

**Erasmus Grasser (Schmidmühlen 1450-1518)**  
**A Holy Knight**  
**Germany, Bavaria, Munich (?)**  
**c. 1500**



*121 x 33 x 23 cm; limewood, traces of polychrome on the hair and the base, a small loss to the drapery edge at the front and the Saint's spear held in his right hand now lost, otherwise in very good condition*

***Published in:***

Rohmeder, Jürgen. *Erasmus Grasser: Bildhauer, Bau- und Werkmeister*. Peter Lang, 2003, pp. 296 -297.

Buchheit, Hans. *Unbekannte Kunstwerke in Münchner Privatbesitz*. Munich, 1954, pp. 49. (attributes it to Erasmus Grasser, c. 1500)

Otto, Kornelius. *Erasmus Grasser und der Meister des Blütenburger Apostelzyklus. Studien zur Münchener Plastik des späten 15. Jahrhunderts* (Miscellanea Bavarica Monacensia) Dissertation, Munich, 1988, pp. 128ff.

***Exhibited:***

Altdeutsche Kunst, Galerie Böhler, 1934

***Provenance:***

Kleine Galerie, Munich (a private collection of the graphic artist Walter Schnackenberg), before 1923

Kunsthandel AG, Lucerne, June 1923  
Julius Böhler, Munich, 1924 (inv.no. 27-3).  
Baureis, Starnberg, 30 November 1945  
Julius Böhler, Munich, 1950 (on consignment)  
Baureis, Starnberg, 1962 (returned)  
Private Collection, Austria, 1963

This standing figure of a holy knight has been firmly attributed to Erasmus Grasser (c. 1450-1515), one of the most celebrated German sculptors of the late Middle Ages. The sculpture is one of a pair, which was originally owned by the graphic artist Walter Schnackenberg. The two sculptures were displayed in the Kleine Galerie in the Arco Palais in Munich (which also served as Schnackenberg's atelier) before being sold to Julius Böhler in 1923 (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Together, they were a part of an exhibition on 'Altdeutsche Kunst' in 1934 in Munich. Possibly because of financial difficulties after the war, Böhler split the sculptures up on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 1945 by selling the Holy Knight which was in a better condition into a private collection.

### ***Description:***

The weight of the Holy Knight rests on his left leg, while his right knee is bent. With his left hand he pulls the right edge of his mantle to the left, creating a series of thick folds, which imbues the figure with a sense of dynamism. In his right hand he once held an implement, probably a spear, and beneath his mantle he wears a coat of armour. On his head he has a tall hat which flares at the top. He has a mop of curly, shoulder-length hair, and facial features such as rounded eyes and a slightly smiling mouth that are characteristic of Grasser's animated physiognomies.

Erasmus Grasser worked in Munich from 1474, developing his own highly individual style, imbued with drama. Despite being characterized as a "disruptive, promiscuous and disingenuous knave" by the Guild of Painters, Carvers and Glaziers, he was commissioned by the Munich City Council to work on some of their most important projects, such as the Town Hall. Known for his genius and his inventiveness, Grasser's figures are carved in animated poses with drapery that is characterized by regularly curved edges. Working mainly in wood, Grasser is widely celebrated for the series of the *Morris Dancers* carved for the dancing room in Munich town hall in 1480 (fig. 2). He is also known for the oak choir stalls in the Cathedral of Munich, carved in 1502, and the high altar at Reichersdorf carved in 1502-1506. His large workshop was important in Munich and south Bavaria well into the sixteenth century.

The attribution of this figure to Grasser himself comes not only from a stylistic analysis but also from its close relation to a group of figures from Grasser's workshop that possess very similar characteristics – most notably the identical carving of the drapery folds. The closest comparison of this group to our statue is the figure of St Martin, which was united with our sculpture until at least 1934 and which is now in a private collection (fig. 3).<sup>2</sup> A number of authors, including Liedke, Buchheit, Otto and most recently the National Gallery in Munich have attributed this

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<sup>1</sup> Archival material from the Bohler Archive is available upon request.

