

## Water and Earth.

### Reconstructing two Baroque Dance Costumes by Johann Meßelreuther of 1723

Dorothea Nicolai, ICOM Costume Committee  
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#### **Abstract**

This paper retraces the complex journey of bringing two Baroque dance costume designs to life. Beginning with the original 1723 sketches and research in the dance archives in Salzburg and the Baroque theatre at Česke Krumlov, a team of seven experts was assembled to realize the designs: in addition to the author were three cutters, an embroiderer, a hat-maker, and a theatre trompe l'oeil specialist. The goal was to retain the Baroque spirit for a costume wearable by a modern classical ballet dancer on stage today.

#### **Content**

Markgräflisches Opernhaus Bayreuth – Margravian Opera House Bayreuth

Bavarian Administration of State-Owned Palaces, Gardens and Lakes

Johann Meßelreuther and his costume catalogue, 1723

Research: Česke Krumlov

Research: Derra de Moroda Dance Archives

Contact with Museums

Nicolai Costumes and Team

Materialization

Research for Embroidery and decoration

Reconstruction Work/Sewing: Head Dresses, Wigs, Boots, Gloves, Stockings

Presentation at the Margravian Opera House

Future Plans

References



**Left: Figure 1.** *The newly renovated interior of the Margravian Opera House Bayreuth*  
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**Right: Figure 2.** *Wilhelmine von Bayreuth (1709-1754)* ©Bayerische Schlösserverwaltung

## **Markgräfliches Opernhaus Bayreuth – Margravian Opera House Bayreuth**

The small city of Bayreuth in remote Frankonia at the far north end of Bavaria, is known to most people as the city with the Green Hill of Richard Wagner's Festival Theater. But there is another treasure: the architectural heritage of Markgravine Wilhelmine of Bayreuth (1709 -1754). Born a Royal Prussian Princess – and the beloved elder sister of Prussian king Frederick II – she was married off in 1731 to the provincial Markgrave Friedrich of Bayreuth. Within the next 25 years this elegant, educated woman, who also was a talented musician and composer, built four castles with elaborate parks. She commissioned the construction of an opera house and engaged the Baroque star architects Carlo Galli da Bibiena (1728-1787) and Giuseppe Bibiena (1696 – 1757) for the inside design, the outside design was executed by Joseph Saint-Pierre (1709 – 1754). The opera house was inaugurated in 1748 to celebrate her only daughter's wedding with "Artaserse", an opera by Johann Adolph Hasse. After Wilhelmine's death and the end of Frankonia's political independence through its attachment to the Bavarian State at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the opera house was abandoned and rarely used anymore. This explains its survival (it did not burn down like so many other opera houses which were mainly constructed with wood for better acoustics) and its fair state of conservation. Still, after some major unqualified treatments from the 1930s to the 1970s, a general conservation and restoration took place when it was classified a "UNESCO World Heritage" site. It was reopened on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018 in magic splendor with a new staging of "Artaserse" to commemorate the beginning.

## **Bavarian Administration of State-Owned Palaces, Gardens and Lakes**

The Bavarian Administration of Palaces, Gardens and Lakes, otherwise known as the Bavarian Palace Administration, is one of the most traditional administrative departments in the Free State of Bavaria within the Ministry of Finance. Created as part of the administration at the court of the electors and kings in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it is today one of the largest public authorities responsible for museums in Germany. It is also responsible for a very special historical heritage: the many magnificent court gardens, palace parks, gardens and lakes.

Because of its origins in the court, the Bavarian Palace Administration looks after the palaces and residences of the civil list which remained after the former royal family was no longer in power. In addition, however, it has gradually taken over a number of other properties, so that it is currently represented in each of the seven regions of Bavaria with 45 palaces, castles and residences as well as further monuments and artists' houses, 32 historic gardens and 21 lakes. The Margravian Opera House is under their custody. Within the administration a team of art historians was responsible of overseeing the renovation work at the opera house. The Palace Administration has a textile conservation workshop at the Nymphenburg castle. Claudia Pontz of the textile conservation team, was a reliable and cooperative helper in many discussions about the choice of material during the costume reconstruction work.



