

Influencing imagery

– Christian Wermuth’s coin collection from the baroque to the digital age

Michał Maliczowski



Fig 1. Portrait of Christian Wermuth, 1701
Peter Schenk
Engraving, 261 x 183 mm
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, RP-P-1906-3575

The Friedenstein Castle in Gotha houses the fourth largest coin cabinet in Germany with around 140,000 numismatic objects. While the beginnings of the collection can be traced back to the 17th century and the collection of the dukes of Saxe-Weimar, one of the earliest additions was the collection of Christian Wermuth – one of the most productive and eminent baroque medallists in Germany (fig. 1).

The house of Saxe Gotha was founded by Duke Ernst I the Pious (1640–1675) in 1640 and is a branch of the

house of Saxe Weimar. Ernst I build the Friedenstein Castle in Gotha and it was he who brought the first parts of the coin collection to the castle. While his son and successor Friedrich I (1675/80–1691) kept and expanded the collection to some degree, it was Friedrich II (1691–1732) under whose patronage the collection in Gotha became one of the most important European collections of its time. Several factors played a role in this development: Friedrich’s shrewd personnel policy and personal interests in numismatics,¹ but even more important was Friedrich’s willingness to spend a fortune. So, when in 1712 the neighbouring count Anton Günther Schwarzburg-Sonderhausen of Arnstadt was selling his numismatic collection, Friedrich II paid 100,000 thalers for the 18,000 coins and medals. With this single purchase the ducal collection in Gotha was lifted to the level of the imperial collection in Vienna or the royal collection in Paris. The size and importance of the Arnstadt collection, immediately overshadowed the comparatively small purchase of the collection of Christian Wermuth in 1706. This paper wants to put a spotlight on it, as it allows a new look on Christian Wermuth as an artist, collector, and entrepreneur.

Born in 1661, Wermuth was first an apprentice to the cutter Ernst Caspar Dürr in Dresden and learned from the moneyer Johann Thun in Sondershausen. Prepared for a career in the mint, he began to work for the House of Saxe-Gotha in 1687. His early work as a die cutter for the mints in Gotha and Eisenach has two rather grim chapters: in 1691 the ‘Wichmannshausen’ affair,² in which the Gotha mint was accused of fraud, and in 1694, in which Wermuth was accused of clipping and smelting coins in the Eisenach mint. However unpleasant it must have been for Wermuth personally, during his arrest in 1694 he wrote an autobiography, which today proves a most useful source for his early life. From his account emerges the picture of a man with high estimations of his own talents and an ambition to create art and not just to enrich himself. At the same time, he also accounts for the wealth he was able to acquire up to that point in his life. After receiving an imperial *privilegium* in 1699 he began to sign

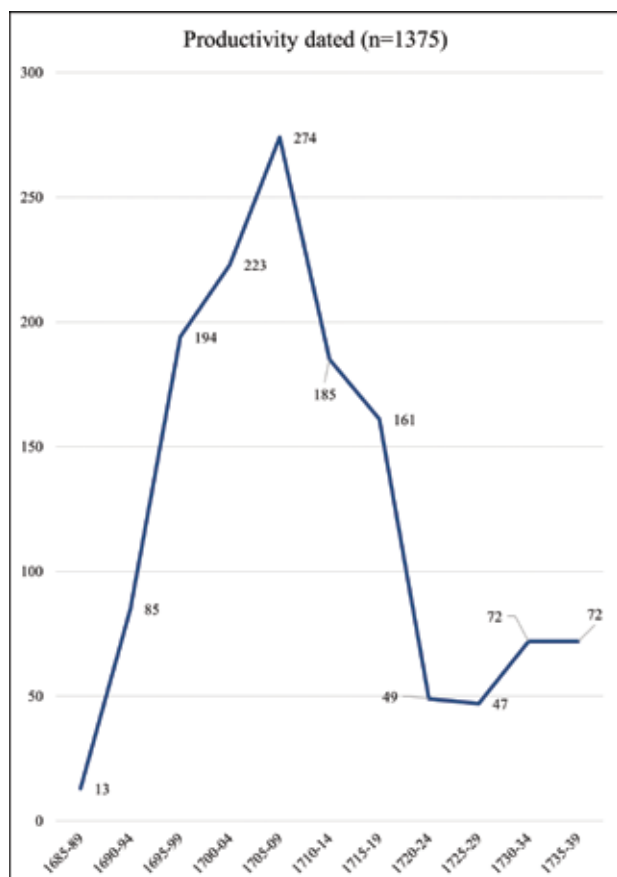


Fig 2. Christian Wermuth, output
Chart: Michał Maliczowski, Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha

