

Just For Decoration or Made for Pedagogical Purposes?
Murals with Scenes from the Life of Confucius in Oranienbaum
Commissioned by Duke Franz of Anhalt-Dessau (1740–1817)¹

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[P]³ *Structure of my paper*

- I Chinese Features in the Park and Palace of Oranienbaum
- II Murals showing Scenes from the Life of Confucius in Oranienbaum and Their Templates
- III Duke Franz and His Interest for „Things Chinese“: Did He just Follow a Trend of His Time or Was There a More Specific Commitment?

Ad I Chinese Elements in the Park and Palace of Oranienbaum

[P] [*Front entrance to the Palace of Oranienbaum*]

This is the Palace of Oranienbaum, as seen from the front. Oranienbaum is a former town and municipality in the district of Wittenberg, in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany. Since 1 January 2011, it is a District of the town of Oranienbaum-Wörlitz. It is situated south of the Elbe, east of Dessau.

[P] [*The former town and the Palace of Oranienbaum as seen from bird's eye view: palace, pagoda and Chinese House*]

– On this bird's-eye-view-picture you see the town with its market place on the left and the palace and part of the park on the right. The Palace of Oranienbaum is part of the famous site called “Dessau-Wörlitz Garden Realm” that was designated as a world heritage site in 2000.

¹ This lecture is largely based on my book „Konfuzius in Oranienbaum: Chinoise Darstellungen zum Leben des Meisters und ihr kulturhistorischer Hintergrund“, published 2020 in Ostasien Verlag. The book [ISBN 978-3-946114-67-3] can be ordered via amazon, via the publisher or directly with me: dschaab-hanke@t-online.de

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³ The number [P] refers to the sequence of pictures shown in my power point presentation but will not be reproduced here due to copyright reasons.

[P] [*Orange tree sculpture on the market place of today's Oranienbaum*]

The name “Oranienbaum”, meaning “orange tree”, takes its origin from the Dutch royal house of Oranje. A princess from this house, **Henriette Catharina** (1637-1708), was married in 1659 to **Johann Georg II. of Anhalt-Dessau** (1627–1693). In 1683 she founded a town that she had called Oranienbaum and commissioned a Dutch architect (Cornelis Ryckwaert) with the construction of a palace and a park there. Because she and her husband got ten children, this number was symbolized in the coat of arms of Oranienbaum. On the picture you see here is a three-dimensional monument showing an orange tree with ten oranges on the marketplace in the center of nowadays Oranienbaum.

[P] [*Leopold III Frederic Franz*]

Leopold III Friedrich Franz of Anhalt-Dessau (1740–1817, hereafter Duke Franz), was a descendant of **Johann Georg II** in the third generation and grandson of Leopold I. (1676–1747), who had become famous as a general in the Prussian army and was nicknamed “The Old Dessauer”. From 1758 on, Duke Franz was ruler over Anhalt-Dessau, an area comprising a little more than 50.000 inhabitants. He owned a palace in his residential town Dessau, a second palace (primarily for representative purposes) in Wörlitz and a third palace, which served more recreational purposes, in Oranienbaum.

[P] [The brick pagoda (50 m high), constructed 1762 by Chambers as a present for princess Augusta in Kew Gardens]

Early in the 1760es, Duke Franz and his friend, the architect Friedrich Wilhelm von Erdmannsdorff, travelled across Europe and also visited several parks in Italy and England. Very probably they had also travelled to Kew Gardens, to the East of London, where at that time a 12-story, 50 meters high pagoda was constructed made from plans by the architect **William Chambers** (1723–1792) that he had presented to Princess Augusta, the founder of the park.

[P] [*Chinese House and Pagoda*]

Soon after their return home, Duke Franz decided to rebuild part of his spacious park in Wörlitz-Dessau from what was previously a typical Baroque-style park into an **English garden**. And he also imitated the model of English gardens in that he conceived them as being open to the public, thus becoming one of the first of its kind in Germany.

In the early 1760es the architect **Georg Christoph Hesekiel** (1732–1818) was commissioned to build a **Chinese-English garden**, with a Chinese pavillon or **Chinese House**, and a five-story pagoda close to the Palace of Oranienbaum. The construction of both the pagoda and the Chinese house were made on the basis of sketches by the Scottish architect **William Chambers** (1723–1792), whom Duke Franz is said to have even personally met on his travel to Kew Gardens.

