

## THE AUGUSTINIAN READING ROOM

### Brief history of its construction and use

The room that is today used as the reading room for Manuscripts and Rare Books was built as the monastery library for the Discalced Augustinian monks. The Augustinians were summoned to Vienna by Emperor Ferdinand II in 1630 and worked there until the 1830s – one of the most well-known was Abraham a S. Clara (1644–1709).

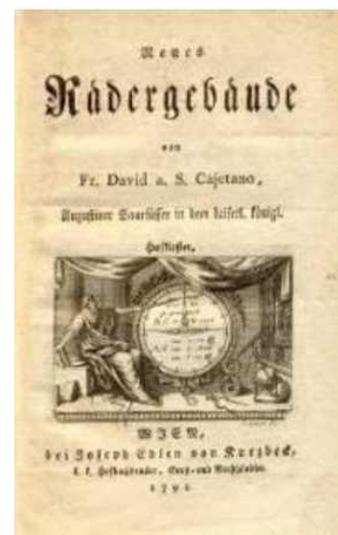
Even in the 16th century, it was possible to reach the Augustinian church from the Hofburg Palace by a private connecting corridor and from 1634 to 1918 it was also the imperial parish church.

The present architectural appearance of the Augustinian monastery is the result of alterations and additions that were made between 1330 and 1630. Then in the 18th century, extensive building work was carried out relating to the library room.

In 1720-21, a library was built in a wing at right-angles to the nave of the church – roughly where the rooms beneath the Augustinian Reading Room are located now. Because of the unfavourable location in the shadow of the Court Library which was built in 1723–26, and under the rain gutter of St George's chapel, an additional storey was added in 1772–73 and today's library room was built. Funding amounting to a total sum of 6000 guilders was provided promptly by Maria Theresia, so Johann Wenzel Bergl was able to complete the ceiling fresco in just 10 weeks in 1773. His fee was 400 guilders.

No doubt because of the particular position of this branch of the Augustinian order, Josef II had protected the Viennese Augustinians during the widespread dissolution of the monasteries; however, the community did not continue to increase. The last of the monks died in 1836; by that time, this room was already part of the Court Library.

Moritz Joseph, Prince of Dietrichstein-Proskau-Leslie (1775–1864), who was Prefect of the Court Library from 1826–45, needed to find additional space, because the holdings of the Court Library (in what is now the State Hall) could no longer be accommodated there. In the spring of 1829, Dietrichstein's proposal was approved and the room that is now called the Augustinian Reading Room was leased. Starting on 23 October of the same year, the entire holdings of the Augustinian Library



were sold by public auction; these consisted mainly of collections of natural artefacts (sea creatures, precious rocks, numerous stuffed animals), medals, plaster statues, paintings and technical devices. They also included *the famous big astronomical clock with more than 40 hands made by Frater David, who published "Eine Praktische Anleitung ... Räderwerke Mit Leichtigkeit vom Himmel unabweichlich genau auszuführen"*. (Fig.: title page from the first edition.) This astronomical clock, which is also depicted on the ceiling fresco in the room, was housed from 1865 to 1928 at Zwettl Abbey and is now one of the most precious exhibits at the Watch Museum in Vienna. (Another one is owned by the Schwarzenberg family and a third is in the Presidential Chancellery in the Hofburg Palace in Vienna.)

Originally, the Augustinian Reading Room was used to house everything that was superfluous or in the way, as Dietrichstein put it; later it served as a book stack and storage space for duplicates.

When Vienna was fired on by imperial troops in the night of 30 to 31 October during the year of revolution in 1848, not only did the roof of the Court Library catch fire but also that of the Augustinian Room. Brave librarians managed to rescue books and put out the fire, with the result that only about 900 books which had got wet had to be rebound.

About 50 years later, a review by Dr Josef von Karabacek (1845–1918), Prefect of the Court Library from 1899–1917, established that a complete refurbishment of the ceiling was urgently needed. Several rotten dowel beams were replaced and the old construction was connected with a new one laid on top. In the process, several parts of the ceiling fresco fell off the layer of wattle which was loosened and now had to be re-secured using several thousand screws. *Virtually nothing was ... repainted*, but an observant visitor can see that some areas are noticeably set back from the rest, for example the group of people on the right in the representation of the law (see below). In 1905–06, under Prefect Karabacek, the architect Friedrich Ohmann (1858-1927), Director of the Masterclass in Architecture at the Academy of Fine Art in Vienna – who was responsible among other projects for the landscaping of the Wien river bed in the Stadtpark, the memorial to Empress Elisabeth in the Volksgarten and the Palm House in the Burggarten, and was site manager for the Neue Burg development (1899–1907) – was called in to redesign the Court Library. In the 1760s, Nicola Pacassi (1716–1790) had built the magnificent staircase leading to the Court Library, and Ohmann now gave access to this through an oval antechamber opening directly on to the Josefsplatz. He also connected the top of the stairwell – through anterooms intended to allow access to the general public, and likewise designed by him in neo-baroque style – to the room which in 1906 was designated the main reading room for the Court Library. The furnishings also date from this period, as do the banisters – also in neo-baroque style – and the installation of electricity. In those days, the reading room was open every day from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., except on Sundays and public holidays.

