

IN THE SHADOW OF PERMOSE

by Michael Riddick



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A fruitwood corpus of anonymous authorship, intended for private devotion, exhibits the workmanship of a sculptor whose talents are emphatic of the wood and ivory carvers of South Germany and Austria during the late Baroque period.¹ Its rich detail and elaborate, exaggerated features suggest the hand of a talented and individual sculptor (cover; Figs. 01; 04, center).

The Italianate face of Christ, integrated with a corpus of distinct South German or Bavarian influence, recalls the immediate impact of Balthasar Permoser, who was born in Bavaria, trained in Vienna and was active as an assistant to Giovanni Battista Foggini in Italy, before serving

in Dresden under commission of Johann Georg III, Elector of Saxony. Permoser's fourteen years spent in Italy introduced new ideas to his German peers, elevating his status as one of the foremost sculptors of the region.²

While the corpus retains stylistic tendencies superficial to the late Baroque period, certain nuances distinguish it as the work of a unique sculptor. The closest figural and stylistic analogies to the corpus are observed in an example modeled by Johann Joachim Kändler for the Meissen porcelain factory in 1743 (Fig. 02). Period examples of the model survive as part of two impressive porcelain Crucifixion groups at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden (commissioned



Fig. 01: Pearwood corpus, Johann Joachim Kändler (?), probably ca. 1730 (private collection)

that year by the Dresden Court Hotel)³ and the Palace Church in Lauchhammer-West.

The corpus also shares analogies with another fruitwood corpus, twice-its-scale, attributed to a sculptor active in the circle of Permoser (Fig. 03).⁴ The masterful approach in articulating Christ's suffering on this additional corpus is adept while the management of the perizonium's drapery is forcefully unique and dramatic. Its maker is yet-to-be-identified although its hulking upper chest, situated atop a thinly cinched waist, with



Fig. 02: Porcelain corpus after a wood model by Johann Joachim Kändler, 1743, Meissen porcelain factory (Porzellansammlung, Dresden)

idiosyncratic brows delineated by angled strokes forming an arrow-like pattern, suggest a tentative regional relationship between the two wooden corpora. The advanced accomplishment of the larger corpus may suggest a work one or more decades ahead with its early Rococo tendencies. It is certainly a masterwork in the shadow of Permoser's influence.

Notably, Kändler is recognized as facilitating Permoser's influence into the later 18th century by way of his tutelage under Dresden's other

court sculptor, Johann Benjamin Thomae, who himself had been hired by Permoser to assist with the palatial decorations at Zwinger from 1712. By 1731, at the age of twenty-five, Kändler's talents procured him the appointment of court sculptor by Augustus II. Kändler immediately began producing models for the Meissen porcelain factory, of whom his teacher Thomae



Fig. 03: Wood corpus, anonymous sculptor in the ambit of Balthasar Permoser, ca. 1740-60 (private collection)

and Permoser alike, had enjoyed previous employment. Kändler quickly became the Meissen factory's model-master in 1733 and remained with the factory until his death in 1775.⁵

Kändler's work with Meissen made him famous in the courts of Europe for his clever, skilled compositions and is today considered the most important proponent in Europe's history of porcelain production.

While it would seem unlikely to consider such an arresting and brutal portrayal of Christ could come from a sculptor better known for his elaborate animals, cute dogs, and Rococo figurines of dancing harlequins and jovial figure-groups inspired by *Commedia dell'Arte*, Kändler's origins were in consort with others of his trade prior to the advent of widespread porcelain production in Europe. Particularly, as the son of a pastor, Kändler may have been keen to work in the decoration of religious institutions or on behalf of religious patrons who were the frequent commissioners of sculpture apart from nobility.

