



Spring 2024

Art and Propaganda :The Formation of Habsburg Absolutism

Emily B. Suter
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship



Part of the [European History Commons](#), [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [Political History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Recommended Citation

Suter, Emily B., "Art and Propaganda :The Formation of Habsburg Absolutism" (2024). *Student Publications*. 1129.

https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/1129

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Art and Propaganda :The Formation of Habsburg Absolutism

Abstract

Habsburgian propaganda is most often understood within the context of the 17th and 18th centuries, during the monarchy's period of baroque absolutism, causing earlier attempts at propaganda and centralization to be seen as ineffective in comparison. However, through analyzing royal, propagandistic art in the 16th century empire, produced by monarchs beginning as early as Maximilian I, it becomes clear that a unified foundation of an absolutist policy was developed and fostered within this era, one which was a necessity in the success of the absolutist ideologies two centuries later. Through analyzing trends of royal, propagandistic art in the 16th century empire, not only is the root of the Habsburg family's rise to power better understood, but the foundation of an absolutist ideology and public policy that would become central to Habsburg rule until its dissolution in 1918.

Keywords

Habsburg, Propaganda, Art, Vienna

Disciplines

European History | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | Political History

Comments

Written during off-campus study for HIST 304VA: Vienna Past and Present

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

Art and Propaganda :The Formation of Habsburg Absolutism

Emily Suter

HIST 304: Vienna Past and Present

Professor Karl Vocelka

05/03/2024

I: Introduction

Through ruling over the Holy Roman Empire, engaging in various territorial and religious wars, and expanding across Europe through political marriages, the Habsburg Empire is often regarded as one of the most prominent dynasties in European history. The history of the Habsburg influence (traced back to Rudolph I's acquisition of the Duchy of Austria in 1282) spans over six centuries, with the monarchy only dissolving after the end of the first World War in 1918. However, as author Robert Kann highlights, understanding the evolution of the Habsburg empire, once a collection of multinational and multicultural lands run by territorial princes, into the centralized, absolutist power of the 17th and 18th centuries, is a complicated task.¹ Historians often attribute the Habsburg rise to power to their strategic marriage politics, as they gained various lands such as the Netherlands, Hungary, Spain, and Bohemia in the 16th century through these marriages alone. Once previously viewed as insignificant, it is from here that the Habsburg family began to slowly stabilize their finances, expand their territories, and thus assert their divine power over territorial rulers. However, historians also regard a second political policy, one crucial in centralizing political authority, as an important aspect in understanding the Habsburgs rise to power and its formation as an empire: propaganda. A key aspect in legitimizing authority to subjects, propaganda has been used by various monarchs, rulers, and leaders in attempts to psychologically persuade the opinions of the consumer. And while the official usage of propaganda by Habsburg rulers can be traced back to the beginning of the 1500s, the political and social turmoils of the 16th century hindered their attempts at centralization. Therefore, the direct effects of propaganda of this time are therefore viewed as limited in comparison to the absolutist policies under later Habsburgs. It is for this reason that

¹ Robert A. Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire: 1526-1918*, (London, England: University of California Press, 1974), xii.

the study of Habsburg propaganda is largely situated in the Modern Era, citing 18th century absolutism, the baroque era, or efforts undertaken during the first World War rather than the instability of the 16th century. However, although limited in its *direct* attempts at centralization, the analysis of early Habsburg propaganda, created shortly after the empire's expansion, is still crucial in understanding the foundations of the monarchy. Through analyzing trends of royal, propagandistic art in the 16th century empire, not only is the root of the Habsburg family's rise to power better understood, but the foundation of an absolutist ideology and public policy that would become central to Habsburg rule until its dissolution in 1918.

The notion that art can also serve as propaganda is largely uncontested. With its ability to be easily replicated and distributed among a populous, art can easily be used with the intention to persuade the opinions of citizens on behalf of a larger figure or organization.² Further, the visual nature of art propaganda allows its message to be distributed to different 16th century classes—regardless of their wealth or literacy—while also appealing to the high culture of art that attracted the nobility. However, as Charles W. Connell states in his book *Popular Opinion in the Middle Ages*, the act of actually defining propaganda is often debated among historians. He states that, in efforts to quickly understand the influence and impact of Nazi propaganda after World War II, propaganda developed an extremely negative connotation, frequently regarded as something evil and something always made up of “false stories told by liars.”³ And while he does not directly argue against this notion, he states that, through such definitions, analyzing propaganda in pre-modern eras—times before popular literacy or even the printing press—becomes even more limited than it previously was. It is for this reason that Connell argues for a broader definition of

² Sheryl Tuttle Ross, "Understanding Propaganda: The Epistemic Merit Model and Its Application to Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36, no. 1 (2002): 16–30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3333623>.

