An Allegory of Sight attributed to Hans Christoph Schürer in the Nationalmuseum

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Fig. 1 Hans Christoph Schürer (c. 1590–1620), Allegory of Sight (Visus). Oil on panel, 67 x 51.2 cm. Nationalmuseum, NM 5057.
The Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie in Dessau holds a series of paintings of the Five Senses (Figs. 2 A–D and 3), consisting of female half-length figures with oval heads and relatively wide necks, generously displaying their charms. The loosely coiffed hair is interwoven with ribbons and strings of pearls. The young women have elegant, long fingers, but their gestures remain strangely flat. The colours are bright, and liveliness is generated by shimmering highlights and a slight sfumato. Showing some similarity to works by the Prague court artist Hans von Aachen (1552–1615), the pictures have been attributed to an anonymous follower until now. Auditus (Hearing) is holding her lute in approximately the same position as the lute player in Von Aachen's

Figs. 2 A–D Hans Christoph Schürer (c. 1590–1620), Auditus (Hearing), Oloratus (Smell), Gustus (Taste), Tactus (Touch). Oil on canvas, 63/64 x 51/52 cm. Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie Dessau, inv. nos. 1429–1433.
Donna venusta, an early painting from around 1585 whose subject the artist varied until the end of his life. Tactus (Touch) with a dagger is reminiscent of a Lucretia by Von Aachen, known from an engraving by Aegidius Sadeler. However, compositionally more compatible is the woman in Von Aachen’s drawing of an Unequal Couple in Cologne.

Another version of the Dessau Allegory of Sight (Fig. 3) is in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm (Fig. 1). The picture obviously belongs to a further version of the series, this time on panel (the Dessau paintings are on canvas), with approximately the same dimensions. The four remaining Senses in this series are in the collection of the municipal museums at Bamberg (Figs. 4A–D).
Comparing the two series, one cannot help but notice that the figures in Dessau appear to be forced into their confined space and that they were executed rather hurriedly. This becomes apparent when considering the folds of the light fabrics and the strands of hair which are rendered delicately and clearly in the Bamberg/Stockholm pictures unlike the paintings in Dessau (though it should be pointed out that the Dessau canvases are probably in slightly worse condition). While the Senses are explicitly labelled in Dessau, the inscriptions on the Bamberg panels can be deciphered only with difficulty, probably because at some point the backgrounds were covered with dark paint. This is not the case with the panel in Stockholm, where the Latin inscriptions are clearly legible. [Figs. 4 A–D Hans Christoph Schürer (c. 1590–1620), _Auditus_ (Hearing), _Oloratus_ (Smell), _Gustus_ (Taste), _Tactus_ (Touch). Oil on panel, 66 x 56 cm (cradled). Museen der Stadt Bamberg, inv. nos. 381D–384D.]
The allegorical representation of the Five Senses is quite conventional. An engraved series by Cornelis Cort after designs by Frans Floris, dated 1561, includes the same attributes: Visus is also shown with a mirror, Auditus with a lute, Odoratus with a vase of flowers and Gustus eating a fruit from a fruit basket. In the paintings, however, the animals conventionally associated with the

Fig. 5 Hans Christoph Schürer (c. 1590–1620), Unequal Couple. Oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm. Private collection.

scription “VISVS” is clearly visible on a blue background (Fig. 1). Looking into a convex mirror held in her right hand, the young woman touches her breast with her left hand. Being the most erotic in the series might explain why this picture was sold as a single image.
The inscription on the drawing reads: “This I made in friendship for the honourable and artful Niclas Sierxleben in good memory, at Prague September 28, 1612. Hans Christoph Schürer f.” The addressee of the sheet was probably a musician named Nicholas Siersleben, who was at the court in Berlin in 1618.

In subject and style, the drawing is similar to late works by Hans von Aachen. Moreover, a list of outstanding payments sent by Von Aachen’s widow to the Saxon court in September 1615, mentioning a debt of “300 fl. fee for Hans Christoff Schierrr”, confirms that Schürer actually completed a kind of apprenticeship in Prague.

