

Victoria & Albert Art & Love

Prince Albert: early encounters with art and collecting

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Fig. 1 (far left)
Unknown artist, *View of Coburg*, c.1800–10
Watercolour and bodycolour; 39.2 × 50.7cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg

Fig. 2 (left)
Karl Koch (1791–1875),
Ehrenburg Palace, c.1812–16
Watercolour and bodycolour; 34 × 50cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg

I arrived at Coburg ... The aspect of that city was little calculated to restore my spirits. I saw a sort of ancient borough town with strait [sic] streets, houses half in ruins and low doors as in villages in France. An air of silence and ennui seemed to hang over the city... We passed before a house, higher, larger and more gloomy than all the rest. In the middle of a vast, smoky wall a massive and ill proportioned gate seemed to be an entrance to some Gothic stable. Very high up there appeared a double rank of small windows, long and grated, which bore a certain affinity to the murderous keeps of an old castle. The sight would have quickly dissipated from my mind all notions of a stable, if I had not also observed the green colour of the lattices which ornamented them. Two large rats – I remember them – escaped from the lower part of this venerable edifice, and ran about my feet. I had horror of these animals, and well I might, for they were courtier rats. They issued from the same palace as his Serene Highness the Duke of Coburg.¹

This rather unkind description of Coburg was penned by Pauline Adélaïde Alexandre Panam (1789–1840) and can be read in her autobiographical *Memoirs of a Young Greek Lady*, published in 1823 in Paris and London. They contained a bitter settlement of accounts with the Duke of Coburg, Ernst I, father of Prince Albert, who had seduced her in Paris in 1807 when she was just a young girl and lured her to Coburg, only to abandon her. The 'young Greek lady' created a political scandal with her memoirs. Whether the story was still the talk of the town when the Duke first came to London 13 years later with his sons to make arrangements for the marriage of Albert and Victoria, we do not know. However, it does not seem to have had any negative impact (figs 1, 2).

Around the same time as the 'young Greek lady' publication was plaguing the Coburg court, the poet and scholar of oriental studies Friedrich Rückert was staying in Coburg. He, by contrast, had the pleasantest memories of the ducal town, drawn there by the court library: he sought pertinent texts to deepen his knowledge of oriental languages. On the well-stocked shelves of the Coburg library he found not only a series of ancient oriental manuscripts, but also an abundance of literature about the history of the Orient and its languages. As these two episodes show, the capital of the tiny state of Saxony-Coburg was by no means a place without interest, depending on one's preoccupations.

The young Duke of Coburg brilliantly handled a crisis in the confusion of the Napoleonic era. While he was fighting Napoleon, as a general in the Prussian cavalry in 1806, the year of his accession to power; his mother, who was staying in Coburg, joined Napoleon's Confederation of the Rhine when French troops entered and occupied the town. After the Battle of the Nations, fought at Leipzig in 1813, the Duke left the Confederation of the Rhine, entered Paris with the victors and obtained various benefits at the Congress of Vienna. The situation of the duchy, which had fallen deep into debt in the eighteenth century, thereafter visibly improved. Moreover, the house of Saxe-Coburg was in the process of establishing family relationships with all the ruling houses of Europe by means of a skilful marriage policy. Duke Ernst's marriage with Princess Louise of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg, Albert's mother, promised him an extension of his territory, which became a reality in 1826 with the creation of the Duchy of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha and increased the number of his subjects fourfold.

However, while in Berlin, Paris and Vienna, the Duke did not devote his time solely to amorous escapades; he also pursued his interest in the arts. In matters of aesthetics and culture he was a man of his times and was firmly resolved to give visible expression to his territory's rise in status of by means of prestigious projects. In this paper I outline the artistic and cultural environment into which Prince Albert was born, and his early encounters with art and collections.

Art between representation and expression

Albert's father, Duke Ernst I, apparently shared the disparaging view of his young mistress about Coburg. Even while the Napoleonic Wars were raging, he issued a decree ordering the restoration of the ducal castle because of its poor structural condition. The portrait of Duke Ernst, commissioned by George Dawe in 1818 and completed in 1822 (**fig. 3**), depicts the new façade of the palace.² In October 1810 Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781–1841), an up-and-coming young architect from Berlin, travelled to Coburg to draw up the plans (**fig. 4**). Having been employed previously as an architect by the state of Prussia, Schinkel had created quite a sensation with his plans for the tomb of the Prussian queen, Louise, who had died in the summer



