

Josef Karl Rädler

The "Court Painter of Austria, Italy and Siam"

He called himself "Court Painter of Austria, Italy and Siam" and also a "laughing philosopher". He was a pacifist, preached a healthy way of living and painted untiringly. The Austrian Josef Karl Rädler (1844 - 1917) was a contemplative and at the same time difficult person. From the age of 50 to the end of his life he lived in lunatic asylums, as they were then called. 50 years after his death, between 800 and 900 of his drawings were saved from the litter bin.

"I was fascinated", Prof. DDr. Leo Navratil (1921 - 2006) wrote in his book on Josef Karl Rädler, when in 1972 a nurse offered him some of Rädler's drawings. It was only 20 years later that Prof. Navratil found the time to attend to Rädler's work. He had meanwhile gained his reputation as an author on Art Brut and as discoverer of the Gugging artists. Analysing Rädler's medical files, Navratil wrote a catalogue for Rädler's exhibition in St. Pölten, Lower Austria, 1994, so far the one and only and therefore authoritative source of information on the work of this unique artist.

Worldwide successes as porcelain painter

Josef Karl Rädler was born in 1844 in the Bohemian town of Falkenau. Today it is called Sokolov and is situated in Czechia.

Rädler moved to Vienna when he was 23 years old and became a master porcelain painter. Together with Robert Pils he founded the "Artistische Atelier für Porzellanmalerei Rädler & Pils" in 1872, one of the most important enterprises in this field. Rädler's studio had branches in Vienna, London, Paris, Frankfurt, and storage rooms in Melbourne, Sidney, New York, Philadelphia and Rio de Janeiro. His firm took part in the world exhibitions of Vienna (1873) and Paris (1878) and was awarded numerous medals, certificates and national awards. It designed porcelain services for the Rothschild family; Rädler's products were donated by Archduke Rainer to the South Kensington Museum - today the Victoria and Albert Museum - in London. The firm's products were nostalgic imitations of an old Viennese style and a historicism of the former Viennese Porcelain Factory from around 1800, and also of designs of the painters Angelika Kaufmann (1741 - 1807) and the pompous style of Hans Makart (1840 - 1884). The Viennese liked them and they were in great demand for export. Occasionally objects made by Rädler & Pils turn up on the art market and in auctions. However it is (yet) unknown what Rädler's own porcelain painting looked like.

Locked up in asylums

Rädler was married. Of his eight children four died when they were still young. The dramatic change in his life took place in 1893. Upon his family's initiative Rädler in 1893 was committed to the private mental home in Lainz / Vienna, and shortly afterwards to the asylum "Pilgerhain" in Vienna. In 1905 Rädler was committed to the

"Kaiser Franz Josef Landes Heil- und Pflegeanstalt" in Mauer-Öhling, a village situated between Vienna and Linz. He was hospitalized there until his death in 1917.

Rädler's hospitalization in "lunatic asylums" was instigated by his family. They charged him with heightened excitation, mood swings fluctuating between megalomania and faintheartedness, erratic behaviour damaging to the business, and permanently raising lawsuits, among other things. Rädler, however, was able to refute all these charges and the judicial commission was told that Rädler did not show any psychic abnormalities. He was nevertheless put under guardianship in 1897. A "circular psychosis with manic states of excitation" was attested by the doctors in the Vienna asylum. He was characterized as being "grumpy, foolish, rude, arrogant, and stubborn". Later on in Mauer-Öhling "secondary dementia" was diagnosed, of which today's equivalent is a schizophrenic defect. In the last year of his life Rädler was plagued with epileptic seizures. This diagnosis forms the basis of Navratil's theses on Rädler's painting and writing after 1893.

The Viennese antiquarian Dr. Hansjörg Krug discovered that in 1909 Rädler made the following notes on drawings he produced in asylums: "My wife became unfaithful to me. I stood in the way of two gallants (a senior civil servant and a merchant) and they secretly ushered me into the lunatic asylum – is this fate??" In 1915 Rädler makes a note concerning his wife: "She was faithful for our mutual good. But then she fell for vanity=hedonism=obsession with cleaning ... interned unlawfully, by her?"

"The Court Painter"

In 1897, Rädler began, on his own initiative and without the assistance of his doctors, to paint and write at the Viennese asylum "Pilgerhain". He used water colors and tempera, colored inks and Indian ink. Almost all the pictures are painted or drawn on both sides of the paper. Rädler painted his sheets of paper at varying times. The front and the back were signed in different years. A page could therefore be started in Vienna in 1904 and finished in Mauer-Öhling in 1911. The size could vary up to 30 x 40 cm. His medical history documents that he considered himself to be the "first painter" and referred to himself as "court painter of Austria, Siam and Italy". Logically he therefore initially asked exorbitant prices for his drawings, but then sold them cheaply, calling himself "an honest person". So the initial prices of 500, 1000 or 3000 crowns became one crown or little more, depending on "the yearly income" of the prospective buyer (1000 crowns = € 5000).

The combination of figural painting and ornamental text images on the other side are typical for Rädler. Both sides are framed, and the text pages are often subdivided. Thus his drawings recall book illuminations or oriental / Asian manuscripts. The artist's elaborate work fills the pages right to the edges, leaving hardly any white areas. The careful design down to the smallest detail may be traced back to Rädler's profession as a porcelain painter. The subtle and intricate style of his early work gradually gave way to a coarser style, bordering on what is called naive painting.

People in the mental home and their milieu form the subject of Rädler's densely painted pictures. There are drawings of the dormitory, captured at five o'clock in the

morning, the dining room, the bathrooms, work in the fields, of workshops, walks and parties. He paints group portraits of women and children in traditional costumes, people reading or smoking, blind people and visitors. The artist is also an impressive portrait painter, even though he once added to a finely painted portrait the coarse remark that it "resembled more an animal than a person".

