

Die »natürliche abconterfectur und gestalt«

The Eye of the Animal Painter

»When painters depict the sky or the earth, wide oceans, mountaintops or remote islands, we allow them to convey just an intimation of these things, and are satisfied with an approximate outline which is only the result of their perception, because these are things which we know nothing about. But if they portray a subject which we know and is familiar in a realistic way, we expect an exact, even perfectly accurate depiction of all contours and colours and if they are not able to do this, we despise them,« wrote Michel de Montaigne in one of his famous essays.¹ And truly, what began with Giotto in the early 14th century reached its zenith in the 16th century: this constantly growing differentiation of views or opinions and the deepening of the impression of nature in art. What was demanded of art was to repeat or recreate the beauty of nature and Leonardo da Vinci was the master of that. In his treatise on painting he delivered the opinion that »the painting which shows the greatest similarity to what is being painted is the most praiseworthy.«²

It can be ascertained that this maxim also applies to the animal painters of the Renaissance. Albrecht Dürer was one of these painters, and he also spoke on this subject, saying that the closer a work is to nature the better it is because »life in its natural form shows the truth of its being, therefore look at it closely, act in accordance with it and do not stray from it in your thoughts. Do not think that you can make it into something better. [...] Art is truly to be found in nature and whoever can manage to pull it out, has it.«³

Two of Dürer's depictions of animals are still famous today. One of these is his *Rhinoceros* (Cat. No. 2.1), the portrayal of the Indian Rhinoceros which, according to the woodcut, was delivered from India to the Portuguese King Manuel I on May 1, 1513. For the educated Europeans this animal was a miraculous creature; in it, they saw a kind of rebirth of Antiquity. After all, it was Pliny who mentioned the rhinoceros in his *Naturalis Historia*⁴: he reported that it had been seen at Caesar's circus in Rome. As a rhinoceros, after over 1000 years of absence, once again treading upon European soil, it served as living proof of the credibility of the works of antiquity. It was for this reason that it awakened Dürer's interest, and through the use of printing technology, his version of the exotic animal was brought to the masses. »Das ist hie mit all seiner gestalt Abconderfect« (This is, in all its form, a copy) can be read on the woodcut. »Abconderfect«, this term itself seems to make the conflict between nature and art more explicit. If the form here is »abconderfect« (made after) nature, then following his precept, it needs to be forced out; it must, as Dürer said of drawing, discussed above, »be pulled out of nature.« In terms of the extraction from nature, it was precisely with the rhinoc-



eros that Dürer had his hands full, since he had never seen one of these creatures in real life. He had to be satisfied with sketches and descriptions from other people, and he did this with the full consciousness of the benefits of knowledge, about which he wrote in his *Lehrbuch der Malerei* (ca. 1500). »Wir könnten gern viel« (We could happily do a lot). »Dann es ist uns van Natur eingossen, daß wir geren viel wußten [...] Aber unser blods Gemüt kann zu solicher Vollkommenheit aller Künsten, Wahrheit und Weisheit nit kummen« (Because it comes naturally to us to want to know a lot [...] but our dense minds cannot come up with such perfection in art, truth and wisdom), unless we want, »durch Lernung unser Vernunft schärfen« (to sharpen our understanding through learning).⁵ The *Rhinocerus* became the most famous depiction of an animal of this species and was printed in works on the natural sciences long after its creation, even when there were already more realistic images of the creature.

The fascination caused by these exotic types of animals remained for a long time. People began to collect them not only in illustrated forms, but also *in natura*. This was a passion which took hold of both Emperor Maximilian II and his son Emperor Rudolf II at the time in which it was the trend to establish royal menageries in Europe. These passions combined with new trading connections allowed seamen to earn a lot of money by procuring such items, and the competition which developed between the various royal houses fuelled the trade even more. So it was that decades later, in 1577 to be exact, the arrival of another Indian rhinoceros in Lisbon became a bone of contention between Emperor Rudolf II and King Philip II of Spain. »In the end it was sent, together with an elephant, on an extensive tour throughout Spain. Philip wished to use this trip in order to demonstrate the power and majesty of the Spanish Habsburgs to his subjects. This trip offers one of the few references to all the processions, spectacles and theatrical productions, with all their symbolism, which must have been part of