**Left: Figure 3.** Johann Meßelreuther costume engraving “Water”, 1723 @Bayerische Schlösserverwaltung



**Right: Figure 4.** Johann Meßelreuther costume engraving “Earth”. 1723 ©Bayerische Schlösserverwaltung

### Johann Meßelreuther and his costume catalogue, 1723

To prepare the opera house renovation work the responsible art historians found precious original documentation in the Bayreuth City Archives and in the Bavarian State Library. The original sketches and technical drawings of the architects showed the design of the lost stage curtain and various set designs. This was of enormous importance, because during the time of neglect, all original sets, costumes and other equipment were lost. They also purchased a book by Johann Meßelreuther, issued in Bayreuth in 1723: *Neu-eröffneter Masquen-Saal, Oder: Der verkleideten Heydnischen Götter, Göttinnen und vergötterter Helden theatralischer Tempel, Darinnen In mehr als 200. Kupffer-Stichen vorgestellet wird, wie solche Gottheiten der Alten, bey jetziger Zeit In Opern, Comoedien, Aufzügen und Masqueraden eingekleidet und praesentiret werden können: Nebst einer beygefügten accuraten Beschreibung derer Zeichen und Farben, wie auch derer Götter Geburten, verrichteten Thaten, und erfolgten Vergötter- und Verwandlungen.* (in English: *A newly opened hall of masks, (The temple of pagan gods and goddesses and idolized heroes in disguise, presented with more than 200 engravings how the old gods could be shown now in operas, comedies, parades and masquerades. Together with an accurate description of their symbols and colors, and also their birth and deeds, and their deification and transformation.)*) Johann Meßelreuther was responsible for the Bayreuth stock of

costumes for more than 40 years. He was not an artist, but a man of practice. It also proves that theatre tradition existed in Bayreuth before Wilhelmine's opera house. Meißelreuther was probably documenting the costumes of the past he cared about: the costume style is already a little bit "outdated" at the time when his book was published. The more than 200 coloured engravings show detailed costume sketches of the baroque stage world. This book circulated in many copies during the baroque period and can be found in various archives and libraries (Heidelberg, Prague, Dresden). These costume sketches encouraged the team of art historians at the Bavarian Palace Administration to have some designs realized as costume reconstructions. Not only the costume, but all of it: wigs, shoes, stockings, gloves, trousers— They were looking for "someone" to do this job and this is how the author of this paper became involved in the project with them.

### **Research: Çeske Krumlov**

The first meeting took place in an office of the Bavarian Palace Administration in Nymphenburg Castle, their headquarters. The art historian Dr. Cordula Mauß and her team presented the intriguing designs of four baroque dance costumes, representing the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. The art historians explained that they planned to realize as a first step two of them: "Earth" and "Water." The costumes should recall the period language of costume at that time, but also be ready to be worn by dancer for a performance today. As the team of art historians never had realized costumes nor had come "close" to costume, the author dared to incorporate a proposal into the estimate: the team of art historians and the team of costume experts would visit Çesky Krumlov together. In this little Czech town south of Prague, a baroque theatre has been preserved with all its components: sets, lights, thunder machines and also costumes! The author thought that looking at the originals together would establish a common base of expectation. The author is still thankful to the wonderful and dedicated team of the Çeske Krumlov Castle Theatre, Dr. Pavel Slavko and Katerina Cichrova. They opened their closets for us, sharing their treasures. We were even allowed to see the insides of the costumes. Unfortunately, no tonnelet (hoop skirt for dancers) had been preserved. This visit established our vision.

### **Research: Derra de Moroda Dance Archives**

The author worked in 2006 with the Derra de Moroda Dance Archives in Salzburg together with the dance historian and choreographer Claudia Jeschke and Gunhild Oberzaucher-Schüller from the Faculty of Dance Science of Salzburg University. The task was to re-create a baroque dance costume following a period sketch showing the dancer Jean Georges Noverre (1727-1810) by Louis René Boquet (1717-1814). This costume is kept in their archives, along with many very specific, mostly French, books about baroque dance costumes. Most of the books date from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is where the author took profound looks into the esthetics of baroque dance costumes and their construction.

### **Contact with Museums**

In Sweden, at the Scenkonstmuseet in Stockholm, some original baroque stage costumes are conserved. The author contacted the curator, Camilla Hällbrink, who was very helpful by supplying the author with special photos documenting the baroque dance costume: each detail was captured in a photo, but as in Çeske Krumlov, in Stockholm no original tonnelet has been preserved.





