

War Painting and the Soldier as the New Man

Karl Sterrer's Pilot Portraits and the Ambivalent Face of Heroism during the First World War

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Abstract

With his series of pilot portraits during the First World War, the Viennese painter Karl Sterrer made a significant contribution to the depiction of a modern heroic figure. It has not yet been analysed in the context of the modern soldier and his masculinity, which came under strain in the brutal trench warfare. At the mercy of an abstract war machine, the common soldiers could hardly find heroic moments to impress. Only a few new types of troops, such as the aviators, succeeded in doing so, which gave them a great deal of public recognition and made them part of modern visual culture. Ultimately, they were seen as New Man, above the horrors of modern warfare. At the same time,

they were also role models for a noble habitus that met the phenomena of modernity calmly. This aspiration was evident in their elegant countenance, their extraordinary physiognomy. Unlike previous attempts in art history, however, this article provides a look at the conservative take on the subject – by a traditional, academic artist. This focus underlines the extent to which old and new soldierly values overlapped in modernity and became actualised by different artists regardless of their political orientation. The same applies to the stylistic realisation, which intertwines traditional elements with those of new movements such as New Objectivity.

Introduction

[1] Modern mechanised warfare and the trenches of the First World War severely challenged the traditional image of the soldier.¹ The experience of the army of the soon-to-collapse Habsburg Empire was no different from that of other European nations. The battles on the Isonzo against Italy brought great bloodshed, evoking comparisons with Verdun. In Galicia, the Austro-Hungarian army struggled for a long time to hold off the advancing Russian forces.² More often than not Habsburg found itself in a difficult position among the Central Powers. The army relied on outdated standards in warfare and technology and had to catch up to the new reality. The new way of warfare resulted in trench wars and mass battles, which allowed for little heroism. These developments made it even more important for the leadership to accompany the events of the war with propaganda. The army officials of Austria-Hungary therefore founded the Imperial and Royal Military Press Office (k.u.k. Kriegspressequartier, KPQ) in 1914 as a part of the army high command, a large press office that provided complete news coverage of the war. It also employed numerous war painters such as Albin Egger-Lienz (1868–1925), Anton Faistauer (1887–1930) and many lesser-known artists, who depicted the battles, the front lines as well as the everyday life of the soldiers.³ KPQ officials largely dictated the style and the motifs of the war imagery. Artistic experimentation was not a focal point; it was only in the later years of the war that new themes were taken up. Consequently, artists stayed within the boundaries of traditional military genres such as portraits of army officials, wide landscapes with advancing units, or key moments of battle. The aim was to present a noble impression of the troops to the people back home. Between 1915 and 1918, the KPQ presented the results in more than 40 exhibitions at home and abroad in allied or neutral countries in Europe.⁴ The naturalistic depictions provided the audience with a closer look at the war events, along with a glimpse of the often unfamiliar landscapes, and sometimes even the hardships and losses of battle.

[2] A remarkable case within the KPQ was the painter Karl Sterrer (1885–1972), who is little known today outside of Austria. Often overlooked as an academic painter, he has not attracted substantial research yet.⁵ Sterrer was a young aspiring artist before the First World War and received most of his accolades later in the interwar period, as a professor at the Academy of Fine

1 Eric Leed, *No Man's Land. Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge, UK 1979.

2 John R. Schindler, *Fall of the Double Eagle. The Battle for Galicia and the Demise of Austria-Hungary*, Herndon 2015.

3 Jozo Džambo, ed., *Musen an die Front! Schriftsteller und Künstler im Dienst der k.u.k. Kriegspropaganda 1914–1918*, exh. cat., 2 vols., Munich 2003; Liselotte Popelka, ed., *Vom "Hurra" zum Leichenfeld. Gemälde aus der Kriegsbilderausstellung 1914–1918*, exh. cat., Vienna 1981.

4 Liselotte Popelka, "Die Musen schweigen nicht", in: Džambo (2003), vol. 1, 64-78: 68.

5 And if so, only as a negative example for the conservative atmosphere in the First Republic, see, Christoph Bertsch, "Das ist Österreich! Die visuelle Kommunikation im politischen Kontext der Ersten Republik", in: id., ed., *Das ist Österreich! Bildstrategien und Raumkonzepte 1914–1938*, Berlin 2015, 9-53: 16-18. One unpublished master's thesis covered Sterrer's development with an emphasis on the First World War, see, Karin Zangerl, *Karl Sterrer. Leben und Werk unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Ersten Weltkriegs*, Diplomarbeit, University of Innsbruck, 1999.

