

F:

This slate with stylus once belonged to Goethe. It takes us back to the early days of his life at his parents' house in Frankfurt, where, supported by several tutors, Goethe's father himself took on the task of teaching his children.

He was a gentleman of independent means, and his library and collections formed the basis for his children's education. As well as Greek and Latin, Goethe learnt French, English, Italian and later even Hebrew. At the age of ten, he was reading Aesop, Homer, Virgil, Ovid and the bible, as well as "A Thousand and One Nights", the satirical tales of "Owlglass" (Eulenspiegel), and Christopher Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus". He practised the piano and the violoncello along with drawing, horsemanship and fencing. From his earliest childhood, young Goethe's imagination was stirred by views of the city of Rome which decorated the walls of his parents' house. This was where the seed of Goethe's fascination with Italy was sown – the country he called, the *"object of my most ardent longing"*.

As a poet, he would draw deeply on his travels to Italy and many other places. In obedience to his father's wishes, he started studying law in Leipzig at the age of sixteen. But it soon became obvious that the wide-ranging education he'd enjoyed at home was to lead him down a different path. Beneath the items on display here, you'll find an overview of the key stages of his life and work.

But the foundation for his journey through life was created by his parents. As Goethe himself put it:

M:

"My build I have from father's side,
with it my earnest view of life;
from mother comes my genial heart
and my delight in spinning yarns."

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F:

This small-scale model represents the writing-desk of another great Weimar poet, Friedrich Schiller. Do you see the small scrap of felt glued to the table top? It's from his original desk. Schiller wrote many of his works at that desk – and possibly some of his letters to Goethe.

The extensive correspondence between the two poets laid the foundation for their alliance in the field of aesthetics. Their association developed against the background of the French Revolution, to which Goethe and Schiller responded with the artistic ideal of Weimar Classicism. They believed that humanity was on a gradual path towards higher development. However, people would progress to social change through art and literature, not by way of violent revolution. Their educational ideal was the "beautiful soul", in other words, a human being at peace with himself, in whose soul passions and morality were finely balanced. They harked back to antiquity in seeking perfection, harmony and humanity in art.

Both poets relied on the power of art and the poetic word, which they pitted against the outside world.

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F:

This heavy greatcoat made of grey cloth provided protection from dust, wind and weather when Goethe was travelling. The shoulder cape was specially designed to keep off the rain. In the 19th century, the greatcoat became a popular item of clothing, and not just among coachmen and carters.

Travelling was an onerous business during this period. The roads were in disastrous condition, and the accommodation was often filthy. There were also footpads and highwaymen, who represented a serious danger. Nevertheless, Goethe covered countless miles on his many journeys, on foot, on horseback or by coach. In all, the distance he travelled was equivalent to circling the equator.

But what made him want to travel? Let's hear Goethe himself:

M:

"For natures like mine, which like to establish themselves firmly and hold fast to things, a journey is invaluable; it animates, instructs and cultivates." *

F:

Travelling was very much in keeping with Goethe's ideal of self-education and life-long learning.

M:

"Man knows himself only insofar as he knows the world, for he is only aware of the world in himself, and of himself in the world."

F:

Take a look at the map on the wall opposite. It shows all the places where Goethe lived and worked, and all the locations he visited.

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* Source: Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe from 1704-1805, translated by George H. Calvert (1803-1889), New York & London, 1845 – OUT OF COPYRIGHT

F:

This delicate red chalk drawing by the Polish artist Daniel Chodowiecki depicts a key scene from Goethe's epistolary novel "The Sorrows of Young Werther", to which the exhibits in this glass case are devoted. We see Lotte, Werther's beloved, handing her husband's pistols to Werther's servant, who is borrowing them on his master's behalf. Her worried, helpless gaze suggests she senses the disaster to come. And indeed, these are the pistols with which Werther later commits suicide because of his unrequited love for her.

Goethe was just 25 years old when he wrote "Werther" – a young man, like Werther himself. He was motivated by his own unrequited love for Charlotte Buff, already betrothed to another. Goethe had, in his own words, *"lived, loved, and suffered greatly"*. He wrote "Werther" as an epistolary novel, but broke with the genre's rules: A dialogue form would have been the expectation, with responses – under the banner of reason – designed to temper the exchange. Instead, Goethe gives voice only to Werther. The effect is of a world created with unbridled subjectivity and given absolute validity.

Werther is isolated, both by his emotions and as an artist – because that's how he sees himself. He refuses to adhere to any rules or conventions. Ultimately, Goethe's theme is his view of genius. Without connections to the surrounding world, genius is doomed to failure and perishes due to its intrinsic nature.

However, sensitive youngsters among Goethe's contemporaries were less concerned with abstract notions of genius. They emphasised with the tragic story of unrequited love. The novel produced actual "Werther fever" and is said to have led to several suicides. "Werther" offered a way for the younger generation to express its opposition to the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason and its lack of scope for individual expression.

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F:

A long friendship was to link the two men in these portraits: Goethe (on the left) and Duke Carl August. When the duke invited Goethe to attend his court in Weimar in 1775, the "Werther" novel had already made its author famous. When Carl August took up the reins of government at the age of eighteen, Goethe became, in a way, his mentor.

But at first, if rumour is to be believed, the two of them mainly pursued a rollicking lifestyle at court. In keeping with Werther's cry: *"Oh! you reasonable people! Passion! Intoxication! Madness!"* they embarked on wild rides across the countryside, took a dip in rivers and spent the nights out under the stars. Their behaviour gave rise to a great deal of consternation at court, but it also tempted other artists and writers to visit Weimar from time to time.

The aesthetic concept invoked in "Werther" had become a way of life, and that's clearly reflected in the two portraits by Georg Melchior Kraus. Goethe is shown as an informal figure, a poet from the period of genius. In an environment where, according to Kraus, *"everyone appears in the most festive garb"*, he's wearing a loose frock coat in the English style. This would have given him full freedom of movement, in keeping with Rousseau's principle of *"back to nature"*, as propounded by Werther. Both the profile view and the silhouette in his hand are references to Johann Kaspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*. The Swiss writer believed a person's particular character could be deduced from their facial features and the shape of their skull.