Fig. 3
George Dawe (1781–1829),
Duke Ernst III of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld
(after 1826: Duke Ernst I of Saxe-Coburg
and Gotha), 1818–22
Oil on canvas, 323 x 200cm
Coburg, Schloss Ehrenburg



Fig. 4
Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1761–1841),
Draft for the façade of Ehrenburg Palace, 1810
Pencil, 45.8 x 64.3cm
Coburg, Staatsarchiv Coburg



Fig. 5
Ehrenburg Palace, Coburg,
from the north
Photograph
Bayerische Schlösserverwaltung;
Photo: Peetz, Coburg

of 1810. Although he had been commissioned to design a classical tomb, he submitted plans in a neo-Gothic style. In doing so he was doing more than expressing artistic policy: he was manifesting an attitude. While his work had been classical in character until then, during the period of the Wars of Liberation Schinkel found himself swept along by the patriotic and pious enthusiasm for all things connected with Germany's distant past, which was expressed in, among other things, romantic paintings of medieval subjects.

The neo-Gothic movement in Germany began later than it did in England, and for other reasons, although there are examples of neo-Gothic architecture in Germany from the middle of the eighteenth century, commissioned by state rulers as movable background scenery as part of their landscape gardening projects, such as the Gothic House in Wörlitz Park. But the breakthrough for neo-Gothic architecture came with the end of the Holy Roman Empire of German Nations in 1806, the subsequent occupation by Napoleon and the Wars of Liberation. Under pressure from the enemy, the Germans sought to steady themselves by looking back to the glorious period of their past: the Middle Ages. Thus Gothic came to be seen as the German national style.

Admittedly Schinkel's plans were eventually realised in a slightly different form, with less intricate tracery and lower corner pavilions. It was also nearly thirty years before the major part of the alterations were completed. Yet his plans for Coburg were unparalleled in Germany at that time, because he not only fused the new German national style with reminiscences of the English Tudor style and Venetian motifs, but also because, for the first time, the neo-Gothic style had been applied to the architecture of the residence of a ruler. The subsequent restoration of Ehrenburg Palace in the neo-Gothic style was also to prove unique (**fig. 5**). No other ruling prince in Germany had his principal residence redesigned in the neo-Gothic style.



In contrast with the exterior, Ernst chose the French Empire style for the interior decoration. This style alone seems to have satisfied the Duke's demand for outward signs of prestige. He commissioned the French architect André Marie Renié (1789–1855) to carry out the work. The Throne Room (**fig. 6**), which has the peculiar feature of a throne in the form of a sofa rather than a chair, was decorated in red and gold and furnished with pieces from the Jacob-Desmalter workshop.³ The candelabra and pendulum clocks also came from the workshop in Paris. Further examples for the interior design in classical style are the wood-panelled 'salon boisé' (**fig. 7**) with its Etruscan decoration, and the Silver Room, formerly the dining room, with its ceiling fresco of Bacchanal motifs; these also date from the redecoration period around 1816–17.

Fig. 6 (above left)
Ehrenburg Palace, Coburg,
the Throne Room
Photograph.
Bayerische Schlösserverwaltung

Fig. 7 (above)
Ehrenburg Palace, Coburg, salon boisé
Bayerische Schlösserverwaltung



The makeover of Coburg in neo-Gothic style

While Ehrenburg Palace was, on the whole, only used as a residence in exceptional circumstances, Rosenau (**fig. 8**) was the princes' permanent residence during the summer months. Ehrenburg was a palace, but Rosenau was a home – to use Queen Victoria's words characterising the difference between the Royal palaces and Balmoral.⁴

Duke Ernst I originally had the medieval castle of Rosenau renovated in neo-Gothic style between 1808 and 1817, with an English-style landscaped garden laid out around it. For this, too, Karl Friedrich Schinkel drew up plans in 1810, but these were not carried out: it was decided that no more than minor intervention in the basic structure and a few references to the Gothic style would be enough to breathe new life into the ancient feudal seat. Battlements were added to the round stair tower and the windows were given Gothic-style frames. On the occasion of Ernst and Louise's wedding on 17 August 1817, a medieval tournament was held on the meadow below the castle. On the same evening there was a ball in the Marble Room, with the entire court and the nobility of the town appearing in traditional German costume (**fig. 9**).

