

Article for Online Publication: *Trachtenbild of Gabriel Figy und Elsbeth Conrad von Glarus*

The *Trachtenbild of Gabriel Figy und Elsbeth Conrad von Glarus* was painted by the Lucernese painter Joseph Reinhard around 1800. It was part of the second cycle of paintings presenting swiss costumes, so called *Trachten*, as they were imagined to be typical of Swiss people at the time. The cycle counts around 46 oil paintings, subdivided by region and usually showing a couple or a family doing specific chores.

Whereas in the first cycle of *Trachten* which Reinhard painted in the 1790es the focus of the paintings was more on the almost caricatural bodily and facial features of the couples shown on a neutral background, deceiving a certain closeness to the theories of physiognomy by Johann Kaspar Lavater, who was part of the same Swiss patriotic network as the commissioner of the first cycle, the style of the second cycle draws more from typical elements of genre-painting to conceive an idea of Swiss rurality. On the *Trachtenbild of Gabriel Figy und Elsbeth Conrad von Glarus* the latter is shown as she is probably handing out the Schabziger cheese under the delighted gaze of who seems to be the customer. It is not known whether the names in the title belong to existing people although the adding of names is common to both cycles made by Reinhard, of which some are known to have been the names of real people living at the time. Another open question concerns the conditions in which the paintings were made: that Reinhard met the people he painted in real life is mentioned in some contemporary texts but it is rather improbable that Reinhard painted the oil paintings on the spot. In any case the images as images always reveal a degree of construction. Just as the *Trachtenbild of Stans* in this *Trachtenbild* many elements seem to idealize peasantry, who live from their self-made products, in a poor but natural setting. The Schabziger cheese and the blackboards depicted here were typical products from the canton of Glarus and became an important export good. In this sense the image links a region, Glarus, and its people to their economic output in an image of idealized work life, where people are shown living in harmony with their environment and their animals in what seems to be a pre-capitalistic setting of goods-exchange.

In reality though, ideas about peasantry and its link to Swissness were part of an intellectual discourse of 18th century industrialization and agrarian reforms which were quite common in European debates. As Denis Diderot writes in his encyclopedia this “class of valuable people” had to be taken into account by governments as they represented the basis of a nation’s prosperity.¹ The population as an object of study and resource was born. Also in Switzerland especially in the economic centers of Bern and Zurich economic and patriotic societies were founded such as the Oekonomische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft in Bern in which ideas on how to increase agrarian outputs were discussed by the economic elite.² Target of this commitment to economic growth was also the population, which ideally had to be hard-working, healthy and happy.³

But the beginnings of industrialization had many, also negative consequences for the common people: For example many poor farmers lost their land due to the enclosures of common pastures and were integrated into industrialized processes, especially the textile industry. Self-sufficiency was no longer the main organization of peasant life but was given up

¹ Quoted from: Held, *Bauern*, 125.

² Stuber, Moser, Gerber-Visser, Pfister, *Einleitung*, 18.

³ Dubler, *Handwerk und Gewerbe, Heimindustrie und Manufaktur*, 109.

for other income sources such as home-based-work (*Heimarbeit*), which was already a widespread sector, especially for women and poor people at the time.⁴

Against this background it is not a surprise that the *Trachtenbild* as a genre suggesting stability and tradition was, as many historians have shown,⁵ a product of the 18th century so that Joseph Reinhard counts as one of the first painters of swiss *Trachten*. Just as the theories of physiognomy which tried to pin down a people's national character can be seen as the result from the new interest in populations, the *Trachten* can be seen as their visual correspondent, and as a powerful instrument for linking people with land and moral. Insofar the main theme of the so called *Trachtenbilder* are not just the clothes themselves but also the values and the *habitus* attached to them. Though aestheticized, they were considered to be working clothes and usually people were depicted carrying working instruments, important elements which shouldn't be overseen in almost all the paintings. It is important to note also that the images representing peasants were seldom (or never) self-representations of the peasant population itself but usually commissioned by scholars from the main cities, who more often than not were part of an economic elite. Whereas the first cycle which was commissioned by the industrialist Johann Rudolph Meyer is known to have been exposed in his palace for visitors, it is thought that the second cycle was exposed in a cabinet of the painter himself, before it was acquired by the city of Lucerne and later exposed in the city's art museum. In any case this gives information on the addressed viewers, which must have been of the same urban class as them or scholars and tourists able to travel around Europe. In a time when many scientific theories about the physical features and its relation to a people's culture were popular in Europe, especially with Kaspar Lavater impact in Switzerland, the image-cycles must have attracted many scholars who admired them as ethnographic research disclosing a country's people. As the contemporary philosopher Gottfried Peter Rauschnik noted as he saw the paintings on a trip to Switzerland "they are a collection of striking physiognomies, that introduce the viewer to the particular, strong traits of this people".⁶ The popularity of the *Trachtenbilder* by Reinhard is also noticeable in the many reproductions and media-transfers it unleashed. The *Trachtenbild of Gabriel Figy und Elsbeth Conrad von Glarus* can be found again in the form of a graphic reproduction by Franz Hegi in 1801 and a terracotta-group made by Anton Sohn a few years later.

⁴ Dubler, *Handwerk und Gewerbe, Heimindustrie und Manufaktur*, 109.

⁵ Vinken, *Die Erfindung der Heimat aus dem Geist der Moderne*, 14.

⁶ Rauschnik, *Malerische Ansichten*, 147.



Josef Reinhard, *Trachtenbild, Gabriel Figy und Elsbeth Conrad von Glarus*, um 1800, Öl auf Leinwand, 71 x 59.2 cm, Kunstmuseum Luzern.

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