³ Charles W. Connell, *Popular Opinion in the Middle Ages: Channeling Public Ideas and Attitudes*, (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2016), 24

propaganda when analyzing its application in a pre-modern era. Through using Jacques Ellul's concepts written in his 1965 book *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, Connell summarizes three key aspects of propaganda before providing a broader, more applicable definition. First, he summarizes that propaganda involves psychological actions to modify opinions, which can occur in a positive sense, a negative sense, or even a complex mix. Second, he adds that "in order to undermine an enemy's sense of the validity of his own beliefs, psychological warfare is employed" in instances of propaganda. Lastly, he states that "there is a big picture aspect of propaganda that tries to use various approaches to address social problems that may prevent individuals from adapting to the dominant culture." Through this analysis, Connell states that, "in other words, the overall aim of propaganda is to make individuals conform."⁴ It is through this broader analysis that Habsburg artistic propaganda will be analyzed, as it not only opens the qualifications for 16th century propaganda, but broadens the intentions of its creation.

II: Maximilian I (r. 1493-1519)

It is first under emperor Maximilian I that, even before the church coined the popular term "propaganda," a Habsburg emperor first recognized the propagandistic potentials of art. In the Middle Ages, artwork, its subjects, and its patrons were largely centered around religion, as nobles concerned with their salvation would commission paintings for the church in hopes of atonement.⁵ The Renaissance, reaching the Habsburg lands around the start of the 16th century, brought both a cultural and political shift in the European artworld. Although the church still significantly influenced the creation of art, a "culture of patronage and collecting" began outside of the religious institution, "widely supported by the elites that dominated political, intellectual,

⁴ Connell, *Popular Opinion in the Middle Ages*, 23.

⁵ Kunsthistorisches Museum, *Kunsthistorisches Museum Audio Guide*, Wien, Austria. Room XXVIII. Accessed April 14th, 2024.

and economic life.”⁶ This cultural shift, combined with the new invention of the printing press, did not go unnoticed by Maximilian. Towards the beginning of his reign, Maximilian I suffered various political setbacks, the most significant being an enemy blockade in 1508 which halted his coronation journey to Rome— an ancient tradition since the first emperor Charlemagne —and thus prevented him from being crowned Holy Roman Emperor directly by the Pope.⁷ Further, Maximilian continued to face financial setbacks throughout his reign, largely due to his various military campaigns, and in response began to shift taxes onto an unhappy population. The nobility, which Maximilian relied on for the economic support and reelection, was by no means



Figure I: Bernhard Strigel, *Kaiser Maximilian I. (1459-1519)*, Late 16th Century, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Picture Gallery, 828, Room XXXI.

sympathetic to Maximilian's financial difficulties either, and were more concerned with retaining local authority over their regions.⁸ It is for this reason that, beginning in the early 1500s, Maximilian not only began to commission artwork depicting the family's material wealth and status, but works which attempted to glorify and legitimize his role as an emperor in the eyes of the populace. Painters such as Bernhard Strigel were hired to create detailed court portraits, such as the painting depicted in Figure I. Strigel depicts

Maximilian's status through his clothing, its detailed designs and the chain around his neck (the symbol of the prestigious Order of the Golden Fleece) serving as a clear indication of wealth and prestige.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Larry, Silver, *Marketing Maximilian: The Visual Ideology of a Holy Roman Emperor*, (Princeton University Press, 2008), viii. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2fccv0d>.

⁸ Ibid.

Through this painting, Strigel also attempts to create a pictorial image of Maximilian I which is able to be easily identified and replicated. By depicting his side profile, Maximilian's defining features, such as his sharp nose and soft jaw, become easily discernible and his pictorial image more recognizable. Replications of this side profile were so common, that they not only continued to be copied well after his death in 1519, but were also transferred to various different mediums, such as woodcuts (chosen for their easy replicability) and coins, as seen in Figure II.⁹ The detailed replication of Maximilian's side profile on various coins, made possible due to new developments in minting practices, is crucial in Maximilian's goal of centralizing his power. To the common citizen, who existed outside the nobility of the artworld, these coins not only provided a face to the emperor which ruled them, but also "served as a reminder of him and ever represented him when he was absent."¹⁰ In a time where the Habsburg empire was expanding into a multicultural empire, there was little to link its citizens together outside of the common practice of Christianity.