[P] *[The architect William Chambers / Construction plan of the pagoda in Oranienbaum, detail, signed by Duke Franz]*

The **Chinese House** consisted in a two-winged building with a central cupola, with a staircase leading to the entrance door and two slim columns holding the canopy. The pagoda was a five-story pagoda, on the picture you see some details of the sketch of the pagoda, signed by Duke Franz.

[P] *[Appraisal of the park in the new style by Charles de Ligne]*

Charles de Ligne (1735–1814), himself owner of a palace with a park in Beloeil, in today's Belgium, in 1795 published a book in which he compared his own garden with other gardens in Europe. He praised the new park in Oranienbaum that he had visited after Duke Franz had rearranged it in the new English-Chinese style saying:

I have also been to Oranienbaum, whose old French style maintains the sadness and humidity. However, on its right side the Duke, who is dear to the God of Taste and to my heart, has already started to cheer it up by commissioning the creation of Chinese buildings, and in doing this the Duke goes to work as if he had been in Beijing all his life.

[A first look at the murals in the Chinese House]

However, certainly by far the most impressive Chinese elements found in Oranienbaum are the **14** murals, namely **3** in the Chinese House and **11** in the Palace, respectively, which could be identified as **scenes from the life of Confucius**.

[P] *[View from below onto the upper gable field, with four lanterns in Chinese style, Chinese House]*

If one enters the Chinese house from the Northern front, one finds three large paintings, namely a portrait of what could be identified to be the Chinese sage Confucius in the Eastern gable, a scene that looks a bit like the birth scene of Jesus in the Western part, just opposite to the portrait, and finally, on the ceiling, an orchestra consisting of musicians holding Chinese instruments.

Here you can see the three murals more clearly:

[P] *[Seated Confucius with Pearl Crown, Chinese House]*

[P] *[Heavenly Orchestra celebrating the birth of Confucius, Chinese House]*

[P] *[Third-Day-Bathing Ceremony for the newborn Confucius, Chinese House]*

Turning now to the eleven murals found in the palace itself, on the second floor or bel étage, nine of them cover the walls of what has been called the “chambre” or main room, where e.g. guests were received – and two have been painted as supraports in the “antichambre”, one over the door that leads from the antichambre to the chambre and one that leads from the chambre outward.

[P] *Chinese wall decoration (nine scenes from the life of Confucius) in two rooms of the upper floor, Palace of Oranienbaum, panorama photo*

As we know from archive documents, these two rooms in the palace were decorated in **1789** in this Chinese style, while the decoration of the Chinese House can be dated a few years later, to **1796** or one year later.

The panorama photo shows altogether 11 scenes from the life of Confucius: two of them as the main decoration of the wall, one above the chimney, five as supraports, and three above other figures that are not part of the scenes from the life of Confucius and to which I will refer later.

Before proceeding to take a closer look at the scenes depicted on the murals in Oranienbaum that the painter whom Duke Franz had commissioned had made use of, let me briefly report the results of my research on where the painter had copied these from.

Ad II A Closer Look at the Murals showing Scenes of the Life of Confucius in Oranienbaum and Their Templates

[P] [*Helman's Abrégé historique des principaux traits de la vie de Confucius (Paris 1788), title page*]

The altogether 14 scenes found in Oranienbaum were all copied from a book with copper engravings, consisting of 24 pictures and the accompanying text, by the French copper engraver and publisher **Isodore-Stanislas Helman** (1743–1809) published in 1788.

Helman's copper engravings for their part, as we learn from the title-page of his book, were made on the basis of „**original drawings from China, sent to Paris by Pater Amiot, Missionary in Peking**“. And remarkably, the book was first published in Paris in 1788, only one year before Duke Franz had commissioned his painter to copy them onto the walls of his palace and of the Chinese House in Oranienbaum.

