

Orpheus losing Eurydice at the gates of the Hades

German Alabaster,
S. German, y 2nd Quarter 17th Century
Leonhard Kern (1588-1662) (workshop)
After the model by Peter Vischer the Younger (1487-1525)

H 17,3 x W 15,3 cm
(H 6,8 x W 6,0 inch)



This fine alabaster rectangular low-relief plaque represents a scene from the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. The central figures in this masterfully elaborated piece are two nude figures representing the nymph Eurydice and the mythological musician Orpheus, who's holding his viol and bow in front of him. The scene depicted, illustrates the fateful moment when Orpheus is

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about to lose Eurydice forever, as they are about to pass through the gates of the Hades into the



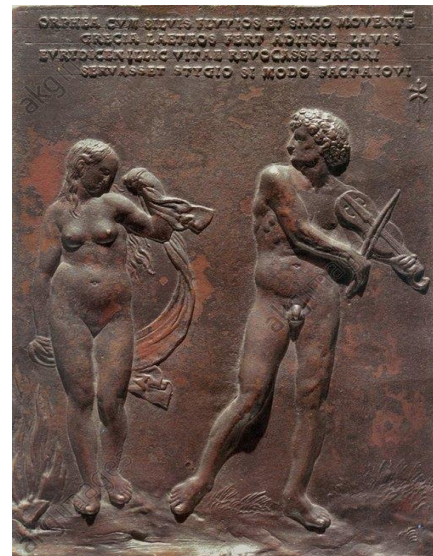
world of the living. Orpheus suddenly pauses to look back and make sure Eurydice is still following him, thus breaking his promise to the gods. As if to bid him one final farewell, Eurydice makes a waving gesture with her wind-blown veil to Orpheus. Standing in between them is a small child, a putto, with an expression of sadness on his face. On the right a dog gazes yearningly at the viol, seduced by the divine music emanating from it.

This alabaster plaquette by the hand of Leonhard Kern was modelled closely after an original by the

*Orpheus and Eurydice, 1610s,
Bronze plaquette by P. Vischer Jr.,
National Gallery, Washington*

celebrated German sculptor Peter Vischer, whose fascination for Ovid's retelling of this story prompted him to create several drawings as well as plaquettes of it.

Four copies of this plaquette carrying the signatory Vischer family mark, two fish transfixed by an arrow, have survived. Although still the subject of discussion, it is hypothesized that the version at the Washington National Gallery slightly precedes the other extant copies. Its size is slightly bigger than that of the other copies and moreover it is the only version actually depicting the rocky entrance to



*Orpheus and Eurydice, 1610s,
Bronze plaquette by P. Vischer Jr.,
MKG, Hamburg*

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Adam and Eve, 1504,
Pen and brown ink, by A. Dürer,
Morgan Library and Museum, NY

the Hades. The other remaining copies can be found respectively at the Hamburg Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Dahlem) and the Abbey at Sankt Paul in Lavantthal (Austria). These latter three are all smaller in size and only show minor differences among themselves, mainly pertaining to the positions of the figures' extremities and the inscriptions. It is conjectured the latter three plaquettes were all based on the same model.

William D. Wixom writes, concerning the plaquettes made by Vischer:

“The extraordinarily unified expression of this

plaquette makes it one of the finest ever produced. With great economy of detail, remarkable subtlety in both modelling and movement, and keen restraint in the composition, the younger Peter Vischer conveys an elegiac mood in his interpretation of the most touching moment in Ovid's retelling of the Greek myth”. It has convincingly been hypothesized that Dürer's sketch and engraving of Adam and Eve served as a model for the proportions, contrapposto, and the gestures of the figures in the plaquette. However it is not unlikely that Vischer, also had first hand access to the drawings and engravings of artists such as Jacopo de' Barbari who had served as a source of inspiration for Dürer while the Venetian was in Nuremberg.

