Tyrolean “Paintings on Cobwebs”
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The Tyrolean folk art of “paintings on cobwebs” was invented in the 18th century by a local craftsman of the Puster Valley in the Middle of the Tyrolean Alps. For more than 200 years a small group of artists and craftsmen from Bruneck, Salzburg and Innsbruck had painted miniatures with religious and profane subjects on a very fragile support of which was rumoured to be a spider’s web.

THE ORIGIN

BRUNECK, South Tyrol – In the Middle of the 18th century a craftsman named ELIAS PRUNNER invented a special painting technique for painting on very thin and transparent gossamer which later became known as “cobweb painting”. Prunner’s pupil JOHANN BURGMANN, later became one of the most famous representatives of this art form, painting delicate devotional images and landscapes. After Burgmann’s death in 1825, the demand for the so-called “paintings on cobweb” declined.

INNSBRUCK, East Tyrol – In the late 19th century several art dealers began to sell miniatures painted on a very transparent fabric, labeled with “cobweb paintings”, as souvenirs. They employed local artists to paint popular motifs such as scenes showing native Tyrolean people wearing traditional costumes, Alpine flowers and landscapes.

At the beginning of the 20th century the later period of the Tyrolean technique came to an end. Today it is considered to be a “lost art”. It is surprising that, in spite of their fragility, over 100 “cobweb” pictures still exist, most of them housed in private collections, cloisters and local museums. The main attraction of these artworks is their apparent transparency. The support is normally stretched in a narrow cardboard frame so that the central image can be enjoyed from both sides.

THE FABRIC

Over centuries, the historic use of cobwebs used as a painting support became an urban legend. Microscopic examinations in the middle of the 20th century revealed that only one of the surviving art works was painted on a spider’s web; all others were executed on the caterpillars’ gossamer.

According to historical sources of the early 19th century the artists mostly used fine silky gossamer spun by the caterpillars of the moth Hyponomeuta evonymella L. which wrap their web around the branches of the tree Prunus padus L., known locally as bird cherry. These specific moths can be found all over Europe from bottomland to deciduous forest line. The caterpillars produce a material that is less fragile and easier to handle than the common cobweb, but of a very similar type of silk. The gossamer consists of decussate double fibres with a diameter of 1-3 µm, glued together with sericin.

TECHNIQUE

The Gossamer could be cut from the tree branch using a knife and then removed with the finger tips. Before the painting process started, the web was cleaned and sized with milk diluted in water in order to obtain a more resistant fabric. It was then stretched between two cardboard frames. Historical treatises indicate that paintings with water colours, fine brush drawings with Indian ink and copperplate prints have been executed on caterpillar gossamer. An exemplary analysis of the pigments on the Portrait “s’ Nandi”, from the late 19th early 20th century, with SEM-EDX, indicates the use of zinc chromate yellow, prussian blue, red lead, as well as yellow and red ochre. A water based medium is suspected.

There are three main symptoms of damage which can be expected on such paintings: tears and holes in the primary support caused by mechanical or organic degradation, the fading of the watercolours due to UV-light and accumulation of dust which, embedded between the fibers, clouds the appearance of the image. So far, conservation treatments are rare. At the present moment it is advisable to keep the paintings framed, glazed and in a controlled environment.