
A Little Known Portrait of Goethe

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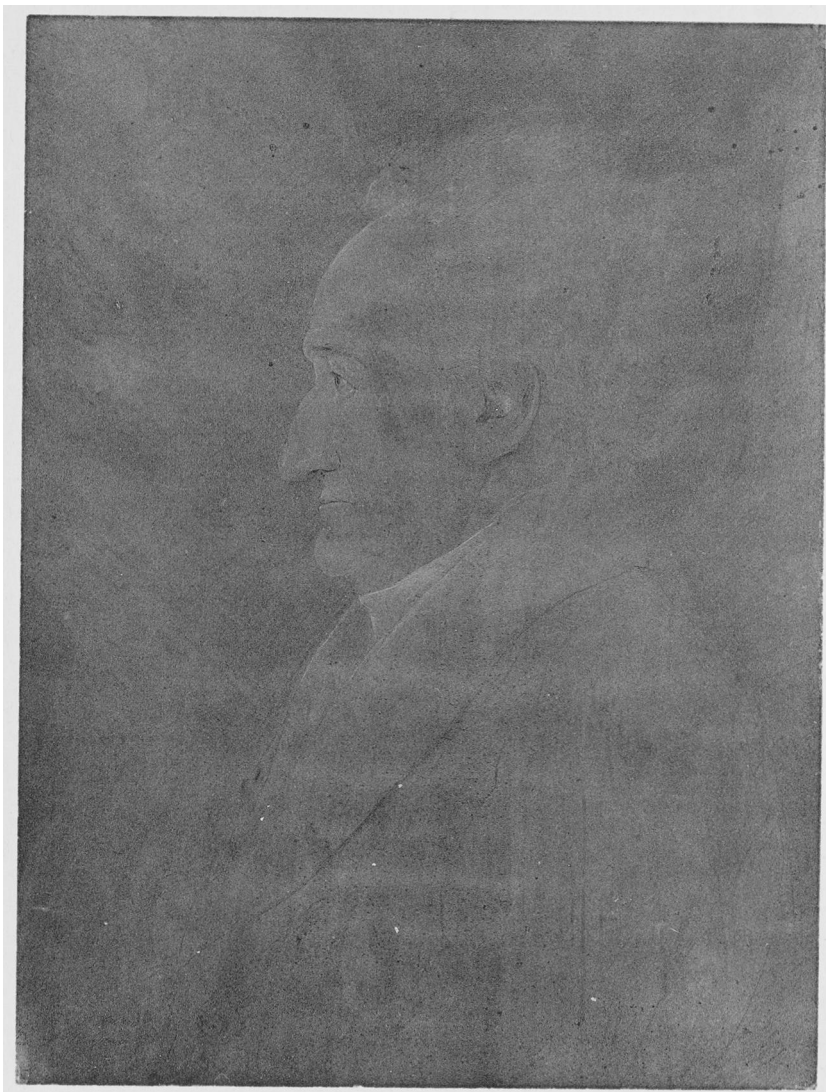
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GOETHE IN 1826

The portrait bears the following inscription: "Nach der Natur gezeichnet v. L. Sebbers, Weimar den 7ten September, 1826."
This reproduction of the original has not been retouched.

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A Little Known Portrait of Goethe

BY GEORGE M. PRIEST

THE Treasure Room of the Princeton University Library was enriched astonishingly and very impressively a few years ago when a unique crayon portrait of Goethe by Ludwig Sebbers was presented to the University and added to its collections. The gift was astonishing because it was difficult to believe that German scholars could be unaware of the continued existence and whereabouts of any portrait of Goethe inside or outside of Germany and that they had not acquired each and all of the existing portraits for permanent safe-keeping in the land of Goethe's birth and life. The gift was impressive because the portrait is one of the last which Goethe sat for and German experts in Goethe portraiture had declared this particular portrait to be "the best," "the most gripping" portrait of Goethe, "the most magnificent portrait of Goethe in his old age."

Princeton's acquisition of this portrait was indeed so almost unbelievable that microscopic photographs of the portrait were made and taken to Germany at the earliest opportunity for verification of the portrait's authenticity by eminent German scholars. All of these scholars knew this portrait in a more or less adumbrated reproduction, but none knew what had become of the original. In a recent volume devoted to portraiture of Goethe ("Goethe im Bildnis," Leipzig, 1930) Hans Wahl, one of the most distinguished Goethe scholars of the present time, had listed the Princeton portrait as one that had "vanished." However, face to face with the photographs from America and with facts accompanying the photographs, German scholars were bound to greet the discovery of the original with bitter-sweet acclaim, with acclaim that the portrait still existed, but, natu-

rally and inevitably, with regret that the portrait, in the keeping of an American university library, was lost to Germany forever.

Among these German Goethe-scholars two especially are to be named: Ernst Beutler, Director of the Goethe-Museum in Frankfurt-on-the-Main, and the above mentioned Hans Wahl, Director of the Goethe National-Museum in Weimar. Anton Kippenberg, the head of the Insel publishing house in Leipzig, was at first highly skeptical of the authenticity of our portrait but he has now accepted it as the original. (Dr. Kippenberg has collected and owns the most comprehensive and therefore, perhaps, most enviable Goetheana in existence.) The acceptance by Beutler and Kippenberg and Wahl of the Princeton portrait as the authentic original sufficed to establish it as all that was claimed for it, but this authenticity was attested definitively by the publication of a reproduction of it as the frontispiece of the "Goethe-Kalender auf das Jahr 1938," an annual published under the auspices of the Goethe-Museum in Frankfurt. No one will now or ever doubt that Princeton possesses the original portrait. It is, to be sure, *e pluribus unum*, one may say, since Goethe was sketched or drawn or painted or otherwise reproduced pictorially one hundred and two recorded times, but the only authenticated crayon portrait of Goethe by Ludwig Sebbers is hanging in the Princeton University Library. Several German libraries or Goethe collections have expressed a desire or readiness to buy the portrait, but of course they have received the answer that the portrait is not for sale.

