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MUSEUM LUDWIG

PRESS RELEASE

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Sisi in Private: The Empress's Photo Albums

Press conference: Friday, October 23, 2020, 11 a.m., press preview starting at 10 a.m.

Like many upper-class women of her time, Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary, known as Sisi, collected portrait photographs in the 1860s—it was in vogue. The Museum Ludwig holds eighteen of her albums with some 2000 photographs in carte de visite format—photographs mounted on cardboard around six by nine centimeters in size. They show members of the nobility—many of them from Elisabeth's family—as well as celebrities and artworks. Only in recent years have such albums been rediscovered as creative collages, imaginative spaces for social structures, and a medium for self-reflection. Among the empress's eighteen albums are three “albums of beauties.” “I am creating a beauty album, and am now collecting photographs for it, only of women. Any pretty faces you can muster at Angerer's or other photographers, I ask you to send me,” she wrote in 1862 from Venice to her brother-in-law Archduke Ludwig Viktor. Shortly thereafter the same request went out via the minister of foreign affairs to the Austrian ambassadors in Constantinople, St. Petersburg, Paris, London, and Berlin.

The three albums of beauties at the Museum Ludwig are precious—with amethysts, brass fittings, gilt edges, and bound in leather—and at first glance their composition appears heterogeneous. How did Elisabeth curate these works in her private gallery of beauties, her counterpart to the gallery of painted portraits of beautiful women at Nymphenburg Palace? And why the focus on women? The answer is: she used these highly staged images to burnish her own image, since she had a keen sense of the interplay between seeing and being seen. The years in which she compiled the albums were those in which she “fled” from Vienna, as her biographer Brigitte Hamann wrote, and lived for months in Venice, Madeira, and Corfu. During this absence from Vienna, while she collected photographs, she matured into a more energetic, self-confident figure whose beauty would become legendary. And she found the models for her self-presentation not in the aristocracy, of whom she was critical, but in the stars of the international stages. To her the fine clothes she wore on official occasions felt like a costume: she spoke of being “harnessed.”

Around the age of thirty, Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary decided to no longer have her photograph taken, not even for a medical X-ray. In the 1880s she turned to poetry, writing “To the Gazers,” quite unlike the sweet character of “Sissi” played by Romy Schneider in Ernst Marischka's films: “„an die Gaffer“, to the gazers: „Es tritt die Galle mir fast aus, / Wenn sie mich so fixieren; / Ich kröch' gern in ein Schneckenhaus / Und könnt' vor Wut krepieren.“ (Bile almost overcomes me,

when they fixate me such; I'd seek my shell most gladly, could die from anger much.)" The presentation sketches the connections between her almost obsessive collecting of portraits of women, the image that she created of herself and refusal of images in later years.

The presentation is supported by the Österreichisches Kulturforum Berlin. The restoration of the photo albums is made possible by the Freundeskreis der Kulturstiftung der Länder.

Curator: Miriam Szwast

Website and Social Media

The Museum Ludwig will be posting about the exhibition on its social media channels with the hashtag #MLxSisi.

Facebook/Instagram/Twitter/Vimeo: @MuseumLudwig

www.museum-ludwig.de