Eliška Fuciková convincingly connected the drawing in Brno to a painting of the same composition once in the Saxon royal collection, sold at auction in London in 1999 (Fig. 5). The painting differs only in details from the drawing. The manner of painting and the colouring are comparable to the late works of Hans von Aachen (if the photo is reliable), for example Courtesan with her Procuress, dated 1613, in the Gallery of the Residenz in Munich. The connection made by Fuciková may serve as a reference point for attributing the composition of two series of senses (eagle, deer, dog, etc.) are lacking, reflecting a trend at the beginning of the 17th century to turn allegories of the Senses into more genre-like representations. The emerging preference for female half-length figures corresponds to a widespread erotic connotation associated with the subject matter. While four of the personifications carry conventional attributes, the suicide scene of Tactus is unusual. Lubomír Konečný mentions a comparable drawing by Hendrick Goltzius and a composition by Geldorp Gortzius, who worked in Cologne around 1600.

In his recent survey of the pupils and followers of Hans von Aachen, Jürgen Zimmer also refers to the Saxon painter Hans Christoph Schürer (c. 1590–1620), whose father, the painter Paul Schürer, born in Dresden, was active in Prague until around 1603. Hans Christoph Schürer left only a few traces in archival documents of the years 1609 and 1616. In 1609, his mother petitioned the Electress Hedwig to intervene on her behalf with her husband Johann Friedrich, Elector of Saxony, in her request for a grant to send her son to Prague to study with Hans von Aachen. So far, only one signed work by Schürer is known, a drawing of an Unequal Couple in the Moravská Galerie in Brno. The inscription on the drawing reads: “This I made in friendship for the honourable and artful Niclas Sierxleben in good memory, at Prague September 28, 1612. Hans Christoph Schürer f.” The addressee of the sheet was probably a musician named Nicholas Siersleben, who was at the court in Berlin in 1618. In subject and style, the drawing is similar to late works by Hans von Aachen. Moreover, a list of outstanding payments sent by Von Aachen’s widow to the Saxon court in September 1615, mentioning a debt of “300 fl. fee for Hans Christoff Schierrer”, confirms that Schürer actually completed a kind of apprenticeship in Prague.

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the Five Senses to Hans Christoph Schürer. The careful handling of the Munich painting is comparable to the pictures in Bamberg, which I have been able to examine in detail. Some similarities may partly be due to the motifs – scantily dressed young women – or the common pictorial repertoire of the Rudolfine court, but even taking these objections into consideration, it still seems highly probable that the series in Bamberg and Stockholm are by Schürer. At present, it seems most likely that the Dessau pictures are replicas or contemporary anonymous copies.

To this group of stylistically homogeneous paintings a few more works may be added. It seems that the same artist executed a series of panels with representations of Greek and Roman goddesses. In Bamberg, in addition to the four allegories of the Senses, we also find a painting of a female half-length mythological figure, the goddess Juno (Fig. 6), who takes the place of the missing  in Stockholm. She resembles Von Aachen’s goddess of love in the painting Venus with Bacchus and Cupid in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, which dates from the late 1590s. The drapery gathered between her breasts can also be found in Von Aachen’s sketches of musical themes in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the paintings in Bamberg were in the possession of a sociable society named Concordia. The Bamberg city archive contains correspondence by the Society of November 1917, referring to a failed sale of “6 Ölgemälde inkl. der 5 [sic] dazugehörigen Rahmen” (“6 oil paintings including 5 corresponding frames”). The Society’s inventory from 1946 lists in the Upper Small Hall of its building, now Villa Concordia, “7 oder 8 Ölgemälde mit Rahmen und Schnitzereien” (“7 or 8 oil paintings with frames and carvings”) and in the attic “7 Bilder mit Rahmen” (“7 pictures with frames”). In each case, the number is larger than the existing five images today in the municipal Museum and in Stockholm. It is worth noting that Villa Concordia, since 1834 the seat of the Society, is a mansion built between 1716 and 1722 by the councillor Ignaz Tobias von Böttinger (1675–1730). Perhaps the paintings can be traced to the Böttinger family.

