

STONES OF VIENNA

The Tuchlauben unfolds the history of the the city's medieval cloth merchants, and a remarkable Bacchanalian wall painting

Of Courtly Love and the Four Seasons

by Duncan J. D. Smith

Hurrying between Hoher Markt and Kohlmarkt in Vienna's 1st District, neither locals nor tourists seem to notice the little statue on the corner at Tuchlauben 20. It depicts a man in medieval garb, his legs astride a portable brazier stove. From his blissful expression, he is clearly deriving welcome respite from the rigours of winter.

But why is he here? And what's that discrete Wien Museum plaque by the entrance of the building opposite at No. 19?

For the answers, you must imagine Tuchlauben, one of Vienna's oldest thoroughfares, as it appeared during the 14th century. At this time the street was lined with covered arcades known as Lauben facing the pavement. It was here that garments and fabrics (*Tücher*) were sold, hence the name Tuchlauben. The arcades were connected by passageways to cellars, where the fabrics were stored.

From the early 13th century onwards the cloth merchants of Tuchlauben were allowed to sell imported fabrics from Flanders and the Rhineland, a lucrative business since high quality fabrics were not manufactured locally in medieval Vienna. The fabric sellers are recalled at the top of the street by the Tuchmacher Brunnen, a

fountain installed in 1928 depicting a merchant cutting a length of cloth with his shears.

Until the 16th century the storage cellars rarely belonged to the houses above them, instead being separate properties which could be purchased or else rented by cloth merchants. A rare exception were the properties at Tuchlauben 19 and 20, owned by the Styrian fabric merchant Michel Menschein.

Menschein was a wealthy man and a member of Vienna's City Council. In 1388, he purchased the fabric cellar at Tuchlauben 20, and in 1396, the entire house. In 1415 he christened it the "Winterhaus" and adorned it with the statue of the man and the brazier. In the same year he purchased Tuchlauben 19, which he re-named the "Sommerhaus".

Menschein's affection for his Sommerhaus is revealed in a cycle of wall paintings he commissioned for it, whose remains were revealed during restoration work on the first floor in August 1979. Their survival was all the more remarkable because the building had been demolished down to just below the first floor ceiling and then rebuilt in the early 18th century, at which time the paintings were plastered over. And there they remained for nearly 400 years.



A Neidhart Fresco at Tuchlauben 19, depicting a round dance in Spring

Photo: Duncan Smith

Menschein's wall paintings would have been astonishing even at the time. Done al seco (rather than the more common "frescoes") probably by a local artist working in the Bohemian idiom of illuminated manuscript, they encircled the banquet hall (*Festsaal*) of Menschein's elegant patrician home. Originally running up to thirty metres in length, they visualised the changing of the four seasons, as a framework for a continuing figural narrative, perhaps echoing in some way a similar cycle at No. 20 that was lost when the building was rebuilt in 1902.

The detailed scenes are inspired by the rustic poetry of Neidhart von Reuental, a songwriter (Minnesinger) in the court of the 13th century Duke Friederich II of Austria. Popular also in Italy, France, and Switzerland, Reuental's overt and explicit poems extol the virtues of chivalry and courtly love, virtues he believed were being eroded by uncouth peasant society. In all, a full half of the frescoes at No. 19 were retrieved, restored 'in situ' over a three year period and subsequently opened to the public.

Along the north wall, the scenes are related first to summer and then to winter. Summer is represented by a peasant brawl (in which several men are engaged in unknightly combat with oversized swords), a ball game (traditionally a literary convention for the summer season), and the Theft of the Mirror, where a peasant gropes

beneath a woman's skirt (surely the antithesis of knightly wooing!), and attempts to pilfer a mirror (the symbol of courtly joy). Winter consists of another fight amongst the peasantry, this time for the favours of a peasant girl and using snowballs, and a sleighride of the type enjoyed by the well-to-do in medieval Vienna. Neidhart is credited as being the first to mention the sleigh as a mode of transport in the literature of Austria.

Along the south wall the cycle continues with Spring and Autumn. The former begins with the so-called Violet Prank, Neidhart's most popular story, wherein a man has discovered the first violet of spring and has concealed it with his hat in readiness for his noble lady to find it. Unexpectedly a peasant uncovers the flower and defecates on it! Unperturbed the characters move on to a Round Dance celebrating the arrival of spring, and it's worth noting that this is Europe's oldest artistic representation of dancing to music. The cycle finishes with Autumn, and a banquet at which there is much drinking and feasting.

A fragmentary landscape showing a bare branched tree with a few red berries terminates not only the painting's cycle but also this fascinating and rarely seen piece of Viennese history.

The Neidhart Frescoes at Tuchlauben 19 are open Tue. and Sun. 10-1 and 2-6. Entry fee. Duncan J.D. Smith is the author of Only in Vienna (Christian Brandstetter Verlag)