

Vienna, September 2019

## **NEIDHART FESTSAAL**

### **Wall Paintings from the Middle Ages**

**Press conference:** Wednesday, 16 October 2019, 10 a.m.  
**Opening:** Wednesday, 16 October 2019, 6.30 p.m.  
**Exhibition venue:** Neidhart Festsaal, Tuchlauben 19, 1010 Vienna  
**Opening hours:** Tuesday to Sunday and public holidays, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.  
and 2 p.m. to 6 p.m.  
**Press photos:** [www.wienmuseum.at/de/presse](http://www.wienmuseum.at/de/presse)

The Neidhart Festsaal is a very special place in Vienna. Its spectacular wall paintings from the early 15th century are the oldest secular interior decorations still extant in the city. The 15-metre-long mural, even more colourful than as it is now, was commissioned around 1400 by Michel Menschein, a well-to-do cloth merchant. The paintings depict scenes in seasonal sequence that illustrate stories in the tradition of the famous poet and court minstrel Neidhart (ca. 1180–1240). The building, which dates back to the 13th century, and its famous wall paintings offer fascinating glimpses of the life of a wealthy medieval family.

Discovered in the course of building renovation works in 1979, the Neidhart Festsaal was transformed into an exhibition space by Wien Museum and has undergone extensive renovation and refurbishment in 2019. The project has benefitted from the expertise of researchers from the fields of musicology, literature and building construction, as well as historians specializing in urban history and fashion. A new permanent exhibition has been designed around the vivid scenes on the walls, conceived for visitors of all ages and with a special focus on groups of schoolchildren. Audio-visual stations and other multimedia technology bring fascinating glimpses of medieval Vienna to our visitors, who are invited to learn about the history of the building and the wall paintings, as well as about the private and professional life of Michel Menschein, and to discover Neidhart, his songs and medieval music. On show are medieval cooking vessels and tableware, as well as pottery used for lighting and heating, including touchable objects for a palpable experience of life in the Middle Ages among both the wealthy and the less well-to-do. Whether you wish to immerse yourself in 15th-century history, enjoy the wall paintings and the stories they tell about feasts, conflicts and pranks, or simply take in this unique room, sharing the pleasure experienced by guests visiting it 600 years ago – a visit to the Neidhart Festsaal is a unique opportunity to get in touch with medieval Vienna.

## **The building at Tuchlauben 19 and Michel Menschein's textile empire**

Today designated the "Neidhart House", the building at the address Tuchlauben 19 looks back on a long history beginning in the early 13th century. Located in the centre of Vienna, the highly-prized property has undergone significant changes over time. It is firmly linked to the history of the city of Vienna through its owners, several of whom held high positions in the city government and were influential in its administration. One of them was Michel Menschein, a wealthy cloth merchant, who bought the property more than 600 years ago. Menschein is believed to have been born in the Mürz valley in northeastern Styria. Historical records first place him in Vienna in 1376. He appears to have made a rapid career in business, rising to the ranks of the city elite and becoming a highly influential member of the city council. His social status was that of a *Laubenherr*, the designation for cloth merchants of the highest social rank. *Laubenherrn* had the exclusive privilege of being able to buy bales of fabric from wholesalers and cut them up for resale – a line of business that required substantial capital.

Menschein already owned a number of properties on and around the street called Tuchlauben, Vienna's centre of textile trading in the Middle Ages. The cloth trade was one of the most profitable areas of business at the time, and the splendour of the residential buildings along Tuchlauben reflected the wealth of their owners. The house at number 19 was designed as a summer residence and also served representational functions. The winter residence of the Menschein household was located just opposite, at number 20. When Michel Menschein bought the property at no. 19, the building was derelict and uninhabited. He had it renovated, and it was probably in the course of these works that he had the banquet hall decorated in the latest fashion of the time – with a series of splendid wall paintings depicting motifs from popular songs of the time: pranks and other humorous stories involving the poet and singer Neidhart and his enmity against the *Dörper*, the peasants or village people. The songs were well-known and often sung, as well as presented in scenic performances. It is easy to imagine how the pictures served as conversational ice-breakers, enhancing the festive and carefree mood of banquets, dances and musical performances.

Financial problems caused Menschein to sell a number of his properties in 1415, but he kept the "summer house" at Tuchlauben 19, which was subsequently inherited by his son Peter. Peter's children Jörg and Barbara (who became a nun and lived at the Sankt Laurenz monastery) were next in line. They decided to sell the house in 1424. In the mid-15th century, the property changed hands several times. All its owners were members of the city council and cloth merchants with the social status of *Laubenherrn*. From the middle of the 16th century onwards, the property was owned by high-ranking public servants and dignitaries of the city of Vienna who were no longer associated with the textile trade. Ownership again changed several times in rapid succession in the 19th century, and in

1934, the building was bought by a family called Klapholz. The family was dispossessed by the Nazi regime in 1938. They regained control of the property in 1947, and in 1969 Emilie Klapholz became its sole owner.