Fig. 8 (above)
Traugott Faber (1786–1863),
Rosenau Castle, 1820
Watercolour; 32.9 x 47.2cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg



Fig. 9
After Carl Alexander Heideloff (1789–1865),
Tournament on the Meadows in front of
Rosenau Castle, August 1817
Etching from *Coburgisches Taschenbuch
für das Jahr 1821*

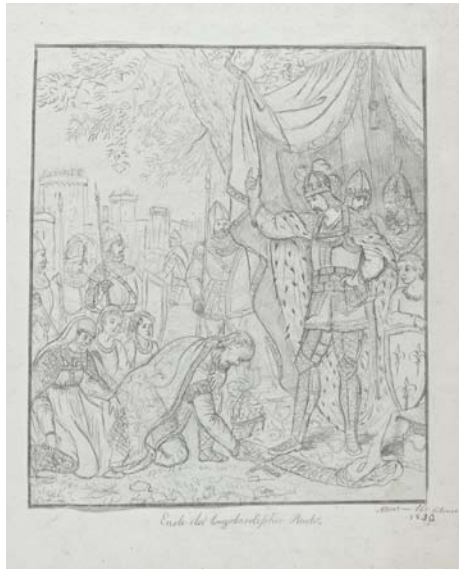


Fig. 10 (far left)
Rosenau Castle, Library
Photograph
Bayerische Schlösserverwaltung

Fig. 11 (left)
Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha
(1819–61), *The End of Lombard Rule in 774:
Charlemagne dethrones Desiderius*, 1830
Pencil, 35.9 x 31.4cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg

The crucial crowning touch to the neo-Gothic interior of Rosenau Castle was the library (**fig. 10**), where numerous chivalric romances, including 23 novels by Walter Scott alone, in English and in German translation, lined the shelves. The paintings by Dresden painter Heinrich Naeke (1785–1835) showed scenes from Scott's *Vision of Don Roderick*, such as *Don Roderick and the Bishop*. For some of these Naeke took his inspiration from the copperplate engravings of Richard Westall, art master to the young Victoria.⁵

Whether the princes Ernst and Albert studied these romantic tales of chivalry during their lessons with Johann Christoph Florschütz, their tutor from 1823, is not recorded. However, they would doubtless have been familiar with the subjects of the paintings. What is certain is that Prince Albert took an interest in medieval history, as indicated by a drawing by the 13-year-old prince of Charlemagne dethroning the Lombard duke Desiderius (**fig. 11**).

In addition to the neo-medieval atmosphere of Rosenau Castle, Albert was also influenced by the 250-acre park, landscaped in a strictly English style. There was relevant literature in the library, such as the standard work on the art of garden design, C.C.L. Hirschfeld's five-volume *Theorie der Gartenkunst*, published between 1779 and 1785 in both German and French. Moreover, Ernst I would have known some contemporary gardens from first-hand experience, and these would certainly have included the English Garden in Gotha, which the Duke of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (Ernst II Ludwig) had laid around Friedenstein Castle in the 1770s – inspired by Kew Gardens – under the supervision of the English court gardener John Haverfield the Younger (1741/4–1820).⁶ The terraces on the outer edges of the park afforded a view of the surrounding landscape, which was full of allusions.

The Lauterburg ruins seen in a painting by Johann Ludwig Bleuler (fig. 12) formed a picturesque point of view and were at the same time deliberately reminiscent of the history of the ducal house. Also within the park grounds was a hermitage (behind which, incidentally, a vaulted cellar was used to store ice for cooling beer or food), a Swiss cottage and a bathing house on the small River Itz (fig. 13).



Fig. 12 (above left)
Johann Ludwig Bleuler (1792–1850),
*The Terrace of Rosenau Castle,
in the distance the Lauterburg Ruin*, 1823
Bodycolour over pencil, 56.7 x 79.5cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg

Fig. 13 (above)
Georg Heinrich Crola (1804–79),
*The Bathing House in Rosenau
Park on the River Itz*, 1828
Pencil and white chalk, 56.7 x 79.5cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg



Fig. 14 (left)
Max Brückner (1836–1919),
*The Rosenau: the Gardens of the
Hereditary Prince of Saxe-Coburg
and Prince Albert with the Aviary*, 1863
Watercolour, 17.2 x 24.5cm
Royal Collection, RL 20445

One special place was the Princes' Garden, with an aviary and flowerbeds tended by the princes (fig. 14). Albert is supposed to have been very attached to it, as Charles Grey reports in his biography:

*Dearly was the Rosenau loved by the Prince ... His brother shared his love for the place, and several traces of their joint labours as boys still exist there, particularly the keeper's house near the little inn, behind which there is a small garden still kept as they made it... Here too is the small skittle ground after which the Prince formed one in after years in the garden of Buckingham Palace. It is a game for which he never quite lost his liking ...*⁷