In the other portrait, Carl August is wearing what became known as the "Werther costume", consisting of a blue coat, yellow breeches and brown boots. He looks relaxed and not at all courtly. That's all the more remarkable given that this portrait was painted in 1796, more than two decades after the publication of "Werther".

F:

Casts of famous people's skulls were popular collectors' items in Goethe's day. The cast was a way of connecting with the revered figure. Physiognomic studies in the manner of Lavater or Franz Josef Gall were thought to give an insight into the person's nature. This is a cast of Raphael's skull. Goethe remarked about it:

M:

"A splendid bone structure, in which a fine soul could readily perambulate."

F:

During his travels in Italy, Goethe had had the opportunity to see some of the famous Italian painter's works in the original. He regarded Raphael's paintings and frescoes as an expression of the highest artistic perfection:

M:

"But to appreciate him properly, one must study his predecessors, his masters. They diligently laid the broad foundations and rivalled each other in erecting the pyramid step by step, until finally, with the benefit of all these advantages, and illuminated by heavenly genius, he placed the final stone upon the summit, above and next to which no other may stand."

F:

The pyramid shape described by Goethe foreshadows his later concept of the genius, where the genius stands on the shoulders of those who went before. Just as Raphael taught himself by studying the work of earlier masters, Goethe, too, chose his role models. Whether Raphael, Newton or Napoleon: in his view, inspirational geniuses could now also be found among those active in the sciences or in politics – people who, in engaging constructively with the world, achieve great things.

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F:

This toy theatre was a Christmas present – Goethe gave it to his son August in the year 1800. The matching figures are mounted on little carts, and their arms and legs are adjustable. August had a choice of backdrops when he put on a puppet show. There was an Egyptian room, for example, an Italian town, a dungeon, a street with a church, a volcano belching fire, and a grand park with a pond. They may even have been miniaturised versions of scenery at Weimar's court theatre.

In the sense of "*theatrum mundi*" (the idea that all the world's a stage) August's toy theatre allowed him to shape the world and make it his own. He was able to explore it on a creative, sensory level, acting autonomously. In this context, education becomes self-education, and that was precisely in line with Goethe's own educational principles. Throughout his life, he acquired expertise in new fields of knowledge, of his own accord and often by way of experiment. He rejected the idea of setting educational goals. Instead, he believed his task as a teacher was to recognise his child's individual aptitudes and create suitable conditions for the child's self-development.

That sounds rather like the kind of educational debate we might have today, and it also influenced Goethe's later concept of the genius. In his view, the genius must also constantly engage with the world.

M:

"I have known artists who boasted of having followed no master, and of having to thank their own genius for everything, Fools! as if the World would not force itself upon them at every step, and make something of them in spite of their own stupidity."*

* Source: Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret. Translated from the German by John Oxenford (1812-1877) London: 1875. OUT OF COPYRIGHT

F:

This illustration shows an early scene from Goethe's novel "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship", which was published in 1795. Wilhelm Meister is a great fan of the theatre. He and the actress Mariane, who's leaning on him, have just been putting on a puppet show. Wilhelm wants to use his relationship with Mariane to forge closer links with the theatre world and thus escape the confines of his parental home. His goal is to achieve self-actualisation by becoming a man of the theatre. He raises his eyes as if waiting for divine inspiration to help him make a decision about his future life.

It is no coincidence that Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister" became the very epitome of the German "bildungsroman" – the coming-of-age novel. The hero, initially a youthful figure, undergoes a development during which he establishes his relationship with the world and hence his place in society. Once again, we come across Goethe's idea of education, which focuses on specifically supporting and developing all a person's innate capabilities. Wilhelm Meister does *not* become a master in the field of theatre. But his self-development nevertheless leads him via several detours to the goal he set himself: *"the cultivation of my individual self, here as I am,"*^{**} And that is precisely what defines him as a useful member of society in Goethe's eyes.

^{*}source: Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship, by J. W. Goethe, translated by Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), vol. 2, Boston, n.d., OUT OF COPYRIGHT

F:

As a member of the Privy Council, Goethe was obliged to comment on a wide range of questions affecting the country – including legal issues, which brought him face to face with the subject of physical violence. Probably the most famous example is the case of infanticide – it's the subject of the article in the journal lying open in front of you. In the early 1780s, this subject gave rise to lively debates in the dukedom of Saxony-Weimar-Eisenach, when a maid called Johanna Katharina Höhn killed her child shortly after it was born.

Up to this point, infanticide had been punishable by death. But during the Enlightenment, and motivated by the way other countries, like Sweden, were dealing with that particular crime, the Duke of Weimar began to have doubts about whether the death penalty was reasonable. He asked Goethe and two other members of the Privy Council to take a fundamental view on the appropriate punishment for infanticide.

Noting that it *"might be more advisable to retain the death penalty"*, Goethe concurred with his fellow councillors, who had given their decisions in writing. They recommended retaining the existing laws, but also specifically mentioned that the Duke had the option of issuing a pardon.

One of the themes Goethe touches on in his "Faust" deals with the special circumstances in which Gretchen kills her new-born child. She is treated with compassion, because there are reasons for her deed. It is seen as a consequence of the diabolical plotting of Mephistopheles on the one hand, and the way that Gretchen is stigmatised by society on the other. Gretchen is in an extreme psychological state, which drives her to commit the crime.

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Destructive violence also had an impact on Goethe's own immediate environment. This was in the early 1790s, when he dutifully accompanied Duke Carl August on his military campaigns against the French Revolutionary Army. As a Prussian general, Carl August was involved in, among other things, the cannon bombardment during the Battle of Valmy.

This print shows the battle plan of the French Revolutionary Army. The black lines show how the French troops were deployed. Yellow and blue lines represent the opposing forces of the allied monarchies of Austria and Prussia. This was to be the first French victory over the allies.

Goethe experienced the gruesome slaughter of the intervention forces and the rigours of their retreat. In a letter to the German poet and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, he wrote:

M:

"I hasten back to my maternal flesh-pots, there to awaken as from a bad dream that has held me captive between dung and misery, privation and worry, danger and distress, among ruins, corpses, rotting carcasses and piles of shit."

