

The Earliest German Medal?

*Peter Vischer der Ältere's
Memorial Medaille to his first wife Margaretha*

by Michael Riddick



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Presently, the earliest known medals in Germany date to the first decade of the 16th century, originating in the Nuremberg brass workshop of the Vischer family.¹ The earliest of these is a two-sided medal dated 1507 featuring a portrait of Hermann Vischer the Younger (Fig. 02), the oldest son of the esteemed Peter Vischer the Elder. A more mature uniface portrait medal of Hermann, dated 1511, is of similar scale (Fig. 05, left).²

In-between these is a much refined, larger scale,³ uniface portrait medal of Peter Vischer the

Younger, dated 1509 (Fig. 01). The quality, facture and form of all three medals are notably diverse with the exception of the shared scale of the two medals of Hermann. The singular parallel among them is their scarcity with only two examples of the 1507 medal known⁴ and one each of the 1509⁵ and 1511⁶ medals known. Their rarity and diversity point to the early experimental origins of the medal in Germany, just prior to the almost sudden proliferation of medallic art by Hans Schwarz in Augsburg during the 1510s.

The medals have most commonly been attributed to Peter Vischer the Younger although Hermann the Younger has, at-times, been considered the author of his own portrait medals.⁷ The self-portrait of Peter the Younger, who “excelled his father and brother in art,”⁸ and whose confident effigy demonstrates a talented hand, is unanimously accepted as a self-portrait and is his earliest known secure work. Its larger scale, higher relief and balanced composition suggest it is the first German medal clearly informed by the influence of Italian medals.⁹ The advent of the portrait medal in Italy had already been a component of its artistic culture since the 1430s.¹⁰



Fig. 01: Self-portrait medal, Peter Vischer the Younger, 1509, brass (Cabinet des Medailles, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris)



Fig. 02: Self-portrait medal, here attributed to Hermann Vischer the Younger, 1507, brass (Cabinet des Medailles, Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris)

The earliest medal of Hermann, dated 1507, appears to imitate antique coinage with its left-facing bust, coin-like scale and classicized scene on the verso. Scholars have traditionally assumed this medal was also conceived by Peter Vischer the Younger, arguing that the disparity of talent shown between the 1507 and 1509 medals were the result of Italy's influence upon Peter the Younger who is thought to have possibly traveled there in 1508.¹¹ Georg Seeger first brought attention to a document mentioning a Peter Vischer of Nuremberg who is recorded travelling through Como, Milan, Genoa, Florence and Bologna selling copies of Hartmann Schedel's *World Chronicle*.¹² However, the idea that this is the same Peter Vischer the Younger remains controversial.¹³ Regardless, the stylistic disparity between the two medals is dissimilar enough to posit two separate hands at work rather than the hastened progression of a single artist.¹⁴

Despite the scholarly disputes concerning Peter the Younger's visit to Italy in 1508 the idea of a sojourn there is not without merit considering he would have been of age to embark on his *Wanderjahre*, a rite-of-passage

traditionally expected of guild members after their apprenticeship and typically occurring around the age of 19 or 20. Although selling books was not his trade, Peter the Younger may have adopted such a task to finance his journey and to use the opportunity as a means to enrich his humanistic sentiments in the company of learned scholars. The 1509 self-portrait medal would have been a way to commemorate his return from such a journey. Additionally, Ulrich Pfisterer notes the commission for the brass Monument of St. Sebaldus underway in his father's foundry may have also inspired Peter to make the medal as a marketing device to demonstrate his ability and secure further commissions alongside his expected participation in the prestigious project whose initial designs were already in-progress between 1507-09.¹⁵