Fig. 15
Attr: Sebastian Eckardt (1782–1846),
*Plan for an Entrance Building to
Reinhardtsbrunn Palace, c.1830*
Bodycolour and oil, 25.7 x 40.7cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg

Although less often than at Rosenau, the princes regularly spent the summer months in Reinhardtsbrunn (**fig. 15**) near Gotha, as the court resided alternately in Coburg and in Gotha. The simple bailiff's house, built on the site of a Benedictine monastery around 1600, was renovated in the neo-Gothic style in 1827 and was ready for habitation from 1833. Even this small castle, with its distinctive battlements and embrasures borrowed from defensive architecture, was surrounded by a landscaped park. The interior was neo-Gothic.

After Reinhardtsbrunn, Callenberg Castle was the next to be renovated (**fig. 16**). A new structure was added in 1831, to plans drawn up by the Nuremberg architect Carl Alexander von Heideloff (1789–1865), and the entire building was subsequently



Fig. 16
Sebastian Eckardt (1782–1846),
*Plan for the Remodelling of
Callenberg Castle in the
neo-Gothic style, 1826–7*
Bodycolour, 32.1 x 42.2cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg



Fig. 17
Carl Alexander Heideloff (1789–1865),
View of Veste Coburg before its Remodelling, c.1840
Sepia, wash and pen, 21.2 x 29cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg



Fig. 18
Carl Alexander Heideloff (1789–1865),
View of Veste Coburg, Plan for a Makeover in neo-Gothic style, c.1840
Watercolour and bodycolour, 21.2 x 29.5cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg

redesigned in the neo-Gothic style. The furniture includes a gaming table, presumably originally made for Rosenau, following an English design probably by Augustus Charles Pugin; this was published in the magazine *The Repository of Arts* in 1827.⁸

The final phase in the Gothic-style makeover of Coburg by Ernst I was the renovation and restoration of the Veste Coburg (**figs 17, 18**), which began in 1839, also following von Heideloff's plans.

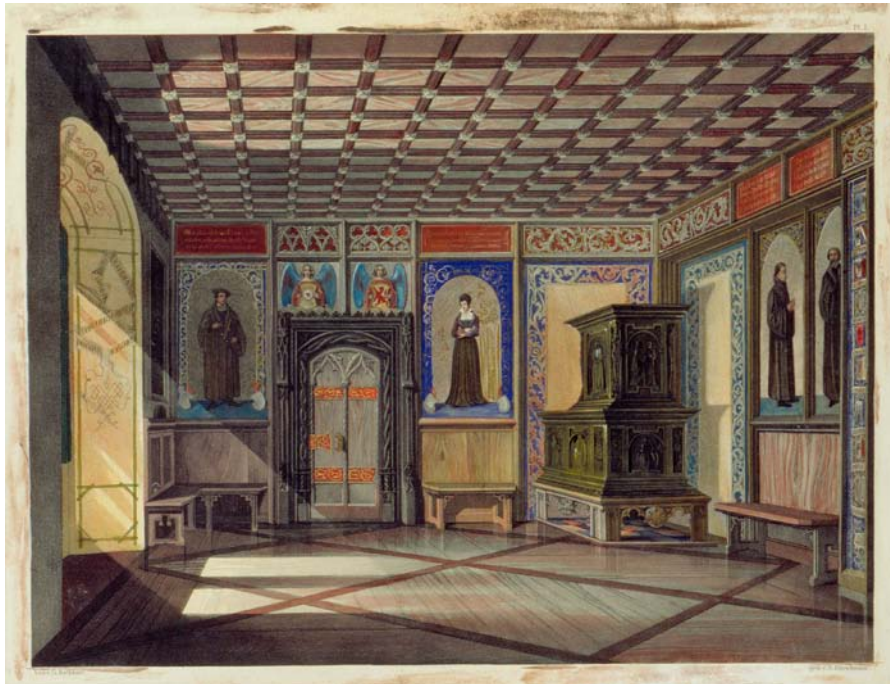


Fig. 19
Andreas Fleischmann (1811–78)
after Georg Konrad Rothbart (1871–96),
The Reformer's Memorial Room at Veste Coburg
Coloured steel engraving, from Carl Alexander
von Heideloff's *Die Ornamentik des Mittelalters*,
Supplement (Nuremberg 1846) erroneously
entitled *The sitting-room of Martin Luther*
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg

The idea was to turn the Veste into a memorial to Martin Luther, who had resided there for six months in 1530 (**fig. 19**). It was also intended to house the ducal collections, which were to be made accessible to the public in this historical place. The Duke of Coburg thus pre-empted widely discussed plans for a prestigious art and history museum which led a few years later to the founding of the German National Museum in Nuremberg and the Bavarian National Museum in Munich (1851). In fact, Albert's brother Ernst II suggested that Veste Coburg might house the collections of the nascent Germanisches Nationalmuseum and in 1853 offered the premises to its founding director, Hans von und zu Aufseß, who eventually turned down the offer in favour of Nuremberg.