Arts in Vienna. During the war, he became the most prominent portraitist of pilots in the Austrian-Hungarian army. His portraits highlight the impact of aviation on the visual language of war painting and more precisely the image of the pilot as a new type of soldier. Sterrer stands out from the field of up to 50 artists who have dedicated themselves to aviation in the KPQ; most of the images by fellow war painters Oskar Alexander (1879–1953), August Hajduk (1888–1958), Elemír Halász-Hradil (1873–1948), Ludwig Hesshaimer (1872–1956) or Josef Humplik (1888–1958) are very conventional.⁶ As aerial combat was initially difficult to observe in real time, the scenes focused on the figures of the pilots and their planes on the ground as a symbol of their actions. As late as the autumn of 1918, the army command was trying to increase the popularity of the air force, but the initiatives were short-lived.⁷ Although the topic of aviation and Sterrer's portraits received partial consideration by the Heeresgeschichtliches Museum (Museum of Military History) in Vienna, the artist has not yet found greater resonance in research. Yet Sterrer's portraits of pilots and his impact in the Habsburg monarchy show how a traditional artist shaped the image of the new role models and their heroism.⁸

[3] Sterrer was employed by the KPQ in 1916 and the field trips to the front led him to the Galician and later the Italian front.⁹ From 1916 onwards, the painters of the KPQ usually went on excursions to certain sections of the front for up to two weeks, where they joined specific companies within the military infrastructure. This practice yielded Sterrer many commissions, recommendations by officers and general requests by the leadership. Typically, the painter created traditional portraits of army officials such as *Generalmajor Arthur Iwanski von Iwanina* (1916) or *Generaloberst von Böhm-Ermolli* (1917).¹⁰ However, in Galicia, he also met pilots of the new Imperial and Royal Airforce (k.u.k. Luftfahrtruppen), a novel branch of the army, which stimulated a new array of portraits. As aircrafts became combat-ready and increasingly used in the army, pilots generated more and more public interest. During the First World War, aviators appeared as a new type of soldier, often referred to as knights of the sky.¹¹ This topic has seen more research recently, especially their cultural impact as masculine figures, but only sparsely for the context of art history.¹² Pilots such as Manfred von Richthofen (1892–1918) or Oswald Boelcke (1891–1916) were widely known heroes in Germany. In Austria-Hungary, Julius Arigi

6 Liselotte Popelka, *Fliegen 90/71. Katalog. Teil II: Fliegen im Ersten Weltkrieg. Gemälde und Zeichnungen*, exh. cat., Vienna 1971, 11.

7 Popelka (1971), 50.

8 For historical accounts see: Jessica Meyer, *Men of War. Masculinity and First World War in Britain*, Basingstoke 2009; Jason Crouthamel, *An Intimate History of the Front. Masculinity, Sexuality, and German Soldiers in the First World War*, New York 2014; René Schilling, *"Kriegshelden". Deutungsmuster heroischer Männlichkeit in Deutschland 1813–1945*, Paderborn 2002. For art history see: Michael Mackenzie, *Otto Dix and the First World War. Grottesque Humor, Camaraderie and Remembrance*, Oxford 2019; Elisabeth Leopold, ed., *Trotzdem Kunst! Österreich 1914–1918*, exh. cat., Vienna 2014; Dietrich Schubert, *Künstler im Trommelfeuer des Krieges 1914–18*, Heidelberg 2013.

9 Popelka (2003), 66.

10 Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, Bezugsnummern 608/2008 and 890/2008.

11 Bernd Hüppauf, "Fliegerhelden des Ersten Weltkriegs. Fotografie, Film und Kunst im Dienst der Heldenbildung", in: *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, Neue Folge 18 (2008), no. 3, 575–595: 577.

(1895–1981) and Godwin Brumowski (1889–1936) quickly became popular.¹³ Postcards with photographs of the new idols were soon available everywhere.¹⁴ Famous pilots often appeared in newspapers and magazines accompanied by elegant women, dressed in furs and other extravagant clothing. August Hajduk's portraits capture some of this glamour, presenting three pilots in lively, genre-like scenes (Fig. 1).¹⁵ In the casual and humorous portrayal, the artist nevertheless also hints at the pilots' quality as bon vivants.



1 August von Hajduk, *Drei Offiziere der Fliegerkompanie 36* (*Three Officers of Flying Squadron 36*), 1918, tempera on paper, 47 × 63,2 cm. Heeresgeschichtliches Museum (hereafter: HGM), Vienna, no. 10.219/2022 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

12 Monika Szczepaniak, "Zwischen 'Kriegsgott' und 'Operettenfigur': Inszenierungen militärischer Männlichkeit in der österreichischen Literatur zum Ersten Weltkrieg", in: *Journal of Austrian Studies* 45 (2012), no. 3/4, 29-60. See also Monika Szczepaniak, "'Ritter der Lüfte'. Der Kampfflieger als (post)heroische Männlichkeitskonstruktion", in: Claudia Glunz and Thomas F. Schneider, eds., *Wahrheitsmaschinen. Der Einfluss technischer Innovationen auf die Darstellung und das Bild des Krieges in den Medien und Künsten*, Göttingen 2010, 241-252.

13 Nicole-Melanie Goll, "Godwin von Brumowski (1889–1936): The Construction of an Austrian-Hungarian War Hero during World War I", in: Marija Wakounig and Karlo Ruzicic-Kessler, eds., *From the Industrial Revolution to World War II in East Central Europe*, Münster 2011, 139-157. See also Nicole-Melanie Goll, "...Nobel und ritterlich im Kampf, war er gleich einer Gestalt aus der Zeit des Minnesangs und der Turniere...": *Zur Konstruktion des Kriegshelden in der k.u.k. Monarchie am Beispiel von Godwin von Brumowski, Gottfried von Banfield und Egon Lerch*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Graz 2014, <http://data.onb.ac.at/rec/AC12043056>.

