The Bride and the Cat: A Possible Source for Overbeck’s *Freundschaftsbild* of Franz Pforr

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In 1981, from May 2 to July 5, The Metropolitan Museum of Art was host to a loan exhibition, “German Masters of the Nineteenth Century: Paintings and Drawings from the Federal Republic of Germany.” Number 66 in the exhibition catalogue was Johann Friedrich Overbeck’s *Freundschaftsbild* of Franz Pforr from the Nationalgalerie, Berlin (Figure 1).1 Thus, for a spell of two months, Overbeck’s painting was under the same roof with one of its possible iconographic models.

In the Museum’s permanent collections is a small panel painting, a portrait of a young man (Figure 2), whose reverse shows a blond girl in an orange-red dress seated at an open window, binding a wreath of forget-me-nots, and a white cat sitting on the windowsill. On the reverse also are the date 1508 and the monogram of Albrecht Dürer, but, unfortunately, both are later additions (Figure 3). The panel is now attributed to Hans Suess von Kulmbach (active by ca. 1505–d. 1522).2

The comparison of two important compositional elements in Overbeck’s portrait of Franz Pforr to the scene on the reverse of the Museum’s panel reveals striking similarities. In Overbeck’s painting the knitting woman at the window is in the same posture as the wreath-binding girl, and in both pictures a cat is prominently placed in the right-hand corner of the window. The Museum’s panel is thought to have been in a private collection in Vienna before 1800. In 1815 it was mentioned as a work by “Alberto Duro,” signed “la sua cifra,” in the collection of the lawyer D. Francesco Santangelo at Palazzo Colombano, Naples.3 It stayed in the possession of the Santangelo family until at least 1884. By 1906 it was in the collection of Dominic Ellis Colnaghi, a London art dealer,4 and soon after, by 1909–13, it was acquired by J. Pierpont Morgan, who gave it to the Museum in 1917.

The painters Pforr and Overbeck were founding members of the Lukasbund, established in 1809 by a group of artists at the Academy in Vienna who were opposed to the Academy’s prevalent pseudo-classicism. As a brotherhood of artists, they strove for a renewal of art with a religious basis and revered the old masters, especially their twin ideals, Dürer and Raphael. Guided by the concept of medieval guilds, the brethren of the Lukasbund even agreed to subject their works to the collective judgment and approval of the group, the better to achieve their avowed goal of the highest artistic and spiritual standards.

During Napoleon’s campaign of 1809 in Austria, the Academy had been closed temporarily; when it reopened that fall the disdissant Lukasbund members were not readmitted. In May 1810 Pforr, Overbeck, and several other members of the Lukasbund went to Rome. By September 1810 they had set up their community in the abandoned monastery San Isidoro—and were soon to be labeled “the Nazarenes” by fellow artists. In October 1811 Pforr, who had tuberculosis, traveled to Naples; when his condition worsened, his friends brought him back to Albano, near Rome, where he died on June 16, 1812.5

Overbeck painted his portrait of Franz Pforr in 1810 as an homage to his friend, who in turn, in 1811, dedicated his diptych, *Sulamith und Maria*, to Overbeck (Figure 4). Once before, in 1808, in Vienna, Overbeck had painted another portrait of his friend Pforr. The *Freundschaftsbild* with its highly symbolic iconography was begun in Rome, but, although it hung in the parlor of Overbeck’s home in Rome, it was not fully finished until 1865, shortly before Overbeck’s death in 1869.

In a letter dated October 10, 1810, Overbeck de-
Figure 1. Johann Friedrich Overbeck (1789–1869), *The Painter Franz Pforr*, 1810. Oil on canvas, 62 × 47 cm. Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz (photo: Jörg P. Anders)
scribes this portrait to his Lukasbruder Joseph Sutter:

He is standing in ancient German garb at an open Gothic window, framed with stone-carved ornaments and surrounded by grapevines. One looks into a window, where on the opposite side in the background is sitting a young woman (thought to be his wife) busy with knitting and reading in a devotional book. In front of her on the table are lilies in a vessel and in the window sits a falcon on his perch; in the back one looks down on a Gothic town and beyond that out on the sea. The whole is meant to represent him in the situation he would be happiest in. . . .

