



Martin van Meytens's Portrait of Johann Michael von Grosser:  
The Business of Nobility

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Daniel Seghers (1590–1661) and Erasmus Quellinus the Younger (1607–1678), *Flower Garland with the Standing Virgin and Child*, c. 1645–50. Oil on copper, 85.5 x 61.5 cm. Purchase: Wiros Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7505.

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##### Martin van Meytens's Portrait of Johann

##### Michael von Grosser: The Business of Nobility

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## Martin van Meytens's Portrait of Johann Michael von Grosser: The Business of Nobility

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**The Nationalmuseum** has in its collection an impressive portrait of the Viennese court jeweler Johann Michael von Grosser (c. 1700–1784) (Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Painted by the Swedish-born artist Martin van Meytens (1695–1770), the portrait was acquired at auction in 1922 using funds from Sophia Giesecke's donation.<sup>2</sup> The painting has been displayed infrequently. It is one of the most impressive and sensitive portraits in Meytens's oeuvre, a testament to what this somewhat underrated artist could achieve.<sup>3</sup> My goal in this essay will be to illuminate this picture through current knowledge of Grosser's life, but I shall also make a broader argument about the relationship between nobility, commerce, and material culture in eighteenth-century Europe. If this painting presents to us the image of a court craftsman, it also tells a story about how objects created social status in a mercantilist economy.

Grosser first appears in court records in 1736 as a *Kammerjuwelier*, but neither his place of birth nor date of birth is known.<sup>4</sup> This possibly indicates modest origins, and given his later engagement with Lower Austria, it is probable that he was born there. On 27 February 1764 Grosser was raised to the Austrian nobility, entitling him to the name "von Grosser," and with this came with a newly designed coat of arms (Fig. 2).<sup>5</sup> This was just the first of several steps up the social ladder. In 1768, Grosser was advanced by Emperor Joseph II to a Knight of the Empire (*Reichsritter*),



Fig. 1 Martin van Meytens (1695–1770), *The Court Jeweller Johann Michael von Grosser*. Oil on canvas, 189 x 116 cm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 2356.



Fig. 2 Von Grosser coat of arms. Austrian State Archives, Vienna.

a more impressive title that implied service to the entire realm. On 4 March 1769 he was granted the title *Edler*, or nobleman, by Empress Maria Theresa herself. Less than a month later, on 25 April 1769, he became a *Landmann* in Lower Austria, which indicates he owned property in the region and was entitled to serve in its regional councils. We know from a detailed court record that on 17 May 1769 Grosser requested that the imperial house relieve him of his responsibilities as jeweler, which was granted.<sup>6</sup> This adds a wrinkle to his story and hints that Meytens's portrait may have more to do with Grosser's social ambitions than his jewelerymaking.

Grosser enjoyed strong connections to Vienna's merchant community. He married Eleonora Rigotti, daughter of a prominent local tradesman, Hieronymus Rigotti.<sup>7</sup> The Rigotti family hailed from Mori, Trentino, now part of Italy but then under Austrian control. Hieronymus's primary trade was in Mediterranean comestibles: fruit, oils, grapes, and fish, but also raw materials like cotton and sugar.<sup>8</sup> Rigotti's financial success was such that he purchased a large house on the Graben, a prominent square in central Vienna.<sup>9</sup> Possibly due to this relationship with Rigotti, Grosser's name began to appear as a "k. k. privilegierter Großhändler," wholesaler to the royal-imperial court.<sup>10</sup> This would have granted him access to raw materials that he could sell for profit, just like his father-in-law.

Grosser's residences in Vienna further reveal his social and commercial ambitions. In 1750 he purchased a house at Untere Alléegasse 22.<sup>11</sup> This street, no longer extant, was located immediately beside Fischer von Erlach's Karlskirche in a neighborhood that was a magnet for noble residents and their attendants. Grosser lived there until 1758, when he sold his house to a glovemaking and moved to a larger residence at Kohlmarkt 6. Despite its unglamorous name, which means "charcoal market," this was and





Fig 3 Martin van Meytens (1695–1770), *The Court Jeweller Johann Michael von Grosser* (detail of cameo). Oil on canvas, 189 x 116 cm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 2356.