In the 1920s, the National Library's collection of journals was housed in the raised rear part, and it remained there until premises in the Neue Burg were acquired (1966). For 23 years after that, the Augustinian Reading Room was reserved exclusively for internal use by librarians.

In 1939 and 1951-52, further restoration and improvement work had to be carried out, partly due to wartime damage. The most extensive renovation and restoration work took place in 1987-89, when large parts of the fresco were taken down completely, to refurbish about 1600 of the mounts dating back to the time of the Habsburg monarchy. On 22 September 1989, the former Augustinian Library finally reopened as a reading room for *incunabula*, rare and precious books.

Following careful alterations supervised by the Austrian Federal Monuments Office in 2009, the reading room, now equipped with all the latest facilities (Wi-Fi etc.), is available as a place for readers to view printed works from before 1850 and the manuscripts owned by the Austrian National Library.

## Ceiling fresco

Johann Baptist Wenzel Bergl (1719-1789), a student of Paul Troger, painted among others the Bergl Rooms at the Schönbrunn Palace. He started work on the ceiling fresco at the Augustinian Library on 13 September 1773 and managed to complete his work by 30 November.

The fresco was most recently examined by the Austrian Federal Monuments Office in autumn 2009 and was found to be in a satisfactory condition.

The fresco depicts similar themes to the one in the adjacent Court Library (State Hall). It is not, as one might expect in a monastery library, dedicated to just one theological subject, but instead conveys the idea of universal erudition, combined with imperial apotheosis. The three pictorial fields are probably intended to be read starting from the narrow end with the two windows and going towards the raised section of the hall.

1. The entirety of material, wholly earthly processes, led by a mighty state
2. The entirety of earthly teachings and arts in the form of the four faculties, the most sublime of which is theology, and
3. Mount Parnassus as the entirety of celestial and absolute understanding



In detail, the **first field** shows, in the centre, the apotheosis of a not precisely identifiable ruler with a laurel wreath in a gold medallion, and with a rod symbolising the imperturbability of the state and allegorical figures and symbols all around. Two putti above the protective golden canopy serve as “clerks” and two large female figures are planning and controlling commerce (Mercury's staff) and production (drawing board and a set square) in the right time, as symbolised by the astronomical clock (Fig.: Clock face from the “Rädergebäude” of 1771). The clock is held aloft by a winged figure, indicating that time is “not of this world”. Between the figures are a number of books, the “holders of information” On the outer edges, pointing up to heaven like the central figure of state, though not with the same supreme importance, on one side is Mechanics, indicating that war also has a role to play in state affairs (a gun barrel in a hoist) and, on the other, Rhetoric, an image which also represents the education of the young. These two groups can also be interpreted as Practice and Theory, and even as a homage to the two famous Augustinians Fr. David a S. Cajetano, a gifted engineer, and Abraham a S. Clara, a gifted orator, who at one time also served as monastery librarian.

On the other side, Fama (Pheme) is depicted with her trumpet announcing the glorification of the state, which is being documented in notebooks by the little putto at her side. This allegory also leads the eye on to the next motif.

The middle of the **central field** gives the eye an insight into infinity, while a painted cornice round the sides depicts four groups. The narrower sides are dominated by architectural images extending far into the room – Philosophy is positioned opposite Theology. On the longer sides, Nature and the Law are opposite one another, each focussed on a central architectural feature.

Philosophy, leaning on a globe, presides over an unruly group of figures, each presenting their symbols. She herself is holding a manuscript, probably containing philosophical thoughts, and she has some books by her feet. Atlas, who is supporting the celestial globe, is a reference to classical times, while the realistic “earthly” figures refer to the *liberal arts* and related subjects (the free arts: arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy – grammar, rhetoric and dialectics are already shown in the first field, in the group around the orator in the pulpit). It is no coincidence that sculpture and, in front of it, painting are in the middle: the exhausted-looking little artist with the palette is Johann Bergl, who was 56 or 57 years old when he carried out this commission. Two other figures, the two clerics on the right-hand side, are clearly recognisable portraits: Fr. David a S. Cajetano, aged about 50, and probably P. Angelus Obrist, who is thought to have been a major influence in the design of the ceiling fresco. Above the group hover genii bearing cornucopia from which they shower the symbols of worldly power (gold, chains of honour, mitres, crowns etc.).

The Natural Sciences group depicts, from the left, an elaborately staged chemical experiment, an Arab scientist studying a urine flask, and, in the centre, Hygieia, the goddess of health, with the snake which is also a symbol of her father Asclepius, towards whose statue she is facing. The god of medicine leads the eye of the observer on to a group of doctors studying a corpse. Probably to round off the design, a scholar is writing down their findings. The fact that the chemist on the other side is turning his back on Theology should not necessarily be seen as symbolic.

