



The identity of Nuremberg's  
**Gänsemännchenbrunnen**  
(Geese-man Fountain)

*by Michael Riddick*



# The identity of Nuremberg's Gänsemännchenbrunnen (Geeseman Fountain)



Fig. 01: *Gänsemännchenbrunnen (The Geeseman Fountain)* depicting Philip Melanchthon, anonymous (presumed cast by Pankraz Labenwolf), ca. 1526, Nuremberg

Nuremberg's most famous city fountain is the Renaissance era *Gänsemännchenbrunnen* (The Geeseman Fountain) cast in brass (Fig. 01). The modest fountain features a man carrying two plump geese, hence earning its famous title. The fountain is presently located at Rathausplatz, since 1945, but was originally in the Gänsemarkt (Goose market), at the southern end of the fruit market behind Frauenkirche. The figure has often been mistaken as a peasant or farmer, owing to its popular appeal, however, he is dressed in the fine period attire of an affluent Renaissance citizen.

The figure's meaning, purpose and subject have remained mysterious for centuries although the fountain's facture has traditionally been associated with the brass caster Pankraz Labenwolf, an apprentice of the Vischer family of Nuremberg brass casters, who had established his own workshop by 1523 and foundry by 1537.<sup>1</sup>

No documents are known regarding the purpose, subject or commission for the fountain. Modern local customs believe the Geeseman was a farmer from the garlic country of Northern Nuremberg who sought to sell his geese at the market, but sensing their fate they began to cry-out, inspiring



Fig. 02: Staff of the Pierpont Morgan Library, NY, handling the Gradual (*Das Gänsebuch*) of St. Lorenzkirche, Nuremberg, 1507, 1510

the farmer to have a change-of-heart and return home with his adopted pets.<sup>2</sup> The sculpture is confirmed to have lost its meaning and context by the end of the 18th century when Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who admired the sculpture, requested a terracotta cast of it from Thomas Seebeck, referring to it in a letter as the *Entenmann* or “duckman.”<sup>3</sup>

A project in bronze in the early-to-mid 16th century was no small feat or trivial expense. Rather, its important commission likely had a glorifying, memorializing, religious or political function or combination thereof. The sculpture’s unusual iconography and subject can be explained by certain events unfolding in Nuremberg during the advent of the Reformation and the city’s metamorphosis in the shifting tide of religious and social reorganization.

The figure represents Philip Melanchthon, collaborator of Martin Luther and intellectual leader for Luther’s reformist principles. When

Nuremberg adopted Protestantism in 1525 there was a sudden interruption in Nuremberg’s educational system which had formerly depended upon the church and its resources to educate its citizens. Anticipating such a problem, Martin Luther, in 1524, delivered an appeal to German cities to “establish and maintain Christian schools.”<sup>4</sup> The Nuremberg councilmen took subsequent action to attract Philip Melanchthon to their city to help initiate and direct their first city-run school. Although invited, Melanchthon did not opt to fill a position as director, but arrived in November of 1524 enthusiastically recruiting and organizing the city’s educational program. In address to the city’s leadership, Melanchthon inaugurated Nuremberg’s first academy at St. Egidien on 23 May 1526.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps on this occasion, or soon thereafter, that the *Gänsemännchenbrunnen* was erected in honor of Melanchthon’s achievement.

The fountain was placed in the city’s market square, a seven-minute walk from the academy.





Fig. 03: Detail of the lower margin for the Feast Day of the Ascension in the Gradual (*Das Gänsebuch*) of St. Lorenzkirche, Nuremberg, 1507 (Pierpont Morgan Library, NY)



Fig. 04: Portrait of Philip Melancthon by Albrecht Dürer, 1526 (Royal Trust Collection, UK)

This was probably a strategic and symbolic move for the city council's members. It publicly displayed a success they helped provision for its citizens while symbolizing a newfound freedom from the church. It also placed an icon of Lutheran principles right in the city market where social gatherings had previously occurred for ritual feast days under the old program of church traditions.

The geese also have relevance to this theme. In 1507 and 1510, two volumes comprising a new illuminated Gradual for liturgical functions at St. Lorenz were completed. These two volumes were an important commission of which the city council were aware, particularly because it served as a platform for independence, asserting Nuremberg's providence over the Bishop in Bamberg.<sup>6</sup>

On feast days these books would have been opened in the market square with the choir boys singing the appropriate songs in celebration. The newly commissioned Gradual were an imposing pair, measuring 654 x 445 mm each and making an impression upon those attending the feast day celebrations (Fig. 02). Today the manuscripts reside in the Pierpont Morgan Library where they reign as the largest books in their collection!<sup>7</sup>

The inauguration of Nuremberg's new academy took place on or close-to the feast day of the Ascension. Interestingly, the page of the Gradual featuring the hymns for the feast day of the Ascension depict a group of geese representing choir boys along its lower margin (Fig. 03).<sup>8</sup> The Gradual was primarily used by clergymen and choir boys and it is quite likely the choir came to





Fig. 05: *Gänsemännchenbrunnen* (The Geeseman Fountain) depicting Philip Melanchthon, anonymous, ca. 1526, Nuremberg (left); portrait of Philip Melanchthon by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1537 (Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe; right)

see themselves as geese, as they were depicted in the Gradual. In our modern era these imposing books are affectionately referred to as *Das Gänsebuch*s (The Geese Books).