A similar idea may relate to the earlier 1507 medal of Hermann (Fig. 02). Its reverse probably represents the *Pillars of Hercules*.¹⁶ Hercules is thought to have raised the pillars as a monument to himself which, if Hermann was the medal's author, would have been a self-commemorative expression inspired by humanist themes permeating Nuremberg at-the-time. Hercules' raising of the pillars opened the Atlantic to the Mediterranean which could imply a sojourn to Italy and could likewise portend the arrival of Italianate themes into the Vischer family workshop. In this regard, Hermann is Hercules,¹⁷ opening Germany to the ideals of Italy, a practice already engendered by others of his home city taking interest in the Italian Renaissance. If this interpretation of the medal's verso is accurate, the medal may commemorate Hermann's return

from his *Wanderjahre* at the age of twenty, being also an impetus for the subsequent creation of his younger brother's self-portrait medal two years later, following in his elder brother's footsteps. One can imagine Hermann's pondering of the Herculean labors, a subject later chronicled by their family friend and fellow humanist, Pankraz Schwenter, whose manuscript, *Histori Herculis*, included illustrations by Peter the Younger.¹⁸

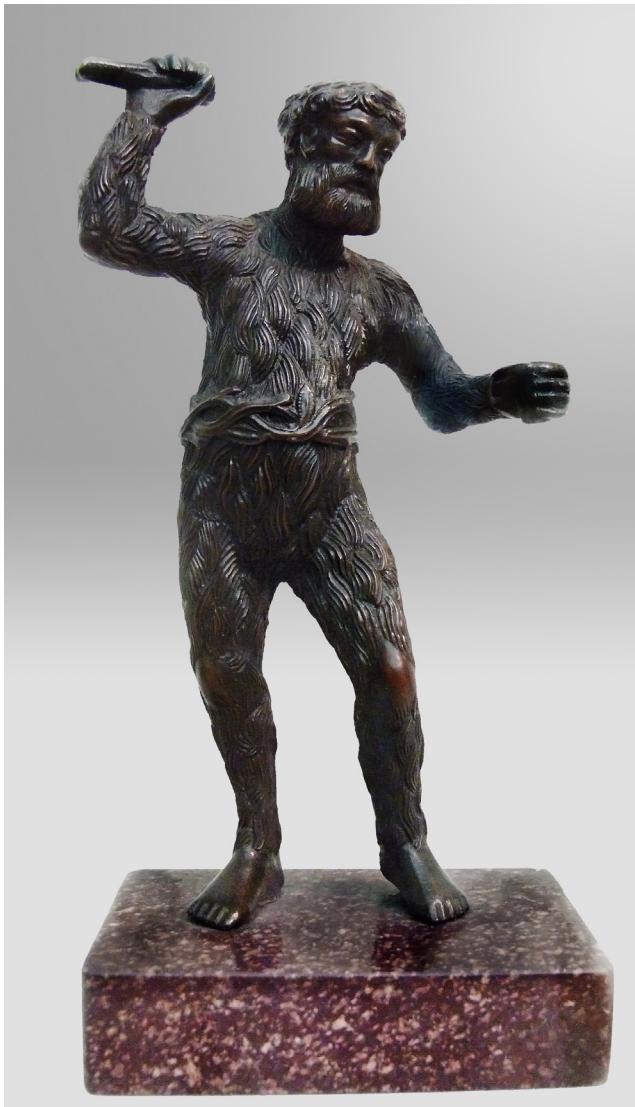


Fig. 03: *Wild Man*, Vischer family workshop (Hermann Vischer the Younger?), ca. 1510-15, brass (Bode Museum, Inv. 8403)

Although Hermann's *Wanderjahre* is untraced, he is documented as paying his own way to Italy after the premature death of his wife in November 1513, visiting Rome and returning with sketches for use in the family workshop. Such a journey may theoretically have been a reprise of his *Wanderjahre*, including the idea of financing his own travel as his younger brother may have evidently been required to do.

The portrait of Hermann in 1507 and that of Peter the Younger in 1509 remain notably distinct. The typeface used on the legend of Hermann's 1507 medal recalls the hand of a woodcutter still influenced by Gothic letter-types while the incised lines used to delineate tufts of hair also suggest a wood or stone model were used whereas Peter the Younger's 1509 medal appears conceived in wax, cast using the lost wax technique, a knowledge for which was possibly inherited by a visit to Italy.¹⁹