Although Kändler remained active with his work at Meissen he also completed other commissions outside the factory during his early career, noted by his only two signed artworks: an epitaph for Maria Rebekka Schlegel, made in 1736, and another for Alexander Miltitz, made in 1738.⁶⁷



Fig. 04: Stone figure of *Father Time* from the epitaph for Maria Rebekka Schlegel by Johann Joachim Kändler, 1736 (Meissen Stadtmuseum) (left); Pearwood corpus, Johann Joachim Kändler (?), probably ca. 1730 (private collection) (center); Porcelain figure of St. Andrew after a wood model by Johann Joachim Kändler, 1740, Meissen porcelain factory (Porzellansammlung, Dresden) (right)

Distinctive features link the present corpus with Kändler's Meissen corpus and with his figure of *Father Time* on the Schlegel epitaph (Fig. 04, left). The unusually thick, raised veins featured on Kändler's *Father Time* correspond with those featured on the corpus, as do the sharply incised wrinkles delineated along Christ's dehydrated kneecaps. The veins branch wildly and with a pulsing vitality and thickness uncharacteristic of the more subtle approach preferred by other regional sculptors-of-the-period whilst still drawing a potent influence from Permoser.

The spear-wound on Christ's side, shaped like eyelids spewing forth worm-like drops-of-blood, are distinct and uniform on the wood corpus and that observed on his Meissen corpus. Further analogies are noted in the arched rib cage forming a sharp upward point toward the sternum, flanked above by the sinuous tension of muscle pulled across the upper chest. The rib cage is likewise delineated by a series of arched bulbous muscles skirted by subtly raised obliques that rise toward the pit-of-the-arms. Although the waist is more emaciated, and the lower rib cage

more dramatically sunken on the wood corpus, the profile of both corpora are identical in their slender depiction of Christ.

A similar energy is also observed in the wind-swept perizonium of each corpus and with the management of their folds-and-flares while their boundary along the curve of the lower abdomen, just below the *arcuate line*, is a frequent feature observed in other works by Kändler. Further correspondences are observed in the features of Christ's face, with his straight nose, thin bridge, slightly agape mouth, bulbous eyes set deep in their sockets, suave curvature of the eyelids, distinct manner in which the ears are modeled and the style in which the hair is rendered. Particularly idiosyncratic is the single curl of hair, terminating frequently, and atypically, to the left.

The closed eyes and resigned expression of the wood corpus recall that observed on Kändler's figure of *St. Franz Xaverius* in the elaborate figure-group portraying the saint's death, probably made for the Queen of Poland, Maria Josepha, ca. 1738-40.⁸ A similar pathos in Christ's expression is also observed in Kändler's figure of *St. Francis*, made for an unidentified Roman client in late 1747.⁹ The anatomical features of the corpus are echoed in a quantity of Meissen figures produced by Kändler during the 1730s-40s, see for example, his figure of

the *Apostle Andrew* (Fig. 04, right).¹⁰ The corpus may also relate in subject-and-manner to some of the earliest models of saints he produced for the factory like those originally prepared for an altar set commissioned by Augustus III as a gift for Pope Clement XI's nephew, Cardinal Annibale Albani, in 1735.¹¹

In consideration of Kändler's possible authorship of the small wooden corpus, the dating of the aforementioned models, as well as Kändler's signed Schlegel epitaph of 1736, the corpus may likely date to the early 1730s or potentially the late 1720s. A particular distinction of the corpus is the presence of certain naïve qualities suggestive of an early work by the sculptor's hand. This includes the lack of veins running along the upper thighs or the overabundance of veins along the neck. The supremely narrow waist supporting a larger upper body is overexaggerated while the head seems out-of-proportion with the remainder of the sculpture. Additionally, the bridge of the nose is rendered slightly too thin, yet there is still a technical virtuosity revealing a promising talent in the sculpture's realization. It is reasonable to consider the corpus may have theoretically been made while Kändler was apprenticed to Thomae during his early 20's or perhaps in the first years of his appointment as court sculptor after 1731. Some features of the corpus may prefigure those

present on his 1736 figure of *Father Time* and his Meissen corpus of 1743, the latter of which, clearly displays an increased refinement that must have depended upon the execution of earlier efforts like the present corpus.

