

Celestial Phenomena and Royal Glory: The Painted Ceiling in Ehrenstrahlsalongen by David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl at Drottningholm Palace in Sweden

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Abstract. This paper explores the relationship of astronomical phenomena and the painted ceiling *The Glorious Deeds of Swedish Kings* executed around 1694-1696 by the Swedish court painter David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl in the Royal manor Drottningholm, outside Stockholm. The central theme of the painting is how “Reputation” brings the renown of the valour of the Swedish kings to the stars. When Galileo dedicated the moons of Jupiter to the Medici’s he used an already established tradition of likening prominent people to celestial phenomena. This paper explores why motifs related to the stars and heavens was considered to be so suitable in the court context in early modern Europe.

The Palace Drottningholm was built from 1662 for Hedvig Eleonora of Holstein-Gottorf, dowager queen of Sweden¹. The decorations of the palace celebrate her, her deceased husband Karl X, her son Karl XI and the crown prince Karl XII, and many motifs are connected to dynastic claims. Sweden had due to its aggressive wars recently extended its borders. New self-confidence and territorial gains were manifested in works of art. Swedish palaces embody these new relationships of power and artists aimed to make works on par with those in the great palaces of Europe. The theme of Ehrenstrahlsalongen, used as an audience chamber, is the reign of the dowager queen (*förmyndarregeringen*) Hedvig Eleonora 1660-1693. The painting *The Glorious Deeds of Swedish Kings* accordingly deals with claims of power and Swedish history (Figure 1).

The painter David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl described his works in detail in a printed booklet with the confident title *Die vornehmste Schildereyen, welche in denen Pallästen des Königreiches Schweden zu sehen sind inventiret, verfertiget und beschrieben von David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl*, 1694 (“The most prominent paintings to be seen in the palaces in the kingdom of Sweden”)². This text makes it possible to identify the intended iconographical programme with certainty. In the centre three figures, Virtus, Gloria, and Fortitude, present a shield. It is inscribed “CG” which stands for several brave Swedish kings of the 16th and 17th centuries: Gustav I, Gustav Adolf, Karl X,

¹On the Drottningholm Palace, see G. ALM-R. MILHAGEN, *Drottningholms slott*, vol. I, Karlstad, Votum Förlag, 2004.

²It is however odd that the placing of some of the paintings in the room as well as some details of the paintings do not conform with the description.

Karl XI and the crown prince, Karl XII. Immortality descends and crowns the shield with a ring of stars signifying eternity, while Fame blows her trumpet. A number of sweet *putti* assist the ladies. Centrally, below the shield is a large lion. Ehrenstrahl wrote in his description that it is the Nordic lion. It is possible that the constellation Leo is alluded to, but no stars are painted to indicate that it is a constellation. Around the major figures a number of constellations marked with white spots to designate the individual stars are depicted: Ursa Minor, Draco, Ursa Major, Corona Borealis, Hercules, Pegasus, Lyra, Aquila, Cygnus, Perseus, Andromeda, Via Lactea, besides Stella Polaris and the fixed stars. These stars are busy admiring the valour of the Swedish kings.

In the description the artist laid out some specific Swedish and northern points: the Swedish kings, the Nordic lion, the fixed stars situated above the kingdom of Sweden where they were all engaged in admiring the scene. It is to be noted that the chosen constellations are all easily associated with valour, heroic deeds, and visible from the north.

Stockholm castle had been decorated with motifs related to celestial phenomena in allegorical form. For example a series of tapestries depicted the planetary deities, and was hung in the audience chamber³. To use the constellations and planetary deities was an established convention in European palace decorations. There are many possible sources of inspiration for the motif and invention. Ehrenstrahl traveled through Europe and was able to see a great number of paintings. Even if he would not have had the opportunity to see the works in situ, he could have known about them. Descriptions, drawings and especially engravings made works of art known also in remote parts of Europe.

Ehrenstrahl was educated in Germany, and in his youth he went to the Netherlands, and later found employment in Sweden. In 1654 he went on further travels through Germany to Italy, where he stayed in Venice and also in Rome until 1660. On the way back to Sweden he went via Florence, Marseille, Paris and London. In 1661 he was back and was appointed court painter to Hedvig Eleonora, and was ennobled in 1674. At Drottningholm Palace he was commissioned with the decoration of several rooms⁴.

There is a group of painted ceilings from the 16th and 17th centuries with celestial motifs that might have been influential. In the latter half of the 16th, in the Sala Bologna⁵ in the Vatican and in the Sala del Mappamondo in Palazzo Farnese in

³P. GILLGREN, *Vasarenässansen: Konst och identitet i 1500-talets Sverige*, Stockholm, Bokförlaget Atlantis, 2009, p. 56 ff.