The crowded composition of Hermann's 1507 medal and its naively conceived bust make it difficult to attribute to any specific family member. Particularly, Hermann's style remains indistinguishable from the productions of the overall Vischer workshop, though it would be logical for Hermann to conceive his own portrait medal rather than his younger brother as is often forwarded. There is, however, a stylistic parallel between the awkward modeling of Hermann's hair and that of one of two versions of a cast brass *Wild Man* statuette attributed to the Vischer workshop (Fig. 03).²⁰ Whereas the majority of examples of this statuette represent hair partitioned in rigid diamond-like tufts with eloquently s-curved striations delineating hair, the unique Berlin



Fig. 04: detail of the 1507 self-portrait medal of Hermann Vischer the Younger (left); detail of a Wild Man, Vischer family workshop, ca. 1510-15 (right)



Fig. 05: Self-portrait medal, here attributed to Hermann Vischer the Younger, 1511, brass (Münzkabinett, Berlin) (left); detail of the *Temptation of Adam and Eve* by Ludwig Krug, 1514, solnhofen stone (Staatliche Museen Preussischer, Berlin-Dahlem)

example of the *Wild Man* is freer in its patterning of hair, articulated instead with thickly carved striations rendered in an arched pattern (Fig. 04).

Given a four-year duration, the later 1511 portrait medal of Hermann shows a progression in skill from the 1507 self-portrait. It features a similar low-relief design and a more eloquent use of space. Its legend is inspired by Venetian letter-types rather than the Roman type, simulating Classical antiquity, preferred on Peter's medal.

This Venetian influence could have been inspired by the affluent economic commerce between Nuremberg and Venice, allowing for the spread of Venetian medals, books or typefaces into Nuremberg. Italian medals were certainly known in nearby Augsburg at an early date, evident in a letter to the Augsburg *Bürgermeister*, Sigismund Gossembrot, from his son who mentions sending lead casts of medals depicting his Paduan university professors while attending school there in 1459.²¹

The fineness of Hermann's rendered hair on the later 1511 medal, along with his protruding neck and taciturn expression, recall a possible influence from Ludwig Krug's compositions (Fig. 05). Krug's reliefs depicting the *Temptation of Adam and Eve* were not only independently conceived works-of-art, but could also be used for casting copies in metal like one example in Cleveland.²² William Wixom notes how Krug's compositions reflect a working knowledge of Peter Vischer the Younger's designs, indicating the two sculptors were both aware of one another's works, and by import, would suggest Hermann's equal awareness of Krug's manner. It could be speculated that Krug may have depended on the Vischer foundry to reproduce his models in brass, and being close-in-age to the Vischer sons, may also have inspired Hermann's nude character on the verso of his 1507 medal which hints at Krug's "Northern Gothic naturalism" fused with "an Italian-inspired interest in the nude as an object of intrinsic beauty," as elucidated by Wixom.²³



Fig. 06: Verso of a tetradrachm of Philip II of Macedon, 359-336 BC (Morton & Eden sale, 24 October 2018, lot 325) (left); verso of a medal of Margaretha Vischer, here attributed to Peter Vischer the Elder, 1490, brass (right)

Of note is an unpublished and unique medal of alike scale as the 1507 and 1511 medals of Hermann (Fig. 08).²⁴ The medal memorializes a woman whose portrait faces left. The casting of the medal's reverse is flawed but appears to imitate a popular motif found on a tetradrachm of Philip II of Macedon (359-336 BC) later copied extensively on Celtic coins (Fig. 06).²⁵ Although superficial, a similar motif appears along the left margin of a sketch of *Peter of Aragon at the bedside of Lisa* by Peter Vischer the Younger.²⁶

The woman depicted on the obverse of the medal wears a bonnet following the fashion of Nuremberg dress during the late 15th century, comparable with depictions of Nuremberg women in house dress by Albrecht Dürer, from 1495-1501 (Fig. 07).