This alabaster plaquette attributed to Leonhard Kern contains elements from both the larger Washington as well as from the other casts. Around the time these plaquettes were made by Vischer, Kern stayed in Nuremberg to work on the statues of the façade of the Nürnberger Rathaus. It is thus likely he knew Vischer and had first hand knowledge of the different versions. Although largely faithful to the original composition, the plaquette clearly shows stylistic and compositional similarities to some of Kern's other works. For instance the execution of the hairs and faces of the figures clearly differ from the Vischer versions and closely match those of Kern's other works. None of the four Vischer plaquettes, portrays the putto nor the dog, from Kern's plaquette. It's well known that Kern, executed and adjusted his

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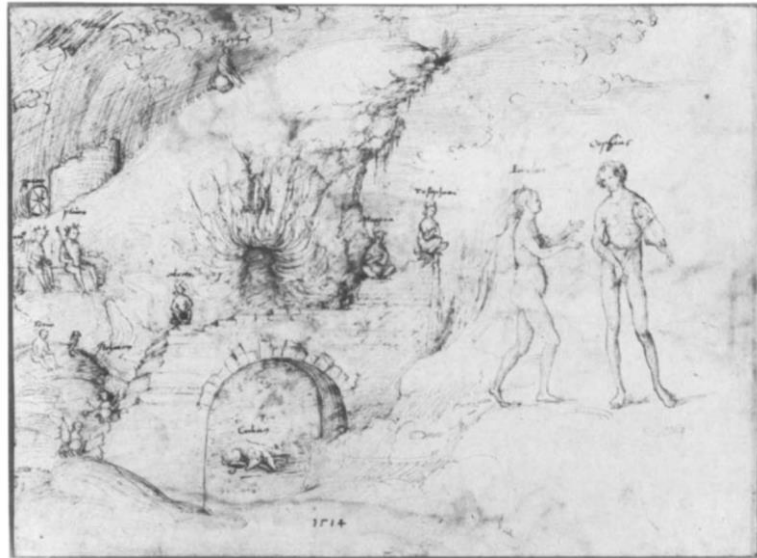
recreations of well-known works of art according to the fashion and tastes of the moment. Similar putti as well as animals and other creatures, can be found throughout his extant works often merely as a decorative elements.

Orpheus & Eurydice

The version of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice that inspired Peter Vischer was the one of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Not long after their marriage, the nymph Eurydice was bitten by a serpent and died instantly. Orpheus sang his grief with his lyre and managed to move everything and everyone; both humans and gods were deeply touched by his sorrow and grief.

In a final effort to revive his beloved, Orpheus travels to Hades. His divine music prompted the gods of the underworld, to grant him his wish to have Eurydice return with him, but only on the condition that Orpheus not look back at her until they had safely left the Hades. Orpheus was delighted and thanked the gods. He then left to travel back into the world of the mortals.

Unable to hear Eurydice's footsteps, however, he began fearing the gods had tricked him. In fact, Eurydice had been following him the whole way, but, as she was still a shade, her footstep could not be heard. Only a few feet away from the exit, Orpheus lost his faith and looked back only to see how her shadow was carried back to Hades forever.



*Orpheus and Eurydice, 1514,
Pen and brown ink, on paper, by P. Vischer Jr.,
Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg*

Leonhard Kern (1588-1662)

Coming from a family of masons, Kern initially served as an apprentice with his brother, the sculptor Michael Kern (1580–1649). As a young man he travelled to Italy, staying there for 4 years in various places. In Rome he learnt life drawing, possibly at the Accademia di San Luca, and pursued

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architectural studies. Later he also stayed in Naples, from where he even travelled to North Africa, and in Venice. Around 1614 he returned to Germany where he subsequently worked in Forchtenberg, Heidelberg and Nuremberg. His most famous work from this period are his statues that decorate the gable of the Nürnberger Rathaus (1617). From around 1620 until his death he supervised a large and studio in Schwäbisch Hall. He produced a considerable number of works modelled after or referencing famous contemporary northern as well as Italian models, vividly recreating them or borrowing from them in his own original manner. In his style, he incorporated his thorough knowledge of the latest developments in Italy at the end of the sixteenth century and onwards.