some of his work with *cum privilegio Caesaris*. More than just a prestigious recognition of his work, it allowed him to operate an independent private workshop in his own home. In 1700 he signed the first apprenticeship contract with his most important pupil Christian Koch, who turned into a very active artist in Gotha as well. Another unfortunate run in with the law occurred in 1705 during the so-called Brink–Bodisch affair.³ The mayor of Leipzig used unlawfully issued city council bonds to pay Wermuth for the assemblage of a numismatic collection as a gift to the Saxon elector. After receiving the first 1,000 thalers for his work (and the collection) the Leipzig merchants Brink and Bodisch were supposed to pay Wermuth the outstanding 2,000 thalers. Unfortunately for Wermuth, the fraud was discovered, and the mayor arrested. Although he got the collection back from the prince elector, Wermuth stubbornly offered the collection to the merchants and demanded the remaining 2,000 thalers from them. Seemingly overplaying his hand against the two influential merchants, Wermuth was banned from the Leipzig fair in October of 1705, and it took until 1718 to lift the ban. This was an economic problem for Wermuth since both he and his wife operated stalls in the fair and were thus cut off from an important market.⁴ It is impossible to say with definitive certainty, whether this was the reason he sold his own coin collection to the Gotha parliament in 1706, which they in turn presented to Duke Friedrich II. The timing seems very convenient. Before the sale, his daughter Maria Juliana Wermuth wrote a catalogue of the collection:

Reichs Thaler-Cabinet des Durchl. Fürsten u. Herrn Friedrich Herzoge zu Sachsen wie solches Hochfürstl. Durchl. anno 1706 von deroelben Landstände überreicht worden, welches vorher innerhalb 12 Jahren colligiret Christian Wermuth⁵

Unfortunately, this manuscript, which was once in the Friedenstein library, is now lost. It has until now proved impossible to deduct when exactly it was lost. It could've been taken to the Soviet Union during the Soviet occupation in 1945–1946 or been removed sometime during or before the Second World War. In 1912, the curator of the collection at that time, Behrendt Pick wrote a history of the collection and mentioned the existence of the manuscript, but only in passing, so it remains unclear, whether he physically had it or was merely aware of its existence.⁶

Although Wermuth parted with his own collection, he remained close to it, since it was part of the ducal *Kunstammer* after the sale until 1712. With the acquisition of the Arnstadt collection (for which Wermuth and Schlegel acted as advisors) the numismatic collection was separated from the *Kunstammer* and became part of the ducal library as an independent coin cabinet.

The dissertation of Cordula Wohlfahrt, published after her untimely death by the British Art Medal Society in 1992, remains the *catalogue raisonné* for Wermuth's works. It is her data, that is used for the graphs illustrating Wermuth's artistic activity, that spiked in the later 1690, and how high it remained for the following 20 years (fig. 2). But even as an older artist, Wermuth still produced an exceptional number of medals. His later works often signed with 'Wahrmuth' – a play on words in German *wahr* meaning 'true' and *muth*⁷ meaning 'brave'. Looking at the contracts of apprenticeship between Wermuth and Koch in 1700 and 1707, it is clear that Wermuth produced as a workshop – him providing the designs and specifications while Koch and other employees and apprentices were to produce dies. The ideas were sometimes of Wermuth's own *inventio*, but often enough he got inventions from his network. After all, he not only had access to the ducal libraries and collections, but also to the librarians and scholars Tentzel and later Schlegel, that were employed by the dukes. How close his cooperation with Tentzel and Schlegel might have been, can probably be best illustrated by the fact that it was Wermuth who published Tentzel's *Saxonia numismatica lineae Ernestinae et Albertinae* between 1705–1714. Wermuth could also rely on a network of agents not only for selling his work, but also to gain information on the ongoing abroad. An example of such an agent would be Peter Schenck the Younger, an Amsterdam based engraver who must have also been a close friend, since both made portraits of each other (see fig. 1). More than just selling Wermuth's medals, he also provided Wermuth with engravings, etchings etc. Thus, it was a rich amalgam that Wermuth could rely on for inspiration. Until now a factor that was not considered was his own coin collection.



