

Menschenhandel

Around 1775, the Kilchberg-Schooren porcelain manufactory in Zurich produced various porcelain figures. Among them was the 19 cm high figure the *Menschenhandel*. The coloured, white porcelain figure depicts three people on a pedestal. They are three men from different geographical and cultural backgrounds. This in particular can be determined by their clothing, as well as by their skin colour. The group is composed in such a way that two of the men face the third, whereby only two seem to address each other. They are a European and an Arabic dressed man. The European facing the Arabic man wears a typical nobleman costume of that time. Based on the tights, the collar and the hat, one can assume that it is a Spaniard. Siegfried Ducret also testifies to this in his work "Die Zürcher Porzellanmanufaktur". The Arabic man wears pump trousers, a loosely wrapped coat, a full beard and an oriental cap. The third figure stands somewhat apart from the other two men, on the side of the Arab, and is depicted as a black-skinned young man. In contrast to the other two he wears no clothes and his hands, as well as his feet are caught in chains, which were designed three-dimensional. All three persons are placed on a pedestal, which is represented as a stone ground. Between the individual rocks algae-like plants protrude and individual small shells lie beside the feet of the men. An exchange of money takes place between the European and the Arab, in which the European handing over the money. The coins are painted gold on the hand of the Arabic man. The slave is placed in the same line as Packet and Arab, which makes him appear as a commodity, worthy of the Packet. This constellation of merchants and goods gives rise to the assumption that this scene is a barter trade. The figure was bought by Heinrich Angst(1847-1922) who was the first director of the National Museum in Zurich. In 1903, the figure *Menschenhandel* became a gift to the Museum. The original purchase price was 400 Swiss francs. The object raises the question of how the fine, noble material of porcelain is related to such a corrupt act as the slave trade and also for what purpose such a contradictory work of art was produced, bought and finally exhibited.

In the 18th century, a great deal of interest in porcelain arose in Switzerland. One of the first and most important porcelain manufactories in Switzerland was the Kilchberg-Schooren factory in Zurich under the management of the Heidegger family. In 1768 Heinrich Heidegger concluded the purchase contract for the property and thus laid the foundation stone for the flourishing business in the following years, which strongly influenced Swiss porcelain production. The porcelain figurines were produced in individual figures or in groups and served as table decorations. Mostly they were set up to stimulate discussions. In this context, the question now arises as to what kind of discussion the group *Menschenhandel* led to. Konrad J. Kuhn confirms in his study of the involvement of Switzerland in the colonial slave trade that the people of Zurich played an active role in the slave trade both state-run and privately. According to Kuhn, in the 18th and 19th centuries several Swiss cotton plantations in the Caribbean and Guayna were owned and operated by enslaved people. Especially from 1763, after the Seven Years' War, Kuhn continues, Zurich experienced an upswing in colonial trade. Cotton was mainly imported and processed in Switzerland. Although the research literature on this subject is very sparse, Thomas David, Bouda Etemad and Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl also conclude that Zurich was active in the manufacture of equipment for slave ships on the one hand and that banks and businessmen participated financially in the slave trade on the other. Hans Fässler also confirms that the political and economic networking with European colonial powers such as Holland and France created a new economic sector for Switzerland that was clearly driven by the slave

trade. If one now devotes oneself again to the porcelain figure with this knowledge, it becomes clear that the subject of slavery and slave trade was quite prominent in Switzerland at that time and thus became the occasion to discuss exactly this trade of goods against slaves.

On the basis of the mussels it can be assumed that the three men are geographically seen close to the sea. The Historisches Museum Basel houses a work by Jean-Herman Faber from 1769, which portrays the Basel merchant Johann Rudolf Harder (1740-1801). It is noticeable that, similar to the porcelain figures, shells are depicted on the floor next to the person. From the visible silhouette in the background it can be concluded that this is the city Cadiz, which played an important role in the trading business with the Caribbean in the 18th century. A connection can thus be drawn with the above-mentioned literature, in which it is mentioned that Switzerland conducted slave trade, in particular with the colonial powers active in the Caribbean. In George Morland's painting "Slave Trade", which was painted in 1788, the viewer also finds a similar scene. The attributes of the rocks, the black slave inferior to the white European, and the chains, which do not serve the same purpose here, are repeated in this painting. This work was created at the time when the abolition of slavery was being discussed and is considered the first anti-slavery painting in Western art history. Works of art that represented the slave trade or the colonial trade in general thus changed their significance depending on the time. Certain motifs seem to repeat themselves. These are, on the one hand, the overly clear distinctions between cultural origin through skin colour, the geographical allocation close to the sea and the gesture of trade. The porcelain figure is therefore not unique in its composition, but no comparable porcelain art was found.

On one hand the literature mentioned points that Switzerland had active participation in the slave trade, and on the other hand it was produced at the time of the emerging counter-movement against slave trade. In an article published in 2012, Martin Mühlheim discusses the porcelain figure and thus offers a more contemporary view of the object. According to Mühlheim, the figure was produced as a "critical commentary on European participation in the slave trade". He sees the object in the context of the Abolition movement, which spread to Switzerland from 1850, and makes a connection with Salomon Gessner, artistic director of the Kilchberg-Schooren manufactory, who had intensively dealt with the slave trade and critically processed it. Although Mühlheim's arguments seem powerful, the exact meaning of the group of figures is not known and the assumption that the production was carried out with a positive view of the slave trade cannot be excluded. Also the fact that no more precise description of the object was made until 2012 seems contradictory. It can therefore be assumed that the research literature is still not clear about the historical and political relevance of this porcelain figure.

Literature

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