There is an additional theme that associates Melanchthon with the symbolism of geese. In German towns and cities, the cantor of the choir boys was also their school master or teacher. In the case of St. Lorenz, for example, the school was attached to its northern wing where various disciplines were taught.<sup>9</sup> The symbolism of the choir boys as geese must have entertained the young boys receiving instruction under the tutelage of their school master. After the

establishment of Nuremberg's academy, these young geese no longer required the church to guide their education but instead had the newfound support of Melanchthon's educational program. Thus, Melanchthon proudly carries his geese: the current and future students of Nuremberg. Further, the bulky two-volume Gradual of St. Lorenz was no longer carried into the market on feast days. In replacement, the figure of Melanchthon stood, carrying two large geese!

Evidence that the figure on the *Gänsemännchenbrunnen* portrays Melanchthon is confirmed by contemporary portraits of him.



Fig. 06: Portrait of Philip Melanchthon by Hans Holbein the Younger (Lower Saxony State Museum in Hanover; left); *Gänsemännchenbrunnen* (The Geeseman Fountain) depicting Philip Melanchthon, anonymous, ca. 1526, Nuremberg (right)

During Melanchthon's visits to Nuremberg in 1525-26, Dürer sketched a profile portrait of him which he translated in engraved form (Fig. 04). Although our statue wears a fashionable cap, the physical characteristics of Melanchthon's appearance correspond with his gaunt features, the trimmed length of his hair and the inclusion of a mustache and goatee. The hair along his lower jaw is also portrayed when observing the sculpture closely, realized in low-relief by a wispy tuft on each cheek. A portrait of Melanchthon by Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1537, adds further credence to the identity of the figure while Hans Holbein's portrait of Melanchthon reproduces the fashion preference displayed in the sculpture: a coat worn atop a descending open V-necked shirt (Figs. 05, 06).

While the subject of the *Gänsemännchenbrunnen* may be identified, its commissioner and sculptor remain a mystery. It's possible the fountain was commissioned collectively by various city council members though donors more commonly seem to have preferred direct patronage in edification of familial lines. Small fountains became a trend in Southern Germany during the 16th century and any of the wealthy families in the city would have obliged such a commission. Someone like Willibald Pirckheimer, whose home Melanchthon stayed at during his visits to Nuremberg, might be a reasonable candidate for such a commission.

While the sculpture has been judged 'anonymous' by art historians, Klaus Pechstein proposed an attribution to Hans Peisser,<sup>10</sup> although there is only minor stylistic substantiation for this idea when compared against this sculptor's signed and secure works and must therefore remain tenuous.

# Endnotes

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- 1 William Wixom (1986): *Gothic and Renaissance Art in Nuremberg 1300-1550*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, cat. no. 234, pp. 425-26.
- 2 English Tours in Nuremberg, 2018: [tourguide-kevin.com](http://tourguide-kevin.com) (accessed May 2020).
- 3 Jochen Klauss (2017): *Der Kunschtmeyer: Johann Heinrich Meyer: Freund und Orakel Goethes*. Springer-Verlag, pp. 315-17.
- 4 *Works of Martin Luther, Vol. 4*. Translated with introductions and notes. Digital Ages Library Collections, 1997, pp. 74-75.
- 5 Harry Vredevelde (2020): The Poetic Works of Helius Eobanus Hessus. *Volume 5: A Veritable Proteus, 1524-1528. The Renaissance Society of America, Vol. 15*, pp. 164-65.
- 6 Volker Schier and Corine Schleif (2002): St. Lorenz: Der Hallenchor und das Gänsebuch. *Verein zur Erhaltung der St. Lorenzkirche in Nürnberg*, 48, pp. 64-75.
- 7 Pierpont Morgan Library, NY, Inv. MS M.905.
- 8 *Gänsebuch*, Pierpont Morgan Library, NY, MS. M.905, see Bd. I, fol. 186r.
- 9 V. Schier and C. Schleif (2002): *op. cit.* (note 6).
- 10 Klaus Pechstein (1973): Der Bildschnitzer Hans Peisser. *Anzeiger des Germanischen Nationalmuseums*. Nuremberg, pp. 89-92, 94.