The medal has several qualifications that suggest it is the product of the Vischer foundry. Its dating corresponds to the earliest known medals produced in Germany and the feature of



Fig. 07: detail of *A Lady from Nuremberg*, Albrecht Dürer, ca. 1495 (Städel Museum, Inv. Inv 696 Z) (left); detail of the obverse of a medal of Margaretha Vischer, 1490 (center); detail of *Nuremberg woman in house dress*, Albrecht Dürer, ca. 1500-01 (Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan) (right)

a woman in German attire reasonably confines it to Nuremberg. The medal particularly relates to Hermann's 1507 medal in terms of scale and imitation of antique coinage. The medal probably derives from a stone or wood model and it is equally as scarce as the other Vischer medals, known by only a singular example descending from the important collection of medals and coins assembled in the first half of the 19th century by Leopold Welzl von Wellenheim in Vienna, Austria.²⁷

The date of the present medal suggests an authorship by Peter Vischer the Elder, as the three children later active in his workshop were toddlers in 1490 and the medal most likely reproduces their mother and Peter the Elder's first wife: Margaretha (Fig. 08).

The medal's legend reads: MA.F.VIXIT.AN.XXXIII. OBIT.1490.17.IN. indicating Margaretha Fischer lived 33 years and died in 1490 on the 17th of January or June.²⁸ It is uncertain whether the "IN"



Fig. 08: obverse of a medal of Margaretha Vischer, here attributed to Peter Vischer the Elder, 1490, brass

refers to January or June. Additionally, Fischer was a common alternate spelling for Vischer.

Interestingly, Seeger places Margaretha's death in 1490-91.²⁹ Peter the Elder would have been about 35 at the time of Margaretha's passing, and as the medal indicates, she was 33.³⁰

Margaretha died sometime after the birth of their third son, Johann (also called Hans der Giesser),³¹ who is thought to have been born in 1488-89 and probably named after Margaretha's father, Hans Gross.³² Peter Vischer the Elder is again married by 1493 to Dorothea von Gericht.³³

It is believed Peter Vischer the Elder was wed to Margaretha around 1485. A document dated 4 October 1490, written by Hans, is the only indication we have of Margaretha's personality, which appears more practically inclined rather than absorbed in material goods. In the document her father recalls his wedding day gift to her of

a green mantle and veil which he requests of Peter the Elder, before all those present at the wedding, that Peter ensures she refrains from selling or trading them after the wedding.³⁴ Although publications do not list the source of this document, it evidently records a memory of Hans written several months after Margaretha's death and perhaps in regard to her posthumous belongings or as a charming reminiscence.³⁵

Like the other early Vischer medals, the present one has features distinguishing it from the others and remains indicative of an early experimentation with the medal in Germany. The most notable distinction is the manner in which Margaretha's bust, small-in-scale, floats in the center of the medal. Its letter-type, however, recalls that of Hermann's 1507 medal. It's possible Hermann, witting of his father's medal, may have used it as inspiration for his own self-portrait medal with its left-facing effigy, scale and classically-inspired verso. However, in observation of the unusually small bust of his mother, Hermann may have overcompensated the scale of his own self-portrait, resulting in its unusually crowded composition.

The scale of Margaretha's bust may particularly compare with one other later medal associated with the Vischer workshop and inspired by antique coinage. Its scale is smaller, at 2.1 cm, though features a left-facing bust of Sebald Rech with an image of his Rechenberg estate on the verso, datable about 1525.³⁶ While the scale of this medal is quite smaller, its bust is of equivalent

scale and modeled depth as Margaretha's bust. The medal of Rech is ascribed to Peter the Younger though could still reasonably be the work of Peter the Elder, as he and his sons were active that year with the Epitaph for Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg.



Fig. 09: Epitaph for Gottgard Wiggerinck in Marienkirche Lübeck, Vischer workshop, 1518

Though later than the medal for Margaretha, the bronze epitaph Peter and his sons completed for Godart Wigerinck in 1518 at the Marienkirche in Lübeck features similar legends on three of the four corner medallions memorializing the Wigerinck family (Fig. 09). Related to both Hermann's 1507 medal and Margaretha's medal are the choice enumeration of dates in Roman numerals, the shortened Latin *Obitus* rendered as OBIT and the feature of the complete date-of-death, inclusive of day and month.

Johann Neudörffer notes how Vischer would work in his foundry daily³⁷ and Cecil Headlam's monograph on Vischer comments that his "grief [was] made bearable perhaps by his absorbing enthusiasm for his work."³⁸ The preparation and casting of a medal in memory of his first wife would have been suitable means to cope with his loss and memorialize her.