Donning knight's attire

The effect of this evocation of medieval tradition in the ducal household in Coburg during Prince Albert's youth is unmistakable. One of the pieces of furniture which most clearly embodies the chivalric ideal is the candlestick from Rosenau Castle, which is in the form of a knight and stands on a three-legged base (**fig. 20**). The furniture-maker Joseph Dannhauser from Vienna invoiced for this in 1816, although the Duke may have brought its curious design with him from Coburg.

Ernst I was given to donning knight's clothing – and not only at costume balls. He had a portrait painted of himself dressed as a knight: a carefully executed gouache of 1837 sets out his agenda quite pointedly (**fig. 21**). Robed in an ermine-lined purple cloak over costly Gothic-style armour, the Duke stands by a table on which lies a

Fig. 20 (below)
Joseph Ulrich Danhauser (1780–1829),
candelabra in the shape of a knight,
commissioned in Vienna for Rosenau Castle,
1815–16
Painted wood, 191 cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg



document listing his principal building projects. The coats of arms of his territories reveal his claim to sovereignty and his sense of history. No other German head of state has, as far as I am aware, so expressly displayed himself in the role of a medieval knight in the exercise of his power. The idea would never even have occurred to King Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia, the 'romantic on the throne', not to mention King Ludwig I of Bavaria. The last time Friedrich Wilhelm IV was to be seen in knight's armour was as the crown prince, in a painting of around 1820 by his aunt, Wilhelmine (1774–1837), the wife of the King of the Netherlands, who poses with him in the guise of Johanna of Aragon in front of a painting of the Madonna (formerly in Potsdam, now lost).⁹ And Ludwig, Prince of Bavaria, later King Ludwig I, only donned Old German dress in a portrait when he was a young man in order to demonstrate his sympathy with the students' movement for the reunification of the German Empire; at his request it became the 'uniform' of the German artists in Rome. He would have been virtually alone in wearing it, for to wear Old German dress had been forbidden in Bavaria by his father, King Max I, in the years of restoration after the Vienna Congress.¹⁰

Art and collecting

In 1835, soon after they were confirmed, the next phase in Albert and Ernst's princely education began: they were to become acquainted with other courts of Europe and emerge as cosmopolitan men of the world. In May 1836 they visited London. From there they travelled to their uncle Leopold's court in Brussels via Paris, where Albert found the Louvre 'dreadful'. In Brussels the princes were given intensive private tuition in foreign languages and modern history. Immediately after this, in April 1837, they began studying at Bonn University. Thereafter, Albert set off on his Grand Tour to Italy.

A few months before Albert's arrival at Bonn University a series of frescoes in the auditorium, representing the four faculties of Philosophy, Theology, Law and Medicine (**fig. 22**), were completed. The university was originally the residence of the Archbishop of Cologne, and the auditorium had been his dining room. The auditorium project was begun in 1818, the initiative of Peter Cornelius, who hoped in this way to launch a revival of large-scale fresco painting. His pupil Jakob Götzenberger executed the work. According to the instructions of Cornelius, Raphael's paintings in the Stanze di Raffaello in the Vatican were to serve as the model: the *School of Athens* unmistakably served the purpose. Götzenberger's paintings were somewhat controversial and the subject of keen debate, which cannot have escaped Prince Albert. Whether it was this that triggered or strengthened his interest in Raphael is hard to say; it certainly did not dampen his appreciation of the great artist. It also, no doubt, taught him more about Cornelius and his school as the instigators of the renewed interest in fresco painting.