F:

On the right, you see a print showing the nightly bombardment of the city of Mainz by the Prussians. Smoke and flames rise high into the sky.

The city had been occupied by the French revolutionary forces and their German supporters. Goethe personally witnessed the siege and the re-taking of Mainz. He had mixed feelings when he saw the destruction. In his correspondence with fellow privy councillor Christian Gottlob Voigt, he remarked that the success must justify the grim decision, but his own mind was at a standstill.

With their battle-cry of "Liberty! Equality! Fraternity" the French revolutionaries had taken to the field. They were fighting against the aristocratic system of monarchy, and for fundamental values and the ideas of the Enlightenment to be put into practice.

Although Goethe recognised the despotism and moral corruption of France's aristocratic elite, he took the view that they certainly didn't justify the violent overthrow of the political order. He saw gradual reforms as the only practicable way to achieve social change.

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F:

Napoleon receiving the poet Christoph Martin Wieland – the memorable event depicted in this print took place in 1808. Goethe was also granted a personal audience, and like Wieland, he was awarded the Cross of the Legion of Honour by the French emperor. Napoleon set great store by the two poets' literary works. Referring to the audience with him, Goethe noted:

M:

"He then brought the conversation around to "Werther", which he had supposedly studied through and through. Following various very proper remarks, he named a particular passage and said, "Why did you do that? it is contrary to nature", for which he adduced abundant and quite accurate explanations. I responded with an amused smile, remarking that one might perhaps forgive the poet for employing a stratagem which defies easy discovery, in pursuit of certain effects which were unachievable by any simple, natural means. He was rarely motionless while listening, either nodding his head thoughtfully, or saying *oui* or *c'est bien* or something similar (...)."

F:

Goethe had high hopes that Napoleon might create a new European blueprint for a lasting peace. Unlike Wieland, who'd originally welcomed the French Revolution and only changed his mind after the Terror, Goethe had always rejected the Revolution. He remained an admirer of Napoleon's to the last, despite being well aware that his hope of *peace* rested on a man wielding *power*. The anti-Napoleonic Wars of Liberation in 1813 and 1815 finally put an end to Napoleon's increasingly violent rule. Goethe, who certainly didn't deny the historical necessity of the French emperor's fall, described it as follows:

M:

"Extraordinary men such as Napoleon step beyond the bounds of morality. Ultimately, they act like elemental forces such as fire and water."

F:

Wieland refused to mythologise Napoleon in this way. He recognised more clearly than Goethe the elements of domination and violence in Napoleon's rule.

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F:

This gouache by Elizabeth Gore shows an eruption of Mount Vesuvius by night. The volcano spews fire and smoke into the darkened sky. Lava flows down the mountain while a group of people watch the natural spectacle from a safe distance.

The elemental forces of nature were a subject that fascinated Goethe. He compared the sudden violent eruptions in nature to the devastating upheavals at the time of the French Revolution. Destructive violence was something Goethe rejected as a matter of principle.

M:

"... anything which is violent, erratic, is abhorrent to my very soul, for it is contrary to nature."

F:

So it makes sense that when it came to theories about the origins of the Earth, he subscribed to what's known as Neptunism. Neptunists believed that the Earth had gradually and continuously emerged from a primeval ocean. In Goethe's view, the violent forces of volcanism played a lesser role.

F:

Goethe also reflected the violent political upheavals of his times in his literary works. The water colour by the painter Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein depicts a scene from Goethe's "Reineke Fuchs" – Reynard the Fox. Sitting on the right, on a raised area resembling a throne, are the lions, king and queen of the beasts. The sly fox has crawled into the queen's lap and turns his back on the assembled court. The other animals want to put him on trial as a liar and a cheat: But the crafty fox has so thoroughly bamboozled the king with his lies that the lion orders the court to treat Reynard as an honest man. His subjects respond with bleating, folded arms and deep bows. In fact, the animals of the court are no whit better than Reynard himself – they loot and lie just like he does. They're just not as clever.

Since medieval times the figure of Reynard Fox had been used to tell stories that subtly criticise those in power. Goethe handled the subject in a similar way: his "Reynard the Fox" is a satire designed to hold up a mirror to court society in France. In Goethe's eyes, it was precisely their intrigues and power games that had triggered the revolutionary upheaval he rejected.

One important purpose he pursued with his writing was to deal, in literary terms, with what he called "*rolling world history*" – a period which, in his view, was sliding ever deeper into disaster. This is how he expresses the idea in his "Reynard Fox":

M:

"Worst of all do I find the conceit of that arrant delusion.
Which lays hold upon men, that each of them can in the frenzy
Of his violent will rule over the world and correct it. (...)
Each would forcibly bring all others into subjection.
And thus deeper and ever more deep we sink into evil."

Source: Goethe's Reineke Fox, West-Eastern Divan. And Achilleid. Translated in the original metres by Alexander Rogers (1825-1911). London 1890. OUT OF COPYRIGHT

F:

The actor in this painting by the artist Georg Melchior Kraus is none other than – Goethe himself! Wearing a classical costume, he stands on the stage of the Liebhabertheater – the Amateur Theatre – with the actress Corona Schröter.

Goethe managed the Liebhabertheater, which had been established in 1774 following a fire at the palace in Weimar. The palace theatre had gone up in flames along with the palace, and theatre life in Weimar was in the doldrums. So Goethe and a group of amateurs, aristocrats and commoners alike, put on their own productions. Corona Schröter was the troupe's only professional actress and singer. Here, she's playing the female lead in the play "Iphigenia in Tauris", which Goethe had written based on the classical play of the same name by Euripides. He himself is playing Orestes, Iphigenia's brother.

We're witnessing the key scene in which the siblings, separated since childhood, recognise one another. The family is under a curse, which is why Iphigenia has ended up on the island of Tauris as a priestess, and Orestes has murdered his mother. Now Orestes, pursued by the Furies, confesses his crime to the priestess, holding nothing back. But Iphigenia pardons him: from now on, the path of truth chosen by Orestes will also determine her own actions. Thanks to her pure, honest and humane nature, she is able to banish the curse on her family.