14 Hüppauf (2008), 585. See also Peter Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers. German Aviation and the Popular Imagination*, Cambridge, Mass. 1992.

15 Popelka (1971), 27, cat. no. 15/17.

[4] This special habitus becomes particularly apparent in another of Hajduk's artworks. The extravagant Hauptmann von Lux (Fig. 2) is smoking a cigarette in front of his plane. Nonchalantly, he seems to face danger and challenges with great composure and a habitualised coolness.



2 August von Hajduk, *Feldpilot Hauptmann Walter von Lux (Captain Walter von Lux, Military Pilot)*, 1917, oil on canvas, 64 × 50 cm. Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 7604/2009 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

[5] Karl Sterrer was clearly drawn to this ideal. Adding to Liselotte Popelka's research, the painter's aim was not only to depict the new experience of flying but presenting the aviators as heroes and role models with a distinct habitus.¹⁶ The pilots, who previously often served as engineers or in the artillery, exposed themselves to extreme situations and appeared as a new type of adventurers. Sterrer experienced this newly emerging gentleman culture of flying at first hand with the aircraft squadrons of the Habsburg army, initially mainly with the Flying Squadron 8 (*Fliegerkompanie 8*) in Galicia, and later in Trieste and Tyrol, where he encountered similar types of soldiers (Fig. 3).¹⁷

16 Popelka (1971), 10.

17 Popelka (1971), 41.



3 Karl Sterrer, *Alfred E. von Eccher, Hauptmann und Feldpilot* (*Alfred E. von Eccher, Captain and Military Pilot*), 1918, lithography, 420 × 366 mm (sheet 736 × 590 mm). Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 1251/2008 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

[6] In 1918, Sterrer contributed to the contemporary debate on the image of men in an interview, arguing that the pilots were the manifestation of the 'New Man'.¹⁸ Published in the *Neues Wiener Journal*, he used a key term of the avant-garde, the New Man, already often employed in Expressionism and then frequently after 1918, and thereby highlights the idealistic view of this new archetype of the soldier.¹⁹ The artist emphasises the pilots' high adaptability to the new conditions of war. This kind of flexibility was central to a modernised understanding of soldierly heroism. According to Sterrer, they remain noble heroes, fearlessly exposing themselves to the greatest dangers. Admittedly, this is a very different image than the avant-garde wanted to convey.²⁰ Sterrer is not concerned with the pursuit of utopian projects or the thematization of the fragmented self in modern society, but with the renewal of traditional values.

[7] Sterrer may have received elements of the modern debates on flying, which first appeared with writers such as the French aviation pioneer Roland Garros (1888–1918) or Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938). The topic became so popular that it soon appeared in other forms of literature throughout Europe. More traditional views flourished as well, for instance in the novel

18 Karl Marilaun, "Der neue Mensch. Ein Gespräch mit dem Maler Karl Sterrer", in: *Neues Wiener Journal*, 6 April 1918, 3.

19 Walter Fähnders, "Der Neue Mensch", in: Hubert van der Berg and Walter Fähnders, eds., *Metzler Lexikon Avantgarde*, Stuttgart / Weimar 2009, 225-226. See also, Nicola Lepp, ed., *Der neue Mensch: Obsessionen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, exh. cat., Ostfildern-Ruit 1999.

20 Paul Fox, "Confronting Postwar Shame in Weimar Germany. Trauma, Heroism and the War Art of Otto Dix", in: *The Oxford Art Journal* 29 (2006), no. 2, 249-267.

Agnes Altkirchner by the Austrian writer Felix Braun (1885–1973).²¹ In one chapter, Braun describes the first aviators during the war years as birds of prey, as bird-like predators still at one with nature, not acting like cold machines. After Benno Berneis (1883–1916), an expressionist painter, was killed in air combat over France in 1916, his friend, the sculptor August Gaul (1869–1922), depicted him as an eagle.²² Such broader psychological observations on instincts and dedication make the portrait genre a logical choice for an adequate representation in the field of arts.

[8] Sterrer stands out among his colleagues in the KPQ, as he provides the pilots with an almost auratic appearance, which sharpens these qualities of coolness and toughness. The interview from 1918, which figures as the key source for this article, highlights Sterrer's interest in this multifaceted 'iconic' image of pilots as new role models. His portraits have rarely been addressed in greater depth, as they stand at an intersection of traditional military portraiture, concepts of the New Man, and the latter's cultural significance for the renewal of soldierly qualities. The depiction of modern pilots in Sterrer's paintings as an ambivalent combination of heroism and soldierdom is the focal point of this essay.

[9] The crisis of masculinity in the interwar period, analysed for example by Änne Söll and Christa Hämmerle, has its origins in war experiences in which men found themselves helplessly exposed to industrialised warfare.²³ As I will show for the first time in art historical research, however, the coping strategies also emerged during the war – not least with the figure of the pilot.

[10] The paper will first introduce Sterrer as an artist and the KPQ as the institution that commissioned most of Sterrer's portraits. It then follows Sterrer's path chronologically from his stint in Galicia in 1916/17 to Trieste and other parts of the Southern front around 1918. The main focus will be on how he portrayed the pilots and their new soldierly appearance.

