

Vienna, September 2011

Wien Museum Karlsplatz, Karlsplatz, 1040 Vienna

ANGELO SOLIMAN AN AFRICAN IN VIENNA

Press conference: Wednesday 28 September 2011, 10
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Venue: Wien Museum Karlsplatz, 1040 Vienna
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Press photos: www.wienmuseum.at/de/presse

The story of the 'court Moor' Angelo Soliman is part of the mythology of Vienna, not least because of the desecration and preparing of his corpse for the imperial cabinet of natural curiosities. A man who had enjoyed a distinguished career in the enlightened circles of the capital was posthumously displayed in a museum as a half-naked 'savage', adorned with ostrich feathers and shells. Born around 1721 in sub-Saharan Africa, enslaved as a child, Soliman was sold to a Sicilian family before entering the service of Field Marshal Prince Lobkowitz as personal attendant, soldier and confidant. From 1753 he lived in Vienna, where he played an important role in the household of Prince Liechtenstein: Soliman was chamberlain and tutor to the prince's children, but he also served as an exotic 'showpiece' in courtly ritual. Against the Prince's will, Soliman married and lived for some years independently in his own house in a suburb of Vienna. A freemason, he knew Mozart and the preeminent scholars and scientists of the day. Dressed in his distinctive oriental-style costume, he was a well known and respected person in the city.

Between fact and anecdote

Soliman is the first non-European migrant in Vienna whose life is sufficiently well documented that we can discover something of him personally. Nonetheless, the borders between fact and anecdote remain fluid, and his life can be viewed from varying perspectives: Soliman as mere curiosity or successful immigrant, as eternal slave or rising member of the bourgeoisie, as role model or martyr. In the story of his life, emancipation and forced assimilation are closely interwoven.

As well as Soliman's own life and its historical setting, the exhibition also relates how Soliman has been viewed since his death: as part of an idyllic, imperial Vienna; in the novelistic and dramatic imaginations of Musil and Herzmanovsky-Orlando; in the post-colonial critique of the legend of a prominent African-Austrian. Continuing African stereotypes and latent racism are also addressed,

bringing the exhibition into our own time. The exhibition concludes with video statements from Africans living in Vienna today.

The exhibition concept is by noted historian, author and journalist Philipp Blom. Some 250 objects are presented, including fine contemporary oil paintings, by Canaletto among others, documents from Soliman's life, and depictions of Africans from the 18th to the 20th century. Design of the exhibition is by architect Luigi Blau.

A walk through the exhibition

Europe's image of Africa was a fantasy. This is revealed at the beginning of the exhibition through Flemish and Italian engravings and maps from the 17th and 18th centuries, a time when great curiosity about the 'savage' continent was matched by almost total ignorance of it – the exploratory expeditions to Africa had not yet begun. To this day it is unclear where Soliman came from and to which ethnic group he belonged. However, it is known by which routes African slaves were brought to Europe, and this is shown in the second section of the exhibition. As a small boy, Soliman came by ship to Messina, where he was placed in service with an aristocratic lady. As can be seen in the exhibition's third section, Messina was an important port for the slave trade, and in this city lived the Sollima family who may have given the enslaved child his name.

What functions did people of colour have in central Europe, what were their tasks, what roles did they play? Section 3 explores these questions. In the first instance, they were prestige servants and 'coffee moors' who served the then fashionable drink in exotic costumes, presenting a bizarre combination of African and oriental that was later incarnated in the 'Meinl moor' with his Turkish fez. Black men were also regarded as especially brave and hardy warriors, and consequently were sought for the army. Angelo Soliman was a soldier in the service of Prince Lobkowitz, though it is not clear whether or not he came to Vienna during this period.

In the service of Prince Liechtenstein: Soliman in Vienna

The exhibition's central, fourth section is dedicated to Soliman's life in Vienna. At least 40 Africans lived in the city in the 18th century, though Angelo Soliman's life is the only one that is well documented. People of colour were thus unusual but by no means unknown; they can be seen in the city views of Carl Schütz and Salomon Kleiner, and remnants such as the house sign 'At the Black Moor's' (now in the collection of the Wien Museum) suggest the same. Details of Soliman's life in the service of Prince Liechtenstein can be drawn from the Prince's archives: how expensively he was dressed, the journeys and political missions on which he accompanied the Prince, and so on. As historian Walter Sauer notes in his catalogue essay, "Because of the colour of his skin, but also because of his urbanity, his facility with languages, and his talent as a card-player, Soliman served as an exceptional, exotic point of reference for the upper echelons of Viennese society".