### **The wall paintings in the Neidhart Festsaal – a rare artistic and historical treasure**

The late medieval wall paintings in the building at Tuchlauben 19 are an extraordinary artistic and historical treasure. They constitute the oldest contiguous ensemble of pictorial interior decorations in a private residence in Vienna which we know. By a very lucky coincidence, the paintings were discovered when apartments in the building were renovated in 1979, and they are now accessible to the public in a museum space. The mural was painted in secco technique and originally covered all the wall space in the room. As the walls were repeatedly painted over in subsequent centuries, the original pictures were eventually covered by several layers of paint. In 1979, a team of art restorers succeeded in removing these on a wall section about 15 metres long, bringing to light the original medieval scenes. With the support of the City of Vienna, Wien Museum subsequently acquired the room and opened it to the public as a museum space.

The building and the banquet hall have undergone significant remodelling and rebuilding over time. But despite the damage which the 15-metre-long series of pictures have suffered since around 1400, large portions of the mural have been preserved to this day. In vibrant pictorial language, the paintings tell us a great deal about the musical and representational traditions of the late Middle Ages. They depict scenes from the songs of the poet-composer Neidhart (ca. 1180–1240) and amusing stories created about a hundred years later by Neidhart Fuchs, who took up themes from the earlier Neidhart's songs. They are about love and feasts, but also about the sometimes difficult relations between different classes in socially turbulent times. The great popularity of these themes lasted for nearly 300 years and was not limited to Vienna, evidence of which is found in similar wall paintings in Zurich, Prague and at Runkelstein Castle in South Tyrol, Italy.

### **Neidhart – a medieval singer-songwriter and his influence on posterity**

We do not have any detailed information on the life of the poet-composer Neidhart (ca. 1180–1240). It is only through veiled hints in his songs and references in other works of literature that we can draw some inferences about Neidhart as a person. This lack of personal information is not unusual for the Middle Ages. Based on analyses of his own texts and those of other poets who were his contemporaries, we believe that he created his works in the period from roughly 1210/20 to about 1240/45. Neidhart is the best-documented Middle High German poet by number of stanzas and of larger collections extant. More extensive records exist only for Walther von der Vogelweide.

Neidhart lived at a time when the *minnesang*, the tradition of courtly love poetry set to music, was at its height. It first developed with the troubadours at the courts of Occitania in what is now southern France, and quickly spread all over Europe. Neidhart was a *minnesinger*, but also added new themes to the genre, including elements of hearty humour. The targets of his ridicule were the *Dörper*, peasants or village people, whom he satirized as coarse and ill-bred. In this, his poetry differs from the traditional “high” minnesang, although it, too, was addressed to the court and the nobility, not to the commoners he was making fun of.

Neidhart’s lyrics were sung, often to an instrumental accompaniment, but little is known about the music to which the texts were recited. Only a few tunes have survived from the heyday of the minnesang around 1200. The oldest tunes associated with Neidhart songs have come to us from the late 13th century, but the majority are dated to the 15th century.

In the early 14th century, a certain “Neidhart Fuchs” is believed to have continued the tradition of the earlier poet-composer, singing “Neidhart songs” and adding his own creations. “Neidhart Fuchs” is thought to have been associated with the court in Vienna, but his existence has been subject to some controversy, as we only know about him from literary sources dated much later, to the 15th and 16th centuries. His supposed grave is located just outside St. Stephen’s Cathedral, next to the southwest exterior wall.

Theatrical performances of the stories, so-called “Neidhart plays”, started to become popular in the mid-14th century. They were also known as “Neidhart dances”, as they often contained dancing scenes with musical accompaniment. Similar to modern stage plays, they were secular counterparts to the popular religious plays (such as Christmas and Easter plays). Most of the performances were given in spring, presumably with the involvement of many lay performers and often outdoors.

What is special about Neidhart’s songs is that they were performed for a courtly audience, but the scenes they describe were set in villages, their protagonists peasants. This is a shift away from the tradition of classical minnesang, in which a knight is courting a noblewoman (*vrouwe*) who always has a higher social status than he. Mixing court ambiance and village scenes was something novel at the time and may have been the reason for the enduring appeal of Neidhart’s poetry well into the late Middle Ages.

<b>Admission:</b>	<p>Adults € 5 / reduced rate € 4</p> <p><i>(senior citizens, disabled persons, Vienna Card and Ö1 Club Card holders, students up to 27 years of age, apprentices, conscripts in military/civil social service, groups of ten or more persons)</i></p> <p>Free admission for school pupils and students under 19 years of age; free admission for all visitors on the first Sunday of each month.</p>
<b>Visitor information:</b>	<p>+43 1 5058747-85173,  <a href="mailto:service@wienmuseum.at">service@wienmuseum.at</a>, <a href="http://www.wienmuseum.at">www.wienmuseum.at</a></p>
<b>Curators:</b>	<p>Michaela Kronberger, Nathaniel Prottas</p>
<b>Exhibition design:</b>	<p>Robert Ruff</p>
<b>Graphic art:</b>	<p>Larissa Cerny</p>
<b>Exhibition production:</b>	<p>Heimo Watzlik</p>
<b>Main sponsor:</b>	<p>Wiener Stadtwerke</p>
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