[P] [*Portraits of Henri-Léonard Bertin and of Joseph-Marie Amiot*]

The French Jesuit **Joseph-Marie Amiot** (1718–1793) was one of the last missionaries who had stayed in China even after the Jesuit order had officially been suppressed by Pope Clement XIV in 1773. **Henri-Léonard Bertin** (1720–1792), who was then minister and controller of finances to the French King Louis XV (1759–1763), had established a close correspondence with Amiot, asking him to send all kind of information about China to him, as well as books, musical instruments, pieces of art, both for the royal collection and also his own private one.

As we know from a letter addressed to Bertin which has been preserved in the BNF, Amiot had collected more than a hundred pictures from various editions of Scenes of the Life of Confucius (the so-called *Shengji tu*) and had commissioned a Chinese painter to make drawings from them that he sent to Paris. Unfortunately Amiot's own collection is not preserved, but among the many Chinese motifs extant, I have chosen originals that

come close to those scenes that Helman has produced as copper engravings, though one can clearly see that they appear in some details as quite, “Westernized”. To which degree this adaption to European taste Helman should be credited with or if Amiot himself had already ordered his painter in China to paint the scenes in this way, must, however, remain open to speculation.

In what follows, I will show you some examples of scenes found on the walls of the Palace and Chinese House in Oranienbaum as compared with the copper engravings in the Helman collection and with scenes from Chinese originals and I will shortly summarize the contents of the descriptions that accompany the selected pictures. To begin with the three scenes in the Chinese House:

[P] [*Seated Confucius with Pearl Crown*]

The portrait of the Seated Confucius, here depicted with a long beard, a pearl crown with twelve strings of pearls, a kind of scepter and a cape over his shoulders with the twelve symbols pointing to a sovereign is a very close adaption of the Helman copper. This motif is, however, not taken from one of the series showing scenes from the life of Confucius but instead from a hagiographical text (called the *Queli zhi*), written in the 15th century.

[P] [*Text accompanying Plate 1 of Helman (Seated Confucius with Pearl Crown)*]

The text accompanying this scene is saying:

This philosopher [...] who had exercised the judicary in several kingdoms was searching for a worthy monarch, not because of any personal advantage that this would bring him, but in order to be able to work for the welfare of the people and in order to give his teachings the authority which he himself received from his disciples.

Texts of this kind accompany each of 24 pictures in the Helman volume, but in what follows I will only shortly summarize their contents.

[P] [*Third-Day Bathing Ceremony and Heavenly Orchestra: Chinese House, and Helman copper*]

The scene in the Western gable, which will certainly remind a European reader of a Christian birth scene, is in fact a picture showing the so-called Baby bathing on the third day after a child's birth. Confucius' mother is lying in a kind of alcove. The baby which is bathed by two women is, of course, Confucius (note the tattoos on his body!), and his birth is also accompanied by a Heavenly orchestra. Probably because the scene was too large to bring it into one picture the Duke Franz' painter has decided to divide the scene, and to shift the orchestra to the ceiling.

[P] [*Third-Day Bathing Ceremony and Heavenly Orchestra:
Shengji quantu, and Kongzi jiaiyu zhengyin*]

Here are two Chinese depictions of the Third-Day-Bathing scene – we do not know which one

Amiot might have given his Chinese painter as template, but they both come quite close to the Helman copper.

[The nine murals in the Palace of Oranienbaum]

Let us now turn to the murals with which two rooms of the Palace have been decorated and the scenes they show and to give four examples, each along with its templates.

[P] [*Confucius distributes rice among the poor*]

“Confucius distributes rice among the poor.” [H 9] The text accompanying this scene says:

Confucius ordered that one thousand measures of rice which had been presented to him by a minister whom he could not estimate should be distributed to the poor people in the countryside.

So Confucius is depicted here as the generous minister serving the public welfare.

[P] [*Confucius was consulted when workers were digging a well*]

“Digging a well, Confucius was consulted for his advice.” [H 10] In the distance one sees workers occupied with digging a well.

It is not so clear which aspect an attentive reader would perceive as more important – the act of digging a well as seen in the upper part of the picture or the scene in which some disciples ask the master for advice regarding the clay figure that one of the workers had found on the earth while digging the well. In the first case the main topic would be the rural works, in the latter case it would be the role of Confucius as competent advisor.