If the present analysis is correct, the memorial medal of Margaretha would be the earliest medal conceived in Germany and one of the earliest potentially secure works by Peter Vischer the Elder, heralded as the most important metal worker in Germany³⁹ and responsible for his role in helping direct the sculptural milieu of Nuremberg, and Germany at-large, out of its Gothic origins and into the burgeoning Renaissance.

Endnotes

- 1 Hermann Maué (1986): The Development of Renaissance Portrait Medals in Germany. *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg 1300-1550*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, pp. 105-07.
- 2 The 1507 portrait medal of Hermann Vischer the Younger is 3.1 cm and the 1511 medal of Hermann is 3.3 cm.
- 3 The 1509 portrait medal of Peter Vischer is 4.3 cm.
- 4 Basel Historical Museum and the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris (Cabinet des Medailles).
- 5 Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris (Cabinet des Medailles).
- 6 Münzkabinett, Berlin.
- 7 For various arguments concerning the authorship of the medals see Georg Seeger (1897): *Peter Vischer der jüngere: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Erzgiesserfamilie Vischer*. E.A. Seemann, Leipzig, pp. 6-13, 142; Georg Habich (1929): *Die deutschen Schaumünzen des XVI. Jahrhunderts*, Volumes 1-2. F. Bruckmann, vol. 1, nos.1-3, p. 3; Max Bernhart (1936): *Kunst und Künstler der Nürnberger Schaumünze des 16. Jahrhunderts*. *Mitteilungen der Bayerischen Numismatischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 54, nos. 67, 70, pp. 1-61; Klaus Pechstein (1962): *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Vischerhütte in Nürnberg*. Ph.D. dissertation, Berlin, pp. 75-80; Heinz Stafski (1962): *Der Jüngere Peter Vischer*, Nuremberg, pp. 37-38; H. Maué (1986): *op. cit.* (note 1), nos. 187-88, p. 387; and Ulrich Pfisterer (2013): *Wettstreit in Erz, Portratmedaillen der Deutschen Renaissance*, Deutscher Kunstverlag, no. 59, pp. 154-55.
- 8 Kunz Rösner. MS. 933 b (Chronicles of Nuremberg). Nuremberg Library.
- 9 It is worth interjecting here the larger 7.2 cm medal of Johannes Stabius, reasonably attributed to Peter Vischer the Younger, which shows an adept skill in modeling (in this case, probably after a design provided by Albrecht Dürer). The medal uses type punches to render its legend which are the same used also on Peter Vischer the Younger's plaquette relief of *Orpheus Redeeming Eurydice*.
- 10 The earliest portrait medals in Italy have their genesis with Antonio di Pietro Averlino (called Filarete) and Antonio di Puccio Pisano (called Pisanello).
- 11 Fedja Anzelewsky (1987): *Apologia Poetarum. Die Schwenter-Handschrift Ms. Lat. Fol. 335 der Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz zu Berlin mit den Illustrationen Peter Vischers d.J.* Wiesbaden.
- 12 G. Seeger (1897): *op. cit.* (note 7).
- 13 See for example Peter Zahn (1991): Die Endabrechnung über dem Druck der Schedelschen Weltchronik (1493) vom. 22 Juni 1509. Text und Analyse'. *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch*, 66, pp. 177-213.
- 14 This is the opinion of the present author and also most recently opined by U. Pfisterer (2013): *op. cit.* (note 7).
- 15 U. Pfisterer (2013): *op. cit.* (note 7).
- 16 First suggested by G. Habich (1929): *op. cit.* (note 7). With thanks to Tom Eden for the independent suggestion concerning the reverse of this medal and for pointing out Habich's reference (private communication, May 2020).
- 17 It's worth noting the figure of on the medal's verso suggests that same individual as featured on the obverse portrait. The character of Hermann-Hercules also wears shoes consistent with Nuremberg fashion of the period.
- 18 Schwenter, for example, dedicates the manuscript to his "honorable" friends, Hermann, Peter and Johann, the first three children of Peter Vischer the Elder. See Dieter Wuttke (1964): Die Histori Herculis des Nürnberger Humanisten und Freundes der Gebrüder Vischer, Pangratz Bernhaubt gen. Schwenter. *Materialien zur Erforschung des deutschen Humanismus um 1500*. Cologne and Graz.
- 19 H. Maué (1986): *op. cit.* (note 1), nos. 187-88, p. 387.
- 20 Ernst Bange considered this example of the *Wild Man* to be the work of Peter the Elder's fifth and youngest son, Paulus Vischer, an attribution still in-use in association with other known models or casts of the figure. However, William Wixom countered this idea with an earlier dating, ca. 1510-15, and a generalized attribution to the Vischer workshop. See Ernst Bange (1949): *Die deutschen Bronzestatuetten des 16. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin, pp. 30, 121 and William Wixom (1986): *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg 1300-1550*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, no. 191, pp. 392-93.
- 21 H. Maué (1986): *op. cit.* (note 1), pp. 105-07.
- 22 Christian Theuerkauff (1975): German Small Sculpture of the Renaissance. *Apollo*, Dec. 1975, 102, pp. 432-39. For the example in Cleveland, see Cleveland Museum of Art Inv. 1948.359.
- 23 William Wixom (1986): *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg 1300-1550*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, nos. 204-05, pp. 408-09.
- 24 The medal of Margaretha is 3.2 cm.
- 25 With thanks to Tom Eden for identifying the possible subject of the reverse (private communication May 2020).
- 26 Städel Museum Inv. 15293.
- 27 *Verzeichniss der Münz und Medaillen-Sammlung des Leopold Welzl von Wellenheim: nebst einem Verzeichnisse von werthvollen numismatischen, archäologischen und anderen Büchern*. 7 January 1846, Wein. Vol. 2, p. 770, Lot 15164.
- 28 With thanks to Ulrich Pfisterer and Delia Scheffer for their feedback concerning the translation of the medal's legend. Thanks also to Alison Luchs for additional feedback. (private communication, May 2020).
- 29 G. Seeger (1897): *op. cit.* (note 7).
- 30 Peter Vischer the Elder's day and year of birth is unknown but he is thought to have been born in 1455 since Johann Neudörffer mentions he was the same age as his contemporary and friend, Adam Kraft.