⁴On the biography of Ehrenstrahl, see I. L. ÅNGSTRÖM, *Det profana måleriet*, in G. ALM (ed.), *Barockens konst*, Lund, Lund Signum, 1997, pp. 396-415; W. NISSER, *Die italienischen Skizzenbücher von Erik Jönson Dahlberg und David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl*, Uppsala, Almqvist & Wiksells, 1948; M. LILJEGREN, *Ehrenstrahls Ungdomsmåleri*, in M. LILJEGREN-S. SANDSTRÖM (eds.), *Vision och gestalt*, Stockholm, Stockholm Natur och Kultur, 1958, pp. 107-127.

⁵Executed by Giovanni Antonio Vanosino da Varese, 1575, see L. PARTRIDGE, *The Room of Maps at Caprarola*, "The Art Bulletin", 77, 3, 1995, pp. 413-444:420 ff.; C. PIETRANGELI (ed.), *Die Gemälde des Vatikan*, München, Hirmer Verlag, 1996, p. 277 ff.; K. LIPPINCOTT, *Two Astrological Ceilings Considered: The "Sala di Galatea" in the Villa Farnesina and the "Sala del Mappamondo" at Caprarola*, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", 53, 1990, pp. 185-207:206; J. HESS, *On Some Celestial Maps and Globes of the Sixteenth Century*, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", 30, 1967, pp. 406-409.



Figure 1. David Klöcker Ehrenstrahl, *The Glorious Deeds of Swedish Kings*, c. 1694-1696, oil on canvas, c. 593 cm × 344 cm, Ehrenstrahlsalongen, Drottningholm Palace, Nationalmusei Drottningholmssamling, inv. num. NMDrh 131. (Credit: © A. Daflos, Kungl. Hovstaterna)

Caprarola north of Rome⁶, large impressive ceilings were painted as maps of the heav-

⁶Devised by Fulvio Orsini and Orazio Trigini de' Marii and possibly by Cardinal Farnese himself, and executed by Giovanni Antonio Vanosino da Varese, Giovanni de' Vecchi and Raffaellino da Reggio, c. 1574, see PARTRIDGE, *The Room of Maps* (cit. note 5); C. ROBERTSON, "Il Gran Cardinale": *Alessandro Farnese, Patron of the Arts*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 118 ff., p. 227 ff.; LIPPINCOTT, *Two astrological Ceilings* (cit. note 4); D. J. WARNER, *The Celestial Cartography of Giovanni Antonio Vanosino da Varese*, "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", 34, 1971, pp. 336-337.

ens. Also in Austria, in Schloss Ambras in Innsbruck a ceiling with the constellations was executed (the “Rüstungsaal”)⁷. Here the ceilings can be seen as metaphors or the heavens placed high in the room. These large rooms had ceremonial purposes, and were used as audience chambers or as dining-rooms. At Caprarola, the constellations are depicted together with the *imprese* and the heraldry of the Farnese family.

Besides these large maps of the constellations, there were painted ceilings with a few constellations and the zodiac. Around 1500 such rooms were made in Rome, in the Vatican in the Appartamento Borgia and in the Sala Galathea in Villa Farnesina⁸. A successive order of rooms named after the planets were also made in notable palaces by the most famous artists such as the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence (by Pietro da Cortona) and Versailles (by Charles le Brun) in the 17th century⁹. It must be assumed that the planets and constellations in those environments were placed according to their representative function and meaning, rather than as explanations of scientific matters. According to my view they should not be read as a predisposition of a particular planetary system, either the geocentric or the heliocentric. Celestial themes in ceremonial chambers were in fashion all over Europe. It seems painted ceilings were especially valued works of art¹⁰.

New discoveries were also motifs on large scale paintings. The Galilean moons were put in allegorical form in the ceiling of the Galleria Grande in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi in Florence, in a painting after an invention by Alessandro Segni and painted by Luca Giordano in the 1680s¹¹. The Medici princes are depicted with a star on their brow, as personifications of the celestial phenomena. It is uncertain whether this painting was seen by Ehrenstrahl, but the architect Tessin the Younger saw it in 1687 and thought it was important enough to describe it in his treatise on architecture¹².

⁷The ceiling in Schloss Ambras was executed by Giovanni Battista Fontana before 1586, but was later moved to another room.

⁸S. POESCHEL, *Alexander Maximus: Das Bildprogramm des Appartamento Borgia im Vatikan*, Weimar, Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 1999; LIPPINCOTT, *Two Astrological Ceilings* (cit. note 5); K. LIPPINCOTT, *The “Camera Dello Zodiaco” of Federico II Gonzaga*, “Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes”, 54, 1991, pp. 244-247; M. QUILAND-McGRATH, *The Astrological Vault of the Villa Farnesina: Agostino Chigi’s Rising Sign*, “Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes”, 47, 1984, pp. 91-105; see also more examples in K. LEHMANN, *The Dome of Heaven*, “The Art Bulletin”, 27, 1945, pp. 1-27; E. H. GOMBRICH, *The Sala dei Venti in the Palazzo del Te*, “Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes”, 13, 1950, pp. 189-201.