Fig 4 Pieter Pietersz. Lastman (1583–1633), *Dido's Sacrifice to Juno*, signed 1630. Oil on oak, 73.8 x 106 cm. Purchase 1857, transferred 1865 from Kongl. Museum. Nationalmuseum, NM 500

remains one of Vienna's luxury commercial avenues.<sup>12</sup> Grosser's house abutted the palatial residences of the high-ranking Esterházy, Pálffy, and Caprara clans. The imperial Hofburg was just down the street in one direction, while his father-in-law's house was mere steps in the other.<sup>13</sup> We learn further from a court diarist that Grosser extensively renovated and beautified this house.<sup>14</sup> But it was not simply as a jeweler that Grosser lived there: he opened a private bank that became one of Vienna's

earliest stock exchanges.<sup>15</sup> At his death, Grosser left his survivors an immense inheritance.

This is the life of a court craftsman who was also an entrepreneur. Commercial interests perhaps explain the bronze statuette of Mercury shown in Meytens's picture, who appears here as the patron deity of commerce. Modeled after Giambologna's famous rendition, it was well known in later centuries through small-scale reproductions.<sup>16</sup> But if the statue tells us

something about Grosser's life, other elements in the painting do as well. Grosser is shown in a palatial setting, sitting before a jewelry cabinet, on which rest pliers used to insert precious stones into settings. The portrait is an intriguing mixture of courtliness and craft. One might ask whether the jewelry shown corresponds to any known examples in Viennese collections. None do, with one significant exception: the cameo shown as part of a pearl necklace (Fig. 3). This is an ancient carved gem, which were

extraordinarily popular among European elites both as tangible remnants of classical antiquity and as bodily decoration.<sup>17</sup>

In the Grosser portrait, the cameo serves as more than a generic reference to antiquity. It corresponds to an object recorded in a catalogue of classical gems by Scottish engraver James Tassie, who cites the German gemologist Philipp Daniel Lippert's identification of its subject as *Dido's Sacrifice to Juno*. In this scene from Virgil's *Aeneid*, IV:56–62, Dido makes a series of sacrifices to the gods to prevent Aeneas, whom she loves, from departing Carthage. The subject is not excessively common in European art, but the Nationalmuseum has a painting representing it, by Pieter Lastman (Fig. 4). Lastman stays close to Virgil's text: Dido at center, her sister Anna and others gathering around an altar with a sacrificial cow. These same elements appear in the Meytens, but the identification raises additional questions. The first is whether such a cameo was in Vienna at the time the portrait was made. Tassie's book offers a clue by mentioning that such a gem was in the collection of Robert Murray Keith the Younger, the British ambassador to the Holy Roman Empire between 1772 and 1792. Keith's collecting activities have not been studied and it cannot be confirmed that Grosser knew him, but if the cameo depicted was Keith's, it entered his possession some time after the painting was made, as Meytens died in 1770. Intaglios of this gem and others similar to it survive today (Fig. 5). It is telling that Tassie describes Keith's cameo as made of carnelian, which corresponds to the color that Meytens uses for the cameo in the portrait. The presence of the Dido cameo in this painting, alongside other references to classical antiquity, associate Grosser with the realm of antiquarianism. The jeweler here assumes the outward form of the learned gentleman-scholar.

That brings us to a heretofore unexamined aspect of the picture, namely the rug draped across Grosser's worktable



Fig. 5 Dido's Sacrifice to Juno, glass intaglio. Collection of Robert Wellington, Canberra.

(Fig. 6). It is not, as one might expect, an imported specimen from Asia, as its appearance does not correlate with the forms of Asiatic textiles. It is a flat rug, constructed without pile, a type known generically as a kilim. Yet what Meytens has pictured here does not correspond to kilim weaving techniques. Typically in Asian kilims, weft threads would be woven across the warp in lines of varying lengths, a technique analogous to tapestry weaving. This made round or curved forms difficult to create, which explains why circles are found infrequently in Asian rug designs. Yet in Grosser's rug, rounded shapes are visible, most prominently in the modified quatrefoil shapes patterned across the red-

ground course, and also in the floral forms near the rug's center.<sup>18</sup>

Looking more closely, it becomes clear that weft threads are wrapped around the warp rather than passed through them and woven across the carpet diagonally. Angled weaving like this was never used in Asian carpets. The appearance of other areas suggests an embroidery-like layering of threads on the rug's surface. The yellow-ground band immediately next to the fringe is one such area; the black and tan courses there appear superimposed onto the rug. The colors and shapes found in Meytens's painting likewise do not indicate an Asian pedigree. Green is a rare color in Asian rugs, and the ornamental language