Sebbers drew this portrait in 1826 when Goethe was a little more than seventy-seven years old. A member of the Princeton Faculty, Professor A. M. Friend, has described the portrait as follows:

"Although not the work of a great artist, the portrait, by reason of the freedom of the eighteenth century pastel technique and the cameo-like quality of the classical profile, possesses a liveliness and, at the same time, a reticent dignity truly expressive of the character portrayed. The intensely interesting and intelligent profile, the noble shape of the large head with its shock of tousled hair, are all set down by this porcelain master with a care which conveys the reverence he felt in the presence of the great old man—an awe not a little increased for us by the fading of the crayon in the course of the century. The head has still the incisive authority of a fine relief for a coin or medallion, which is "nach der Natur gezeichnet," as the notation at the left side of the drawing has it."

According to Goethe's diary the poet sat three or four times for this portrait, in Weimar in the early part of September, 1826, but several weeks earlier, in July and August, Goethe had sat for Sebbers at least twelve times for a portrait on a porcelain cup. Goethe had become very much bored by sittings for oil portraits. He had refused to sit for very reputable painters such as Anton Graff and Friedrich August Tischbein; he rebuffed the artist Karl August Schwerdgeburth for a time with the bitter complaint that painters had often tortured and plagued him with sittings for them, only to produce very little that gave him any pleasure. But Goethe had long been interested in painting on porcelain and he noted in his diary that he talked with Sebbers on August 18, 1826, about that form of art. (As early as July, 1781, when he was not quite thirty-two years old, Goethe had painted and burned a cup which he sent to Charlotte von Stein, confessing "childish joy" in his achievement.)

It is said that Sebbers elicited Goethe's "confidence and favor" as a man as well as in his capacity as an artist, but in any case the Sebbers portrait of Goethe on porcelain—now a treasure of the Goethe National-Museum in Weimar—pleased Goethe so much that only a few weeks elapsed after its completion before the sittings of the Princeton crayon portrait began. Goethe said that the portrait on the porcelain cup was "very laudable and very like" him. It is significant and greatly to the artist's credit that Goethe was willing to sit for him at all. In 1826 Sebbers was only twenty-two years old, a young man of very limited reputation. Goethe thought perhaps that he saw in Sebbers the promise of a distinguished artist which Sebbers was fated never to become. Sebbers died in Berlin in 1843, thirty-nine years old.

The later history of the finished crayon portrait has come down to us in somewhat scattered fragments, unfortunately, but it is worth while to assemble these fragments as far as we can know them and can piece them together.

Sebbers remained in possession of the porcelain cup for a time, but ultimately he presented it to the Grand-Ducal Court Library in Weimar which later entrusted it to the above-mentioned Goethe National-Museum. It seems probable that Sebbers also kept the crayon portrait for a few years. Sebbers was a native of Braunschweig and he was the director of the Braunschweig porcelain manufactory from 1827 to 1837. The actor, Heinrich Marr, a member of the Braunschweig municipal theatre, created the role of Mephistopheles in the world première of the First Part of Goethe's "Faust" on January 29, 1829, in Braunschweig

and he later was an important member of the Weimar Theatre's directorate from 1853 to 1856. Lastly, Sebbers's crayon portrait of Goethe was in the possession of Marr when he died in 1871. When or how or where—in Braunschweig? in Weimar?—Marr obtained the portrait we do not know.

In any event, on March 1, 1882, Adolf Ackermann, a Munich dealer in books and objects of art, announced—in anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of Goethe's death (March 22, 1832)—that he had a crayon portrait of Goethe by Ludwig Sebbers for sale. The announcement stated further that Ackermann had acquired the portrait from the estate of Heinrich Marr, but no detail was published in regard either to Marr's or to Ackermann's acquisition of the portrait. The Ackermann records now state only that Ackermann once owned the portrait and that he sold the portrait "to an American in New York."

To the highly memorable good-fortune of Princeton the "American in New York" was presumably Mr. George A. Armour, a graduate of Princeton in the Class of 1877, though we do not know exactly when or how Mr. Armour acquired the portrait. He did acquire it, however, and it must have come to this country comparatively soon after Ackermann offered it for sale because the backboard of the portrait's frame bears a label which indicates that the portrait was framed in America sometime after 1883. Mr. Armour's children can testify only that they saw the portrait in their father's library in Princeton as long ago as "before 1900."

After Mr. Armour's death in 1936 his heirs very generously presented the portrait to Princeton University, more especially, to the Germanic Section of the Modern Languages Department. It is now in the keeping of the University's Treasure Room where the custodian will show it with pride and pleasure to any interested friend of Goethe, but when the University obtains a new library, the one and only original Sebbers crayon portrait of Goethe will become the permanent chief ornament and inspiration of the quarters allotted to the Germanic Section.