Sterrer's involvement with the KPQ

[11] Karl Sterrer was born in 1885 as the son of the Viennese sculptor Karl Sterrer (1844–1918).²⁴ He studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna from 1900 to 1907 with Alois Delug (1859–1930) and Christian Griepenkerl (1839–1916). Before 1914 he already had his first

21 Popelka (1971), 10.

22 August Gaul, "Meinem Freunde B. Berneis", cover image of: *Der Bildermann. Steinzeichnungen für's deutsche Volk* 11 (1916).

23 Änne Söll, *Der Neue Mann? Männerporträts von Otto Dix, Christian Schad und Anton Räderscheidt*, Paderborn 2016; Christa Hämmerle, "'Vor vierzig Monaten waren wir Soldaten, vor einem halben Jahr noch Männer ...'. Zum historischen Kontext einer 'Krise der Männlichkeit' in Österreich", in: *L'Homme (= Europäische Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft)* 19 (2008), no. 2: *Krise(n) der Männlichkeit*, eds. Christa Hämmerle and Claudia Opitz-Belakhal, 51-73; see also, Christa Hämmerle, *Ganze Männer? Gesellschaft, Geschlecht und Allgemeine Wehrpflicht in Österreich-Ungarn (1868–1914)*, Frankfurt 2022; Christa Hämmerle, *Heimat/Front. Geschlechtergeschichte/n des Ersten Weltkriegs in Österreich-Ungarn*, Vienna 2014.

24 See the monographic accounts by Arpád Weixlgärtner, *Karl Sterrer, ein Wiener Maler der Gegenwart*, Vienna 1925, and Max von Millenkovich-Morold, *Karl Sterrer*, Vienna 1927.

successes as a young academic artist, but the outbreak of the war interrupted this path. Sterrer showed little enthusiasm for the war and did not report to the front until 1915, because otherwise he would have been detached to support troops (*Hilfsdienst*) in Vienna.²⁵ He came to Ivangorod in Galicia with a troop of workers and went with them further east, as far as the Stokhod river in today's Ukraine, where they stayed for several months. He joined the KPQ in 1916 with the help of Baron Heinrich Haerdtl and minister of education Gustav Marchet (1846–1916).²⁶

[12] The KPQ was an institution whose task was to produce propaganda images and texts, but also to coordinate press information.²⁷ A total of 550 artists and journalists were active for it during the war, including 280 painters. The KPQ came into being on 28 July 1914 as a branch of the Austro-Hungarian army and Major General Maximilian Ritter von Hoen (1867–1940) served as its first director until 1917.²⁸ Later, Colonel Wilhelm Eisner-Bubna (1875–1926) took command, in an effort to push the new media of film and photography.²⁹ The agency started with a traditional focus on reportage and literary texts, and began hiring many well-known writers of the time, such as Albert Paris Gütersloh (1887–1973), Egon Erwin Kisch (1885–1948), Robert Musil (1880–1942), Alice Schalek (1874–1956), or Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929).³⁰ Robert Musil became editor of the *Tiroler Soldaten-Zeitung* in 1916/17, for example, before moving to the military weekly *Heimat* in March 1918, where he met Egon Erwin Kisch. In small anonymous articles they dealt with general political topics and everyday life during the war. Those articles still pose a challenge to research on Musil and other modernist writers today, as they are strongly tinged with propaganda. From the May 1918 issue onwards, Musil was the editor-in-chief of the latter journal. Yet, with the end of the war, everything quickly dissolved and the writers immediately left this occupation behind.

[13] In addition to literature, the KPQ also gave an important role to photography and the visual arts and created the so-called Art Group (*Kunstgruppe*) under the direction of *Oberst* Wilhelm John (1877–1934), a historian and general who had been the director of the Army Museum (now the Museum of Military History) in Vienna since 1909. John and his staff sent artists to the

25 Weixlgärtner (1925), 79.

26 Zangerl (1999), 16.

27 See also the autobiographical report by Ludwig Hesshaimer, "Mit dem Skizzenbuch im Feld", in: Jozo Džambo, ed., *Musen an die Front! Schriftsteller und Künstler im Dienst der k.u.k. Kriegspropaganda 1914–1918*, exh. cat., 2 vols., Munich 2003, vol. 2, 65–76: 65.

28 See entry "Kriegspressequartier (KPQ)", in: *Lexikon zum Literatur- und Kulturbetrieb im Österreich der Zwischenkriegszeit* (online), <https://litkult1920er.aau.at/litkult-lexikon/kriegspressequartier-kpq/> (accessed Sept 13, 2021).

29 Sema Colpan et al., eds., *Kulturmanöver. Das k.u.k. Kriegspressequartier und die Mobilisierung von Wort und Bild*, Frankfurt 2015.