⁹The planetary rooms in Palazzo Pitti were executed between 1641 and 1665, and in the Palace of Versailles 1671-1681; see M. CAMPBELL, *Pietro da Cortona at the Pitti Palace: A Study of the Planetary Rooms and Related Projects*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977, p. 63 ff., p. 177 ff.; G. SABATIER, *Versailles ou la figure du roi*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1999, p. 107 ff.

¹⁰On the status of the painted ceiling, see T. FRANGENBERG, “*The Beauty and Majesty of the Images*”. *Pietro da Cortona’s Barberini Ceiling in Teti’s Aedes Barberinae*, in R. PALMER-T. FRANGENBERG (eds.), *The Rise of the Image. Essays on the History of the Illustrated Art Book*, Burlington, Aldershot Publisher Limited, 2003, pp. 135-156, more general on the painted ceiling as a metaphor for the heavens, see LEHMANN, *The Dome of Heaven* (cit. note 8).

¹¹F. BÜTTNER, *Die Galleria Riccardiana in Florenz*, Bern, Herbert Lang, 1972, p. 61 ff.

¹²NICODEMUS TESSIN THE YOUNGER, *Traicté dela decoration interieure*, in P. WEDDY (ed.), *Nicodemus Tessin the Younger: Sources Works Collections*, Stockholm Nationalmuseum och Arkitekturmuseet, 2002. On this painting, see BÜTTNER, *Die Galleria Riccardiana* (cit. note 11), p. 37 ff.

It is known that Ehrenstrahl visited the Palazzo Barberini in Rome and was influenced by Pietro da Cortona's large scale painting. In this palace there is however another painting which I believe has influenced the painting at Drottningholm. It is probable that Ehrenstrahl was familiar with the painted ceiling *Divina providentia* by Andrea Sacchi from c. 1630. In this painting several constellations are depicted. They are clearly to be taken as constellations, because points for the locations of stars are explicitly marked in the painting. The placing of the figures in relation to each other cannot be matched to any map, but their position is made according to their symbolical value.

Upon a throne with lions on each side, with a Sun on her chest, *Divina providentia*, is seated. She holds a mirror signifying purity and wisdom¹³. To her right is a woman with a cross (Crux) and an altar (Ara), symbolizing Faith or Sanctity, above to the right on a cloud a personification of Fear of God with a hare (Lepus), below to the left Clear sightedness or perspicacity with an eagle (Aquila), Purity with a swan (Cygnus), and Beauty with hair (Coma Berenices). Above, to the left of *Divina providentia* is Love riding on a lion (Leo), to the left on clouds (from *Divina providentia* to the right): Divinity with a triangle (Triangulum), Beneficence or Generosity with a scepter (Spica/Virgo), Sweetness or Harmony with a lyre (Lyra), Fortitude with the club of Hercules (Hercules), Eternity with a ring, (Serpens/Ophiuchus), Justice with scales (Libra), Nobility with a crown of stars (Corona Borealis). The constellations are depicted in a way that conforms to the traditional representation of certain virtues, and at the same time recognizable constellation.

Below the virtues is a globe where Africa has the most prominent position, above Italy, and below the Antarctic. This painting has been understood with its religious undertones with references to the Wisdom of Solomon and the glorification of the Barberini family. The throne in the painting is foreseen with bees, the Barberini bees. Wisdom directs her light over Italy, closest to her throne. It is remarkable that Africa has such a protruding place and that also some constellations that are only visible from southern locations are chosen (such as Crux and Ara). This painting has also been interpreted to show a predisposition of the heliocentric view. I do not contest that such readings were possible in the 17th century, but it should be remembered that the function of this kind of painting was at first hand representative of the family for which it was made. Controversial or heretical views, at least if outspoken, would probably not be placed in representative places, and there is yet no satisfactory explanation why there would be such a statement in an official room.

The constellations are not depicted as they would be on a proper map, but as women holding attributes to signify different constellations. For example the constellation Hercules, which normally is drawn as a man in an odd kneeling position, is here

¹³Possibly the spotless mirror is a metaphor for the Moon and a reference to the controversy of the surface of the Moon. On the interpretation of this painting, see J. B. SCOTT, *Images of Nepotism: The Painted Ceilings of Palazzo Barberini*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991; G. S. LECHNER, *Tommaso Campanella and Andrea Sacchi's Fresco of Divina Sapienza in the Palazzo Barberini*, "The Art Bulletin", 58, 1, 1976, pp. 97-108; I. LAVIN, *Bernini's Cosmic Eagle*, in I. LAVIN (ed.), *Gianlorenzo Bernini: New Aspects of His Art and Thought*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985, pp. 209-219, with further references. For the possible usage of the room, see P. WADDY, *Seventeenth-century Roman Palaces: Use and the Art of the Plan*, Boston, The Architectural History Foundation, The MIT Press, 1990.