Fig. 21
Carl Alexander Heideloff (1789–1865),
Duke Ernst I of Saxe-Coburg and
Gotha in Neo-Gothic Armour, 1837
Watercolour and bodycolour, 54.2 x 39.2cm
Staatsarchiv Coburg



Fig. 22 (left)
Peter von Cornelius (1783–1867)
and Jakob Götzenberger (1802–66),
The Faculty of Medicine, 1824–35
Photograph of the ceiling painting
for the university of Bonn
Foto Marburg no. 1.034.209

By this time Prince Albert was already a committed and knowledgeable collector. In a letter to his brother from Florence on 19 February 1839, he wrote:

[F]or our collection, I have so far been able to do little. I have acquired Rothschild's autograph and am hunting for that of Napoleon, which I think I may be able to negotiate from the ex-king of Westphalia. In Munich, I bought a few pretty sketches for the big album, in Bologna three by Old Italian masters, which are supposed to be authentic and genuine. Here, I have bought some very beautiful statues, they are very good copies in alabaster (en miniature) of the most famous masterpieces in sculpture, made by excellent artists. My financial situation prevents me from doing more.¹¹

He was occasionally to repeat the comment that he had insufficient means to satisfy his passion for collecting, even when he was Prince Consort; but no doubt every collector says that, even when he is married to the Queen of England.

Albert may have learned about sketches from his grandfather's copperplate engraving cabinet, for among his childhood drawing exercises are some based on examples in the print room at Coburg. His interest in and knowledge of autographs were developed on his own initiative. A drawing by the 13-year-old prince (**fig. 23**) was copied from an engraved portrait by Jan Pietersz Saenredam (1565–1607; **fig. 24**) preserved in the Coburg print room. At that time the print room was housed together with the ducal library in the armoury near Ehrenburg Palace. It was acquired by the art-loving Duke Franz Friedrich Anton of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld (1750–1806), who had been a knowledgeable and passionate collector; although not a wealthy one.¹²



Fig. 23 (top)
Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha
(1819–61) after Jan Pietersz. Saenredam
(1565–1607), *Duke Maurice of Hesse-Nassau, Prince
of Orange* (detail), 1832
Pencil, 34.4 x 25cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg



Fig. 24
Jan Pietersz. Saenredam (1565–1607),
*Duke Maurice of Hesse-Nassau,
Prince of Orange*, c.1600
Engraving, 35.2 x 47cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg



Fig. 25 (far left)
Michael Ostendorfer (1490–1559),
*Pilgrimage to the Church of the
Beautiful Virgin in Regensburg*, c.1520
Woodcut with letterpress text, 63.5 x 39.1cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg

Fig. 26 (left)
Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553),
Portrait of Martin Luther with a Doctor's Cap, 1521
Engraving, 20.5 x 15cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg

The creation of the collection at Coburg was ambitious, encompassing works from all countries and all schools, with a comprehensive selection of prints by famous artists. Two bundles of drawings have immortalised the name of Coburg in art history: one by the 'Master of the Coburg Roundels', an artist working in the Upper Rhine in the late fifteenth century, the other the *Codex Coburgensis*, an inventory in sketches dating from the mid-sixteenth century of the archaeological monuments of Rome, the first of its kind, comprising 282 drawings by an Italian master. The main focus of the Coburg collection is on German Renaissance engravings, which Franz Friedrich Anton began collecting back in 1775. He was thus one of the pioneers of a revaluation of German Renaissance art, quite some time before the Boisserée brothers in Cologne helped gain recognition for that period. Furthermore, in 1792 in Nuremberg, he succeeded in acquiring an outstanding collection of Albrecht Dürer engravings originally belonging to the Nuremberg patrician Imhoff – and which had been compiled therefore during Dürer's lifetime, possibly even in consultation with him. Proof of their ancient provenance is provided by, among other things, inscriptions on the sheets. A woodcut by Michael Ostendorfer (c.1494–1559), representing the pilgrimage to the church of the Schöne Maria in Regensburg, was owned by Dürer (**fig. 25**). What Dürer knew of this and saw on the sheet – the dizzy crowd of pilgrims who have taken leave of their senses – repulsed him, and his note is a criticism along the lines of Luther's rejection of pilgrimages: 'This spectre has arisen against the Holy Scripture in Regensburg and is permitted by the bishop because it is useful for now. God help us that we do not dishonour the worthy mother of Christ in this way but honour her in His name. Amen.'¹³

Another example giving evidence of a provenance related to humanist circles, is Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1521 portrait of Luther (**fig. 26**), of which only one print exists in this prime condition. This probably belonged to a humanist of the period named

Dr Pfeil, who added a handwritten comment to the inscription: 'This picture is the work of a man but the whole [Luther] was the work of Jehovah, because this world could not produce the like of him.'¹⁴ Moreover, this rare portrait proves the interest of the Coburg dynasty in the great reformer.