30 Peter Broucek, "Das Kriegspressequartier und die literarischen Gruppen im Kriegsarchiv 1914–1918", in: Klaus Amann and Hubert Lengauer, eds., *Österreich und der Große Krieg. Die andere Seite der Geschichte*, Vienna 1989, 132–139; Peter Plener, "Der Medienverbund Kriegspressequartier und sein technoromantisches Abenteuer 1914–1918", in: *Zagreber Germanistische Beiträge* 25 (2016), 255–270.

respective battlefields, where they were to produce art for propaganda purposes, but also material for the later writing of history and the glorification of heroic deeds in war – as formulated in an official document, the "Instruction for pictorial reporting in war".³¹ The document, which came into force on 1 January 1916, describes the general duties and tasks of the artists, such as dress code, membership in the companies, remuneration, preferential production and submission of the artworks to the ministry. Practical reasons were in the foreground. Officials recommended landscape painters to draw maps and help depict enemy positions. Talented portraitists were to produce portrayals of important officers, while figurative painters were to work on large battle scenes. Even though the guidelines show a conservative understanding of art that assumes fixed genres, they served just as recommendations. The appeal of the work for many artists was that they did not have to participate directly in the fighting. Yet, they soon realised that they entered a rather rigid system in which they had to hand over their works regularly to the army command.

[14] The KPQ has been often criticised for this entrenched system by several contemporary art critics such as Richard Hoisel.³² After four years of war, all war painters had long since become slack from the ever-same themes. For Hoisel, the true images of the war would emerge only in some future time, years after the war, after a real confrontation with the events had taken place. The average task of each artist during the war was to deliver at least one sketch per week and at least one painting per month. Artists rarely stayed at the front for more than two months. Larger works were made at home.³³ Most of the works were handed over to the KPQ command in Vienna. From there, depending on their suitability, the works were forwarded to the War Ministry Archives, the Army Museum or to various other military authorities, who used them to decorate their rooms. Artworks of higher quality were sent to a collecting point at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna from spring 1916. There, the staff prepared the works for the various exhibitions of wartime art that were now staged throughout Austria-Hungary and in neutral or allied countries. By the end of the war, the KPQ had organised over 40 presentations with more than 8,000 artworks.³⁴ Most of the shows took place on the territory of Austria and Germany, but there were also presentations in Budapest or Prague.³⁵ The exhibitions in Trieste and Zagreb show that efforts were made to be present near the contested territories. Images of individual army divisions and their fields of operation were often staged in nearby towns, as in the exhibition on

31 K.u.k. Armeeeoberkommando, "Vorschrift für die bildliche Berichterstattung im Kriege", in: Jozo Džambo, ed., *Musen an die Front! Schriftsteller und Künstler im Dienst der k.u.k. Kriegspropaganda 1914–1918*, exh. cat., 2 vols., Munich 2003, vol. 2, 8-12: 8.

32 Richard Hoisel, "Kriegsmaler", in the weekly: *Sport und Salon: Illustrierte Zeitschrift für die vornehme Welt*, 17 March 1918, 7-9: 8.

33 Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Vienna, AT-OeStA/KA FA AOK KPQ Akten 37 A Kunstgruppe, "Protokoll der Sitzung zur Ausnützung der graphischen Gewerbe für die militärische Propagandatätigkeit im Kriegsministerium vom 14.5.1917".

34 Ilse Krumpöck, *Anton Faistauers militärische Nichtsnutzigkeit*, Maishofen 2007 (= *Schriftenreihe zu Anton Faistauer und seiner Zeit*, 2), 15. See also the chapter "Kunstaustellungen" in the online exhibition "1914–2014. 100 Jahre Erster Weltkrieg" of the Austrian State Archives, <http://wk1.staatsarchiv.at/propaganda-kuenstler-und-kpq/bildende-kunst/kunstaustellungen/> (accessed Nov 10, 2021).

35 See the list in Popelka (1971), 14-18.

the Carpathian Corps in Brno in 1916. Towards the end of the war, scenes of the Isonzo battle in particular toured the Allied territories.³⁶

[15] Among the best-known war painters in the KPQ Art Group were established artists such as Albin Egger-Lienz (1868–1926), Anton Faistauer (1887–1930) and Anton Kolig (1886–1950). However, less well-known painters such as Ferdinand Andri (1871–1956), Karl Friedrich Gsur (1871–1939) or Alexander Pock (1871–1950) are more representative of the naturalistic style that dominated war depictions at the beginning of the war. Karl Friedrich Gsur's *Defensive Fight of an MG Division* of 1915/16 (Fig. 4) can serve as a typical example of the works artists produced for the KPQ.



4 Karl Friedrich Gsur, *Abwehrkampf einer MG-Abteilung (Defensive Fight of a Machine Gun Division)*, 1915/16, oil on canvas, 92 × 116 cm. Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 3125/2017 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

It shows groups of soldiers firing, the course of the trenches in the background, and two wounded men. It does not appear overly heroic, but rather focuses on the concerted shooting and the camaraderie within the troop. Stylistically, this depiction is in the tradition of the 19th century. Most artists leaned on such formulas of simple battle scenes in realistic tones. Attempts to change this tradition did not lead very far.

[16] When the dissolution of the Art Group loomed in 1918, caused by the enormously reduced budget of the downsized Austrian state, its director Wilhelm John sent a report to the supreme army command summarising its achievements during the war.³⁷ He even advocated the

36 See the exhibition catalogues: *Isonzo-Ausstellung in der Königlichen Akademie der Künste Berlin. Werke österreichischer und ungarischer Kriegsmaler und Kriegsbildhauer des k.u.k. Kriegspressequartiers, Dezember 1917 / Jänner 1918*, exh. cat., Vienna 1917; *Isonzo Ausstellung 1918. Werke österreichischer und ungarischer Kriegsmaler und Kriegsbildhauer des k.u.k. Kriegspressequartiers (Wanderausstellung in Stuttgart, Dresden und München)*, exh. cat., Vienna 1918.