Fig 3. Ulrich of Württemberg, thaler 1537, Stuttgart
Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, 2.2./14080



Fig 4. City of Goslar, thaler 1705, Goslar
Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, 2.2./2472

Since the catalogue of 1706 is missing, it is impossible to say how large the Wermuth collection actually was. Fortunately, Wermuth made a habit of marking his coins with a 'W' punch mark, thus it is possible to identify coins belonging to him today. Since over 300 years have passed, and the coin cabinet has endured several upheavals no claim of completion can be made, but as of late November 2023, 491 coins from the Gotha coin cabinet can be attributed to the Wermuth collection. Composed of almost exclusively thalers, the oldest coin is a thaler from Ulrich (1498–1519; 1534–1550) of Württemberg minted in 1517 (fig. 3), while one of the youngest coins is a thaler from the city of Goslar minted in 1705 (fig. 4). No ancient coins with a 'W' punch die have been found. The collection contains just 5 medals. The chronological order of the collection (fig. 5) shows that Wermuth consciously took coins out of circulation and marked them specifically for his collection. Of course, the monetary system of the Holy Roman Empire and its states underwent significant changes and crises in the 17th century, but it was still possible to use 'old' money in everyday transactions.⁸ Wermuth also wasn't a very specialised collector since the 491 coins can be attributed to 149 minting authorities. While the majority of them are inside the Holy Roman Empire, almost a third comes from foreign authorities.

A systematic stylistic comparison between Wermuth's medals and the coins in his collection is an undertaking for another (much longer) paper due to the size and diversity of the collection and Wermuth's output, so what follows will just be an exemplary attempt.

On the reverse of the 1687 thaler (fig. 6) of count Christian Wilhelm of Schwarzburg-Sonderhausen (1666/81–1721) in the current collection of the coin cabinet,⁹ the crest with three ornamented helmets is supported by a 'wild man' on the left,¹⁰ and a 'wild woman' on the right. Each of them holds a flagpole. The crest is parted by two crosses into twelve fields and two smaller inescutcheons. In the exergue is a fork and a comb. Upon the elevation of the counts of Schwarzburg-Sonderhausen to imperial principedom in 1697 Wermuth produced a medal for Christian Wilhelm I (1666/81–1721) with an upgraded coat of arms on the reverse (fig. 7).¹¹ The coat of arms is expanded by a third inescutcheon with an imperial double headed eagle. The number of helmets has doubled to six, and Wermuth has put the supporting wild people much closer to the shield. A vine embraces around the hips and prudishly conceals them although they look smaller next to the enlarged shield, they have been stretched in comparison to the coin, have more realistic proportions and are standing in a more dynamic contrapposto. The flagpoles shrunk to make space for the helmet ornaments – a knight with a

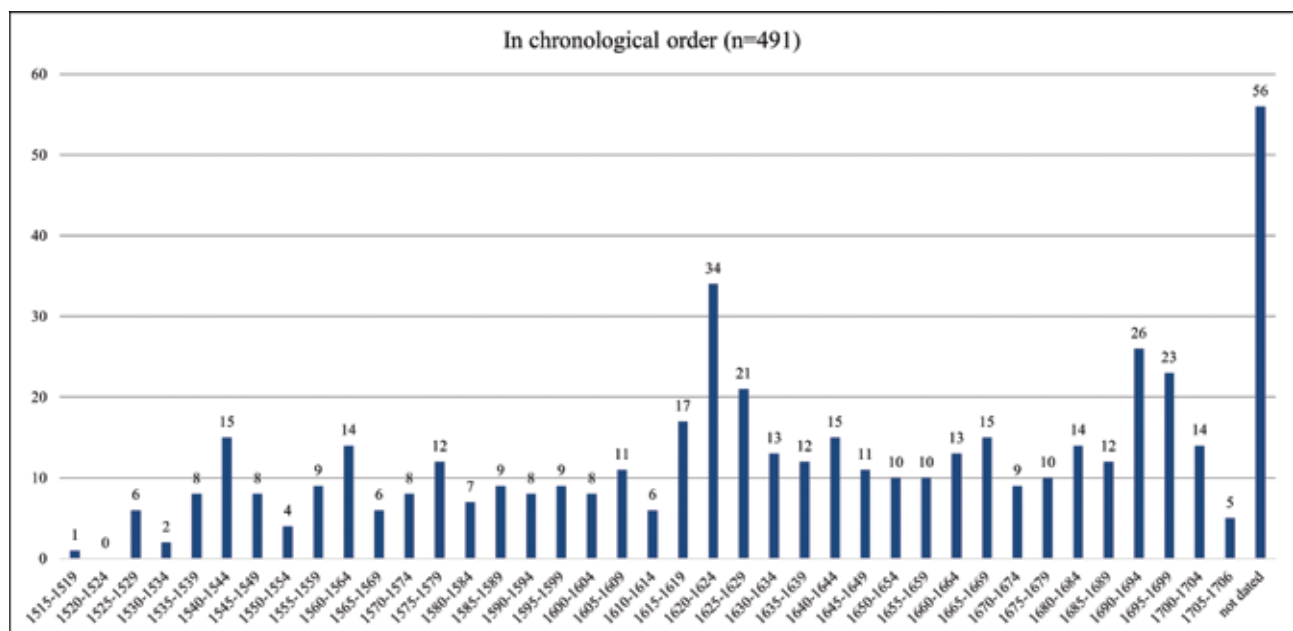


Fig 5. Christian Wermuth, collection
Chart: Michał Maliczowski, Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha



Fig 6. Christian Wilhelm of Schwarzburg-Sondershausen, thaler 1687, Sondershausen
Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, 2.2./855



Fig 7. Elevation to imperial principedom, 1698
Christian Wernuth
Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, WKH700

sword (1st from left), the imperial eagle (3rd from right), and princely hat (2nd from right) was added to the eagle (2nd from left), the monkey (3rd from left) and a peacock tail with horns (1st from right).

