

**Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly.** *Court Culture in Dresden: From Renaissance to Baroque.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xv + 310 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-98448-2.



**Reviewed by** Pernille Arenfeldt (European University Institute, Florence, Italy/American University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates)

**Published on** H-German (July, 2006)

## Court Culture in Dresden

*Court Culture in Dresden* is a succinct survey of the development of the culture at the court of electoral Saxony from the mid-sixteenth to the early eighteenth century. The book is divided into seven chapters that examine the different ways in which the Saxon rulers used “art in its widest sense as part of [their] panoply of power, as a tool of government and as an expression of [their] political ambitions” (p. 238). The first six chapters are each devoted to specific aspects of Saxon court culture (Lutheranism, “Italianization” of the court, collecting, alchemy, official image-making and court theater), while the seventh chapter considers the Dresden court culture during the reign of August the Strong (Friedrich August I, r. 1694-1733).

In chapter 1 (“The Lutheran Legacy: The Albertine Electors and Protestant Court Culture”), the author highlights the pronounced Lutheran identity of Saxony and the House of Wettin and shows how this was emphasized in the burial chapel at the Cathedral in Freiberg, where the electors of Saxony and their closest relatives were interred. Attention is also paid to the specifically Lutheran

motives that characterized the tournaments held during court festivals and, in the last part of the chapter, Watanabe-O'Kelly stresses the importance of music to Lutheranism. She demonstrates how this is detectable in the development of the genre known as the “Historia,” that is, “a setting of a biblical episode and a precursor of the oratorio” (p. 23). Although Johann Georg II of Saxony (r. 1657-80) promoted Italian opera and French ballet, the “Historia” continued to thrive at the Dresden court and Watanabe-O'Kelly argues that the particular mélange of musical and dramatic traditions combined with “Lutheran piety” constituted the foundations for the “biblical semi-opera” as developed by Constantin Christian Dedekind (1628-1715).

Although the title of chapter 2, “The Italian Ideal: The Sixteenth-Century Reception of Italian Culture,” suggests that it deals exclusively with the sixteenth century, one-third of the chapter focuses on the seventeenth century. Watanabe-O'Kelly detects the first evidence of Italian influence during the 1540s and 1550s, when the palace in Dresden was re-decorated. During the latter half of the

sixteenth century, the Italian influence spread to art and jewelry, but remained most intensive in the areas of engineering and architecture. During the reign of Christian I (1586-91) the inspiration from Italy became manifest in the architecture of the new stables in Dresden as well as in other developments related to equestrian arts. Yet it was during Johann Georg I's reign (1611-56) that Italian culture was truly cultivated in Dresden. Already during Johann Georg's childhood, "the Italian ideal of polished behavior or 'civil conversazione'" was clearly present in Dresden (p. 57). His orientation towards Italy was reinforced by subsequent sojourns in several Italian cities and upon his succession, he "immediately ... began his own programme of Italianisation" (p. 61). Watanabe-O'Kelly emphasizes the Italian influence on music (especially by Johann Georg's success in bringing Heinrich Schütz—who had studied in Italy—to Dresden); in the presentation of natural history and medicine at the court (exemplified in the creation and of a decidedly Italian-inspired "Chamber of Anatomy"); and in the resumption and subsequent completion of the Italianate *Lusthaus* or Belvedere on the ramparts at Dresden, which Christian I had begun in 1589.

In chapter 3, "The Management of Knowledge: The Dresden Collections—Their Origins and Development," the development of the electors' *Kunstammer* (and, to a lesser extent, their library) is traced on the basis of numerous inventories compiled during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Watanabe-O'Kelly demonstrates that the Dresden *Kunstammer* as developed by August (r. 1553-86) differed considerably from the collections of most contemporary princes. The Dresden collection was dominated by technical or scientific instruments rather than natural objects (*naturalia*) and/or impressive man-made objects (*artificialia*), which constituted the core of most collections at other German courts. While August's successors added to the collection that gradually came to resemble those at other German courts, the organization of the *Kunstammer* remained unchanged until Johann Georg I in the 1640s, "turned [it] into a monument to its founder, Elector August" (p. 94). It retained this mark until August the Strong initiated a thorough reorganization of the electors' many collections in the 1720s as discussed in chapter 7.