37 Report by Wilhelm John, Vienna, 7 November 1918, "Referat betreffend die Bedeutung der Erhaltung der Kunstgruppe des Kriegspressequartiers", in: Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Vienna, AT-OeStA/KA FA AOK KPQ Akten 2 Exhibitenprotokolle Nr. 14.460-14.999 von 21.9.–18.11.1918.

establishment of a permanent fine arts department in the army. This latter proposal found no supporters and immediately after the end of the war the Art Group was disbanded.

[17] Sterrer joined the Art Group in 1916 and, after a few excursions in Galicia, established himself as a sought-after portraitist of pilots and other military personnel in the region. As far as we know, he produced about a dozen pilot portraits, as well as posters for war bonds, several dozen landscape scenes and smaller depictions of the trenches and other army positions.³⁸ The series of pilot portraits is a numerically small group within Sterrer's work. However, it clearly stands out artistically from the works of earlier and later years. During the war, Sterrer often used a mixed technique of drawing and watercolour, gouache or chalk. Some paintings were done in oil, such as the monumental view of the *Emplacement in Bukovina (Stellung in Bukowina, 1916)*. Many of these works were shown at the regular spring exhibition at the Vienna *Künstlerhaus* in 1916, at the "Watercolourists' Exhibition" ("Ausstellung des Aquarellisten-Klubs der Genossenschaft d. b. K. W.") in 1917 as well as at the "War Picture Exhibition" ("Kriegsbilder-Ausstellung des k. u. k. Kriegs-Press-Quartiers") in 1918 at the same place.³⁹ KPQ officials often used venues such as the well-established *Künstlerhaus* as locations for the new war exhibitions. Sterrer's main works for the KPQ also appeared in art magazines like *Moderne Welt* and *Graphische Künste*.⁴⁰

[18] In January and February 1918, Sterrer was sent to the Southern front near Trieste.⁴¹ At the special request of the airborne troops on the Tyrolean front, he was deployed there in the summer of 1918. In late summer, however, he ended his engagement as a pilot portraitist and began work on the designs for the lithograph portfolio *Flieger im Hochgebirge (Aviators in the High Mountains)*, commissioned by the publisher Julius Brüll. Sterrer conceived it as a summary of his war production. The set, published in 1919, contained a total of twelve prints, six portraits and six landscapes.⁴² This publication marked the end of Sterrer's involvement with the military. When the war ended in November 1918, army officials immediately disbanded the KPQ.

[19] As his biographer remarked in 1925, Sterrer certainly felt constrained by his involvement as a war painter for the KPQ.⁴³ Nevertheless, he became known for his pilot portraits and later received the *Reichelpreis* for them, a prize awarded by the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna from 1808 to 1929.⁴⁴ Additionally, the dense network of exhibitions during the war provided him with a

38 The reconstruction of Sterrer's oeuvre is far from complete. The numbers of works in the various genres may still shift (significantly). For example, more than 40 (mostly smaller) works are recorded as mandatory contributions to the KPQ in November 1916 alone, see Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Vienna, AT-OestA/KA FAAOK KPQ Akten 84 Pflichtabgaben A-J; however, it is not yet possible to identify them all.

39 "Ausstellung des Aquarellistenklubs", in: *Österreichische Volks-Zeitung*, no. 37, 8 February 1917, 10; Popelka (1971), 15-18. Weixlgärtner (1925), 92.

40 A. Seligmann, "Karl Sterrer", in: *Moderne Welt* 2 (1920), no. 1, 6-8; Arpád Weixlgärtner, "Karl Sterrer", in: *Die Graphischen Künste* 42 (1919), 18-32.

41 Popelka (1971), 40.

42 *Flieger im Hochgebirge. 12 Original-Lithographien von Karl Sterrer*, Avalun-Verlag, Vienna/Leipzig 1919.

43 Weixlgärtner (1925), 106.

44 Weixlgärtner (1925), 106.

platform to make his works known. In January and February 1918, for example, the Watercolourists' Club at the Vienna *Künstlerhaus* exhibited no fewer than 41 works by Sterrer. Although the period as a war painter constricted him, it indirectly promoted his art and offered him new opportunities. In this sense, the pilot portraits intertwine his artistic and larger societal aspirations. With his stance as an objective and sober portrait painter, his nuanced images of human beings highlight the importance of virtues in times of hardship. In his portraits from the 1920s and 1930s, Sterrer's oeuvre shows traces, both formally and thematically, of the methods that he had acquired in depicting the pilots. Although his aviator portraits have so far mostly been regarded as singular, perhaps a continuity in Sterrer's work can be shown in the future.

The pilot portraits created in Galicia

[20] Sterrer's first assignment for the KPQ took him to the Eastern front in Galicia, where he soon made a name for himself as a portrait painter. The first significant group of works was created in autumn 1916, when he visited Flying Squadron 8 (*Fliegerkompanie 8*). The unit had its base in Aspern near Vienna and was later deployed to various smaller airfields in Galicia as well as Krakow and Przemyśl, where it helped with supply flights during the siege by the Russians in 1915. Later it relocated to the Adriatic Sea at Pula, closer to the Isonzo front.