It is not certain that these items were known to Prince Albert but one may assume this to be the case since the great reformer Martin Luther, studying his ideas and collecting first editions of his works, became one of his major interests.

Albert's legacy: the Coburg collections

Although there is no mention of the cabinet in Albert's correspondence, there can be no doubt that he was aware of what this valuable collection was worth. His family in England must also have been aware of it. When his brother, Ernst II, got into financial difficulties and made moves to sell the copperplate engraving cabinet in 1882, he needed the consent of Albert's children. It was refused him. Maurice Holzmann, a close confidant of Prince Albert, wrote a memorandum on the subject that could not have been clearer:

*[I]n these days of diminished political importance of the smaller German States it seems desirable to uphold as much as possible. Every reduction in the Fine Art Collections will make residence at a small Capital less desirable, and place it more on the level of small provincial towns. The effect on the public, when it became known that the Duke had been selling off the art treasures belonging to the family in order not to be obliged to curtail the expenditure for his private pleasures, may easily be imagined.'*¹⁵

Familiarity with his grandfather's encyclopaedic collection, the keen interest in science and art instilled in him by his education, and his predilection for classification and order motivated Albert to start collections of his own, with his brother Ernst. From 1830, when the princes were just 11 and 12 years old respectively, they assiduously built up an art and natural history cabinet (*Kunst- und Naturalienkabinett*). In the words of their cousin, Count Arthur Mensdorff, 'Albert never was noisy or wild. He was always very fond of Natural History and more serious studies, and many a happy hour we spent in the Ehrenburg, in a small room under the roof, arranging and dusting the collections our cousins had themselves made and kept there.'¹⁶

A few years later another section was added to their collection, which they kept and developed together over the years until Albert's death and which was to gain some importance: an autograph collection. The first autographs, dating from 1835, include congratulatory letters and other correspondence addressed to the two princes. Among the first items were some letters by Martin Luther (**fig. 27**) that Albert

acquired, admittedly with some pressure, from the city of Coburg in 1839.¹⁷ During the princes' student years in Bonn the collection grew to include specimens of the writing of their science teachers, including signatures and greetings; they also sought and purchased autographs of historical and military figures, scientists and political leaders. By the time of Albert's death the collection had grown to some three thousand items. The *Handbuch für Autographensammler* by Johann Günther and Otto August Schulz, published in 1856, names Queen Victoria of England and Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha as the sole royal collectors of that time; but behind both names is the collector Prince Albert.

As the *Kunst- und Naturalienkabinett* grew it had to be re-housed in the small Augusten-Palais in Coburg since 1845, on the suggestion of Prince Albert in a letter to his brother of 21 June 1844.¹⁸ Clearly space soon ran out again and the idea of a new building for the 'Ernst Albert Museum' was raised. The Coburg architect Wilhelm Streib drew up plans for a museum (figs 28, 29), to encompass far more than the Coburg collections: it seems to have included those in Gotha, themselves encompassing a collection of plaster casts of pieces such as the Elgin Marbles. But in the event the projected building for the 'Ernst Albert Museum' never materialised and the brothers' collections were merged with the ducal collections of Coburg and Gotha.¹⁹

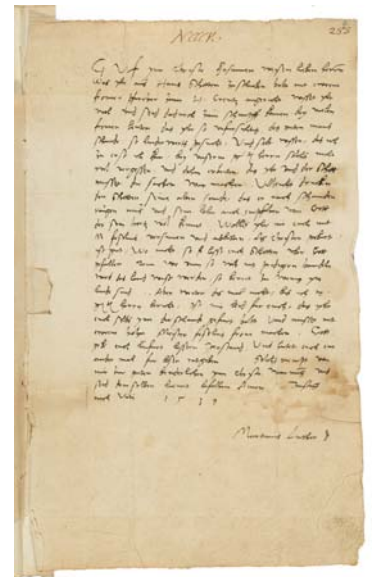
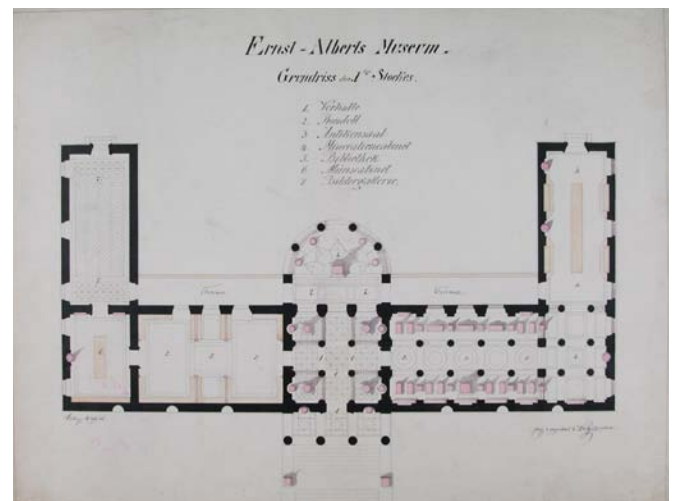