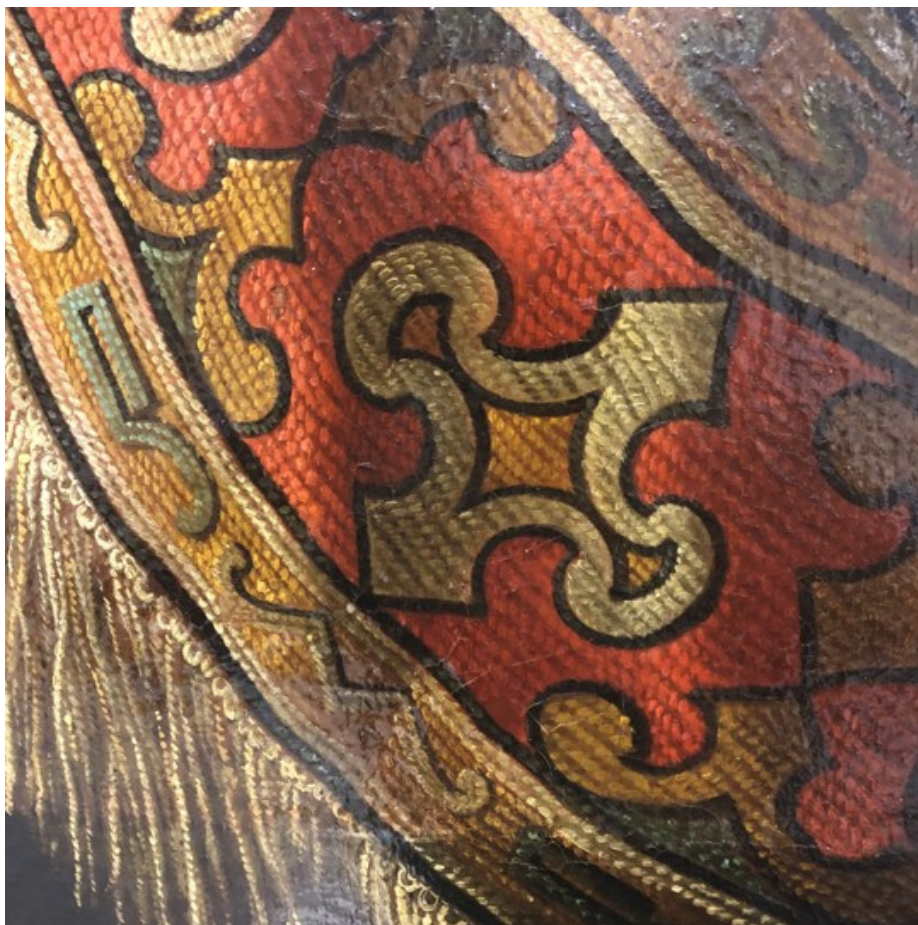


Fig. 6 Martin van Meytens (1695–1770), *The Court Jeweller Johann Michael von Grosser* (detail of rug). Oil on canvas, 189 x 116 cm. Purchase: Sophia Giesecke Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 2356.

depicted follows no known iconographical traditions from Asia. Instead, it seems derived from Greek art, recalling acroterial scrolls and based in the meander pattern common in Greek architectural ornamentation. These formal and pictorial qualities, taken together, indicate that this is a European rug.

This conclusion becomes likelier when we recognize that the region of Austria where Grosser became a landholder, the Waldviertel district, was renowned for a specific kind of textile production that appears to be what Meytens shows. The

rug is made of long ribbons of cloth, which in Austrian dialect are called *Bandl*. Ribbonmaking was a longstanding cottage industry in the Waldviertel, dating back at least to the 14th century, indeed so closely associated with it that the area around the town of Groß-Siegharts became known as the *Bandlkramerlandl*, the land of ribbon sellers.<sup>19</sup> Ribbons had multiple everyday uses: they could tie things together, decorate hair and clothing, and could be woven into rugs or wall coverings. Since ribbonmaking was free from guild supervision, ribbons could be made cheaply and profit