As the Thirty Years War (1618–48) made commissions difficult to come by, Kern had to downsize his studio and exhibit great versatility as a sculptor. Only a few isolated opportunities to create large-scale monumental stone sculptures presented themselves, such as the sculptures on the Regensburg Rathaus (1632). He limited himself predominantly to making small scale enchanting little sculptures, that were easy to transport and that always sought to satisfy the collector's tastes, using almost every imaginable sculptural material, including ivory, boxwood, soapstone, alabaster and bronze. Although his subject-matter equally comprised the sacred and the profane, he nearly always portrayed his figures in the nude, as he felt this was the most effective way to demonstrate his superb carving technique.

Kern rarely signed his works and thus his oeuvre consists for a great deal of attributions. It is impossible to date with certainty his small-scale sculptures. However, his naturalistic and monumental early Baroque style remains unmistakably ever-present. Kern's success and appreciation as a master sculptor is evidenced by his appointment in 1648 as court sculptor to Frederick William von Hohenzollern, Elector of Brandenburg. He eventually died rich and famous and his sculptures found their way in most of the aristocratic art collections of the 17th century.

He is considered to be both a typical representative of 17th-century German small-scale sculptors and, at the same time, one of the most individualistic. He is now seen as one of the most significant sculptors of the Early Baroque in Germany.

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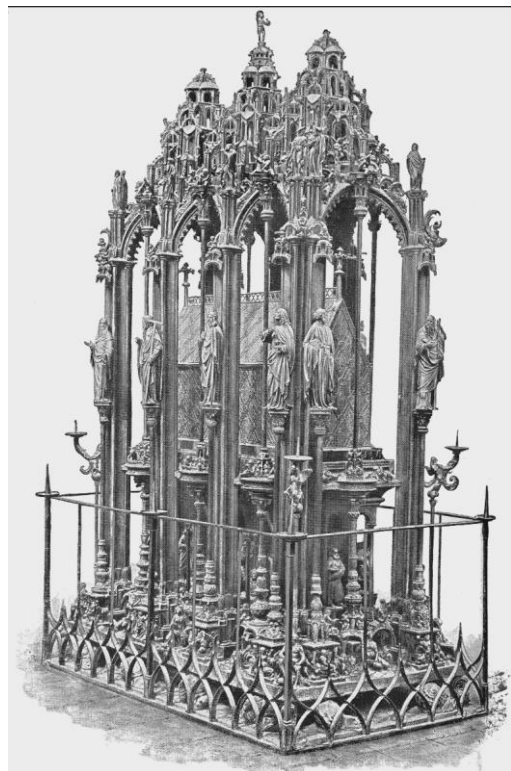
Peter Vischer the Younger (1487-1528)

Peter Vischer the Younger came from a renowned family of German brass founders, redsmiths (Rotschmiede), and artists, active in Nuremberg from the mid-15th century until the second half of the 16th century. Their workshop established by Hermann the Elder in the 1450s, in the vicinity of the Pegnitz River, was referred as the “Vischerhütte” and soon became the most important brass foundry in Germany at the time. The Vischers exclusively used brass for their sculptures and church ornaments.

Peter Vischer the Younger was the son of the celebrated Peter Vischer the Elder and from an early age proved himself to be not only an apt brass-caster, but also a talented sculptor and draughtsman. His most outstanding work consists of his considerable contributions to the exquisitely executed, magnificent tomb of St. Sebaldus at Nuremberg. It is considered to be the masterpiece of the Vischer family and a fascinating mixture of Gothic and Renaissance styles. Peter the Younger presumably made most if not all of the wax models for the countless figures that embellish the St. Sebaldus tomb, as well as the low reliefs on the inner base, showing episodes from the life of the saint. He furthermore produced the statuettes of the Apostles for the tomb, combining Gothic stylistic elements with new insights from the Italian Renaissance.

As a draughtsman, Peter the Younger, greatly liked using allegories and subjects from mythology in his drawings often used for didactic purposes. He produced numerous pen-and-ink illustrations inspired by the stories of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, most notable the stories of Scylla and of Orpheus and Eurydice. Furthermore, he illustrated Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and the humanist Schwenter’s *Histori Herculis*.

Peter produced several plaquettes and small containers, cast in brass, using the lost-wax technique, he had picked up during his travels in Italy. Several of the plaquettes that have come down to us, depict the story of Orpheus and Eurydice.



*St. Sebaldus Tomb, 1508-19,
by the Vischer family, Sebalduskirche,
Nurembreg*

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