The painting of  (Fig. 6) suggests that it was part of a series of ancient goddesses. In 1985, a corresponding image of Venus and Cupid was identified when it was offered (with an attribution to a South German painter) at auction in Munich (Fig. 7). The connection to the group of works under discussion here can be discerned at a quick glance. Among other characteristics, the upward-looking head of Cupid is similar in Von Aachen’s oeuvre. Finally, in 2007, a second version of Venus and Cupid, this time painted on canvas, appeared at auction in Stuttgart, with an attribution to the Cologne painter Geldorp Gortzius.

Comparing the works in the group to the Unequal Couple (Fig. 5), the only known painting that can be attributed to Schürer with some certainty on the basis of the signed drawing in Brno, we can note a reduced interest in anatomical correctness and a less meticulous execution. However, taking into account the numerous correspondences in compositional arrangement and individual details, as well as Schürer’s personal relationship with Hans von Aachen, it does not seem too farfetched to consider him the author of this group of paintings. With the current state of knowledge, it must remain open whether the modified style is the result of a measure of routine acquired over the years by the aging Schürer or whether these divergences suggest a different painter.

Attributing the unsigned Allegories of the Five Senses and the goddesses, as known in the images of Juno and , to an artist previously recognised only by a single painting, is precarious, to say the least. Possibly it would take no more than the discovery of a single, clearly signed image to prove such an assumption wrong (but it could also confirm it). In any event, this hypothesis draws attention to the connections between a group of paintings that have up to now received little notice. If the attribution to Schürer proves to be correct, a series of paintings having previously led a somewhat shadowy existence would at last achieve some degree of recognition.

Notes:
4. Görel Cavalli-Björkman, Carina Fryklund and Karin Sidén, Dutch and Flemish Paintings, III: Flemish Paintings c. 1600–1800, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, 2010, pp. 441–442, cat. no. 296: “The general nature of this painting allows attribution not only to an anonymous painter who may have been Flemish, but also to an artist from Germany or even a painter in the school of Ehrenstrahl during Sweden’s Great Power Era in the second half of the 17th century”. The picture was bought when Carl Nordenfalk...
(1907–1955) was Director General of the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. Nordenfalk did groundbreaking research in the field of the iconography of the Five Senses (see note 9).

5. Panel, each 66 x 56 cm (cradled), inv. nos. 381D–384D. With thanks to Regina Hanemann (Bamberg) and Mike Leyde (Coburg) for their assistance, help and patience.

6. This fact may also explain why the gauzy shawl at the shoulder of Gustav is missing.

7. Posture and gesture resemble the numerous versions of the popular composition by Titian, of which there was an example in the collection of Emperor Rudolf II; Stephan Poglayen-Newall, “Titian’s Pictures of the Toilet of Venus and their Copies”, in Art Bulletin 16, 1934, pp. 358–384, fig. 11; for the picture now in the National Gallery, Washington, cf. Titian: 


18. Oak panel, 83 x 71 cm, signed and dated 1613, Bayerische Verwaltung der staatlichen Schlösser, Gärten und Seen, inv. no. I. 704; Jacoby 2000 (as in note 2), pp. 80–82, cat. no. 3 (Batsheha ?); Hans von Aachen, (exh. cat.) 2010 (as in note 2), cat. no. 78 (Lubomír Konečný). Signature and date were only discovered during cleaning in preparation for the exhibition in Aachen, Prague and Vienna.

19. In a more detailed article for Studia Rudolfinia (Prague, in preparation) I will discuss why I do not accept the proposal to identify some paintings in Schloss Oschatz (Saxon) and a nearby church as works by Schürer; see Dülberg 2012 (as in note 12).

20. Panel, 65 x 54 cm, cradled, inscription on the left: “(IU)NO”, inv. no. 380D. The picture was described as “Sight” in the older documentation of the museum.


26. Neumünster’s, Munich, 4–5 December 1985, no. 144, pl. 148 (Süddeutsch (?), 17. Jahrhundert, Venus mit Amor). The connection between Venus und Cupid and the other Bamberg paintings was noted in the documentation of the museum when the picture appeared at auction.

27. Cf. Hans von Aachen, (exh. cat.) 2010 (as in note 2), cat. no. 71 (Lubomír Konečný), cat. no. 74 (Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann), cat. no. 75 (Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann); Jacoby 2000, pp. 149–151, cat. no. 45, pp. 212–213, cat. no. 67.