the daily business of royal demonstrations of power which has been handed down to us. When the rhinoceros finally died an arrangement was made to assure that Rudolf would at least get the skin of the animal. However, since no one knew how to conserve a rhinoceros skin, it rotted and, hardly a surprise, crumbled into pieces. All that arrived in Prague was the horn and some bones,⁶ but also a small piece of wizened skin which, like all other exotics, came into the Emperor's *Kunstkammer* (Ill. 4). In that »Kammer« the collector was a creator, and perhaps Rudolf II's motives were not so different from Leonardo's. According to contemporary accounts Leonardo gave up painting in his later years because he had realised that the painter created »only a picture«. He delved into mathematics with the stated objective of creating a bird which could fly. »The aspiration to be the creator of things transferred itself from the painter to the engineer. For the artist there remained only the small comfort of being the creator of dreams«. ⁷

Dürer's *Junger Feldhase* (*Young Hare*; watercolour with opaque paint, 1502; Albertina, Vienna, inv. 3073), the second famous depiction of an animal, also belongs on the list of the most well-known works of Renaissance art. Even if Montaigne would have his problems with this »Rhinoceros« (he also probably never had the opportunity to see such a beast in natura), he would have admired this animal portrait immensely: the subtle brush technique, the poignant meekness of the cowering animal! Here you can truly see how art can complement science. In art the enchanting beauty of nature is visible, also the unsettling drama, the bewitching charm, the endless ingenuity. In art it isn't all about the scientific side of nature. When we non-scientists see these paintings of animals we are absolutely dominated by a feeling of amazement, which increases from admiration to enthusiasm and right on up to awe.

Both poles, art and science, play a role in depictions »after nature«, the »abconterfectur«, in the Renaissance. The fact that animals were even depicted is connected to a general development which was occurring at this time: the focus on »the old«, the discovery of the encyclopaedic knowledge of Antiquity. In this regard, Dürer once again stands for the spirit of the age. »Item vor viel hundert Johrn«, he commiseratively wrote in the drafts of his *Lehrbuch der Malerei*, »sind etlich groß Meister gewest, davon Plinius schreibt, als der Apelles, Prothogines, Phidias, Praxidiles, Politeklus, Parchasios und die anderen. Der etlich haben Bücher beschrieben van der Molerei, aber leider, leider, sie sind verloren. Dann sie sind uns verborgen und manglen ihrer großen Sinnreichkeit.« (Many hundreds of years ago there were scores of great masters of whom Pliny wrote about: of Apelles, Prothogines, Phidias, Praxiteles, Politecles, Parrhasios, and the others. They all wrote books on painting, but regrettably they have all been lost. Then they are hidden from us and have therewith lost their greater sense.) In fact, »solche edle Bücher [...] von der Kirchen verdrückt und ausgetilgt worden« (such noble books [...] had been absconded or destroyed by the clergy)«, ⁸ they often lay unheeded in the libraries of the monasteries and the knowledge they contained was therefore lost. Over a period of time, since the Tuscan poet and scholar Petrarch gained fame in the 1330s for having found the lost masterpieces of Livius, Cicero, Propertius and others, humanists became obsessive book hunters. Petrarch inspired whole generations of scholars, rediscovered texts were copied, edited and translated, with commentaries added. This established the basis for the *studia humanitatis*. ⁹ Long before Dürer's time, this wave had already swept over the Alps. Dürer was a humanist and his sorrow over the loss of this knowledge was not surprising. Therefore it is clear why he makes reference to Gaius Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Younger, 23-79 A.D.), whose work every humanist simply had to read: whose compendium of ancient physics, mathematics, medicine, zoology, geography and astronomy was published by

Johannes von Speyer in Venice already in 1469 and was reprinted 15 times by 1500 (Cat. No. 1.3). Still the question of pictures remains. On the one hand there was of course the tradition of handwritten and illuminated books. On the other hand the spectrum of printed books in the non-fiction sector which had increased immensely. The size of educated audiences had also increased and business-oriented printers knew that objectivity also required clarity. Contour woodcuts were made finer with lively hatching and appeared to be three-dimensional. The empirical approach to learning was introduced and the pictorial portrayal was expected to be produced either »after nature« or »according to copies of works which were produced after nature«. When members of the nobility started showing interest in illustrated compendia, the possibilities for the addition of illustrative features were already quite advanced. These compendia were meant to supply the royal *Kunstkammern* with earthly counterparts to the divine macrocosm.