Figure II: St. Vitus Mint. House of Austria: Maximilian I. 1518. Silver. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Coin cabinet, 31ba

Through using visual artwork to unite his citizens under a common ruler, Maximilian I attempted to begin the crucial shift of centralizing authority to lay the foundations of an empire.

Shortly after fostering a pictorial image of himself, Maximilian I also began to also focus on legitimizing his rule in the eyes of the populace. Through utilizing the printing press, various woodcuts and visual prints depicting his "glorious deeds" were reproduced in attempts to

⁹ *KHM Audio Guide*, Room XXXI.

¹⁰ *KHM Audio Guide*, Room XXX.

commemorate– and at times exaggerate –his achievements.¹¹ Other visual propaganda was less direct, attempting a more symbolic approach to glorify his reign. Maximilian frequently stressed his genealogy, such as questionable family ties to Roman rulers and other prominent historical



Figure III: Albrecht Dürer, *The Triumphal Arch*, 1515-1517.
The British Museum, London, England.

figures, to emphasize his divine right to rule. And while such genealogical claims were not an entirely new effort undertaken by the Habsburgs, Maximilian I would be the first emperor to market it.¹² Perhaps the most extravagant example of this ideology is the *Triumphal Arch* (Fig. III), a woodcut created around 1515 by printmaker Albrecht Dürer. Intended to be pasted onto walls in cities or in the palaces of princes, this 116 × 141 inch print depicts Maximilian I sitting on a throne with crown and scepter, surrounded by his wife and children.¹³ His son, the next in line to

the throne, stands below him with a smile, proudly asserting the future of the Habsburg lineage. Surrounding the family are animals, fruits, angels, and various coats of arms, representing Maximilian's conquests and marriage alliances. This visual depiction in itself, although only a small portion of the complete *Triumphal Arch*, not only portrays the wealth of the family, but

¹¹ *KHM Audio Guide*, Room XXXI.

¹² Silver, *Marketing Maximilian*, 55.

¹³ Dürer, Albrecht. *The Triumphal Arch*. 1515-1517. The British Museum, London, England. https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_E-5-1.

therefore serves as a reminder of their power and authority over the lands which they possess. The visuals of the Triumphal Arch extend further down, depicting a family tree which dates back to symbolic figures of Troy, Sicambria, and Francia. The direct labeling of individuals begins with the first Christian king, Clovius, whom, as historian Larry Silver states, serves “as a prototype for Maximilian in both his rulership as well as his religion,” allowing Maximilian to portray himself as a protector of Christianity.¹⁴ Other crucial Habsburg rulers and saints, such as Leopold III, are also depicted along the family lineage. Through claiming a direct relationship with not only historical but holy figures, Maximilian therefore also placed himself in a pseudo-holy position. In the words of Silver:

Maximilian emerges as a new culmination for the House of Habsburg. By ruining the long-divided strands of the Trojan lineage, the Franks with the Romans, he personally– and literally – incorporates both the heritable virtues and the historical powers developed throughout all of Europe over the centuries since the fall of Troy. He is blood heir to the German nation and the worthy bearer of imperial election and dignity. Thus, his current title, Holy Roman Emperor of the German Nation, is fulfilled and climaxes in the person of Maximilian of Habsburg.¹⁵

Therefore, to citizens in the town hall, or to the nobility who had the physical print in their homes, the *Triumphal Arch* served as a constant reminder of not only Maximilian’s successes, but his divine right to power on the throne. Maximilian I attempted to use this position for political gains, such as persuading the nobility to mount a crusade against the Ottoman Turks, or ensuring his son’s election to the throne after his death. However, as the territorial princes continued to resist his attempts at centralization, historians often view Maximilian I’s attempts at asserting full authority over his empire as minimal, and his larger political goals hindered by financial struggles. However, the survival and usage of his pictorial image, later seen through the propaganda of future emperors, tells a story of success. The creation of an absolutist ideology,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Silver, *Marketing Maximilian*, 58.

almost akin to a cult of personality, by Maximilian marks a central shift in Habsburg politics. Maximilian I not only began a public policy of propaganda, utilized by the monarchy until its dissolution in 1918, but thus helped foster the absolutist ideology of his successors.