[P] [*Confucius acting as a wise judge*]

“Confucius as the good advisor.” [H 18] Confucius was successful in dissuading the king of Chen from executing three officials who had been responsible for surveilling the workers who had built a high platform and had failed to force the workers to finalize their work in time. On the picture one sees an official who is announcing an amnesty on the three condemned officials.

[P] [*Confucius reports to Heaven that his work is finalized*]

Confucius and his disciples offer Heaven the sacred books that Confucius had compiled and used for his teachings. [H 21] = Confucius the good teacher and reformer

Ad III Duke Franz and His Interest for „Things Chinese“: Did He just Follow a Trend of His Time or Was There a More Specific Commitment?

Turning now to the question of why Duke Franz decided not only to construct Chinese buildings in his park but also have the walls of the Chinese House and of two rooms in his palace in Oranienbaum painted with scenes from the life of Confucius, I think that we have to distinguish between different aspects or facets, namely firstly that Duke Franz was, of course, following a trend that had affected large parts of the aristocratic class in Europe,

namely the trend to decorate their gardens with what they had regarded to be in a Chinese style, although it was more or less mostly quite exotic.

[P] [*Friedrich II of Prussia's Tea House in Potsdam-Sanssouci, copper engraving*]

Take, for example, the famous **Tea House in Potsdam-Sanssouci** that **Frederic II of Prussia** had commissioned the architect Johann Gottfried Büiring (1723–after 1788) to construct between 1754 and 1757. This Chinese pavillon was modeled on the Maison du trèfle that had been erected in 1738 in the garden of the Palace of Lunéville. Around the outer walls are gilded columns decorated with exotic figures, such as tea cooking and tea drinking Chinese. This is indeed a very exotic style and much more a product of European fantasies than anything authentic.

[P] [*Sanssouci, Tea House, view from Southwest, with group of Chinese boiling and drinking tea/ Konfuzius-Hermes Trismegistos-figure on top of the Tea House*]

The same may be said about the figure on top of the Chinese House. With its bare legs, a cape around its shoulders and the winged cap, a hat with feathers and a scepter in the form of a caduceus, it has been identified by some as a representation of the Greek-Egyptian god Hermes Trismegistos. But at closer look one also may gain the impression that this is perhaps a very European-style interpretation of Confucius.

[P] [*Chambers' Designs of Chinese buildings, furniture, dresses, machines, and utensils (London 1757)*]

In contrast, the Chinese items, both in the park and in the palace of Oranienbaum seem to be mostly based on more authentic information about China and things Chinese. This applies as well for the buildings we have already mentioned as for the items found within these buildings.

This step towards more Chinese authenticity was made possible by sketches such as those found in William Chamber's book *Designs of Chinese buildings, furniture, dresses, machines, and utensils. To which is annexed a description of their temples, houses, gardens*, published 1757. Chambers had studied the construction of traditional Chinese buildings and Chinese gardens when he was in South China in the 1740s.

[P] *Sketch of a Chinese pavillon and a Chinese pagoda (Chambers 1757)*

As one can see on this picture, sketches of pagodas and pavillons in the Chinese style, as we saw them in Duke Franz's *Englisch-Chinesische garden*, are collected in Chamber's book.

[P] *Sketch of interieur with lanterns, table and chair, Chinese style (Chambers 1757)*

Chambers also made sketches of Chinese interiors, such as tables, chairs, and lanterns. Lanterns of this type could also be seen in the Chinese House and in the Palace of Oranienbaum.

[P] [*Chinese interior, with lanterns, chairs, tables and vases, in the “ante-chambre” of the Palace of Oranienbaum (photo of 1927)*]

On this foto taken in 1927 one can still see the original interior of so-called ante-chambre in the Palace of Oranienbaum. Apart from chairs, table and lanterns that are vy much in the Chambers style we can also see vases and bowls in the Chinese style.

[P] [*Two of the scenes of Confucius / Two figures from Chambers 1757*] (2x)

And remarkably, as one can see easily when comparing the Oranienbaum murals with the Chambers sketches, even these huge figures, painted on the walls of the main room (chambre) in Oranienbaum in combination with the scenes from the life of Confucius, were taken from Chamber’s book of 1757. The first pair shows, as it is explained in Chambers’ book, a Co-Lao, or minister of state, and “The Emperor in his robes”, the second one is said to show “Merchant in winterdress” and “A Mandarin of the law” – in other words, representatives of different layers of Chinese traditional society.