A second corpus, in ivory, at the National Gallery of Art, has a more elusive association with any specific artist although it is reasonably considered to be of German derivation from around the year 1700 (Fig. 05).¹² It is impressively wrought by a remarkably skilled master who successfully captures an exhilarating theatricality in his portrayal of Christ's sacrifice. A tenuous, though possible suggestion for its authorship might be found in the relatively obscure work of the Dresden sculptor, Johann Joachim Kretzschmar, whose small-scale wood *Calvary group* of a Turkish soldier in-battle with a European counterpart, shares a similar adventurous vitality (Fig. 06).¹³

It is thought that Kretzschmar may have been a pupil of Permoser's around 1690 and his avowed citizenship in Dresden in 1712 may link him, with reasonable possibility, as having joined Permoser's expanding workshop during his period of work at Zwinger. Certain works at Zwinger are attributed to Kretzschmar like a *Bacchanate with a tambourine* along the right-side of the crown gate, the fountain along the *Kronentor* pavilion, surmounted by a *Bacchanate*, and the *Spring*



Fig. 05: Ivory corpus, Johann Joachim Kretzschmar (?), possibly ca. 1725 (National Gallery of Art, DC)

nymphs flanking the rocky waterfall at the base of the *Nymphenbad*. Unfortunately, the originals, which have suffered from the elements, are in-storage while faithful replicas are on display,¹⁴ with exception of the fountain group which has undergone several restorations since its original creation around 1715. These sculptures may reflect some of the individuality of Kretzschmar but would have been realized under the guidance and direction of Permoser.



Fig. 06: Wood *Calvary group* by Johann Joachim Kretzschmar, ca. 1725-28 (Grüne Gewölbe, Dresden)

Kretzschmar became an official court sculptor in Dresden before 1728 and may have been appointed the title as early as 1725, the year in which his impressive small wooden *Calvary group* is believed to have been completed. The group was once accompanied by a pendant composition, whose whereabouts are unknown. They were both cited in the collection of Heinrich Graf von Brühl,

former Prime Minister of Poland, during the mid-18th century and were afterwards transferred to the Dresden Grüne Gewölbe, inventoried in the fireplace room in 1879 and there described as “by the famous Kretzschmer.”¹⁵ Apart from this work, his only securely documented project was the wood-carved pulpit for St. Wolfgang's church in Schneeberg between 1715-16, destroyed in WWII.