Goethe described his "Iphigenia" as "*devilishly humane*". She is the consummate embodiment of the ideal of humanity as appropriated from antiquity by the proponents of Classicism in Weimar. Based on this ideal, Goethe and Schiller developed an aesthetic counter-proposal to the world surrounding them, which was characterised by wars and political convulsions. And since all the world's a stage, that's where their ideal was brought to life.

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F:

Goethe's collection of poems entitled "West-Eastern Divan" was written in the post-Napoleonic era – at a time when technological progress was advancing the exchange of ideas as well as of goods. What we'd now call globalisation promoted this cultural exchange of ideas between East and West. In his "West-Eastern Divan", Goethe engages intensely with Middle-Eastern culture. He put it like this:

M:

"If we wish to partake of these creations by the noblest of spirits, we must orientalise ourselves."

F:

As you can see in this glass case, Goethe became so involved that he would practise drawing the **persian** letters without knowing what they meant. It was his way of immersing himself in the world of the Orient on a sensory level. The narrator of the "Divan" is sometimes a European Orientalist, and sometimes himself a Muslim:

M:

"Those who know themselves and others
surely must be of one mind:
the Orient and Occident
are now forever intertwined."

F:

The "Divan" was an important milestone on the way to developing Goethe's idea of world literature. He saw this, not so much as a collection of literary works, but as a stimulating exchange between cultures. To him, world literature was based not only on the translation of foreign works, but also on personal contact between writers and their joint creative work.

Today, in the age of the internet and globalisation, the exchange among different cultures is part of our everyday lives. Goethe had a presentiment of this when he came up with his idea of world literature at the time of the "Divan".

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F:

Marked on this map is the route Goethe followed on his travels through Italy, which lasted almost two years. It took him from Trent in the north, via Lake Garda, Verona, Vicenza, Venice, Bologna and Florence to Rome; later, he travelled on to the south of the country, all the way to Sicily. But what he called his "*first necessity*" was to visit Rome. He arrived there in 1786 with the words:

M:

"I have finally arrived in the capital of the world!"

F:

Unlike his father, who had undertaken the "Grand Tour" simply to confirm in practice what he had already read about, Goethe tried to find his own way. He wanted to immerse himself fully into the Italian way of life, and the experience was to be as unadulterated as possible. So at first, the poet travelled under the name of Jean Philippe Möller, using ordinary means of transport such as mail coaches and mules, and wearing Italian dress. He noted:

M:

"I had adopted the maxim of denying myself as far as possible, and becoming engrossed in the object in as pure a manner as might be accomplished."

F:

This method allowed him to dispense with any bias and simply be inspired – and thus gain fresh knowledge and come up with new ideas. He devoted himself to studying works of art from Antiquity and the Renaissance, also botany, mineralogy, geology and meteorology as well as the everyday culture of the Italian people. By experiencing the unfamiliar, Goethe would ultimately succeed in achieving new and better self-awareness.

M:

"I may certainly say I have rediscovered myself during this year and a half of solitude
– as what? As an artist!"

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F:

This coloured etching shows one of many early attempts at manned balloon flight. Spectators have gathered around the balloon ascent – which was a risky business. One man on the left has even climbed a tree to have a better view of what's going on.

Goethe was very enthusiastic about balloons, and he even carried out small-scale experiments himself. He would use small spheres, which he presumably filled with hydrogen. However, he had no success with his experiments until 1784, a year after the Montgolfier brothers had successfully launched an unmanned hot air balloon. Still, Goethe later confidently claimed to have nearly invented balloon flight.

He certainly realised that this invention heralded an age of engineering.

M:

"Anyone who has witnessed the discovery of air balloons will testify to the world-wide movement this has engendered, the interest surrounding the aeronauts, the longing that surged up in so many thousands of hearts to take part in such incredible, hazardous wanderings."

F:

Humanity's old dream of flying would soon become a reality. And although Goethe followed the technological revolution of his day with the greatest of interest, he was also one of its most prominent critics.

M:

"Everything nowadays is ultra. No one knows himself any longer (...). Wealth and rapidity are what the world admires, and what everyone strives to attain. Railways, quick mails, steamships, and every possible kind of facility in the way of communication are what the educated world has in view, that it may over-educate itself, and thereby continue in a state of mediocrity." *

source: Goethe's Letters to Zelter (...), selected, translated and edited by A. D.

Coleridge, M.A. (Arthur Duke Coleridge, 1830-1913) London 1892, OUT OF
COPYRIGHT

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F:

The urge to know "*what holds the world together / in its innermost heart*" not only occupied Goethe's "Faust", but also the poet himself. Goethe purchased these pieces of meteorite for his collection of geological specimens. This collection formed the basis for his study of the planet Earth, along with its micro and macro worlds. His method of acquiring knowledge was based on detailed examination of all its phenomena. The microscope you see here was an important instrument in this endeavour. The eyepiece next to it on the right was used to examine plant microcosmos and even the life of the "slipper animalcule" – a one-cell micro-organism we now know as "paramecium". Seen under the microscope its form resembles a slipper – hence its popular name. Goethe formulated his agenda as follows:

M:

"To approach the infinite, you must follow the finite in all directions."

F:

To study the meteorites, ordinary eyesight was enough. Goethe believed them to be terrestrial phenomena that formed within the Earth's atmosphere. He disagreed with the theory of the physicist and astronomer Ernst (Florens Friedrich) Chladni, with whom he was acquainted. Chladni classified meteorites as cosmic phenomena that originated in outer space, and his theory remains valid today.

Goethe acquired pieces of meteorite from various parts of Europe for his collection of geological specimens. As merchandise, they were highly prized.

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F:

Once again we come face to face with Cupid, this time in the guise of an "ink merchant". The hand-written draft by the artist Tischbein, next to it on the right, sketches out a story in which Cupid converses with a poet. In the end, the little love god fills the poet's inkwell, and the latter says:

M:

"Since I obtained my ink from the boy,
my writing comes more easily.
Write with love, and of love I must and will now forever write."