**Figure 5.** Detail of the finished “Water” costume with embroidered dolphins, trompe l’oeuil corals and Baroque (glass) pearls on blue silk satin with silver brocade and tulle © D. Nicolai



**Figure 6.** Detail of the finished “Earth” costume with golden wheat ears made of twisted cords, silk flowers and leaves, animal embroidery in gold on silk and wool velvet © D. Nicolai

## Nicolai Costumes and Team

The author is the owner of the small company “Nicolai Costumes”, and she has worked in the field of opera and dance costumes for more than 40 years. Her special interest in period costumes has enabled her to approach and work with museum staff quite naturally as a member of the ICOM Costume Committee. She has long experience in establishing projects and productions and managing them. To build the team for this project, she asked two cutters she knew from former collaboration, Armin Zwicker in Salzburg and Ursula Schwandt in Munich, and an expert in ladies’ period patterns Luca Castigliolo, from Genova, to work with her. She invited Kaname Kiyono from Vienna, one of the best “costume painters”, meaning that she is an expert in decorating surfaces with *trompe l’oeuil* technique. The author asked Susan Pieper of Hamburg, who is a hatmaker, and Thomas Sjølander in Denmark, an embroiderer, to join. The author knew that this was a special task demanding a passionate dedication. This was not work to do within “normal” work hours. They all agreed, and they were the dream team for a dream job!



**Figure 7.** Elements use in the embroidery for “Water”: blue silk satin, silver net, silver brocade, Baroque pearls, silver sequins and lobster embroidery

## Materialization

The first need was to select materials to realize the ideas. The author established a precise estimate for the Bavarian Palace Administration including proposals for fabrics, and proposals for sources for the stockings, the boots, the gloves and the wigs. She also described how she imagined interpreting the ornaments of the Johann Meßelreuther costume sketches. Included in the estimate was the timeline for the work: the order was confirmed by the Bavarian Palace Administration in mid-December 2018, the delivery date was the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, 2019. No time to lose! The outer fabrics are always the “easiest”—the author decided to look into the range of Rubelli fabrics in Venice, famous for maintaining the period touch of colour and texture. She imagined the “Water” to be a shiny fabric like a silk satin, and the “Earth” softer like a wool velvet. The over-sleeves of “Water” are lined in silver, the over-sleeves of “Earth” are lined with a red-golden jacquard. The first fabric she purchased was a silver sequined remnant in a fabric shop in Zurich. She talked with the cutters technically about



the realization - most important is the “interior” life of a costume, all you do not see. She ordered a special cotton, like a rough moleskin, in a very light weight from Socolatex to put inside. Nothing would be “glued,” most would be stitched by hand. They took care with each detail - including hand sewn buttonholes. The thread used was silk thread. The buttons were thread buttons.



**Figure 8.** Examples of the embroidery motifs for “Earth,” taken from engravings in the *Thesaurus of Animal Specimens* published in 1734 by Albertus Seba (1665-1736). Embroidered animal motifs: lion, deer, moth, turtle and crocodile on dark gold lame before they were cut out. © Thomas Sjølander

### Research for Embroidery and decoration

Decoration was extremely important for baroque stage costume to enhance the illusion for the spectator: the metal threads shimmered in the candlelight, and made them look mysterious. In order to support the embroiderer with good references, the author remembered a specific artist of the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, the same period when the costume book was published, who mastered animal engravings: Albertus Seba. The original books are kept in the Salzburg University Library. She found an animal illustration for each motif necessary for the embroidery: She met with the embroiderer in his workshop to talk about the technique and choose the threads. He works with digital computerized machine embroidery. It is amazing how with High Tech you can succeed in imitating a period touch. Together with the art historians they discussed the kind of roses for the floral edging of the “Earth” costume’s doublet panels and decided on the simple form of a baroque rose, “not filled”. Kaname Kiyono suggested beaded gold to create the wheat ears for the “Earth” costume. The author ordered various gold cords in different tonalities and sizes to compose the air. Kaname Kiyono also did a prototype for the baroque rose, and the company, Die Deutsche Kunstblume, in Sebnitz, Germany, reproduced them together with the leaves. The fabric for the flowers and leaves was composed by the author in various tonalities of pink and green. The corals for the “Water” costume were done in a very traditional “theatre” *trompe l’oeuil*: real coral would break and does not come in the sizes needed for the hat or the spaces between the fastenings in the front. Theatre corals are made with metal thread, covered

with glue which is painted in the typical red colour after drying - a simple recipe. The pearls decorating the “Water” costume came from a little Bohemian pearl company, and they imitate baroque sweet water pearls with a rough, irregular surface. There were no round Japanese Mikimoto pearls at that time in Europe.