Chapter 4, "The Secrets of the Heavens and the Earth: Alchemy, Mining and Astrology at the Dresden Court," is devoted to the pursuit of the so-called occult arts of alchemy and astrology at the Dresden court. Drawing upon the rich material preserved in the Saxon archives, the author identifies the wide-ranging theoretical frame-

work of alchemy and related arts at the Dresden court. Subsequently, attention is turned to the ways in which alchemy was practiced in Dresden. While the occult arts were cultivated at the Dresden court throughout the early modern period, August and Johann Georg II (r. 1657-80) were particularly active alchemists and the laboratory flourished during their reigns. Stressing the links between alchemy, metallurgy, mining and astrology, the last part of the chapter examines the prominent role of these interrelated subjects in the Saxon court festivals. While astrology played a central role in courtly representations across early modern Europe, Watanabe-O'Kelly stresses that the theme of mining was specific to the Dresden court and reflects the importance of this sector to the Saxon economy.

Chapter 5, "The Fabrication of an Image: Johann Georg II's Self-Presentation," focuses exclusively on Johann Georg II. Examining the development of Johann Georg's self-representation in selected festivals from the 1650s to the 1670s, Watanabe-O'Kelly reveals a sophisticated and coherent program in which the frequent references to the ancient heroes Jason and Hercules appear as precursors to the elector's subsequent identification with the Christian hero St. George. All three figures enabled Johann Georg to present himself as a victorious warrior who successfully defended his people against all dangers. In the second half of the chapter, the ways in which Johann Georg ensured resonance and permanence of his self-representation are exemplified by an analysis of two comprehensive and richly illustrated works published at his request: Anton Weck's 548-page account of Dresden with its elaborate account of the historical events that took place in the city from 1366 to the 1670s; and Gabriel Tzschimmer's detailed description of the Albertine family gathering in Dresden in 1578 and the celebrations that were staged during this "Most Noble Gathering" (p. 155).

In chapter 6, "The 'Recreation of the Spirit': Theatre at the Dresden Court during the Seventeenth Century," the development of three types of theater at Dresden court is considered: performances by strolling players, *ballet de cour*, and opera. Although Watanabe-O'Kelly considers the impact of the decidedly Italian opera to have been relatively peripheral in electoral Saxony (see especially p. 192), the itinerant groups and the ballet were cultivated during several decades and receive greater attention. The author first documents the presence of several itinerant groups of actors in Dresden during the seventeenth century and examines their repertoire. Until the 1660s—that is, as long as the English actors dominated the scene—the performances were dominated by English plays (above all

variations of Shakespeare's works). However, as groups of German actors came to Dresden later, the repertoire widened and works by Molière, Corneille, and Pedro Calderón (among others) were introduced. In contrast to the performances by strolling players, the *ballet de cour* was specific to the courtly setting. Developed in France during the late sixteenth century, the first influence of the genre in Dresden can, according to Watanabe-O'Kelly, be found in a play staged on the occasion of the baptism of Johann Georg I's son August in 1614. Elements of the ballet are also detectable in several performances from the 1620s, but it was only in the 1650s that the interest of the poet David Schirmer (1623-86), who held the office as electoral librarian, led to a "full-scale cultivation of ballet on the French model" (p. 176).

In the account of August the Strong's reign (chapter 7, "The Saxon Hercules: August the Strong, Elector of Saxony, King of Poland"), several subjects addressed in the preceding chapters are revisited. After a brief summary of the political events that led to August's election as king of Poland, Watanabe-O'Kelly shows that—contrary to what one may expect—August's conversion to Catholicism reinforced the Lutheran identity of electoral Saxony. The author also stresses the elector's reliance on tradition in other areas. Examining four of the most elaborate festivals that took place during his reign, she thus concludes that they were only distinguished from earlier court celebrations in Dresden by their scale. In some areas, however, August did introduce changes. Inspired by his own stay in France during the 1680s, he imported significant aspects of French culture: the Italian actors at the court were replaced with a group from France and the architectural structure known as the *Zwinger* is decidedly influenced by French baroque architecture. Similarly, it was the collections at the French court (as well as those in Florence and Vienna) that inspired August to reorganize the collections of his predecessors. Watanabe-O'Kelly pays particular attention to August's fascination with *objets de vertu* and his transformation of the Green Vault from a storage space to a permanent exhibition.

