A Baroque Funeral Crown from St Michael’s Crypt Vienna, Austria: Analysis and Exhibition Preparation

Susanne Heimel

di:angewandte conservation

Introduction

The crypt under the St Michael’s Church in Vienna was used as a burial place for deceased members of the Viennese upper class and was mainly used in the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century, it contained some of the ossuaries in the 1660s and found a fragile funeral crown on a skeleton assumed to be that of an unmarried woman, where it was placed as a compensation for the burial ground. The coffin could be dated back to the late eighteenth century [1], which serves also as a reference for the crown’s date of origin.

After the crown was stored in the Austria Museum of Folk Life and Art for about fifty years, it has been recently returned to the parish of St Michael, where it shall be exhibited in future.

The main tasks on this investigation project were:

- Developing a concept for conservation and exhibition
- Clarifying the material, composition and production method
- Doing research on the historical and traditional background
- Analyzing the condition and grade of degradation
- Generating a concept for conservation and exhibition

Tradition and craftsmanship

Funeral crowns used to play an important part at burials of children and unmarried adults for both Catholics and Protestants [2]. In the area of today’s Austria the tradition was mainly followed between the late seventeenth and nineteenth century [3]. In the area of today’s Austria the tradition was mainly followed between the late seventeenth and nineteenth century [3].

Composition and material analysis

The crown is about 13 cm high with an outer diameter of 30 cm. Its basic structure is built of several iron wires that have been bound to a wreath. The ends of those wires stick out in all directions and serve as a framework for the whole construction. Many small blossoms made of copper wires and silk threads are fixed to and give the white crown its vibrantly appearantion.

There were many different types of crowns, depending on the regional and social background of the mourners. At rural funerals they were often made out of branches, herbs and flowers and they symbolized certain characteristics, such as good moral standing, virginity but also marriage. The connection to bridal crowns was very close - in meaning as well as in appearance.

The crown from the St. Michaels crypt is already of a more advanced type. Instead of vegetable material they used this spangled metal wire that are twisted into fragile floral ornaments. This special kind of handicraft used to be done originally by nuns in convents, where they decorated relics or devotional objects, such as good moral standing, virginity but also marriage. The connection to bridal crowns was very close - in meaning as well as in appearance.

Reconstruction of technology

Reports and descriptions of contemporary witnesses make it easy to reconstruct the production method. Since it was mainly crafted by hand, the necessary tools were limited to pins, different profiles for spiraling the wire and a hammer to bend the results. The manufacturing of gilded and silvered wire was already standardized in the late eighteenth century and the products were easily available, found on artworks and in various thicknesses [5].

To get a better understanding of the whole object, every ornament type was analyzed in its making and then reconstructed with silvered and gilded copper wires.

Condition

During almost two hundred years of storage in a coffin, the metal has become badly corroded. Cross sections indicated that the copper wire are almost corroded through, which makes the object extremely fragile. The green corrosion products could be identified by X-ray microanalysis (EDX) as the copper corrosion products malachite and cuprite.

Test series with complexing agents and air abrasive methods proved that corrosion removal was an ineffective treatment. The procedures caused simply too much motion on the object and therefore further loss of wire fragments. Besides, there was not enough silver and gold plating left underneath to get a aesthetically pleasing result.

Treatment

Conservation treatment was limited to the removal of dust and insect remains with the vacuum cleaner. The subsequent procedure focused on preventive conservation methods. Therefore a permanent support was made from acrylic glass, covered with a suitace of acryllic and unretouched cotton fabric has been made, to limit further loss of substance during transport and handling. This support fits into a display case, which is made of aluminium with an insert of black polyethylene foam. It is easy to carry and can be used for both exhibition and storage. The conservation treatment caused some damage and has two hidden chambers for further conservation. Furthermore it was visible side is some extra space, to present the reconstructions of different wire ornaments, in order to give the observer an impression of what the funeral crown looked like.

List of Illustrations

- Fig. 1: The funeral crown, overall picture
- Fig. 2: Detail of an ornament
- Fig. 3: At some parts the gilding is preserved.
- Fig. 4: The funeral crown, overall picture
- Fig. 5: Cross-section showing the structure of the crown
- Fig. 6: Cross-section of a silvered copper wire in the SEM
- Fig. 7: EDX-spectrum, the measuring point is marked as a red dot in fig. 6
- Fig. 8: Table with two ornament types and their reconstructions
- Fig. 9: Orange fluorescent shellac under UV light
- Fig. 10: Showcase with the crown on its support
- Fig. 11: Back view of the crown with the red support

References