Soliman won a substantial amount of money gambling, and with this in hand, he attempted to break out of his former servant's role. In secret, he married the widow Magdalena Kellerman; he was dismissed from service and moved to the suburb 'Unter den Weißgärben', a fairly rough quarter where, over the course of the following years, he grew poor. A return to the Liechtenstein court proved his financial salvation. Soliman became tutor to the Crown Prince Alois Joseph. As a member of the

Freemasons' Lodge 'Zur Wahren Eintracht', he mixed with preeminent men of the day, including Mozart, jurist and writer Joseph von Sonnenfels, and scientist Ignaz von Born. Little is known of Soliman's private life, his relationship to freemasonry, or his political views. In later life he resigned from the Lodge. His last place of residence was on the Freyung, in a comfortable quarter of the city.

Creating a posthumous legend

The exhibition's fifth section is dedicated to the exhibiting of Soliman's body and to his later presentation. Soliman died in 1796, and the following year saw the opening of the imperial 'Physical and Astronomical Cabinet of Art, Nature and Animals', where Soliman's own stuffed body was displayed. It is not clear how much the public knew about this undertaking, nor precisely who had commissioned it. What is known is that Soliman's daughter Josepha protested strongly against it. In 1806 the exhibit, together with other similarly prepared bodies, was removed to a storeroom in the Hofburg, where it was destroyed by fire during the 1848 revolution.

Very quickly after his death, numerous legends about the 'court moor' began to circulate; these are presented in the sixth section, which details Soliman's 'afterlife' in Vienna. In 1807, the writer Caroline Pichler produced a first biographical essay which, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, sought to demonstrate the 'civilizability' of Africans, presenting Soliman as an educated, God-fearing 'Negro'. Pichler is silent on politically awkward issues, such as Soliman's membership of a Freemasons' Lodge and the fact that, after his death, his body was stuffed. Soliman was stylized as an exotic example of society's tolerance, a case of successful 'integration' – an extremely one-sided interpretation which held sway for a long time.

No less striking are the stereotypes and Africa clichés which continued, with some modifications, until the 20th century, as shown in section 7. The spectrum ranges from the display of Africans in the Prater around 1900 to 20th century advertising images and the picture of African asylum seekers in the media today.

The exhibition's final, eighth section refers directly to the present day. There are now some 22,000 Africans living in Vienna, many of whom are confronted with racism on a daily basis. Guest curator Philipp Blom has invited some of them to speak about their everyday lives in recorded interviews. "The negative clichés have proved astoundingly robust, but the positive perception of Africans has been almost completely destroyed by the intellectual legacy of colonialism and racism."

First-Class Accompanying Programme

An ambitious accompanying programme links directly into present-day Vienna. It includes a discussion of 'Operation Spring', moderated by Falter journalist Florian Klenk, and a presentation on the image of Africans in the media, designed by Simon Inou and Clara Akinyosoye in cooperation with africanet.info. Noted German writer and musician Noah Sow, author of the bestseller 'Deutschland Schwarz Weiß', delivers a lecture on everyday racism; the 'Wege nach Wien' (Roads to Vienna) evening features Wolfgang Kos in discussion with Mamadou Diabaté, Beatrice Achaleke und Chibo Onyeji. Cornelius Obonya reads from 200 years of selected texts about Soliman, from Caroline Pichler to Iliya Troyanov. City discovery walks and a children's programme with Babátólá Alóba conclude the accompanying programme. Further information is available at www.wienmuseum.at.

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- Entrance:** Adults: 6 €. Concessions: Seniors, Disabled, Wien-Card, Ö1-Club, Groups of 10 or more: 4 €. Students under 28, apprentices, civil & military service: 3 €
School pupils and under 19: entrance free
First Sunday of every month: entrance free
- Guided tours:** Sundays, 11 and 16
Group bookings: Tel. (+43 1) 505 8747- 85180
or email: service@wienmuseum.at
- Information:** Tel (+43 1) 505 87 47-0, www.wienmuseum.at;
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- Curators:** Philipp Blom, Eva-Maria Orosz
- Academic consultant:** Walter Sauer
- Production:** Isabelle Exinger
- Architectural design:** Luigi Blau with Fartak Khatibi
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