Endnotes

- 31 Georg Seeger noted Johann was likely named after his maternal grandfather, Hans Gross, probably born between 1488-90. See G. Seeger (1897): *op. cit.* (note 7).
- 32 G. Seeger (1897): *op. cit.* (note 7).
- 33 Peter Vischer the Elder and his second wife, Dorothea von Gericht, had a daughter they also named Margaretha. It is uncertain if she was named in memory of Peter's first wife. It's possible Dorothea could have been a close friend or relative of Margaretha (the later was posited by Seeger). Coincidentally, Peter the Elder's third wife was also named Margaretha.
- 34 Cicil Headlam (1901): *Peter Vischer*. London, p. 16. The document of 4 October 1490 led early scholars of Peter Vischer to presume he had wed Margaretha in 1489, however, Georg Seeger corrected this misunderstanding through his clear reference to Peter the Younger's medal of 1509 securing Peter's year of birth in 1487. See G. Seeger (1897): *op. cit.* (note 7).
- 35 If the document of 1490 is directed to Peter it is perhaps a reminder that he refrains from selling the treasures Hans gifted to his daughter.
- 36 Only five lead casts of this medal are known. See also G. Habich (1929): *op. cit.* (note 7), I, II, p. XLV, fig. 37.
- 37 Johann Neudörfer (1547): *Nachrichten von den vornehmsten Künstlern und Werkleuten so innerhalb hundert Jahren in Nürnberg gelebt haben 1546 nebst der Fortsetzung von Andreas Gulden 1660*. Abgedruckt nach einer alten Handschrift in der Campeschen Sammlung. Ed. G.W.K. Lochner (1875), Wien, p. 21.
- 38 C. Headlam (1901): *op. cit.* (note 34).
- 39 Wilhelm Lübke, for example, praises Peter the Elder as "one of the great masters of German art." See Wilhelm Lübke (1872): *History of Sculpture, From the Earliest Ages to the Present Time*. Smith, Elder & Co., London, vol. 2, p. 298.