

The Hans Rudolf Rahn's figure clock at the National Museum Zurich

The Hans Rudolf Rahn's figure clock was given in depositum to the National Museum Zurich around the year 1913.¹ It consists on a wooden stand-up figure identified as a Moor, dressed as a soldier with bow, arrows, and a silver shield, over a *secrétaire* that serves as pedestal (Fig. 1). During the seventeenth century's first half, the wooden pedestal, possibly at par with the metal ones, had an important development in terms of size and complexity, and in relationship to the figure clocks typology.² Sometimes containing the clock's mechanism, the Rahn's pedestal was though for a personal use, because it was provided with two drawers associated both with the secrecy and the private writing act.



Fig. 1. Hans Fend's workshop and unknown German watchmaker and carver, Figure clock with a Moor, 1646, Wood, silver, silk, 66cm high. National Museum Zurich, Switzerland.
Provenance: Present to Hans Rudolf Rahn in Baden; Zurich Rahn family.

On the top of the *secrétaire*, a base covered with silk supports the figure. Also made of silk,³ its garments correspond to a roman armor, with laced sandals and straps on shoulders and skirt.⁴ But where the roman armor is supposed to let the skin be shown, in

¹ Olga Amberger, "Die schwarze Baden-Schenkung," *Zürcher Wochen-Chronik* 5 (1913), 51.

² Georg Himmelheber, "Uhr und Sockel," in *Die Welt als Uhr. Deutsche Uhren und Automaten, 1550-1650*, ed. Klaus Maurice and Otto Mayr (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1980), 124.

³ Werner Schnyder-Spross, *Die Familie Rahn von Zürich* (Zurich: Schulthess & Co., 1951), 111.

⁴ Renate Eikermann, ed., *Der Mohrenkopfpokal von Christoph Jamnitzer* (Munich: Bayerisches Nationalmuseum München, 2002), 303.

the arms and legs, the clock's figure is covered by a thin white filigree, what avoids the figurative carving's problems and gives a luxurious material appearance to the composition. Decorated with gilded embroidery flower motifs all over, the costume with its central "feather" panache's representation in the crown, places the figure in an exotic land.

Some wildness is also expressed materially through the use of real hair to hold the removable crown (Fig. 2), and ichnographically through the bow and the quiver with arrows the figure carries, correspondingly, in its left hand and on its right hip (Fig. 3), usually associated with the allegory of America and with African warriors. Nevertheless, the earrings the figure wears seem more likely to find in African representations.⁵ What especially attracts the attention is the fact that the Rahn's clock is an automaton. The pronounced white eyeballs move from side to side with the mechanism every second, and the prognathic mouth opens and closes according to the change of every hour. The clock on the chest and the automaton's mechanism were made in Augsburg. The enamel clock's dial has been decorated with flower motifs and a bird on the top of the circumference (Fig. 4). And its mechanism is hidden inside the torso not just to be protected, but to maintain intact the mystery of the synchronized motion between the clock's hand and the head.



Fig. 2. Unknown German carver, Moor's figure. Photograph by Daniel Vifian.



Fig. 3. Unknown German carver, Quiver with arrows on the Moor's figure. Photograph by Daniel Vifian.

⁵ For a description of the earring's iconography, see Lorenz Seelig, "»Ein Willkommen in der Form eines Mohenkopfs von Silber getriebener Arbeit«. Der wiederentdeckte Mohrenkopfpokal Christoph Jamnitzer aus dem späten 16. Jahrhundert," in *Der Mohrenkopfpokal von Christoph Jamnitzer*, ed. Renate Eikelmann (Munich: Bayerisches Nationalmuseum München, 2002), 96-97.



Fig. 4. Unknown German watchmaker,
Clock's dial on the Moor's figure.
Photograph by Daniel Vifian.



Fig. 5. Hans Fend's workshop, Goldsmith's
marks on the back of the shield. Photograph
by Daniel Vifian.

The watchmaker of the Rahn' clock rest unknown; but in the back of the silver shield is possible to recognized two marks (Fig. 5): The left one is a *Pyr* (*Zirbelnuss* or cembra nut) that refers the year, which correspond to 1645-1650;⁶ and the right mark, a HF, belongs to the goldsmith Hans Fend (1575 ca.-1641).⁷ Although he died in 1641, it is for sure that his widow continues with the workshop's operations,⁸ a practice also common between the Augsburg watchmakers.⁹ Given the close relationship between goldsmiths and watchmakers,¹⁰ maybe could it be possible to consider the marks of Hans Fend's workshop as a trace for the watchmaker's identification.