<sup>2</sup> *Bewegte Zeiten: Der Bilhauer Erasmus Grasser*. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum: Munich, 2018.

figure to the hand of Erasmus Grasser himself.<sup>3</sup> Amongst the publications that have looked at the figure of St Martin, there is a clear consensus that our sculpture and the figure of St Martin were a part of the same altarpiece – not least on account of their identical size, their current state of preservation, the same dynamism, and similar facial features. The two figures are clearly each other's counterpart, sharing also a similar provenance history. The figure of St Martin was in the collection of the National Gallery in Munich before being sold to Julius Böhler in 1928, and then making its way into a private collection. As our statue was also in the possession of Böhler before being sold to a private collection in 1963, it is highly probably that these two statues were together as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Another statue that may be related to this group is the Holy Figure from the Harvard Museum, also attributed to Grasser and possibly a part of the same altarpiece as the figure of St Martin and our figure of a Holy Knight.<sup>4</sup> This connection, however, may only be stylistic as the figures do not share a similar recent provenance.

The other figures in this group include two male saints (also called Holy Kings) and a group of statues from the parish church of Kirchdorf, attributed to the workshop of Grasser but not to Grasser himself (fig. 4 - 5). These statues all have identical drapery folds to either our figure or the statue of St Martin. The two Holy Kings are both in private collections and are much smaller in size than our statue (published in Volker Liedke, *Ars Bavarica*, Munich, 2002, vol. 85, pls 214, 215 and 217, pp. 248-49). In Liedke's 2002 publication, he discussed this group and compared the statue of St Sigismund from Kirchdorf to the statue of St Martin, noting that the drapery and form of St Sigismund copies the figure of St Martin completely (fig. 4). Liedke argued, however, that although these statues clearly come from the same workshop, the crisp lines of the drapery, the facial type, and the carving of the hair of St Martin (and therefore also our statue) illustrate an artist of the highest caliber, almost certainly Grasser himself.

The reason for these contemporary copies is that Grasser's workshop frequently reused models made by Grasser himself, and altered them depending on the particular saint's attribute(s). This was a common trend in late medieval Europe, as masters would often create models that would be copied by their workshop and sold upon request. Our statue possesses the same command, facial type and confident carving as the statue of St Martin, thus decisively validating the theory that this was carved by Grasser and possibly used as a model in the workshop. One of the Holy Kings, noted above, may have been directly modelled on our figure as it possessed the same drapery forms yet lacks the Grasser facial type, the distinctive rocky base that Grasser's figures stand on, and is of a much smaller size. In the recently published *Bewegte Zeiten: Der Bildhauer Erasmus Grasser*, the discussion also involves the figure of St John the Martyr (fig. 5), and although the comparison is made again to the statue of St Martin, the stance and drapery forms are closer to our figure. Assuming that our figure acted as the prototype that was reused with alterations for the figure of St John the Martyr in Kirchdorf (dated to c. 1500), a date of execution in the preceding decade seems highly likely.

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<sup>3</sup> Hans Buchheit, *Unbekannte Kunstwerke in Münchner Privatbesitz* (Munich, 1954), pp. 49; Volker Liedke, *Art Bavarica*, Munich, Vol. 25/26 (1982), pp. 24-28; Kornelius Otto, *Erasmus Grasser und der Meister des Blütenburger Apostelzyklus. Studien zur Münchener Plastik des späten 15. Jahrhunderts* (Miscellanea Bavarica Monacensia) PhD Dissertation, Munich, 1988, pp. 128ff; Volker Liedke, *Ars Bavarica*, Munich, 2002, vol. 85; *Bewegte Zeiten: Der Bildhauer Erasmus Grasser*, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum: Munich (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Published in Walter Cahn, *Romanesque Sculpture in American Collections. Volume 1: New England Museums*. (Publications of the International Center of Medieval Art, 1).

All in all, this powerful statue of a Holy Knight with its dynamic drapery and animated facial features illustrates the energy of the Grasser workshop and represents a figure that would have been admired and copied.

*Related Literature:*

Buchheit, Hans. *Unbekannte Kunstwerke in Münchner Privatbesitz*. Munich, 1954.

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Liedke, Volker. *Ars Bavarica*, Munich, 2002, vol. 85.

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Fig. 1  
Holy Knight (or St Sebastian) and St Martin  
Photograph from the Böhler Archive, Munich  
c. 1928



Fig. 2  
Erasmus Grasser  
Morris Dancer  
1480  
Munich Stadtmuseum (originally for the Munich City Hall)





Fig. 3  
Erasmus Grasser  
St Martin (?)  
c. 1490  
Private Collection  
(Previously Bohler, inv.no. 27-2)



Fig. 4  
Erasmus Grasser (workshop)  
St Sigismund  
c. 1500  
Parish church of Kirchdorf



Fig. 5  
Workshop of Erasmus Grasser  
St John the Martyr  
c. 1500  
Parish church of Kirchdorf