F:

Love appears here both as a literary motif and as a compelling creative impulse. Goethe's early poetry is devoted to this and associated themes. In around 1767, during his time as a student in Leipzig, he'd begun to write what's known as "anacreontic" lyrical poetry. The anacreontic style was based on the love poetry of the ancient Greek lyrical poet Anacreon. In playful, gallant verses, the poems revolve around subjects like love, friendship, nature, wine and conviviality. According to the anacreontic tradition, a whole person is made up of sensuality as well as morality. Another common subject in these verses is poetry-writing itself.

This collection of works on paper by Tischbein was also inspired by the anacreontic tradition. Fifty years after Goethe's creative exploration of the subject, Tischbein presented Goethe with a later version of these works in the shape of a leather-bound album. He hoped the poet would respond with lines of his own to what the artist called his *"efforts in the style of Anacreon with attached drawings"*.

Goethe did not fulfil his request for lyrical poems to complement the works – it was too long since he'd written poetry in the anacreontic style. But Goethe exploited the subject of love for his poetry throughout his life.

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F:

"Annette" is one of the earliest surviving collections of poetry by Goethe. An elaborate manuscript version was assembled and illustrated with vignettes by Ernst Wolfgang Behrisch, a close friend of Goethe's in Leipzig. The creative inspiration for the poems is presumed to be Anna Katharina Schönlkopf. She was the daughter of an innkeeper in Leipzig, where Goethe met and fell in love with her as a sixteen-year-old student. In "Annette", Goethe wrote:

M:

They sat and dallied in the shade, alone,
close to the heart that fondly loves.
Those to whom Cupid grants such joy,
will they not feel more than others may?
And soon our couple was feeling more than before.

F:

The poems are lightweight and entertaining, playful and occasionally ambiguous. They revolve around the themes of the then popular anacreontic tradition, which was devoted to subjects of love and conviviality.

It's no coincidence that Goethe's early lyric poetry is predominantly about love. Since the middle of the century, the notion of sensibility had elevated love to the supreme, most prized subject – a subject permissible even when sensuality was involved. Hence the artful way in which Goethe explores the subject poetically across a range of variations.

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F:

This is Charlotte von Stein – a woman courted not just by Goethe the man and the writer, but also by Goethe the draughtsman. Here, he's portrayed her in profile against a dark background. The picture shows the aristocratic court lady adopting a cool and remote-looking attitude. An enigmatic, vaguely mocking and resigned expression plays around her mouth.

Their platonic love affair lasted for Goethe's entire first decade in Weimar. It started when Goethe was twenty-six and Charlotte von Stein was seven years his senior. In her marriage of convenience with Josias von Stein, the Master of the Duke's Horses, Charlotte's life was in many ways typical for an aristocratic young woman of the period. Her marriage was not at all fulfilling. All the more powerful was the sense of spiritual kinship that Goethe describes in a poem addressed to her:

M:

Of my nature, you knew every trait,
with one glance, you always read me straight,
whom mortal eye would strain to penetrate.

F:

In the glass case, the plastercopy of Charlotte's left hand embodies the ambivalence of her dealings with Goethe. In one sense, the hand conveys the element of touch. But the material, marble, with its chilliness and artifice, brings Charlotte's elusiveness to mind. She would issue visiting bans, plunging Goethe into what he called a state of "*persistent resignation*" that positively spurred him on to write and draw. In the end, he abruptly fled to Italy for two years – and returned a changed man.

The lock of hair you see here in an envelope belonged to Charlotte. Goethe kept it as a fond memento in the drawer of his writing desk in the house on Frauenplan until the day he died.

F:

We're looking at three different views of Christiane Vulpius, who later became Goethe's wife. The drawings were dashed off with casual, loose strokes of the pen shortly after the two of them met in 1788. They give an informal, lively impression of Christiane's sensual, unspoilt nature – and at the same time provide snapshots of her everyday interaction with Goethe.

Goethe was thirty-nine when he first met Christiane Vulpius just after his travels in Italy. She was sixteen years younger. As Goethe's mother noted, not unfavourably, Christiane quickly became his *"treasure in house and in bed"*.

Weimar society responded with hostility to Christiane, who came from a modest background. But Goethe remained committed to the woman he called his "little spirit of nature" for as long as she lived. He valued her directness. For her part, Christiane supported him in his creative work by covering his back.

After eighteen years of "living in sin", Goethe decided to marry his Christiane. With the image of pillaging French soldiers in Weimar still fresh in his mind, he wrote to the court preacher, a man called Günther:

M:

"In the course of these days and nights, an old intention has ripened in me; I wish to confer upon my young friend, who has been of service to me in so many ways, and even lived through these testing hours with me, full and civil recognition as mine own. Kindly tell me, respected spiritual sir and father, how I should proceed so that we may be married as soon as possible, on Sunday or even sooner. Which steps must be undertaken for the purpose? Could you not perform the ceremony yourself? I would wish it to take place in the sacristy of the Stadtkirche.
Give your answer to the messenger at once when he finds you, I beg you!"

F:

Goethe's interest in love is also reflected in his art collections. This reticulated bowl shows the Roman god Jupiter and his lover Io in a close embrace, reclining on a bed of clouds between two oak trees. Soaring above them is the eagle with lightning-bolts, Jupiter's attribute.

Goethe's majolica collection consists of around a hundred such pieces of tin glazed pottery from the 15th and 16th centuries – he described it as "a delight for the eyes". He took a liking to the pieces originally because of their typical bright colours and their value as art objects, which Goethe believed was underrated. As well as ceramics with Christian themes and everyday scenes, the ones decorated with erotic images met with Goethe's particular approval.

That *this* erotic subject should be embedded in a scene from antiquity is no coincidence. It was the only context in which the moral and ethical boundaries could be maintained. Even though such images are perfectly unambiguous, they were considered acceptable in Goethe's day, provided they appeared in mythological contexts.

Perhaps you'd like to see more pieces from Goethe's majolica collection. If so, do visit the Goethe House, where you'll find his majolica room.

153 Wörter

F:

This portrait shows Goethe in an Italian landscape, wearing a travelling cloak draped in the Roman style with a matching hat. The drawing is based on a painting by Tischbein which is one of the most famous portraits of the poet. The artist lived in Rome and was one of Goethe's main companions and discussion partners during his travels in Italy.