Both silver-works, the one that frames the coat of arms and the vermeil one of the chest's dial, consist on symmetrical compositions of masquerades and putti. Although a common decorative recourse, based on grotesques, it contributes to form a fantastic

⁶ Helmut Seling, *Die Kunst der Augsburger Goldschmiede 1529-1868. Dritter Band. Meister – Marken – Beschauzeichen* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1980), 20, number 70. I do not see any confusion between the *Pyr* 70 and the 58 as it is noticed in Eikelmann, ed., *Der Mohrenkopfpokal*, 303. The number 70 have its different parts separated as in the silver shield, while the number 58 is a unified silhouette.

⁷ Seling, *Die Kunst*, 144, number 1256.

⁸ Eikelmann, ed., *Der Mohrenkopfpokal*, 303.

⁹ Eva Groiss, "Das Augsburger Uhrmacher-Handwerk," in *Die Welt als Uhr. Deutsche Uhren und Automaten, 1550-1650*, ed. Klaus Maurice and Otto Mayr (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1980), 69.

¹⁰ Groiss, "Das Augsburger," 64.

appearance. Notwithstanding, the birth of this image must be found not related to the *Wunderkammer's* historical development,¹¹ but in the heraldry. The clock's Moor is actually duplicating the one of the Rahn's coat of arms (Fig. 6).¹² This *Mohrenkopf* (Moor's head) with a headband is in fact common to find and is not the only Swiss one. But according to Schnyder-Spross, the genealogist Carl Keller-Escher proposed around 1914 that the adoption of this coat of arms was because the older brother Heinrich Rahn (?-1503) served under the orders of Ludovico Sforza, "il Moro",¹³ who also had a Moor as symbol.



Fig. 6. Hans Fend's workshop, Rahn's coat of arms on the shield. Photograph by Daniel Vifian.

Accurate or not, this old theory, by locating the coat of arms into a convulse context, in which Ludovico made a versatile use of its own symbols through allegories and emblems, opens the understanding of the Moor figure to its symbolic adaptability, in its pass from an escutcheon to a freestanding sculpture. When in 1646 the burgomaster Hans Rudolf Rahn was prescribed to go to the baths of Baden for a natural healing, the tradition demanded to honor him with presents (*Badengeschenk* or *Badenschenki*) as loyalty signs,¹⁴ which generally consisted in victuals and gold for the journey given the long distance to be traveled.¹⁵ But apparently it was the idea of the Baden's governor Hans Jacob Leu to make the present,¹⁶ since it was usual for the visitors to leave behind, at the place of the bath, some image of their coat of arms.¹⁷

¹¹ Jean Michel Massing, "The World of the Collector," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art III, Part 2. From the "Age of Discovery" to the Age of Abolition. Europe and the World Beyond*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 394.

¹² Sundar Henny, *Vom Leib geschrieben. Der Mikrokosmos Zürich und seine Selbstzeugnisse im 17. Jahrhundert* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2016), 158.

¹³ Schnyder-Spross, *Die Familie Rahn*, 447.

¹⁴ Pius Kaufmann, *Gesellschaft im Bad. Die Entwicklung der Badefahrten und der «Naturbäder» im Gebiet der Schweiz und im angrenzenden südwestdeutschen Raum (1300-1610)* (Zurich: Chronos Verlag, 2009), 211.

¹⁵ Kaufmann, *Gesellschaft im Bad*, 267.

¹⁶ Amberger, "Die schwarze," 51.

¹⁷ Kaufmann, *Gesellschaft im Bad*, 305-307.

Hans Rudolf took the automaton with him, but he surely ordered to leave his coat of arms in form a painting glass (*Wappenfensterscheibe*) as a sign of his physical presence there. And this had political and social recognition, as well as a recognition of the water's healing properties.¹⁸ As a present for the return then, could has been that the representation of the Moor as a warrior have had the function of serving as a page? An early case of this use is found in the 1488 so-called *Sforza cassone*, in which a black warrior is behind a riding Ludovico "il Moro", following him on foot as "a living *impresa*".¹⁹ The notion of familiar and individual possession that a heraldic device carries is essential. For example, regarding the painting, in an "urban context, the presence of a black in a portrait could give the sitter an air of wealth and sophistication".²⁰ The particularity resides here in the figure clock as a companion in the journey, both as a luxury and as a material symbol of authority.

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¹⁸ Kaufmann, *Gesellschaft im Bad*, 306-307.

¹⁹ Translated quote in Elizabeth MacGrath, "Ludovico il Moro and his Moors," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 65 (2002), 70.

²⁰ David Bindman and Helen Weston, "Court and City: Fantasies of Domination," in *The Image of the Black in Western Art III, Part 3. From the "Age of Discovery" to the Age of Abolition. The Eighteenth Century*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 125.

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