

An Illustrated Comparison of Europe's Peoples [*Völkertafel*] (18th Century)

Abstract

Between 1718 and 1726, the engraver Fridrich Leopold of Augsburg produced his “Aigentliche Vorstell- und Beschreibung der Fürnehmsten Land-Völcker in Europa befindlichen Land-Völcker.” At the time, people from many parts of the known world frequented Augsburg; local Christians worshipped St. Afra, a 4th-century Christian immigrant from Cyprus. A few years after Leopold created his work, an unknown painter in Styria copied it and produced the oil painting featured below. Back then Styria was a contact zone between people of south Slavic and southeast German dialects and, to a lesser extent, people who spoke the Magyar language. For this reason, the title “Styrian Table of Peoples” is sometimes used for this piece. The area was crisscrossed by roads to and from the Balkans, via Pettau—and later via Vienna—to Hungary. Italian merchant families settled there as well.

Entitled “Short Description of the People Living in Europe and their Characteristics,” the painting features ten men who are supposed to represent their respective peoples or nations; they are shown in columns with attributed characteristics in a table below. Listed are (from left to right) southwestern and western Europeans: Spaniards, French, Italians; central Europeans: Germans; western and northern Europeans: English, Swedes, Poles, Hungarians, Russians, and southern Europeans: “Turks or Greeks.

The painting offers up a visual summary of judgments and prejudices about foreigners (foreign men, that is, since women do not appear in this work). Presumably the imagery was based on what the engraver and the painter thought about foreigners and on what their contemporaries thought—or were meant to think—about other peoples and nations as well. Alternatively, the engraver and artist may have acted on the knowledge that serving clichés can be quite profitable. The underlying assumption appears to be that Germans are better than everyone else.

Source



Source: “Short Description of the People Living in Europe and their Characteristics” [“Kurze Beschreibung der In Europa Befindlichen Völckern Und Ihren Aigenschafften”]. Also referred to as “Table of Peoples” [“Völkertafel”] or “Styrian Table of Peoples” [“Steirische Völkertafel”]. Volkskundemuseum Vienna, Signature: ÖMV/30.905. Available online at: <https://volkskundemuseum.at/online-sammlungen/oemv30905>

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