Tischbein represents his friend as a traveller and an artist. Goethe appears relaxed as he takes his ease on the ruins of ancient cultures. With one arm resting on an Egyptian obelisk, he is surrounded by elements of Greek architecture. In the background, we see the city of Rome with the Via Appia. In other words, the artist has included all three advanced ancient cultures in the picture. There's even a reference to the poet's own work – a relief showing a scene from Goethe's "Iphigenia in Tauris". It was during his travels in Italy that he re-worked the play in classical metre and brought it to perfection.

Art and nature are very closely linked in this portrait. That makes sense, given that Goethe regarded nature as the foundation of all art. He believed it was the task of the artist, not simply to imitate nature, but to identify its laws and use them to create a second, enhanced, ideal version of nature – art!

In the art of antiquity, Goethe saw this ideal brought to perfect fruition. So he continued his travels in Italy and made his way via Pompeii all the way to the South, where he studied the works of art from antiquity in great detail.

223 Wörter

F:

Take a look at the two bronze bulls in this glass case. Let your gaze travel back and forth between them and identify the similarities and differences between the bulls.

[short pause]

That's exactly what Goethe used to do. He wasn't primarily interested in the individual works of art, but in comparing their forms. By collecting small bronze figurines and arranging them into series, he was applying the same method in art that he used in his scientific collections: comparative observation. By creating series, he was able to research the typical features of the objects and work out their inherent formal rules. That allowed him to understand developments in the history of art based on the objects themselves. This serial principle is also at work in the small Hercules figures below the bulls, which are from widely differing periods.

Goethe's activities as a collector were increasingly influenced by his desire to take the context of art history into account.

M:

"I collected, not according to mood or caprice, but always according to plan and with intent, for the benefit of my own consistent education, and I learnt something from every piece in my possession."

F:

The need for this approach only makes sense if we consider that art history as an academic discipline did not exist during this period. However, Goethe was able to develop his insights based on direct observation, especially in cooperation with his friend, the Swiss artist Heinrich Meyer, who advised him on artistic matters.

207 Wörter

F:

"Achilles on Skyros" is a painting submitted by the Düsseldorf artist Heinrich Christoph Kolbe for a competition known as the "Weimarer Preisaufgaben" (- the Weimar prize assignments). Goethe had set up the competition in 1799 along with Heinrich Meyer, his friend and adviser on artistic matters. He wanted to put his classical theory of art into practice and influence contemporary artistic work in Germany according to his own ideas.

The competition subjects were drawn from themes associated with the world of the epics of Homer – the Iliad and the Odyssey. Goethe's enthusiasm for them had originated in his youth. Now, they were to lead the artists of the day back to the models from antiquity.

M:

"Homer's poems have always been the richest of sources from which artists have drawn material to create works of art. (...) Much of his work is so vivid, represented so simply and truthfully, that the creative artist finds his work already half done."

F:

Kolbe's drawing follows the rules of the competition: the statuesque approach to the figures is in keeping with ancient sculpture. Their expressive gestures follow the principle that the portrayal must make sense in and of itself – a demand frequently voiced by Meyer.

Nevertheless Kolbe – who had won the first competition – was not awarded a prize for this drawing. The judges praised mainly the female figures in the drawing. However, the two figures on the right, Odysseus and Diomedes, were found to be lacking in "*dignity and energy*". This assessment suggests that despite all the rules about content, Goethe was mainly interested in the portrayal of the human figures. As time went by, the submissions were increasingly found to be unsatisfactory, and the art lovers of Weimar finally abolished the competition in 1805. They were forced to recognise that their competition could not halt the rapid emergence of Romantic art

in Germany.

258 Wörter

F:

This self-portrait brings us face to face with the Swiss painter Johann Heinrich Meyer, who also wrote about art. He became known as "Kunstmeyer – art Meyer". Goethe originally met the diffident young man in around 1787 on his travels through Italy. Four years later, he invited him to Weimar. The poet made no secret of how impressed he was by the other man's appreciation of art.

M:

"He possesses a heavenly clarity of ideas and is as good-hearted as an angel. He never speaks to me, but that I want to write down everything he says, so confident and right are his words as he describes the only true love. (...) I have no words to express the calm, alert bliss with which I am now beginning to regard works of art; my mind has been sufficiently broadened to take them in, and it continues to develop, enabling me to achieve a genuine appreciation."

F:

In his frequent conversations with Meyer, Goethe was indeed continuing to develop his appreciation of art. Meyer was also responsible for the poet's increasing awareness of the history of art. In addition, he played a part in systematically expanding Goethe's art collections, both by making suggestions, and with copies he'd made himself. The intense discussions between the two men on practical and theoretical questions of art are further reflected in a wide range of projects they undertook jointly. These include works they wrote together as well as magazine projects and the joint re-design of Goethe's House, of the "Roman House" overlooking the river Ilm, and of Weimar Palace.

F:

In 1798, Goethe and Meyer jointly established a periodical called "Propyläen", named after the monumental gateway at the entrance to the Acropolis. You can see the first issue on display here. The essays it published on art theory were designed to influence – not just the art of the day, but also the public – in favour of the classical ideal of art. In his introduction to the periodical, Goethe described his own thinking on art theory as follows:

M:

"The highest, indeed, the true subject of creative art is man! The human figure cannot be understood merely by superficial observation; one must uncover what is within, separate its parts, take note of the connections between the same, (...) if one is truly to see and imitate what moves before our eyes in living waves as a beautiful, undivided whole."

F:

Goethe applied this creed in his essay on the Laocoön group, which appears as an illustration on the periodical's title page. The famous ancient sculptural group shows the Trojan priest Laocoön and his two sons in an agonising struggle to the death with twin serpents. Like other art theorists (for example Johann Joachim Winckelmann or Gotthold Ephraim Lessing) Goethe puzzled over the question of why Laocoön isn't screaming.

While Winckelmann looked for a reason in the ideals of Greek art, Lessing's argument made reference to the distinct genres of art and poetry.