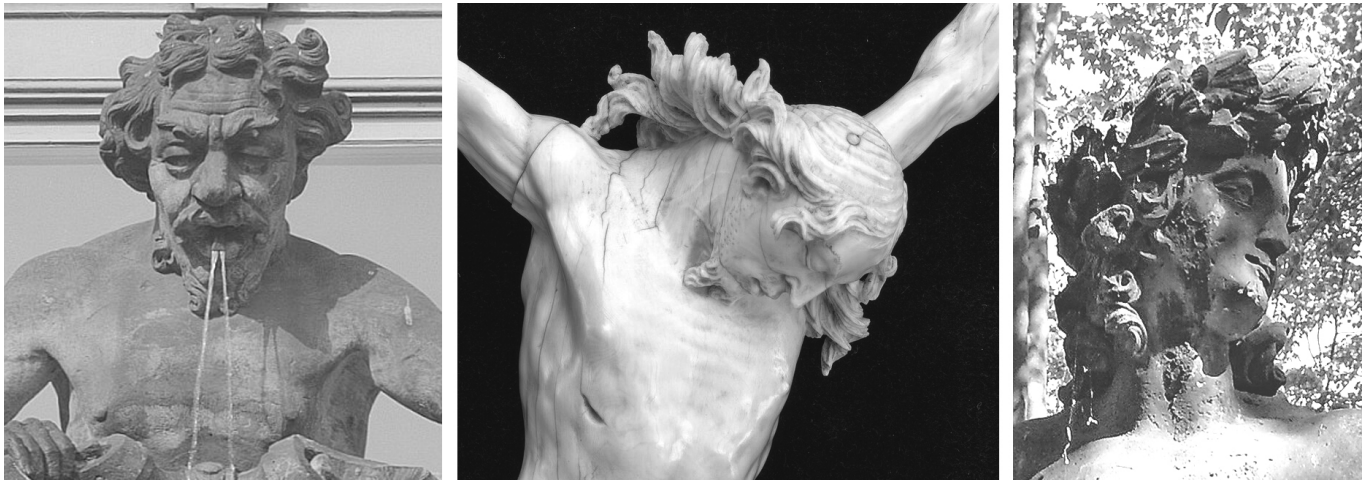


Fig. 07: *Kronentor Bacchanate* attributed to Johann Joachim Kretzschmar and the workshop of Balthasar Permoser, ca. 1715 (Zwinger, Dresden) (left); Ivory corpus, Johann Joachim Kretzschmar (?), possibly ca. 1725 (National Gallery of Art, DC) (center); *Apollo* attributed to Johann Joachim Kretzschmar (Hermsdorf Schlosspark) (right)

However, his talent as a wood-carver in small-scale has naturally led to the possibility of works in ivory. Notably, two ivory statuettes portraying figures of *Winter* and *Spring*, ca. 1725-30, are attributed to Kretzschmar and loyally copy figures of the *Seasons* by Permoser.¹⁶

As with Kändler, certain idiosyncrasies in Kretzschmar's approach to sculpting may distinguish him not only from Permoser but as an artist with compelling individuality. Notable is the overall "windswept" quality of his figures. Also distinctive is the wild portrayal of drapery, sometimes flaring northward and often billowing outwardly from the protagonist's hips. Although generically Baroque in attitude, there is also the frequent exposure of a nude hip, as featured on a figure of *Apollo* attributed to Kretzschmar at

Hermsdorf Schlosspark, one of the two *Spring nymphs* at Zwinger and observed also on his *Bacchante with a tambourine*, also at Zwinger, whose robust presence and stocky-build is likewise comparable to the ivory corpus. On this latter sculpture, there are additional shared similarities in the rendering of the kneecaps with the sharp delineation of the *vastus medialis* muscle as it runs above the interior lower thighs, creating a sculpted divet and channel above the knees.

Also distinguished is the manner in which Kretzschmar articulates hair as it gyrates forth in swaths that burst from the ground of the scalp. This is most evident on his fountain *Bacchanate* at Zwinger's *Kronentor*, embellished by an alike carving of channels to suggest naturalistic movement (Fig. 07, left). In some instances,



Fig. 08: Ivory corpus, Johann Joachim Kretzschmar (?), possibly ca. 1725 (National Gallery of Art, DC) (left); Wood *Calvary group* by Johann Joachim Kretzschmar, ca. 1725-28 (Grüne Gewölbe, Dresden) (right)

gravity weighs itself upon these bursting locks, causing them to descend like the twisting spiral observed along Christ's proper left-face, comparable also with those portrayed on his stone figure of *Apollo* at Hermsdorf (Fig. 07, right). A single tuft also falls along Christ's proper right-face in an eloquent S-curve that would have dramatically protruded from beneath his former crown-of-thorns, much in the same way as on his Zwinger *Bacchanate* in which a single lock-of-hair emerges from beneath his crown of grapevines.

However, the strongest comparisons may be observed in the relationship between the ivory corpus and Kretzschmar's *Calvary group*, whose similar scale correspondingly captures an adroit drama masterfully realized in soft material. There is a commensurate energy in the character of the actors and animals in these sculptures, from the fiery temperament of the horses' manes to the fantastic and intricate rippling of windswept draperies (Fig. 08). The strain upon the tendons of the Ottoman archer's wrists compare with the