In depicting animals he shows a preference for birds. A bird painted above a human head symbolizes being insane: "to have a bird" in German means being mad. In landscape painting Rädler prefers romantic sunrises and sunsets. He also documented the asylum buildings.

The pictures, apart from their artistic value, are of unique historic value as regards the history of medicine. They document how a patient experienced mental homes and his fellow inmates at the beginning of the last century.

Philosopher and pacifist

Rädler's medical report states that "he inclines to embellish all his pictures with aphorisms". Rädler is not only a "court painter", he also calls himself "a poet", "a laughing philosopher", "co-reformer" and "apostle of mankind". His edifying speeches with which he harangues his social environment (but for which he also gets applause) are often written down on his drawings, and they are frequently in verse. These messages ridicule his fellow patients, moralize, preach peace, demand equal rights for women, and show a hypercritical but at the same time committed and sympathetic person. He wrote in one of his drawings: "have always been a pacifist / behold how beautiful the path is / as a laughing philosopher". After the outbreak of the First World War, the pacifist Rädler writes on Aug. 22, 1914: "It is a disgrace for the whole of Europe that man must go to war against man ... what can be gained from strangling and murdering? - Annihilating men and cultures!!! - When mankind wants to live in peace! Turn those deadly weapons into lightning conductors and plows ..."

In another poem he wrote: "It is madness to walk with an umbrella - a bath brings life! Lunacy is any idle talk ... decorating every face, smoke any tobacco ..., going to church, ... playing with weapons. Think about it, wake up! A healthy life means garden, field, working in the woods, drawing, painting. Have a natural, positive attitude, ... creating useful things for others!" Churches, according to Rädler, should be converted into museums and art galleries. He urged his "dear contemporaries to cultivate the good, the noble and the beautiful", and he calls upon them to "become vegetarians".

Navratil wrote that " Rädler's copious writings on his pictures indicate that he also wanted to make verbal statements". He summarizes that it is "total artistic separation coupled with an urgent desire to communicate which bestows on his work radicality and authenticity". He diagnoses a kind of "prolific madness" in Rädler's work.

Delightful for a painter's eye

Rädler spent twelve years, from 1905 to 1917, in the asylum "Kaiser-Franz-Joseph Landes- Heil- und Pflegeanstalt Mauer Öhling". This mental home was designed by Carlo von Boog. In this project Von Boog used the latest building techniques. He employed new and almost revolutionary methods in medical treatment and care practices in the psychiatric department. The complex, built in art nouveau style, comprised 40 buildings, among them 19 pavilions, and at the time was regarded as the most modern and "one of the best asylum", and was visited by experts from around the world. After the opening in 1902 Emperor Francis Joseph wrote to his friend Katharina Schrott: " ... all for the well being of the fools. It must be a special treat to be locked up there".

Rädler benefitted from the open concept of the mental home. He enjoyed the greatest conceivable freedom and could develop his artistic activities, if unappreciated, at least at liberty. "It is delightful to the painter's eye", he said in 1905. After separating from his family he wrote: "so I came from the hall of misery to hall of joy hurray, I came free!" He felt "grave - but serene" but also "with aches". Mauer-Öhling was to him a "world-university".

Saved from the litter bin

As Rädler noted on his drawings, he wanted to bequeath his pictures to the Peace League in Haag, but it all turned out differently. One year before his death the physicians' verdict was the following: "Talks, rhymes, writes poetry and prose and paints a lot of rubbish." As "rubbish" his pictures were thrown away during renovation work on the mental home in 1965, and were saved by several persons by sheer coincidence.

For the first time Rädler's works were presented in a small travelling exhibition in various towns in Lower Austria during the 1980s, organized by Dr. Werner Boissl, who was then chief physician of the mental home.

The Niederösterreichisches Landesmuseum (county museum of Lower Austria) in Vienna presented Rädler's work in 1994 in a solo exhibition, with Navratil compiling the relevant publications on the artist. Two further exhibitions gave a detailed viewing of Rädler's oeuvre, and his contemporary intellectual environment: the Welcome Collection in London in 2009 and an exhibition at the Wien Museum in Vienna in 2010, dedicated to the theme "Art and Insanity in Vienna at the Turn of the Last Century" (see the catalogue).

The Museum of Everything, London, exhibited Rädler's works in Paris in 2012 in a group exhibition (see the catalogue 2010). Rädler's works are on offer in Vienna and New York and are represented internationally in prominent collections on the art of outsiders. Our gallery Altnöder in Salzburg dedicated the first sales exhibition to Rädler in 2010. Thanks to a sensational discovery in an attic, a comprehensive collection of some 50 pictures will follow this summer. So far, his preserved works are estimated at between 800 to 900 items, more than 400 of these belong to the Niederösterreichische Landesmuseum St. Pölten. Rädler himself writes: "(I) painted easily a thousand water colours".

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Bibliography

The Catalogue of Leo Navratil: Josef Karl Rädler 1844-1917, County Museum of Lower Austria, Vienna 1994, so far has been the relevant source for Rädler's late work. The medical report forming the basis for Navratil's theses, is at present missing.

The facts on Rädler and his porcelain painting have been extracted from various articles by Waltraud Neuwirth. From 1979 - 2002 she was custodian of the glass and ceramics section of the Viennese Museum of Applied arts.

Latest research on the architecture of Mauer-Öhling was presented in a dissertation by Hofrat DI Dr. Peter H. Kunerth. It will be published this summer.