Goethe, on the other hand, developed his own interpretation based purely on observation. Laocoön, claimed Goethe, was unable to scream because after being bitten by the serpent, he had contracted his abdominal muscles to *"reduce the pain"*. What mattered most to Goethe was that the right moment from the story had been chosen for the portrayal of the Laocoön group. He put it like this:

M:

"If we now recall how events first unfolded, and recognise that they have at this very moment reached their culmination, we shall instantly become aware, should we consider the moments immediately following, and those thereafter, that the entire group must needs change, and that no other moment may be found equal to this in artistic value."

F:

The periodical was cancelled after just two years due to lack of demand. But the essay on Laocoön still stands as a model today. It reflects Goethe's classical concept of art by describing Laocoön's suffering and the way he overcomes it as an harmonious balancing of contrasting elements.

325 Wörter

F:

Is there a fundamental difference in bone structure between human beings and mammals? Goethe pursued this question by carrying out comparative studies of human and animals skulls, including the monkey skull you see in the glass case. Goethe examined them because he was looking for something called the "intermaxillary bone" – that's the part of the upper jaw in which the incisors are found in humans.

Today, we know that both human beings and monkeys have this intermaxillary bone; however, in humans, it fuses with the adjoining bones in childhood and is then no longer visible.

But in Goethe's day, leading anatomists believed that the intermaxillary bone was lacking in the human skull. They interpreted this absence as evidence of the special status of humans as the pride of creation.

But Goethe took a different view. After carrying out patient comparative studies, he was able to show in 1784 that the so-called *os intermaxillare* was indeed present in humans. Delighted, he proclaimed:

M:

"I have discovered – neither gold nor silver, yet something that gives me ineffable pleasure – the *os intermaxillare* in man! (...) it is like the keystone of man, not missing, but also present!"

F:

Goethe only found out later that the French anatomist Félix Vicq d'Azyr had made the same discovery a little earlier. So Goethe was not the first to note the presence of the intermaxillary bone in humans. But his discovery did confirm one of the basic assumptions behind his thinking and research: that nature does not develop by sudden leaps, but as a result of a gradual change in the design of individual forms.

F:

In his botanical studies, Goethe examined plants right down to the most delicate branchings – in the case of these ash twigs, all the way down to the irregular spiralling outgrowths at the ends. In his "Metamorphosis of Plants", he commented:

M:

"Let us take an ash twig (...) the whole has become curved; the remaining woody part forms the back, and the inward-turning formation resembling a bishop's crozier represents a most strange, abnormal monstrosity."

F:

Goethe was interested in these variations in plants, the ones he called "monstrosities" – where the balance of growth was out of kilter. He believed that they were particularly suitable specimens from which to deduce the rules of *regular* plant growth.

Goethe held that plants, too, were integrated into nature as a whole and into its continuous development. The idea of plant forms continuously merging into one another also found expression in his poetry – in an artful didactic poem entitled "Metamorphosis of Plants":

M:

"Here nature seals the ring of timeless forces,
but instantly a new ring joins its like;
so that the chain may stretch across the ages
and like the one, the whole be filled with life."

199 Wörter

F:

This drawer contains pieces of quartz and rock crystal from Goethe's mineral collection. With eighteen thousand objects, it is the largest of his scientific collections. The system by which it is organised has remained essentially unchanged. Even the little boxes in the drawer are the originals.

Do you see the dark brown stopper from a perfume bottle among the rocks? Goethe would include such objects in his collection as examples of how the minerals could be put to practical use. He was constantly expanding his knowledge of minerals, through purchase, exchange, and his own finds – not least in connection with his work as chairman of the ducal mining commission.

In geology as in other fields, Goethe's main purpose was to *"eavesdrop on Nature and discover her method"* – and thus to understand the laws governing the development of natural forms. On his travels, he made careful observations of the geological conditions out in the countryside and tried to visualise the processes involved in shaping the landscape.

Putting together series of related rock types helped him to imagine how they had originated. If you take a look in the glass case on the left of the drawer, you can see one such series.

In his scientific essays, Goethe gave vivid descriptions of many of his observations. With his method of starting with external appearance – what's known as morphology – he influenced many of the scientists of his day.

185 Wörter

F:

Goethe also collected fossils. However, as in the visual arts, he occasionally made do with casts for his studies. The coloured plaster-of-paris slab on display here is a cast of a pterosaur fossil. The original was discovered in Solnhofen, a famous site where several archaeopteryxes have been found.

Goethe wrote a flattering letter to the fossil's owner, Samuel Thomas Sömmering, begging him to supply the cast. By way of encouragement, he didn't fail to mention that he was in frequent contact with Georges Cuvier, who had established the science of vertebrate anatomy:

M:

"Furthermore, I would greatly appreciate a plaster cast of the fossilised ornithocephalus. My son is carrying forward the fossil collection previously begun by me, and going about the matter seriously and knowledgeably. Some other plaster casts recently arrived from Monsieur Cuvier. Your kind gift will splendidly adorn a drawer in our house which has so far remained almost empty, and preserve a grateful remembrance by giving it new life."

F:

The letter reveals Goethe's passion for collecting. His son August proved an able assistant in this respect. He looked after the fossil collection and also catalogued it. After August's early death, Goethe carried on the collection on his own.

It's no coincidence that Goethe's interest in palaeontology – the study of creatures from past geological eras – arose at a time when the newly established, "enlightened" sciences were changing people's view of the world. Fossil finds and other obvious evidence of geological change contradicted the biblical story of creation, which had previously been regarded as a wellspring of knowledge. Like others, Goethe grappled with the question of how the new insights could be incorporated at a philosophical level. It was one of the main reasons why he subsequently concentrated on natural history.

254 Wörter

F:

This drawing of a "Girl in reverse colours" is from Goethe's personal collection. It records an observation he once made at an inn and described as follows in his "Colour Theory":

M:

"Towards evening, as I entered an inn, a well-built girl with a very pale white face, black hair and a scarlet bodice came into the room where I was. She remained standing at a certain distance, and I studied her closely in the gloom. When she moved away afterwards, I saw on the white wall opposite a black face surrounded by a bright glow, and the remaining dress of this very distinct figure appeared in a handsome sea-green."