Archduke Ferdinand II was one of these clients who had such intentions for his *Kunst-kammer*. He collected portraits, *naturalia*, *artificialia*, *scientifica* and his extensive library contained, among other things, ancient and contemporary works on the natural sciences.

Thus we encounter two famous names at his court: Pietro Andrea Mattioli and Giorgio Liberale. These men stood for the mutual coalescence of natural science and art. Mattioli (1501-1577), medical doctor and botanist in Trent and Görz, wrote a Latin commentary on the most famous fundamental work on medicine of his time, the so-called *Dioscurides* (Cat. No. 6.2). This commentary was printed for the first time in 1554 and included splendid hand-coloured illustrations by the painter Giorgio Liberale of Udine (ca. 1527-1579/80). The edition was dedicated to Emperor Ferdinand I who called Mattioli to Prague and appointed him as his »personal doctor« in 1557. Liberale followed Mattioli and both also served Archduke Ferdinand II, who was at that time the Governor of Bohemia. In 1559 Liberale was commissioned by Archduke Ferdinand I to produce a »natürliche abconterfectur und gestalt« (»real portrait and form«) of all the different types of sea creatures to be found in the Adriatic Sea, the »Granzi, Cape, Ostroghe, Lumache und Angelle«¹⁰. Approximately 100 gouache paintings on calf parchment, most of which were painted on both sides, have been preserved. These are large-format studies and based upon their naturalism, one comes to the assumption that Liberale saw these creatures first-hand, perhaps in a fisherman's catch, and did not copy them from models or drafts (Ill. 2). Archduke Ferdinand's inventory of 1596 notes that the 8th cabinet in the *Kunst-kammer* contained, »allerley sorten von Mörffisch, Krebs, Mörspinnen und dergleichen sachen, so zum einpünden gehört« (all sorts of saltwater fish, crabs, sea spiders, and the like, to be binded)¹¹, which can be connected with the portrayals mentioned above. Individual sheets of »Siben Pargementene stuckh, auf jedem ain Conterfee von unterschiedlichen Hunden« (seven pieces of parchment, each with a likeness of various dogs) (Ill. 3)¹² and birds are also attributed to Liberale (Cat. Nos. 4.14, 4.15). Here, both natural scientific interests and artistic requirements appear to be fulfilled in equal measure. Even in Vasari's *Vite*, Liberale's ability to »imitate« is mentioned and explicitly put in the context of the fish illustrations as works commissioned by Ferdinand II.¹³ His employer appears to have been thrilled by the works, as Mattioli noted.¹⁴

Also the other Habsburg princes took a very keen interest in illustrations of animals. In the library of Emperor Maximilian II there was a compilation of 170 sheets of animal studies, which were later passed on to his son Emperor Rudolf II.¹⁵ A portion of these works, which were executed with pen, watercolours, opaque white, or tempera paint on paper and parchment, and produced in the years between 1552 and 1585, were most like-



Ill. 4: Anonym, Horn, Zahn, Deckelpokal
 Bild eines Rhinocerosses aus dem *Museum
 Um 1570–1611 // Anonymous, Horn,
 t and a rhinoceros skin from *Museum
 Ca. 1570-1611. Wien, Österreichische
 iothek, Sammlung von Handschriften
 rucken, Cod. min. 129, fol. 10r. // Vienna,
 tional Library, Department of manuscripts
 oks, Cod. min. 129, fol. 10r.
 chische Nationalbibliothek, Bildarchiv.)**

ly carried out in connection with the acquisition of exotic animals for the menagerie in Ebersdorf (Cat. No. 1.7). Other sheets, worked with the finest of brush strokes and much opaque white, were produced by court painters, who on the one hand could observe the fauna in the menageries in Ebersdorf and Prague, but preferred to copy and adapt existing works, too. Many studies now assigned to Giuseppe Arcimboldo show a completely different signature. Due to the volume and, in some cases, the truly outstanding quality of these works it is questionable if these were only preliminary studies or sketches for his paintings – which was the case with his composite painting *Terra* (Ill. 1).¹⁶

