Steyer/Karl Pani, Institute for Art History, University of Vienna.

storage, including approx. 45 busts and approx. 35 relief portraits, which will thereby become part of the great public collection of medical history *material memories*.

Visibility and perception are the first steps to understanding monuments for what they are. Monuments – their intention, their form, and their style, their content and material design – are part of a historical, artistic and representative system of communication. When we take a conscious look and question them, what they tell us goes far beyond merely remembering a person from medical history.

(Translation from German by Nadezda Kinsky-Müngersdorff)

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⁹ <http://himetop.net>.

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