III: Charles V (r. 1519-1556) and Ferdinand I (r. 1558-1564)

Maximilian's two grandsons, Charles V and Ferdinand I, are remembered as the brothers who caused the division of the Habsburg lineage between the Spanish and Austrian branches. However, the decision was largely made in attempts to assert a tighter control over the suddenly vast empire. After inheriting the economic struggles of their grandfather, the advancing Ottoman

Turks, and the sudden schism of the Reformation, Charles and Ferdinand sought to maintain the unity of the dynasty, and attempted to continue the centralization efforts of Maximilian I.¹⁶ Both brothers, wishing to assert their authority, utilized the visual propaganda techniques that their grandfather had fostered throughout his reign. Figure IV depicts the survival of Maximilian's absolutist ideology well, in addition to the survival of his pictorial image. The



Figure IV: Hans Kels der Ältere, *Backgammon Board and Gaming Pieces*, 1537, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Kunstammer, 3419, Room XXXI.

elegant Backgammon board, carved in 1537 by artist Hans Kels der Ältere, depicts both Charles V and Ferdinand I on horseback, surrounded by fruits, vines, exotic animals, and the various coats of arms under Habsburg dominion. When compared with earlier Backgammon boards of

¹⁶ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 29.

the 14th century, a clear shift becomes noticeable, not only in the artistry, but in the ideology of its creation. Intended for the nobility, game boards of the Middle Ages often appealed to courtly activities such as hunting, music, archery, or weaponry.¹⁷ Therefore, Hans Kels der Ältere not only reflects a stylistic change, but a political change, as the game board is now centered around the emperor and his family. Charles and Ferdinand are surrounded by various figures, such as important relatives, Roman emperors, and prominent historical rulers, reflecting the continuation of Maximilian I's methods of psychologically legitimizing his rule. More notable, however, is the presence of Maximilian himself on the game board (bottom left), depicted in his popular side profile, almost identical to the one of Figure I. The presence of Maximilian's pictorial image, even after his death, reflects an important addition to Habsburg propaganda techniques. Through utilizing the popular image of Maximilian's side profile, Charles V and Ferdinand I purposefully "exploit the memory of their grandfather in order to present themselves and their family as Maximilian's legitimate successors to the Holy Roman Empire."¹⁸ To the nobility and citizens, who, through his established pictorial image, were aware of their grandfather's reign, Charles V and Ferdinand I appear as the official successors to the divine authority which Maximilian attempted to foster. The two brothers would continue to use their grandfather's image to serve their political needs, as artwork commemorating Maximilian continued to be produced throughout their respective reigns. Portraits of the three emperors, side by side, even appeared on numerous medallions and coins, further establishing a visual and psychological connection in the eyes of the common citizen.¹⁹ Therefore, while Maximilian failed to directly centralize his authority during his reign, he succeeded in not only establishing a visual memory of himself,

¹⁷ *KHM Audio Guide*, Room XXVIII, associated with object INV. NO. 168.

¹⁸ *KHM Audio Guide*, Room XXXI.

¹⁹ *KHM Audio Guide*, Room XXX.

utilized long after his death, but in beginning a public campaign of artistic propaganda, a crucial ideology for emperors which followed him.

And through having the foundation of Maximilian's already established methods, Charles V and Ferdinand I began to utilize propagandistic artwork to develop their own pictorial image. Charles V commissioned artworks glorifying his various campaigns against enemies such as the Ottoman Turks, the French, and even Protestantism as a whole.²⁰ While the Reformation caused internal conflicts within the empire, depicting Charles V as a victorious protector was crucial, as the only aspect truly uniting the Habsburg lands during this time was the common need for defense. Therefore, depicting foes like Ottoman Turks as the brutal enemies of Christianity was not only crucial in garnering financial support, but glorifying the victories that Charles achieved. Charles V further utilized developing art techniques, such as tapestries, as ways to disperse his propagandic ideology. As Silver states, the tapestries emphasized "religion, the hunt, and success in war to accord fully with both the aspirations and the programs of Maximilian."²¹ Therefore, Charles not only used the foundations of his grandfather's memory, but used the development of artwork to create a pictorial image in his own right. Ferdinand I, although not Holy Roman Emperor until his brother's abdication in 1558, was charged with managing the Austrian hereditary lands, and made various efforts to impose a uniform, administrative structure across the empire. Similar to Maximilian I, however, Ferdinand struggled in centralization due to the territorial princes, whose authority had only strengthened due to the political upheaval brought by the Reformation.²² Like his brother, Ferdinand therefore utilized new artistic methods in attempts to legitimize his rule in the eyes of the populous. Figure V, painted by Johann Bocksberger der Ältere in the mid 16th century, depicts a full body portrait of Ferdinand I.

²⁰ *Kunsthistorisches Museum Audio Guide*, Room XXVIII, associated with object 3985.

²¹ Silver, *Marketing Maximilian*, 218.

²² Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 35.