margins were high, which made them an excellent investment.<sup>20</sup>

In the early eighteenth century, the Waldviertel ribbon industry grew through the calculated intervention of the Austrian nobility. The most significant patron was Johann Ferdinand Christoph von Malenthein, lord of Groß-Siegharts between 1682 and 1728, who worked to make the region into the primary Habsburg textile district.<sup>21</sup> Despite its regional character, it enjoyed interaction with the southern Netherlands and northern Italy, which put weavers there into contact with the latest trends.<sup>22</sup> The industry reorganized several decades later under the aegis of an ambitious entrepreneur named Johann Peter Wührer.<sup>23</sup> On 10 December 1760, Wührer petitioned for an imperial authorization to produce ribbons in the Waldviertel for six years, which was granted him.<sup>24</sup> When he requested additional court support a few months later, he bragged about the high quality of the region's ribbons, noting that they matched the quality of Dutch weaving while improving on their beauty.<sup>25</sup>

Under Wührer's support the region's ribbon industry flourished. They were in high demand, and their economic vitality contributed to textiles becoming by far the largest sector of the industrial economy in eighteenth-century Austria.<sup>26</sup> With financial support from the Viennese elite, including in 1762 from the Empress herself, Wührer expanded the ribbon industry with new machinery, including special machines for making *Deckengarn*, a kind of heavy embroidery thread used for tassels, braiding, and carpets. This kind of yarn was often shipped to Hungary, where it was much prized.<sup>27</sup> By 1773, the industry's success was such that ribbon makers were able to sell their wares without intermediaries, and after court approval in 1785 essentially in a free marketplace.<sup>28</sup> Ribbon vendors became a common sight in the streets of Vienna, where they sold their wares directly to the city's households. An early representation of them appears in Jakob Adam's *Abbildungen des gemeinen*



*Volkes zu Wien* of 1777/1780, which shows a Bandlkrämer or ribbon seller carrying spools of ribbon and a measuring stick. (Fig. 7).<sup>29</sup>

I would argue that this context is important for understanding the Grosser portrait. If we accept that the rug shown in Meytens's paintings is a carpet made of *Bandl*, then we might understand why it is included. The region that came under Grosser's authority was deeply involved in the textile trade, but it also was searching for legitimacy through imperial support. Grosser was in a highly advantageous position to advocate for the Waldviertel's needs. The painting, then, directly connects Grosser to this region through its industry, which suggests both that he wished to raise the prominence of ribbon-making while also associating himself with it. I think it important to note how ribbons appear in this portrait: in a rug whose bold patterning and coloring indicate the advanced state of the region's artistry. This is a luxury good, and Meytens's painting may have been intended to associate ribbonwork with other luxury goods like jewelry. This would have raised the profile of a rather humble textile and made a case for its mercantile potential.

This brings us to some broader conclusions. In much of Europe, noble status in theory implied a separation from marketplace concerns, but in reality, this was rarely the case. The French historian Pierre Serna has noted that the social changes of eighteenth-century Europe demanded nobles reimagine themselves to remain relevant to the increasingly commercial nature of society.<sup>30</sup> Grosser played this social change to his advantage. He was not born noble, but acquired it through court service associated with a craft. Being a jeweler fostered regular contact with the Habsburg Empire's wealthy, which enabled Grosser to raise his standard of living. And when he attained a sufficiently high level of social clout, he devoted himself to commercial activity fully. In other words, nobility was a pathway for him to make money, and it was



Fig. 7 Jakob Adam (1748–1810), *Bändelkrämer*. From *Abbildungen des gemeinen Volkes zu Wien*, 1777–80. Etching. Wien Museum, Vienna.

through engaging with different kinds of objects that he forged this path.

On a final note, knowledge of Grosser's commercial activities perhaps allows a firmer dating of the picture, which is unsigned. Since Grosser wears no insignia or coat of arms, the portrait certainly predates his ennoblement in 1764. Given that discussions between Wührer and the Habsburg court about the ribbon industry took place between 1760 and 1762, we might plausibly date this picture to that time based on the likelihood it was intended to broadcast the region's commercial potential. If that is the case, then Meytens's portrait is more than just a picture of an artisan; it reveals traces of a life deeply embedded in commerce, one in which the potential of objects for defining identity is given an unusual twist.

#### Notes:

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