[21] This set of works, executed as watercolours and with chalk, marks Sterrer's initial attempts to depict the new type of soldier. He thematises the youth and self-confidence of the pilots, but also indicates vulnerabilities and their ability for introspection. Sterrer is obviously trying to convey a more reflective notion of heroism than was common in other examples by Oskar Alexander or August Hajduk, and certainly different from the later glorification of the soldier by figures such as Ernst Jünger (1895–1998). Possibly this nuanced expression was a response to the situation in Galicia and the difficult tasks of the pilots. The portrait of *Richard Ritter Maurig von Sarnfeld* (Fig. 5) gives a good impression of how Sterrer approached this task.

[22] The young pilot appears in a shoulder portrait in the lower right half of a vertical format, wearing a scarf and a leather cap. Behind him, his plane fills the rest of the sheet. To the left behind him, two other pilots are busy loading an aerial bomb. By contrasting foreground and background, Sterrer tries to embed the aviator in a lively, yet monumental scene. Against this backdrop, the face of the young pilot, who looks straight ahead with concentration and expectation, but also with slight fear, appears very vibrant. Sterrer visualises the pilot's doubts, feelings that surely mounted up before each take-off, as the artist himself later thematised in his interview.⁴⁵ The new flying machines had a reputation for being dangerous and unreliable. Their operation required technical knowledge and strength. The early days of flying carried an air of adventure that may have appealed to younger soldiers like Maurig (1894–1918), but the reality was different. Many of the pilots active in the First World War enlisted at a young age. The anxiety of take-off was something to overcome, a test of manly virtue.⁴⁶

45 Marilaun (1918), 3.

46 Mosse (1996), 21.



5 Karl Sterrer, *Feldpilot Richard Ritter Maurig von Sarnfeld* (*Richard Ritter Maurig von Sarnfeld, Military Pilot*), 1916, chalk and watercolour, 484 × 314 mm. Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 9798/2010 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

[23] This is what Sterrer tried to depict, the pilot's youth and a notion of doubt that comes with the challenge of flying. Slight psychological nuances, paired with the lively, technique-filled background created the formula for the first pilot portraits, which go beyond many of the examples by Alexander or Hajduk, his colleagues from the KPQ. There is little research on pilot portraits in general, either of the pilots of the other Central Powers or of the Entente Powers, for whom other modes of representation may have been more important. Although there were pictures of famous aviators like Manfred von Richthofen in Germany, for example by the Stuttgart portraitist Karl Bauer (1868–1942), they rarely reached a high artistic quality. They were more like quick sketches or memorabilia of the battles. With the aspect of insecurity, Sterrer's first portraits are rather reminiscent of the soldier drawings by Stephanie Hollenstein (1886–1944), a Vorarlberg artist who disguised herself as a man in order to be able to join the fights.⁴⁷ For the pilots, the stakes remained high. Maurig crashed fatally in August 1918.⁴⁸

[24] Sterrer's gouache of Maurig's colleague, the military aviator Otto Stella (Fig. 6), dated 16 October 1916, shows the pilot in a knee length portrait. Stella is just taking off his leather gloves and wears the distinctive leather cap and a loose aviator jacket.

47 Evelyn Kain, "Stephanie Hollenstein, Painter, Patriot, Paradox", in: *Woman's Art Journal* 22 (2001), no. 1, 27-33.

48 Popelka (1971), 41.



6 Karl Sterrer, *Otto Stella, Fähnrich der Reserve und Feldpilot, Fliegerkompanie 8* (*Otto Stella, Reserve Fähnrich and Military Pilot, Flying Squadron 8*), 1916, gouache, 472 × 307 mm. Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 952/2008 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

Stella (1894–1918) appears young, but a little more self-assured than Maurig (Fig. 5). Other pilots gather at the aircraft in the background. They are preparing for the upcoming flight. Wrapped in large coats, their faces are barely recognisable. The colouring seems a bit plain, but again it is an attempt to create an interesting contrast between fore- and background. This gouache is reminiscent of an aviator's portrait by the German artist Fritz Erler (1868–1940), which he created for a poster for war bonds. Erler shows the aviator standing in his cockpit with great self-confidence. The poster underlines once again that these portraits are to be seen as war propaganda, not least the works of Sterrer, even though a calm, cautious tone prevails with him. Stella fell in aerial combat over the Cismon (today Region of Veneto, Italy) in June 1918.⁴⁹

[25] Sterrer never thematised the frequent crashes. The sculptor and painter Josef Humplik (1888–1958) is one of the few who designed an expressive depiction after a crash (Fig. 7).⁵⁰ However, he was never officially a war painter in the KPQ, so he was not bound by the regulations. His painting is distantly reminiscent of works by Egon Schiele or expressionist tropes. In the drawing, a pilot carries his injured comrade out of the wreckage of an aircraft. The suffering gesture of the injured man's hands in particular is reminiscent of Schiele. Humplik was drafted into the artillery in 1915 but volunteered for the air force. He later crashed during a training flight and then fought again as an infantryman.⁵¹