Previously, court artists almost always depicted their subjects through half portraits, with the bottom half of their body out of frame, as seen in Maximilian's portrait in Figure I. This shift to a full body portrait is intentional, attempting to assert the emperor's authority over the viewer.



Figure V: Johann Bocksberger der Älter, *Emperor Ferdinand I (1503-1564), Full-Length Portrait*, Mid 16th Century, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Picture Gallery, 4386, Room XXX.

Although Ferdinand himself is not depicted with anything royalty assertive, such as his crown or scepter, the size of the full body painting forces a greater distance between the figure and the viewer. An intentional psychological effect is thus created, as observers are forced to look upwards towards the painting, and thus upwards towards Ferdinand himself.²³ This technique was used frequently on the royal family, as full body portraits of Ferdinand's wife, children, and brother Charles V were commissioned throughout their reigns. The replication of such paintings, appealing to the art culture of the nobility, marks a subtle yet assertive declaration of authority over territorial rulers. While both Charles and Ferdinand continued to struggle with centralization, hindered by the turmoil of the Ottomans and Reformation, their successes cannot be

overlooked either. Charles V, through his military campaigns, became depicted as a fierce protector of Christinity, who's individual claim to power furthered the absolutist policies of his grandfather. Ferdinand I, through his skillful statesmanship and administrative reforms, brought a

²³ *KHM Audio Guide*, Room XXX, associated with object INV. NO 4386.

level of cohesion and unification to the empire that was not seen under his predecessors. And through both brothers existed the survival, and more importantly the development, of a Habsburg ideology that would later accumulate in absolutism.

IV: Maximilian II (r. 1564-1576)

While Ferdinand I's skillful statesmanship cannot be discredited, his son, Maximilian II, still inherited an empire of instability. With the ever present threat of the Ottomans, the need for financial support only increased, creating a tension between citizens and the emperor. Further, Maximilian II was the most lenient of the Habsburgs towards the growing power of Protestantism, causing upset among his Catholic supporters.²⁴ As a result, Maximilian II began to commission and replicate propagandistic artwork, using the methods of his predecessors to glorify his rule. Woodcuts and visual prints such as *The Apotheosis of Emperor Maximilian II* depict the emperor as the defender of Christianity and protector against the advancing Ottoman threat, much like his uncle Charles V. Maximilian II also used similar tactics such as genealogy, religious motifs, and an emphasis on wealth to glorify and legitimize his position in the eyes of the public.²⁵ However, similar to his predecessors, Maximilian II also used new techniques in order to reflect the political climate of the time. Historian Václav Bůžek describes the use of exotic animals, both in real life and in artwork, to symbolically reflect the power of the newly expanded empire and its prominence in the Age of Discovery. Frequently throughout his reign, Maximilian II would emphasize the ownership of a real elephant and other exotic animals as a clear status of wealth. Their presence would be made apparent throughout imperial processions, and more importantly through various leaflets, visually depicting the animals height, sex, age,

²⁴ Paula Sutter, Fichtner, *The Habsburg Monarchy: 1490-1848*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 25.

²⁵ Václav Bůžek, "Elephants in the Political Propaganda of Maximilian II," In *The Habsburg Mediterranean 1500–1800*, edited by Stefan Hanss and Dorothea McEwan, (2021), 283.

and characteristics to those unable to see it.²⁶ The artistic symbolism of the elephant and other exotic animals would even extend further, as seen through Figure VI. This woodcut, made by Donat Hübschmann around 1564, depicts “the entry of Emperor Maximilian II in Vienna after his coronation at Frankfurt,” as he passes

through Rossmarkt’s triumphal arch. Decorated in preparation for his arrival, the arch is filled with artistic symbolism, such as angels and historical figures. Three prominent animals are also present in the Triumphal Arch, and particularly emphasized in the woodcut replication. A lion in a crown sits atop the structure, the coat of arms of Hungary and Lower Austria resting in its paws, serving as a symbol of the powerful protector that Maximilian wished to portray himself as.²⁷

However, as Bůžek correctly highlights, the addition of the elephant and the rhinoceros in the bottom right and left corner of the arch portray a deeper, symbolic meaning. Both the

elephant and rhinoceros, creatures born in southeast India and gifted to the Spanish House of Habsburg in the mid 16th century, come to symbolize the globalization of the Habsburg empire, as “Mediterranean networks connected territorial and maritime Habsburg domains both within