A similar compilation from the collections of Emperor Rudolf II has also been conserved, parts of which are based upon older original works of art, the so-called *Bestiarium* (Animal book) compiled over the years between 1570 and 1611. Here too there was more than one artist at work, and, among others, Arcimboldo was also involved.¹⁷ This monumental collection contains 181 oil paintings on parchment in two volumes with depictions of exotic, fabled and indigenous animals.¹⁸ In addition to this there are also illustrations of naturalia presented against a green background (Ill. 4). This compilation is obviously a reflection of the imperial *Kunstkammer*, which explains how this work received the name



Ill. 5: Georg (Joris) Hoefnagel, Ansicht
 Schloss Ambras und Innsbruck. 1582–1592
 Georg (Joris) Hoefnagel, Ambras Castle and
 Innsbruck. 1582–1592. Wien, Kunsthistorisches
 Museum, Inv.-Nr. KK 5351 // Vienna,
 Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstammer,
 Inv.-Nr. KK 5351. (©: KHM-Museumsverband.)

of »Emperor Rudolf II's Museum«. ¹⁹ Such compilations were used as models for reference, as can be seen in Hans Hoffmann's *The Fall of Man* (Cat. No. 4.2). A red-flanked duiker, the desert jerboa and the blackbuck, studies produced by Arcimboldo and found in Cod. min. 42, are inserted into this work, and are inserted to those found in Cod. min. 129.

Especially (Landscape-) Scenes related to the Bible or mythology provided ideal locations for depicting animals; they should represent the diversity of God's creation. Roelant Savery was one of those court painters of Rudolf II who knew best to stage impressively such »paradise landscapes« full of animals of all species or origins.

In this regard Joris Hoefnagel (1542-1600) should also be mentioned. Since 1579 the Netherlander had been employed as court miniaturist at Duke Wilhelm V's court in Munich. Archduke Ferdinand II commissioned him to produce illuminations (1581-90) for a large *Missale Romanum* (Vienna, Austrian National Library, Department of manuscripts and rare books, Cod. 1784). For the city atlas, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1572-1617) compiled by Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg, Hoefnagel produced, among other things, a topographical view of Ambras Castle (Ill. 5). The three bulls in the foreground of the composition are not merely staffage, but rather allegorical figures. In the text of the author, the Bacchus grotto and the tradition of the »Ambrascher Willkomm« (a welcoming ritual carried out at Ambras Castle) are referred to. The god of

wine has the nickname of »horned bull«, making the true meaning of these bulls clear.²⁰ During his years of service in Munich, and also for some time before and after that (1575-92), Hoefnagel was also engaged in producing a work which is noteworthy in connection to our topic, namely the work entitled, *Die vier Elemente* (The Four Elements, watercolour and gouache paintings on parchment, now located in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., inv. 274 Miniatures). In 1590/91 he began working at the court of Rudolf II. In 1592 this work was completed: one of the most extensive and most representative compilations of painted illustrations of nature, which the emperor immediately purchased for his collections. With its enormous volume, its admirable brilliance and its store of knowledge on nature, Hoefnagel raised the depiction of nature to an unprecedented level and therewith continued the trend, which had been set in humanist circles of Rudolfiner naturalist painters. The copying of other artists, for example the illustrations of Dürer, or the woodcuts from Conrad Gessner's multi-volumed, *Historia Animalium* (Cat. No. 1.4), was included in this encyclopaedic goal. Hoefnagel was – like other painters of animals – a pioneer of the animal still-life painting which was to become a new genre shortly after 1600.