Figure 2. Michael Natalis (engraver) after a painting by Andrea Sacchi, *Allegory of Divine Wisdom* (the central section of the painted ceiling) in Palazzo Barberini, Rome in Girolamo Teti, *Aedes Barberinae ad Quirinalem*, Rome, 1642, plate 12 (folio). The fold-out plate measures 45 cm × 56.5 cm. (Credit: Bibliotheca Hertziana)

replaced by a woman carrying his club. They are also animated, moving on the clouds as if the heavens were inhabited with living creatures.

Small paintings with reproductions of the motif of the ceiling were given as gifts to prominent guests. It was also published in Girolamo Teti's *Aedes Barberinae ad Quirinalem* (1642), which indicates how important the decoration of this room was considered to be (Figure 2). The engraving in the book differs from the original painting in that the stars in the constellations are not marked, and only a partition of the terrestrial globe is visible¹⁴.

A comparison between Andrea Sacchi's painting and Ehrenstrahl's shows the same kind of inhabited heavens with the constellations depicted as living beings of the heavens celebrating a particular family. Ehrenstrahl has not chosen Biblical references as the point of departure. Constellations with outright religious connotations like Crux and Ara are not included, neither Lepus which could be associated with the lowly feeling fear. There are also in Palazzo Barberini several constellations visible only from

¹⁴T. FRANGENBERG, "The Beauty and Majesty of the Images": Pietro da Cortona's Barberini Ceiling in Teti's "Aedes Barberinae", in R. PALMER-T. FRANGENBERG (eds.), *The Rise of the Image: Essays on the History of the Illustrated Art Book*, Guildford, Biddles, 2002, pp. 135-156.

southern locations whereas in Ehrenstrahl's painting, constellations visible in Sweden are chosen. They are also more or less placed in relation to each other as they would be on a map.

It can be concluded that Ehrenstrahl used the general language of European allegory and established traditions of connotations between royalty, power, nobility, strength, valour and celestial phenomena. Ehrenstrahl would have seen many painted ceilings during his travels through Europe, and formed his opinion of what a palace of rank should look like. But he transformed what he had seen into an independent and explicit Swedish expression and meaning. The invention is entirely his own, and meaningful in the Swedish context at the time. Here the valour of the Swedish kings is demonstrated to the constellations to be admired. The right with which the dowager queen and her descendants exercised their power is in the painting even approved by the stars themselves. Who could then doubt it?

Ehrenstrahl's self portrait from 1691 well illustrates his ideas of painting, conceived to be exhibited in the same Palace Drottningholm¹⁵. He is portrayed with two females. The one to the right represents painting, and painterly effects. To his left is another lady signifying the intellectual part of painting. She is pointing at a piece of paper. According to Ehrenstrahl's description, he consults her as if asking her what to paint. She holds forth a piece of paper, which says: "Immortales pinge Majestatum", that is to paint the immortal reputation of the Majesties. In his self-portrait he showed the high value he attributed to the kind of painting that *The Glorious Deeds of Swedish Kings* represents.

Astronomy was particularly useful for this kind of painting. Astronomical phenomena and the heavens had several positive values, which could be used to enhance the subject. Therefore it was also ideal for emblems, impresas and devices. The French Jesuit Claude-François Menestrier in his *La philosophie des images* specifically pointed out celestial phenomena as useful for heraldry and devices and presented a great number related to the Sun, Moon and stars¹⁶. He wrote that preferable motifs are beautiful and agreeable to look at. Stars, peacocks, eagles, palmae, pomegranates, lions, roses and lilies were considered agreeable rather than snakes, swine, trefoil or thistles (in this order)¹⁷.

The "high" and noble outlook of astronomy in particular together with esthetical considerations made it into a subject suitable at court. The presumed proximity to God and Heaven further added positive values. In Ehrenstrahl's painting the constellations are depicted and described as if they were living beings able to perceive events on Earth. Ehrenstrahl used pictorial conventions from several European sources, but transformed the visual language into one of his own.

¹⁵NATIONALMUSEM STOCKHOLM, inventory number NM 949.

¹⁶C.-F. MENESTRIER, *La philosophie des images*, Paris, 1682; the first part was exclusively dedicated to the heavens and stars.

¹⁷C.-F. MENESTRIER, *L'art des emblèmes*, Lyon, 1662, p. 57.