The image of Law on the other side is similarly composed, with Justitia in the centre; she is holding the scales of justice and the fasces, symbol of the holder of the highest power in Ancient Rome and an indication that modern jurisprudence is based on Roman law.

A striking feature of this group is the large number of written documents which are being referred to by all the scribes, students and figures engaged in sometimes very vehement debate. It is also noticeable that there are no depictions of real people – although perhaps there were some in the group on the right, which was apparently painted later.

The most space among the four faculties is occupied by Theology – the overall composition matches that of Philosophy on the other side. Above the cathedral with the papal cross with

the triple bar, angels hover, wafting sweet aromas. The figure of Fides – with a codex opened at the book with seven seals (Fides is the personification of loyalty, often shown with Spes and Charity, who appear as grey statues on the buildings above her) – constitutes the central point between the mighty architectural painting and the groups of people below her. On the left is the Old Testament, represented by Moses with the Tablets of Stone and high priests, together with the four Evangelists holding open books, and John alone holding a quill pen. On the right is the New Testament, represented by the fathers of the church Ambrosius (a bishop), Hieronymus (a cardinal with his Bible translation), Gregory the Great (with papal tiara, cross and quill) and, right in the front, and considerably larger than the others, Augustine, according to whose principles (hence the quill and codex) the Augustinian monks led their lives. In front of this phalanx of holy fathers, heretics (holding books containing heresy), the ignorant (a woman) and Envy with her snake tumble down towards the observer (as the latter are also shown falling from the attic of the central risalit in the Court Library).

Below them in the middle, aligned with Faith and the Church, is another monarchic medallion showing Maria Theresa, who financed the building of the Augustinian Library, and her son Joseph II who, at the time the fresco was painted, was already the Roman-German King. The power of Saturn, who is touching the medallion, is being broken – symbolised by a scythe – by the putto who is perhaps also a cupid, to ensure that the fame of the two rulers is immortal and timeless.

From this medallion, a link can be made to the anonymous one in the first field, which depicts either Maria Theresa's father Charles VI or her husband Francis I who had also already died and preceded his son Joseph as Emperor. Both interpretations seem possible, since both men played important roles in developing beneficial principles of state. Perhaps, however, the medallion is only intended to depict a benevolent and wise *pater patriae*.

In the **third field**, Apollo rests with his cithara on Mount Parnassus, dedicated to him, surrounded by the nine Muses each bearing their symbols. In the middle in the front is Clio, the muse of history, holding a volume on which the name of the Greek historian Thucydides is written. The others, starting from the left, are: Thalia (comedy), Euterpe (lyric poetry, flute playing), Erato (love poetry), Calliope (epic poetry, rhetoric, philosophy, academia), on the right: Urania (astronomy), Melpomene (tragedy), Terpsichore (choral lyricism, dance) and Polyhymnia (sacred poetry, with a lyre).

Pegasus is highlighted in quite an unusual way. Normally he is only seen in the background, as it is the case in the State Hall. Or he is absent completely from the depictions of Mt Parnassus, even though he formed Hippocrene, the source of poetic inspiration, with his hooves. The image of the crouching Pegasus with the source springing from between his back legs is probably a crude joke on the part of Bergl and/or the monastery officials.

The somewhat careless execution of this design may be due to the fact that, by the end of November, as it was getting colder and the light was fading, Bergl wanted to complete his work in this windowless area as quickly as possible.

Each group is designed in the same way with a central figure and 4 or 5 flanking figures on each side. Among the many figures who are turned away from the onlooker or have blurred, unidentifiable facial features, there are some character portraits – and perhaps contemporaries may have been able to put a name to a particular angel or scholar among the others. Moreover, several old men can be seen wearing turbans, no doubt a reference to the fact that all areas of science stem partly from pre-classical Arab sources. The onlooker's attention between the scenes is drawn, above all, to the cloud formations.

Two cartouches with sayings along the narrow side serve to bracket the depictions on the ceiling fresco, as do the portrait medallions. *Codices certa hora [singulis diebus] petantur* from the Rule of St. Augustine (5.39) – Books may be obtained [daily] at certain times (requests are not accepted outside of these hours).

This practicality of daily life is contrasted with a saying on a more spiritual level: *Scrutamini Scripturas [quia vos putatis in ipsis vitam aeternam habere]* from the Gospel of St John (5.39 [sic!]) tells readers that they will find the right path to eternal life in the (Holy) Scripture.

The owl and the accompanying putti underneath the inscription on the woodwork of the bookcases are a later neo-baroque addition by Friedrich Ohmann in about 1905.

Since 18 January 2010, the Augustinian Reading Room has been open at specific times for all users of the collections of manuscripts and rare books – just as it was in the time of Abraham a S Clara. Approximately 20,000 volumes of works for reference are available to readers, some of them on the open-access shelves; any of the four terminals for digital research will provide direct access to the relevant databases.

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