Fig. 27
Letter from Martin Luther to Mayor and Town Council of Coburg, 17 June 1539
Ink on paper; 33 x 20cm
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg, autograph collection, entry from 1839



Conclusion

Prince Albert's early encounters with art and collecting were largely guided by two factors: his father's interest in the neo-Gothic style, which resulted in a number of building projects in the Duchy of Saxe-Coburg, and the well-ordered and in part highly significant collections he had come to know in his home town, which in turn provided the impetus for his own collecting activities. In Coburg, the interest in the

Fig. 28 (above left)
Wilhelm Streib (1822–88),
Plan for a Ernst-Albert-Museum,
cross section, 1846
Watercolour
Staatsarchiv Coburg

Fig. 29 (above)
Wilhelm Streib (1822–88),
Plan for a Ernst-Albert-Museum, ground plan, 1845
Pencil, watercolour and bodycolour; 35.5 x 46cm
Staatsarchiv Coburg

Middle Ages and the judicious enhancement of the ducal collections by moving them to the Veste Coburg served the purpose of promoting the dynasty's image at a time of transition, when the restoration of the old powers was taking place side by side with the emergence of a new national awareness. Although Albert no longer needed to use art and collecting as a political tool, the experience of building a collection and his intimate knowledge of the pieces in the Coburg collections were profoundly influential, and enabled him to go on to achieve very remarkable things.

Notes

1. Panam 1823, pp. 47–8.
2. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LA A, 6656.
3. Brunner and Seelig 2002, pp. 41–6.
4. Pope Humphrey 1893, p. 25.
5. Heym 1996, pp. 239–68.
6. Wandel 2008.
7. Grey 1867, p. 114.
8. Wainwright 1997, p. 103 (illus.).
9. Potsdam 1995, p. 319, illus. p. 316.
10. Joseph Stieler (1781–1858), *Crown Prince Ludwig I of Bavaria in Old German Costume*, oil on canvas, 1822 (Thorvaldsen Museum, Copenhagen, *Künstlerleben in Rom. Berthel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844). Der dänische Bildhauer und seine deutschen Freunde*, exh. cat., Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg and Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landesmuseum Schloss Gottorf, Schleswig 1992, no. 8.5, p. 656 [illus.]).
11. Staatsarchiv Coburg, LA A, 6969.
12. In fact at that time the Duchy of Coburg was deeply in debt and its finances were under imperial administration. The situation only changed when, after the marriage of Franz Friedrich Anton's eldest daughter, Juliane, to the Russian Grand Prince Constantine in 1796, financial contributions came in from the Tsar's court and the Duke's financial situation improved.
13. Michael Ostendorfer, *Pilgrimage to the Church of the Beautiful Virgin in Regensburg*, woodcut with letterpress text, c.1520 (Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg, Kupferstichkabinett, inv. I, 100, 147).
14. 'LVCAE OPVS EFFIGIES HAEC EST MORITURA LVTHERI AETHERNAM MENTIS EXPRIMAT IPSE SVAEW D X X I Dr. Pfeil: Hoc opus est hominis: sed opus fuit omne JEHOVAE mundus enim numquam Protulit Huic similem / Dr. Pfeil: Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553), *Martin Luther in Profile with Doctoral Cap*, engraving, 1521 (Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg).
15. RAVICSI 788. Weschenfelder 2007, p. 46.
16. Grey 1867, p. 58.
17. Böcking 2006, pp. 16–17.
18. 'Ich bin noch der Meinung, dass es am besten sein wird, Cabinet und Kupferstichsammlung zu vereinen und im Augustenstift auszustellen, das vielleicht den Namen Ernst Albert Museum annehmen könnte' (Staatsarchiv Coburg, LA, A, 6972, pp. 40–41).
19. The plans of Wilhelm Streib in the Staatsarchiv Coburg, Plansammlung 2986, 2987.

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