[P] [*Confucius, in Couplet’s Confucius Sinarum Philosophus (1687), in Du Halde’s Description géographique... (1735)*]

But let us return once again to Confucius as he is represented in Oranienbaum: As we saw, the Confucius as Duke Franz had him painted was much different from the phantasy figure found in Sanssouci or elsewhere at that time. His portrait, as we saw, was modeled after a Chinese picture dating to the 15th century, and we have other portraits of Confucius, such as those found as frontispiece of Jesuit works such as Couplets *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* of 1687 or Du Halde’s *Description géographique, historique, etc., de la Chinese of 1735*.

So **what exactly did Confucius stand for in Duke Franz’s thought?** Unfortunately Duke Franz had not left any documents that would have given uns safe evidence regarding his ideas about Confucius, but at least we may guess what he moght have meant to him as a monarch of the late age of enlightenment.

[P] [*Seated Confucius, with verses by Voltaire below the copper engraving, Helman 1788; portrait of Voltaire*]

Perhaps the key to what Confucius stood for in Duke Franz’s mind is again found in Helman’s book, the title page of which not only shows the Seated Confucius with the pearl crown (that I have shown to you so far), but also some verses below the figure that are signed by the name **Voltaire**, alias, François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778). He has celebrated Confucius as a **paragon of the Age of Enlightenment**, saying:

Solely concerned with interpreting the common good,
Without dazzling the world, enlightening the minds,
He only spoke as a wise man, and never as a prophet;
However, he was believed, even in his own country.

If one imagines that Duke Franz read these lines from Voltaire in the collection of coppers produced and published by Helman, one can well imagine that to him Confucius stood for values that he also advocated.

We know from research on Duke Franz that he was a reformer in his realm Anhalt-Dessau, especially with regard to agriculture, but also with regard to education, healthcare, social services, road construction, agriculture, forestry and industry. Even though it may be doubted that he understood much of the scenes from the life of Confucius painted on his walls, he certainly perceived Confucius likewise as a reformer who served the public welfare, as a good teacher or as a sage judge.

[P] Parnass of church and pagoda as a symbol of syncretism in Salzdahlum, commissioned by Duke Anton Ulrich von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (copper engraving, c. 1710)

And the fact that Duke Franz had painted the portrait of Confucius in his Chinese house exactly at the place where in Christian churches Jesus the pantocrator would be depicted, along with the scenes of the birth of Jesus here replaced by the Third-Day-Bathing Scene suggests that this was an expression of his thought of tolerance for which he was also well-known. In this respect one might even see him as standing in a tradition of mutual acceptance of Christianity and Confucianism as Leibniz had formulated it first and as it had been symbolized in the form of a parnass of Christian church and Chinese pagoda as early as in 1710 by Duke Ulrich Anton of Wolfenbüttel.

Regarding the possible educational purposes that Duke Franz might have pursued with his paintings, we know that had an overall goal of educating the people, part of which was to bring his subjects in closer contact both with technical developments and also with paintings of the world. One aspect of this concept was that he had built various kinds of imitations of old buildings in his park in Dessau-Wörlitz (such as an English cottage, a Greek temple, various kinds of bridges and even an artificial volcano). As for the other aspect, he had established a calcographic society where a large number of copper printings of famous paintings were collected. Very probably, the Helman book also came into Duke Franz's hands because of his pedagogical concept of collecting copper printings, which would also explain why the paintings in Oranienbaum could be produced within such a short time – the first scenes were painted within no more than a year after the publication of the Helman book in 1788.

To conclude, it seems to be justified that to Duke Franz Confucius and the scenes from his life meant more than only decoration. To him he was probably a sage advisor, someone who acted in behalf of the common welfare, as an enlightened ruler should do, and the fact that he perceived Confucius in this way is probably the reason why we have here, and obviously unique in Europe, a collection of scenes from the life of Confucius, filtered through several stages of mediation, in the little town of Oranienbaum in the very center of Germany.