This interpretation refers to a letter written by Pforr to his Lukasbund friends, in which he explained that he wished to spend his life as a Schlichtenmaler, in a room hung with paintings of bygone ages and with a lovely wife sitting at a table nearby occupied with some domestic work.

Every detail in Overbeck's painting has been carefully weighed for its symbolic meaning, down to the red-wine color of Pforr's medieval-style altdutsche tunic. This particular hue was used to indicate the Heiligkeit, "saintliness," of the wearer according to a color symbolism developed by Pforr and Overbeck when they were still in Vienna. The view through the open window shows a medieval German town—its dominating church very much resembling St. Stephen's cathedral in Vienna with its slim spire and lozenge roof-tile pattern—but the distant seashore is clearly Italian. The towering cliffs are likely those of the Sorrento peninsula, near Naples. In this combination of German and Italian motifs is expressed the Nazarenes' hope of blending the best in German and Italian art.

Although there is no documentary proof that Overbeck ever saw the Museum's panel, either in Vienna or in Naples, the details of the touchingly demure women quietly occupied with some handiwork and the cats on the windowsills suggest strongly that Overbeck had it in mind when he painted his friend's portrait. The sentiment expressed by the scroll inscription—ICH.PINT.MIT.VERGIS. MEIN.NIT ("I bind with forget-me-nots")—would have made this charming little picture the perfect inspirational source for his planned Freundschaftsbild. Admittedly, the tabby-and-white cat that so affectionately rubs against Pforr's sleeve is different from the white cat in the Museum's panel, but it is identical to the cat that appears in several of Pforr's works, most prominently in his Sulamith und Maria, his gift in response to Overbeck's Freundschaftsbild.
Figure 4. Franz Pfort (1788–1812), *Sulamith und Maria*, 1811. Oil on wood, 34.5 × 32 cm. Schloss Obbach bei Schweinfurt, Sammlung Georg Schäfer (photo: Sammlung Georg Schäfer)
These two women were meant to represent imaginary idealized brides, Sulamith (the fair Shulamite of Solomon's Song of Songs) for Overbeck, and Maria (the Virgin Mary as symbol of purity) for Pforr. Maria is seated in a little room styled after that in Dürrer's print of St. Jerome in His Study (1514). She is braiding her long blond hair, while reading a book that lies on the windowsill. She is dressed in red, with a narrow white apron; the tabby-and-white cat at her feet is rubbing against her skirt, almost a mirror image of the cat in Overbeck's painting. Although Overbeck does not mention it at all in the detailed interpretive description he gives to Lukasbruder Sutter, this cat in all probability was Pforr's actual beloved pet to which Overbeck gave a place of honor in his Freundschaftsbild as a counterpoint to the imaginary wife of Pforr's unfulfilled dream.

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NOTES


3. D. Romanelli, Napoli antica e moderna (1815) III, p. 92, describes the picture, in the collection of the lawyer D. Francesco Santangelo at Palazzo Colombano, as "una V. [a Virgin], che intessa una ghirlanda di Alberto Duro, che vi segno l'anno 1518 [sic] e la sua cifra."

4. Burlington Fine Arts Club, Early German Art, no. 39a.


7. Franz Pforr's father, Johann Georg Pforr (1745-98), a painter of animal scenes (especially horses), was known as the "German Wouwerman," a fact that presumably played a role in forming Pforr's ideal of becoming a Schlachtenmaler (painter of battles).


9. Professor Jensen, Consultant to the Sammlung Georg Schäfer, kindly sent me a color print of the diptych, in order to verify the cat's coloring.

10. Although it is understood that Sulamith was supposed to be Overbeck's spiritual bride, and Maria was to be Pforr's (as is iconographically confirmed by the cat at her feet), it is interesting to note that Sulamith's face and hairdo are practically identical to those of Pforr's madonnalike "wife" in the Freundschaftsbild.