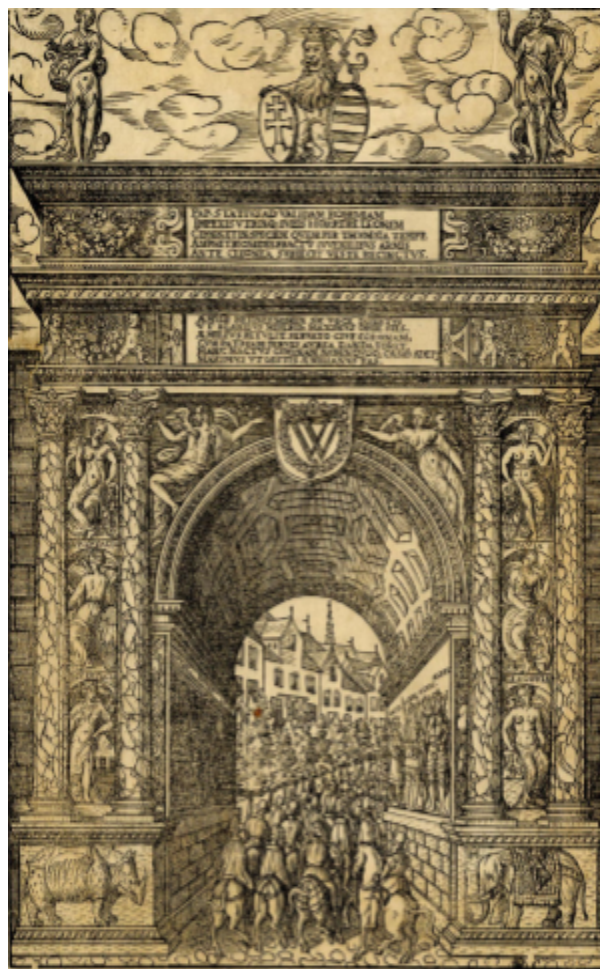


Figure VI: Donat Hübschmann, *The Entry of Emperor Maximilian II in Vienna after His Coronation at Frankfurt*, 1563-1566, The British Museum, London, England.

²⁶ Bůžek, *Elephants in the Political Propaganda of Maximilian II*, 295.

²⁷ Bůžek, *Elephants in the Political Propaganda of Maximilian II*, 289.

Europe and across the globe.”²⁸ Therefore, in the developing Age of Discovery, these exotic animals reflected not only the political connections of Maximilian II, but the global expansion of his lands as well, as Habsburg influence suddenly “went beyond the borders of Europe and created an imaginary rule over the world.”²⁹ Further, Bůžek argues that the inclusion of the elephant and rhinoceros in this artwork, as they were notably gifted to the Spanish branch of Habsburgs, “glorifies the political unity” of both branches, an ideology which Maximilian urgently needed to emphasize to the public, as hostilities rose between the two sides.³⁰ Overall, historians view Maximilian II as a ruler who, despite his various attempts at mediation, struggled in the face of political and religious turmoil. Although he largely succeeded in his attempts at religious toleration, his political aims elsewhere failed, hindered by the imposing Ottoman threat and the powerful nobility. Despite his attempts at artistic propaganda, albeit weaker than his predecessors, Maximilian II failed overall to assert and centralize his authority. However, through his reign, the survival and development of propagandistic methods are made clear, reflected in the succession of his son, Rudolph II, and his continuation of the crucial ideology that it fostered.

V: Rudolph II (r. 1576-1608)

Although described as one of the most politically ineffectual Habsburg rulers, Rudolph II is widely considered one of the most cultured, and an elegant patron of the arts.³¹ Although the direct effectiveness of his propaganda is therefore minimal, as the effects of the Ottoman wars and peasant revolts characterized his reign, his additions to the Habsburg propagandistic policy through art cannot be overlooked, as he helped to shape our modern day association between the

²⁸ Bůžek, *Elephants in the Political Propaganda of Maximilian II*, 280.

²⁹ Bůžek, *Elephants in the Political Propaganda of Maximilian II*, 291.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire*, 41.

Habsburgs and their art culture. Similar to his father, Rudolph II popularized the collection of exotics, and used their display as a symbol of status and wealth in the Age of Discovery. However, Rudolph's additions to the Habsburg art collection exceed any emperor before him. His standards, only collecting items of the highest quality and exclusiveness, reflect "an awareness of his rank and position" in the newly globalized world.³² Using his power and



Figure VII: Unknown, *Bezoar*; third quarter of the 16th century, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Kunstammer, 981, Room XXV.

influence to access treasures from Africa, the Americas, and Asia, Rudolph obtained and displayed items such as ostridge eggs, ivory carvings, delicate bowls made out of rare gems such as agate and pearl, exotic horns from narwhals and rhinoceroses, and various elegant sculptures depicting foreign culture.³³