The Gotha Transdigital 2027 project that enabled the author to attend the FIDEM congress in Florence has the goal of a digital transformation of the Friedenstein Castle and all of its many collections. From early 2021 until November 2023, it was possible to photographically digitize 79,000 numismatic objects. A broad illustration of the workflow shows the many steps and the actors involved in this process (fig. 8). Each physical object was assigned a unique object-ID that additionally locates it exactly in the space of the cabinet. It was brought to the media service provider Julius Fröbus GmbH, where technical core-data (weight, measure and die axis) were

measured. Only after this an object was photographed with standardized lighting set up to highlight the relief, the camera parallel above the object and an additional light deflection to ensure that shiny coins did not appear black in the reflection (fig. 9). The photographs as well as the data that was accumulated during each step of the workflow up until this point was sent to the Thuringian State Library (ThuLB) as .xml files. The ThuLB is responsible for the management and the long-term preservation of the data.

Another 1,000 objects were chosen to be modelled in 3D (fig. 10). Following the principle of photogrammetry, the coins and medals were photographed from all sides – a total of around 1,600 images per model. Those individual images were then calculated into a three-dimensional object, that was then delivered to the Friedenstein Castle in several different data-formats (OBJ, USDZ, GLB)



Fig 8. Digitisation workflow
Chart: Josefine Frank, Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha

with a standard polygon count of 300,000. An object modelled this way can be displayed on commercial and open access 3D viewers by standard smartphones and personal computers without issues, as long as the internet connection is good enough. But to keep up with the expected technological progress of the coming years, the

master-file of each model has the potential to comprise not of 300,000 but 3,000,000 polygons (fig. 11). Something that only specialized computer set ups are able to display nowadays.



Fig 9. Photography station
Photo: Robert Niemz, Julius Fröbus GmbH



Fig 10. August Brunswick and Lüneburg, thaler, undated, Zellerfeld, detail
Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, 2.2./1294



Fig 11. August Brunswick and Lüneburg, thaler undated, Zellerfeld, detail
Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, 2.2./1294

The work of the past two years was only the first step (see fig. 8) on the coin cabinets long journey into the digital age. The next step is the enrichment of the objects in our database with normative, descriptive metadata (nominal, actors, events, inscriptions, etc.). Only after this is accomplished, it is possible to gradually publish **useful** data according to modern museum standards, that can be freely used by researchers, artists, as well as the interested public. The enrichment and publication of the collection are going to be the main tasks for the remaining four years of the project. A continued assignment of object IDs to the rest of the collection, not only as preparation for future digitization campaigns but also as an important step in fulfilling the museum's mission to be accountable to the public about its collection will be an ongoing part of the project.

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NOTES

1. The Catalogue *Gothas Gold, 300 Jahre Münzkabinett* (Eberle and Wallenstein, 2012) offers a very concise overview of the different approaches of each duke to the collection.

2. Wolfgang Steguweit has reconstructed the 'Wichmannshausen' affair in detail (Steguweit, 1987, pp. 98-102).

3. Cordula Wohlfahrt (Wohlfahrt, 1992, p. 19), and Frede (Frede, 1948, pp. 56-65) have reconstructed this trial extensively, but since this might have been a pivotal moment in the history of the Wermuth collection, a short account of it follows.

4. It is not without irony, that his arrest in Eisenach in 1694 as well as the confiscation of his possessions at the Leipzig fair in 1705 provide us with a rare insight into his character and his economic situation.

5. Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, Chart. A 1234.

6. Pick, 1912, p. 8.

7. In an antiquated orthography.

8. In fact, the very issue of the 'Wichmannshausen' affair was the fraudulent practice of back-dating coins by the mint in Gotha. With back-dating, an average user of the coin was made to believe that the coin was older and thus followed an older higher standard for fineness and contained more pure silver than it actually did.

9. SSFG 2.2./855; Wermuths punchmark is on the duke's shoulder on the obverse.

10. To simplify the reading, the author uses the non-heraldic orientation: left is left from the readers point of view, and right is right.

11. Wohlfahrt, 1992, 98 021, SSFG WKH700.