Broadsheet about the "Electrifier" Martin Berschitz (1789)

Abstract

In the eighteenth century, public demonstrations of natural scientific phenomena (especially those relating to physics) were extremely popular with audiences. Itinerant "electrifiers" [*Elektrisierer*] such as Martin Berschitz (or Berschütz or Bergschütz, ca. 1750–1800), who traveled through the German-speaking territories, made their living by performing electrical experiments for the public—and at times even for princes and other high-ranking persons.

This broadsheet advertising Berschitz's show promises the demonstration of electrical shocks, positive and negative electricity (a newly discovered phenomenon), and the melting and destruction of materials ranging from glass to paper. As part of his shows, Berschitz also demonstrated the utility of a lightning rod or thunder house [*Donnerhaus*], experimented with "flammable air" (hydrogen), and attempted to detonate gunpowder under water.

Source

May it be permitted to announce herewith that Mr. Martin Berschitz has arrived here; he has already long been famous for his feats in mechanics and physics, and has the favor of the most noble courts, attestations, and privileges. And just as he has already amused many princely persons with his brilliant machines and the experiments that are to be performed with them, he is convinced that, at this location, too, he will gain the approval of spectators and patrons with his cleverness and diligence.

His experiments all relate to physics. In addition to the usual experiments involving electricity, which he will perform with an extremely powerful machine, he also has an electrophorus, which has become known in the last few years. He will demonstrate all the experiments relating to electric shock; positive and negative electricity; the melting of metals, glass, and other materials; the burning and destruction of those materials through wood, paper, silk, etc.; the calcification and melting of gold; and the melting of golden figures and letters onto glass, canvas, paper, and other materials. Using a special machine and experiment, he will clearly show for all to see the theory of electricity of the famous Mr. [Benjamin] Franklin.

Furthermore, the similarity of electrical material and its phenomena to the electricity of air or thunderstorms, and their effects, will be demonstrated most clearly. To this end, he is equipped with the so-called Thunder House recently invented in England; with it, the important use of a so-called conductor—or lightening rod—is shown, and it is proven that a lightening bolt that strikes the top of a house travels without damage into the ground and dissipates there, if it is conducted through a metal rod or chain; that it follows the metal as long as it can hold onto it and jumps onto the metal again when it comes close to it; but that the house is smashed to pieces as soon as the conduction through metal is interrupted and the bolt must jump because of a lack of connection, or pass into non-metallic bodies.

A unique experiment will show how the bolt can melt a knife blade without damaging the sheath.

In the case of the electrical experiments, especially to provide amazing proof of electrical fire's rapid action, he will present experiments with the flammable air that rises as foul air from boggy earth, swamps, cesspools, and the

like, and is collected, or is emitted from various metals, and captured. He will fill all kinds of vessels and machines, e.g., bottles, spheres, and guns with this kind of air, unmixed, for special purposes. He will demonstrate various ways to ignite it, with an ordinary electrical spark, with a silk stocking or water, even under water, and he will make the ignition occur not only with a brisk flame but also with a loud bang; other bodies will be ignited more quickly than fire or light otherwise is. He will intensify the electricity so much that fungus or tinder can be burned off cold metal or a human body. If desired, or if the occasion permits, he will ignite gunpowder under water and demonstrate that in this manner very extraordinary, terrible effects can be brought about with a little powder. Cannons fire of their own accord, soldiers shoot at one another, illumination arises from many thousands of lights; completely natural imitation of lightening, heat lightening, and the way in which the heavens are cooled down by such can be seen. Many other curious and entertaining experiments are beyond imagining.

Source: Broadsheet about the "Electrifier" Martin Berschitz and his Mechanical and Physical Feats (1789); reprinted in Oliver Hochadel, *Öffentliche Wissenschaft: Elektrizität in der deutschen Aufklärung*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003, n.p.

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