Rudolph further exceeded the propaganda techniques of his predecessors, as various objects contain a deeper symbolism, such as Figure VII. At first glance, the object is a clear indication of wealth: the pedestal, decorated with lions and a cross at the top, is intricately carved from real gold. Exotic rubies and emeralds line the golden frame, reflecting Rudolph's

ability to obtain and afford such rarities. However, Rudolph's intention in collection lies instead in the circular object in the middle. Collected around the mid 16th century, this large bezoar stone is said to possess healing properties, and counteract ailments such as "poison, epilepsy and melancholy."³⁴ Therefore, Rudolph's possession of such an object is not only a reflection of

³² *KHM Audio Guide*, Room XXVII.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *KHM Audio Guide*, Room XXV, audio associated with INV. NO. 981.

wealth, but of a powerful ability to protect oneself against possible enemies. In a highly political era marked by a largely apolitical ruler, having this artistic object on display for various princes and nobility to see would not only reflect his wealth, but his security and divine protection as a ruler. Outside of his exotic collections, Rudolph II also commissioned propagandistic artwork of himself, continuing the public policy strategy of his past predecessors. Figure VIII, a bust created by sculptor Adriaen de Vries in 1603, glorifies the nonpolitical emperor as a military hero. The bust itself was modeled after those of ancient

Roman emperors with the intention of “drawing a parallel to the rulers of antiquity” and military might, and once again reflects the survival of techniques such as genealogical claims throughout the century.³⁵ The armor itself is intricately decorated with a lion (symbolizing power and strength), a griffin (symbolizing courage and prestige), and two angels with a wreath and trumpet. The Order of the Golden Fleece is also present, hanging around his neck by a chain. The actual bust itself is supported by three figures: an eagle, with what historians believe to be Mars and Bellona (the

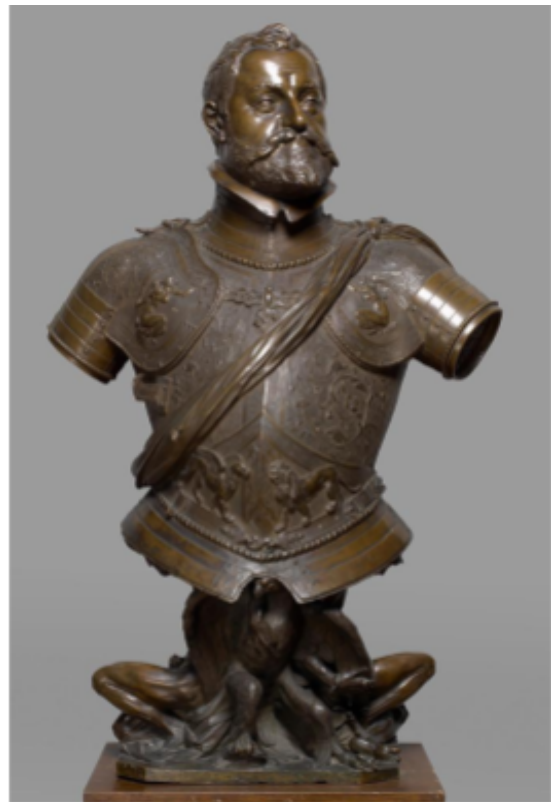


Figure VIII: Adriaen de Vries, *Emperor Rudolf II*, 1603, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Kunstammer, 5506, Room XXVII.

Roman God and Goddess of war) on either side. The intentions of de Vries become clear, as Rudolph II is suddenly depicted as an emperor of wisdom, military might, and a divine bloodline, rather than an ineffective ruler plagued by both external and internal threats. The sculptor's attempts at portraying Rudolph II as a militarily strong emperor are also alluded to

³⁵ *KHM Audio Guide*, Room XXVII, audio associated with INV. NO. 5506.

through analyzing the bust of Charles V, created by sculptor Leone Leoni in 1555. The bust of Charles V, depicting him in the armor he had worn when defeating revolving Lutheran princes in the Battle of Muhlberg, is practically identical to the bust of Rudolph II.³⁶ An eagle, Mars, and Minerva hold the bust of Charles V, donned with decorative armor and the chain of the Order of the Golden Fleece. This choice to copy not only the artistry of the bust, but specifically the bust of *Charles V*, is a clearly intentional act by Rudolph II. Largely known for his campaigns against enemies of the Habsburg empire, Charles V was remembered as an emperor of military strategy and might. Rudolph, like Charles did with Maximilian I, therefore exploited the memory of his great uncle in attempts at glorifying his image in the eyes of the increasingly powerful princes. Therefore, although directly unsuccessful, his contribution to Habsburg public policy cannot be overlooked. Through his collection of artwork, Rudolph II not only continued the Habsburg policy of artistic propaganda, but enhanced it through symbols of exoticism, a practice that would continue to be central to Habsburg policy, as seen through the creation of the Kunsthistorisches Museum and the Imperial Treasury.