- 1 Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, translated by Hans Stilet, Frankfurt/Main, 2002, Book II, Chapt. 12, p. 317.
- 2 Erwin Panofsky, *Idea*, Berlin, 1960, p. 24; quotation from Fritz Koreny, *Albrecht Dürer und die Tier- und Pflanzenstudien der Renaissance*, Munich, 1985, p. 14.
- 3 *Vier Bücher von menschlicher Proportion* (1528), quotation from: Ernst Ullmann (Ed.), *Albrecht Dürer, Schriften und Briefe*, Leipzig, 1978, p. 198.
- 4 Plinius, *Naturalis historia*, VIII, Chapter XXIX, 71.
- 5 Ullmann – Dürer 1978 (quoted note 3), p. 116.
- 6 Simon Winder, *Kaisers Rumpelkammer. Unterwegs in der Habsburger Geschichte*, translated by Klaus Binder, Bernd Leineweber and Nele Quegwer, Hamburg, 2014, p. 180.
- 7 Ernst Gombrich, *Kunst und Illusion. Zur Psychologie der bildlichen Darstellung*, Zürich, 1986, p. 119.
- 8 Ullmann – Dürer 1978 (quoted note 3), pp. 110 and 114.
- 9 Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Die Wende. Wie die Renaissance begann*, translated by Klaus Binder, Munich, 2012.
- 10 Letter from Archduke Ferdinand II to Veit von Dornberg, quoted in David von Schönher (Ed.), »Urkunden und Regesten aus dem K.K. Statthalterei-Archiv Innsbruck.« In: *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 11: 1891, Reg. 7374.
- 11 Wendelin Boeheim (Ed.), »Urkunden und Regesten aus der K. K. Hofbibliothek.« In: *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 7: 1888, Reg. 5556, fol. 382v; Exhibition Catalogue Wilfried Seipel (Ed.), *Natur und Kunst. Handschriften und Alben aus der Ambras Sammlung Erzherzog Ferdinands II. (1529-1595)*, Innsbruck (Ambras Castle), 1995, pp. 67–75.
- 12 Boeheim 1888 (quoted note 11), Reg. 5556, fol. 382r; Exh. Cat. Innsbruck 1995 (quoted note 11), pp. 64–66; Exhibition Catalogue Christina Weiler (Ed.), *Von Fischen, Vögeln und Reptilien. Meisterwerke aus den kaiserlichen Sammlungen*, Vienna (Austrian National Library), 2011, pp. 18–63.
- 13 »Gensio Liberale fu anch'egli discepolo di Pellegrino, e fra l'altre cose imitò nelle sue pitture ogni sorte di pesci eccellentemente. Costui è oggi al servizio di Ferdinando arciduca d'Austria in bonissimo grado e meritamente, per essere ottimo pittore,« quoted in G. Coronini Cronberg, »Giorgio Liberale e i suoi fratelli.« In: *Studi di storia dell'arte in onore di Antonio Morassi*, Venice, 1975, pp. 85–96, here: p. 85.
- 14 »[...] di continuo disegna figure grandi di piante e animale, tanto belle quanto possa far la natura di modo che ho fatto inammorare il mio principe di questa impresa di sorte che non mancherà de ogni possibile aiuto [...],« quoted in Sara Ferri (Ed.), *Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi. Il Problema delle immagini nei »Commentari.«* In: Pietro Andrea Mattioli, *Siena 1501 – Trento 1578: la vita le opere con l'identificazione delle piante*, Perugia, 1997, p. 370.
- 15 Vienna, Austrian National Library, Department of manuscripts and rare books, Cod. min. 42; pasted into an album at a later date.
- 16 Exhibition Catalogue Sylvia Ferino-Pagden (Ed.), *Arcimboldo 1526-1593*, Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum), 2008, p. 151, cat. no. IV; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Arcimboldo. Visual Jokes, Natural History and Still-Life Painting*, Chicago – London, 2010, pp. 146–147.
- 17 DaCosta Kaufmann 2010 (quoted note 16), pp. 125–127.
- 18 Vienna, Austrian National Library, Department of manuscripts and rare books, Cod. 129, 130.
- 19 Lee Hendrix, »Natural History Illustration at the Court of Rudolf II.« In: Eliška Fučíková et al. (Eds.), *Rudolf II and Prague. The Court and the City*, New York, 1997, pp. 157–171, here p. 162.
- 20 Exhibition Catalogue Thea Vignau-Wilberg (Ed.), *In Europa zu Hause – Niederländer in München um 1600*, Munich (Staatliche Graphische Sammlung), 2005, 52, cat. A 8.