**Figure 9.** Dorothea Nicolai working on the final proportions of “Water” © Susan Pieper

### Reconstructing Work/Sewing

The team decided to use “real” measurements to establish the cut. The author asked a dancer who is familiar with period dances to serve as a “role model,” Rainer Krenstetter, who was a soloist at the Vienna and Berlin operas and now dances in Miami. The patterns were first tested in cotton calico. The calico models also helped to determine the size of the animals for the decoration. There was not much time to realize the two costumes and many processes had to take place simultaneously. The assembling of doublets and sleeves respected the period process: the sleeves were first finished with their lining as was the doublet. Then the armhole was sewn by hand edge to edge. In order to allow today’s dancer all necessary freedom to move, the narrow sleeves of the doublet were sewn to an undergarment of cotton calico. That also helps with the costume cleaning. The long oversleeves are sewn to the doublet. The doublet opens in the front with hooks and eyes. Luca Castigilio constructed the hoop skirts or paniers, called *tonnelet*, that were worn by the baroque court dancers. The *tonnelet* gives emphasis to the smallest movements of the dancer and thus expands them for the audience. The *tonnelet* for “Water” is wider than the one for “Earth.”



## Headdresses

The headdresses are extremely important for baroque dance costumes: they re-enforce the slightest movement of the dancer. Susan Pieper built the hats from a *spaterie* (buckram) base. For “Water” the hat looks like a fountain, the blue satin is lined with silver fabric like the shimmering of water. The hat is ornamented with pearls and corals and two tiny embroidered fish. At the side is a “bouquet” of ostrich feathers. Each feather is doubled and curled. The hat for “Earth” follows the same construction system and uses the same material as for the costume, deep red silk satin combined with taupe velvet, decorated in gold with roses and petals in silk.



**Left: Figure 10.** Buffalo hair wig and headdress of “Water” © D. Nicolai  
© D. Nicolai



**Right: Figure 11.** Buffalo hair wig and headdress of “Earth” © D. Nicolai

## Wigs

The wigs were supplied by Olga Reks, a young wig maker, who had studied at the August Everding Theatre Academy in Munich. We re-used old wigs dating from the 1950s made from buffalo hair knotted into a cap of cotton tulle. The style followed a baroque Allonge wig without imitating it. For “Water” the author decided to free the curls like the movement of water waves, and dyed the buffalo hair into pale tonalities of blue and grey. The wig for “Earth” is more conservative in style keeping the baroque form of rolled curls. Here the buffalo hair was dyed into a soft tone of beige.

## Boots

The boots were executed in an Italian workshop specializing in period shoe making, Epoca, in Milan. The author specified the choice of leather and cut for the boots. They were made-to-measure for the dancer's feet.

## Gloves

The gloves came from a very old glove maker, Alois Chiba in Augsburg, Germany. He is over 80 years old and has been making gloves for his whole life. They were made-to-measure following the dancer's hands.

## Stockings

The stockings were purchased from a specialist in period hosiery: Funn Stockings in Steyning, East Sussex in England. They are made from mercerized cotton to meld the shimmer of the silk satin with the stockings. The author dyed the stockings into red and blue matching the trouser fabric.



**Left: Figure 12.** “Earth” costume facing the audience of the Margravial Opera House, Bayreuth ©D. Nicolai



**Right: Figure 13.** “Water” costume on stage of the Margravial Opera House, Bayreuth ©D. Nicolai

## Presentation at the Margravian Opera House

During the music festival of the “Residenztage” in Bayreuth from May 2<sup>nd</sup> to May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the two costumes of “Water” and “Earth” were presented to the public on the stage of the Margravian Opera House in Bayreuth. They melded into the baroque set decoration, carefully lit by a light technician. It was enchanting! Dr. Cordula Mauß of the Bavarian Palace Administration and the author offered commentary as the audience visited the costumes on stage.

## Future Plans

The Bavarian Palace Administration is working on a concept to open a museum for baroque theatre in the Redoute palace next to the Opera House in Bayreuth. It aims to visualize baroque theatre for the visitor to the opera house. The costumes will be part of the exhibition, and they will receive special mannequins for the presentation. The exhibition opening is planned no sooner than 2022.

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