Throughout the analysis, the impact of the different Saxon electors and their personal interests is balanced with consideration of the changing fashions that characterized European court culture. In the conclusion, the author explicitly discusses the interplay between the different forces that shaped the court culture and concludes that the central location of Saxony and the rulers' cultural engagement with Italy and France, combined with the strong Lutheran traditions of the ruling dynasty, resulted in a court culture that was characterized by a unique and

fruitful synthesis of traditions.

Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly's in-depth knowledge of early modern court culture is evident throughout the book. Yet, her particular strength and interest is in the Baroque rather than the Renaissance court, and the account does give greater emphasis to the late seventeenth century. As the volume rightly demonstrates, seventeenth-century courts differed from those of the sixteenth century in several ways. But the volume does not consider one of the most fundamental differences: the very gradual emergence of Dresden as *Residenzstadt* (the seat of residence for the rulers and the government). During the sixteenth century, the Saxon electors spent as much time away from Dresden as they did in the city, and some of their most elaborate building projects can be found in other parts of Saxony (for example in Moritzburg, Lochau/Annaberg and Augustusburg). In this respect, the focus on Dresden—rather than on the territory at large—means that certain important aspects of the sixteenth-century court culture are not considered.

The survey is founded on a truly impressive volume and range of material preserved in the Saxon archives and libraries, and the author's meticulous references to the hundreds of manuscripts consulted make the book an indispensable tool for other scholars working on related subjects. However, while the emphasis on primary sources is most agreeable and benefits other researchers, the arguments could at times have been strengthened by further consultation of previous scholarship. In the discussion of the ways in which mining and astrological themes were used in court festivals (pp. 120-129). A reference to Mara Wade's observations on the subject and her discussion of Heinrich Schütz's role as artistic director of court festivals could have been useful,[1] especially because Watanabe-O'Kelly stresses how unusual this theme was in early modern court festivals and discusses Schütz's role in the development of music at the Dresden court. Similarly, the analysis of Johann Georg II's self-representation resonates with Peter Burke's arguments in *The Fabrication of Louis XIV* (1992) and could have been reinforced by consideration of this influential work.

As the above summary reveals, the subject of cultural transfer is central to the book and the author successfully outlines numerous areas in which this theme can be studied further. Watanabe-O'Kelly also shows that the transfers frequently happened in several steps. Hence, discussing the important role of the architect and designer Giovanni Maria Nosseni (1544-1620), she rightly

points out that in spite of his own Italian background, his contributions to “Italianization” were often inspired by events at other German courts (p. 54). In several other cases, she pointedly illustrates that any cultural import implied a selective and creative appropriation. These observations bring important nuances to the processes of cultural transfer, but they also raise questions about the author’s claim that “modernisation meant Italianisation” in the context of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century courts of Germany (p. 37). Although the Italian influence doubtlessly was strong, other parts of the book reveal that this claim may be an oversimplification.

These questions aside, Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly’s work deserves praise. This book will doubtlessly inspire

other scholars to pursue further research on many subjects she considers. The book is not simply an introduction to the electoral court of Saxony, however; the clear and concise introductions to so many activities and aspects of the material culture at the court also make it a useful introduction for any student and scholar who is interested in early modern court culture throughout Europe.

Note

[1]. Mara R. Wade, *Triumphus Nuptialis Danicus: German Court Culture and Denmark. The Great Wedding of 1634* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), particularly pp. 208-278.

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**Citation:** Pernille Arenfeldt. Review of Watanabe-O’Kelly, Helen, *Court Culture in Dresden: From Renaissance to Baroque*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11954>

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