VI: Conclusion

Despite the various attempts at centralizing power and asserting authority over the nobility in their lands, the political aims of the early Habsburgs are often considered ineffective by historians, especially in comparison to the baroque absolutism of the 17th and 18th centuries. The following baroque period and the official assertion of the Habsburg empire would be described as a “style of imperial, aristocratic, and monastic ecclesiastic grandeur,” and thus 16th century Habsburg propaganda can be seen as ineffective in direct comparison.³⁷ However, it is clear that without the unified foundations of this absolutist policy, the assertion of Habsburg

³⁶ *KHM Audio Guide*, Room XXVII, audio associated with INV. NO. 5504.

³⁷ Silver, *Marketing Maximilian*, 152.

authority and the policies which followed could easily have faltered. Starting as early as Maximilian I, it became clear that the Habsburgs began to rethink “the structure through which [they] exercised [their] power, and had also made plain that the defense of that complex, along with other titles that [they] held in Germany, was central to Habsburg policy.”³⁸ Through his successors carrying out and developing this public policy, utilizing artistic propaganda in attempts to centralize and assert their authority, a crucial shift is revealed within the Habsburg empire: the formation and unification of subjects, who, as the propaganda tried to emphasize, had one central ruler: the emperor. And although the political turmoil of the 16th century prevented this propaganda from fully succeeding, it is the foundation of this ideology which allowed the development of 17th century absolutism and the full assertion of the monarchy itself.

³⁸ Fichtner, *The Habsburg Monarchy*, 11.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- de Vries, Adriaen. *Emperor Rudolf II*. 1603. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Kunstkammer, 5506, Room XXVII.
<https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/91513/?offset=2&lv=list>.
- Dürer, Albrecht. *The Triumphal Arch*. 1515-1517. The British Museum, London, England.
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_E-5-1.
- Hans Kels der Ältere. *Backgammon Board and Gaming Pieces*. 1537. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Kunstkammer, 3419, Room XXXI.
<https://www.khm.at/en/objektdb/detail/89425/?lv=detail>.
- Hübschmann, Donat. *The Entry of Emperor Maximilian II in Vienna after His Coronation at Frankfurt*. 1563-1566. The British Museum, London, England.
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1927-0614-231.
- Johann Bocksberger der Älter. *Emperor Ferdinand I (1503-1564), Full-Length Portrait*. Mid 16th Century. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Picture Gallery, 4386, Room XXX.
<https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/2302/>.
- Strigel, Bernhard. *Kaiser Maximilian I. (1459-1519)*. Late 16th Century. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Picture Gallery, 828, Room XXXI.
<https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/1854/?offset=0&lv=list>.
- St. Vitus Mint. *House of Austria: Maximilian I*. 1518. Silver. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Coin cabinet, 31bα
<https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/1008283/?offset=242&lv=list>.
- Unknown. *Bezoar*. Third quarter of the 16th century. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria. Kunstkammer, 981, Room XXV.
<https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/87180/?offset=11&lv=list>.

Secondary Sources

- Bůžek, Václav. "Elephants in the Political Propaganda of Maximilian II." In *The Habsburg Mediterranean 1500–1800*, edited by Stefan Hanss and Dorothea McEwan, 279-304. N.p., 2021. Austrian Academy of Sciences Press.
- Connell, Charles W.. *Popular Opinion in the Middle Ages : Channeling Public Ideas and Attitudes*. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2016. Accessed May 3, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.

- Fichtner, Paula Sutter. *The Habsburg Monarchy: 1490-1848*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Kann, Robert A. *A History of the Habsburg Empire: 1526-1918*. London, England: University of California Press, 1974.
- Kunsthistorisches Museum. *Kunsthistorisches Museum Audio Guide*, Wien, Austria. Accessed April 14th, 2024.
- Ross, Sheryl Tuttle. "Understanding Propaganda: The Epistemic Merit Model and Its Application to Art." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36, no. 1 (2002): 16–30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3333623>.
- Silver, Larry. *Marketing Maximilian: The Visual Ideology of a Holy Roman Emperor*. Princeton University Press, 2008. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2fccv0d>.