F:

What Goethe is describing here is the after-image in complementary colours that is created when you stare at a coloured object and then look at a white surface afterwards. Goethe was the first to conclude that these after-images were a physiological side-effect of the ordinary act of seeing. But whether and how we see them varies from person to person. So Goethe was describing colour as a subjective perceptual phenomenon – and dissociating himself from Newton, who regarded colour as an objective phenomenon of physics.

In his drawing of the "Girl in reverse colours", Goethe recorded his own perception in a way that others could understand. The act of drawing helped him to train his eye for natural phenomena. His observations even found literary expression in works such as "Faust".

F:

These portraits were deliberately used by Goethe to jog his memory. At the age of seventy-five, he commissioned the artist Johann Joseph Schmeller to draw a series of likenesses of, as Goethe put it:

M:

"... highly revered personages who are connected and associated with me through business relationships, scientific links and the concerns of friendship, with a view to creating a permanent memorial for posterity."

F:

Despite the differences in character, the pictures nevertheless seem cut from the same cloth, because Schmeller portrayed each person in a similar pose and framed the images in roughly the same way. By opting for the technique of **chalk** on paper, he was able to call on the people chosen by Goethe either at home or in Goethe's house without any further ado.

Here at Frauenplan, Goethe displayed the likenesses not only as a kind of "photo album", but also temporarily in clip-on picture frames to remind him of those who were absent. Schmeller's simple style of portrayal emphasised the uniqueness of each personality and further enhanced the sense of their presence. This allowed Goethe to enter into an intellectual dialogue with the subject. Goethe described the value likenesses had for him as reminders in the following categorical statement:

M:

"There are various memorials and tokens which bring closer things distant and remote. Of these, none is as important as a picture. To converse with a beloved picture, even if it fail in resemblance, possesses a certain charm, just as there is occasionally a pleasing quality in quarrelling with a friend. One has a pleasurable sense that we are two, and yet cannot be parted."

F:

The row of portrait busts you see here all represent Goethe – on the left as a young man, on the right at the age of seventy-one. As we look at his changing features, we not only see an entire life passing by. They also reflect a development in the style of portraiture – one in which Goethe himself played a part with his ideas on art theory and his lively involvement in the creation of the busts.

The two busts by the sculptor Martin Gottlieb Klauer at the beginning of the row reflect an early neoclassical style. On the far left, you see the first fully three-dimensional likeness of Goethe. Next to it is Goethe as a poet, writing tragedies on subjects from antiquity – note the fillet in his hair, a badge of honour worn by the ancient Greeks. This reference to antiquity is even more evident in the next bust, by Alexander Trippel. The tumbling mass of curls and the cloak fastened with a clasp are obviously derived from portraits of the ancient military leader Alexander the Great. In this idealised portrayal, Goethe is elevated to the status of ruler over the kingdom of poetry.

The two busts on the far right were created thirty years later as the result of a competition. Both are in a late neoclassical style. The one that later became more widely known was the bust by Christian Daniel Rauch on the extreme right. Its style is modelled on antiquity, while offering a naturalistic, even unflattering depiction of Goethe's features. This gave the portrait an element of truthfulness that rendered the poet particularly approachable in the eye of his contemporaries.

So it is hardly surprising that Rauch's portrait became a kind of branded product. If you take a look in the glass case on the right of the busts, you'll see that he himself produced a variant: a little statuette of the poet wearing his house-coat. Other objects reproduce Rauch's version of Goethe's head on a much smaller scale or on a cup. Other artists of the day created portraits of Goethe in a wide range of different materials, shapes and sizes – there was something to suit every buyer.

268 Wörter

F:

There they stand, side by side – Goethe and the other great poet of his time, Friedrich Schiller. This design for a monument, which was never built, shows both men wearing antique robes. Both of Goethe's hands rest on Schiller's arm and shoulder – symbolising their close bonds.

The friendship between the two poets began with a letter Schiller sent to Goethe in 1794, on the occasion of his forty-fifth birthday. It marked the beginning of a lively correspondence in which they jointly formulated their classical artistic ideal. Even during a period when the two poets were close neighbours, they exchanged ideas in writing. That's because the notion of publishing their correspondence had arisen quite early on. The first edition is on display in this glass case.

From the early days of their correspondence, Goethe recognised that their exchange would provide "*pure enjoyment and genuine benefit*" to both parties. In his reply to Schiller's birthday letter, he wrote:

M:

"All that relates to me, and is in me, I will gladly impart. For, as I feel very sensibly that my undertaking far exceeds the measure of the faculties of one earthly life, I would wish to depose much with you, and thereby not only give it endurance, but vitality."*

F:

In other words, for Goethe, their correspondence was another way of ensuring that he and his work would be remembered.

The exchange came to an abrupt end with Schiller's death in 1805, at the age of only 45.

* Source: Correspondence between Schiller and Goethe from 1704-1805, translated by George H. Calvert (1803-1889), New York & London, 1845 – OUT OF COPYRIGHT

F:

Goethe was eighty-two years old when he died on the 22nd of March 1832. The copper plaque with shellac finish shows the poet on his deathbed, with a laurel wreath on his brow. The artist, Friedrich Preller, had enjoyed Goethe's patronage. The family entrusted him with the prestigious task of creating this final likeness of the poet. Initially, Preller's drawing was only intended for an exclusive circle, but a lithograph made from it was later in wide circulation.

In the glass case, you'll also find the obituary notice with which Goethe's family announced his death. It describes Goethe as "*in full possession of his mental faculties and loving until his final breath*". The cause of death is also mentioned – as "*catarrhal fever*". Goethe's personal physician gave the following report:

M:

"Since the demise of his only son and since the pulmonary haemorrhage, Goethe had, when speaking to me, often calmly referred to his end, as if it were now not far off. During our conversation today, he returned to this matter and once again told me coherently and in detail of his intentions, plans and hopes. At that moment, neither of us anticipated that Goethe had just proclaimed his truly last official will."

F:

Goethe had definite ideas about how his estate was to be settled. His will is recorded in a "testamentary disposition" on display next to the obituary notice. In it, Goethe decreed that his collections should remain intact and be open to the public.

Without this provision, the Goethe Nationalmuseum with all its treasures would not exist. It also, among other things, laid the foundation for Weimar to become a place of remembrance.