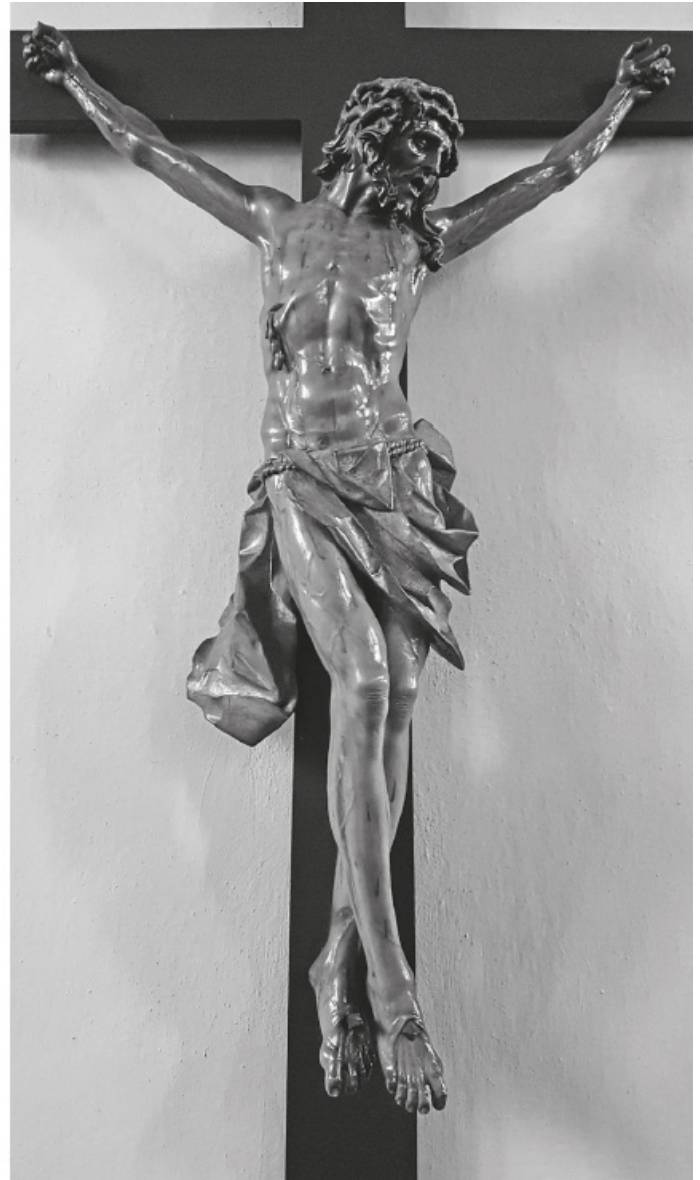


Fig. 09: Boxwood *Pilgrim as a Memento Mori*, attributed to Balthasar Permoser, ca. 1685 (?) (Julius Böhler fine art) (left); Wood corpus by Paul Egell, 1716 (Kath. Kirche St. Otto, Bamberg) (right)

tension of Christ's as he is suspended from his crucifix. Kretzschmar's distinguishing appeal is his ability to exert a sensational theatric unleashed through his sculptural virtuosity.

A context for these corpora can be established in the environs of the Saxon Elector's court, whose requisite dedication to the Catholic faith prompted an ongoing need to edify religious commitments to the Polish nobility. A quantity



Fig. 10: Wood corpus by Paul Egell, 1716 (Kath. Kirche St. Otto, Bamberg) (left); Boxwood *Pilgrim as a Memento Mori*, attributed to Balthasar Permoser, ca. 1685 (?) (Julius Böhler fine art) (right)

of devotional objects for the Dresden court were produced for church dignitaries and Catholic nobles, predicated the environment in which these remarkable figures of Christ would have been reasonably commissioned.

Of final note is an extraordinary wood statuette of a *Pilgrim as a Memento Mori*, attributed to Permoser (Fig. 09, left).¹⁷ While its 19th century Florentine provenance, stylistic subtleties¹⁸ and reasonable comparability with the ivory figure of *Death* at the base of Permoser's *Triumph of*

*the Cross*¹⁹ suggests a highly probable origin with Permoser, another outlier artist might also be tenuously considered a candidate, if at least, a follower inspired by it, namely Permoser's pupil: Paul Egell.

There is a similar tormented pathos in the *Pilgrim* that finds expression in Egell's earliest documented work: a wooden crucifix he completed for St. Michael's Monastery in Bamberg during May of 1716 at the age of twenty-five (Figs. 09, right; 10, left). Notably, Egell made this corpus



Fig. 11: Wood *Memento Mori* by Paul Egell, ca. 1720-25 (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg) (left); Boxwood *Pilgrim as a Memento Mori*, attributed to Balthasar Permoser, ca. 1685 (?) (Julius Böhler fine art) (right)

just prior to his departure for Saxony where he is thereafter apprenticed under Permoser and active in Dresden, possibly that same year, and until around 1720 whereupon, in 1721, he establishes himself as a court sculptor in Mannheim where the majority of his career is later spent. It is conjectured Egell may have also spent time in Italy on account of the distinct Italian influences in his work, unless such traits were instead adopted through a careful appreciation and attention to Permoser's instruction and work.²⁰

The *contrapposto* stance of the *Pilgrim*, with outstretched hand, features in many of Egell's

sculptures of saints such as those produced for his masterpiece: the high altar for Mannheim cathedral, mostly destroyed during WWII. A further correspondence is observed in Egell's *Memento Mori*, also featuring the attribute of a serpent while exchanging the *Pilgrim's* attribute of a salamander for a frog (Fig. 11).

There is an interplay between these two *Memento Mori's* that suggest an exchange of ideas and a point of common origin, individual, or collaborative, but certainly showcasing the power of Permoser's influence on the art-of-his-time and especially upon his pupils.

Endnotes

- 1 It should be noted the proper-left arm of this corpus is a later replacement.
- 2 Sigfried Asche (1966): *Balthasar Permoser und die Barockskulptur des Dresdner Zwingers*. Weidlich.
- 3 Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Inv. PE 230.
- 4 Sotheby's auction, 8 December 2009, Lot 71.
- 5 Ulrich Pietsch and Daniela Antonin (2006): *Die figürliche Meißner Porzellanplastik von Gottlieb Kirchner und Johann Joachim Kaendler: Bestandskatalog der Porzellansammlung Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden*. Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden.
- 6 In addition to these two epitaphs, Kaendler did sign one of his late porcelain works for Meissen: an allegorical figure-group completed toward the end of his career on commission for Tsarina Catherine II for the Palais Oranienbaum near St. Petersburg.
- 7 An epitaph, attributed to Kaendler, for Sophia Theodora Keil is also known. All three epitaphs by Kaendler are located at the Meissen Stadtmuseum.
- 8 Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden, PE 424. See U. Pietsch, D. Antonin (2006): *op. cit.* (note 5).
- 9 Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden, PE 3770. See U. Pietsch, D. Antonin (2006): *op. cit.* (note 5).
- 10 Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Inv. PE 3759. See U. Pietsch, D. Antonin (2006): *op. cit.* (note 5).
- 11 See U. Pietsch, D. Antonin (2006): *op. cit.* (note 5).
- 12 National Gallery of Art, Inv. 1997.70.1.
- 13 Kretzschmar's *Calvary group* celebrates the superiority of the Saxons over the Ottomans at the battle of Vienna in 1683.
- 14 Kretzschmar's *Bacchante with a tambourine* was replaced by a faithful copy in 1998 and the *Spring nymphs* at *Nymphenbad* are 2009 replicas after earlier 1927 replicas. The 1927 replicas were based on original surviving fragments from around 1718.
- 15 S. Asche (1966): *op. cit.* (note 2).
- 16 The two ivories of the *Seasons*, attributed to Kretzschmar, are kept at the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg.
- 17 Florian Eitle Böhler (ed.) (2018): *A Pilgrim as a Memento Mori. Balthasar Permoser*. Julius Böhler Kunsthandlung, Germany.
- 18 Certain idiosyncrasies of the *Memento Mori* establish a strong relationship with Permoser, notably the rendering of the hair, which although diverse in its articulation on several of Permoser's secure works, does conform with the statuette, like his figure of *Poverty* for the façade of SS. Michele e Gaetano in Florence, et al. The delineation of creases on the palms-of-the-hands or the specific manner of the kneecaps is idiosyncratic as is the fluid form of the pilgrim's cloak, which though similarly observed in Egell's ivory works, like his *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* at the Bode Museum, is more graceful than what is typically observed in Egell's stiffer, more angular, draperies.
- 19 Grassimuseum, Inv. 1954.31.
- 20 Klaus Lankheit (1988): *Der kurpfälzische Hofbildhauer Paul Egell 1691-1752*. Hirmer Verlag, Munich.