49 Popelka (1971), 42.

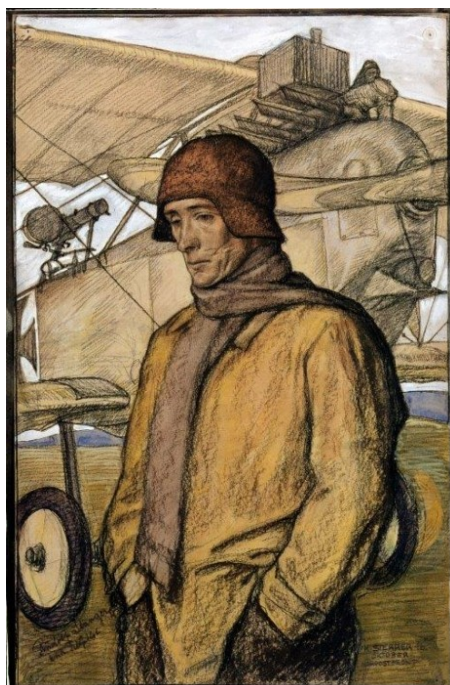
50 See also the painting of a downed enemy plane by Max von Poesch (1872–1968), which is also in the collection of the HGM, no. 8853/2007.

51 Popelka (1971), 30.



7 Josef Humplik, *Flucht (Escape)*, 1919, charcoal on brown paper, 476 × 460 mm. Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 16.958/2017 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

[26] Sterrer's *Portrait of Lieutenant Rudolf Stanger* (1916, Fig. 8) dates from the same period on the North-eastern front in Galicia and appears to be the most direct expression of the dark side of the war – especially in contrast to the version of Stanger made by Oskar Alexander, which shows him against an empty background and is average at best.⁵²

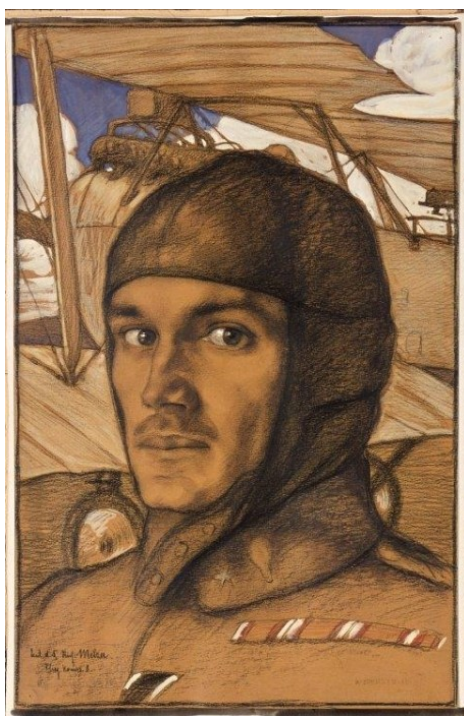


8 Karl Sterrer, *Leutnant Rudolf Stanger (Lieutenant Rudolf Stanger)*, 1916, chalk and watercolour, 448 × 314 mm. Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 9799/2010 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

⁵² The HGM holds many artworks by Oskar Alexander (1879–1953), including the portrait of Stanger, HGM, no. 7526/2009.

Sterrer, on the other hand, drew a picture of Stanger, again a knee piece, that does not glorify the audacity of the early pilots. Rather, the aviator looks down at the ground in a sad and melancholic gesture, as he tucks his hands into his trouser pockets, seemingly expressing his resignation. Sterrer is possibly alluding to the confusing and hopeless situation at the front in Galicia, especially after the siege of Przemyśl.⁵³ The battle for Galicia in 1914 had brought great casualties to the Habsburg troops and they were not able to recuperate the territorial losses against the Russians until the summer of 1915. Yet, the position of the Austro-Hungarian army remained weakened as the theatre of war shifted south and into the Balkans. This shift may explain why Lieutenant Stanger's portrait does not carry the victorious atmosphere that usually characterises military portraits – nor the more recent spirit of optimism that surrounded modern aviation and the heroism of pilots.

[27] During this time Sterrer created several variants of pilot portraits, as shown in the *Portrait of Lieutenant Richard Melzer* (Fig. 9, 1916), who also was part of the Flying Squadron 8.



9 Karl Sterrer, *Leutnant Richard Melzer (Lieutenant Richard Melzer)*, 1916, chalk and watercolour, 484 × 315 mm. Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 9801/2010 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

Sterrer uses a foreshortened perspective here moving closer to the pilot's head, even closer than in Maurig's portrait (Fig. 5). This formal change intensifies the focus on Melzer's face and his self-confident expression. The background is not populated, only the aircraft can be seen behind him. This scheme was to prove fruitful for Sterrer's portraiture, as it is now the pilot's aura and his character that attract most of the attention. As the 1918 interview reveals, he found the physiognomy of the pilots particularly remarkable. In his discussion with the interviewer Karl

53 Schindler (2015), 273.

Marilaun (1881–1934), he describes the stunning appearance of pilots.⁵⁴ As he explains in reference to them, their faces always remain unpredictable – in contrast to the uniform visages of ordinary soldiers:

*The physiognomy of the fighter, the trench soldier, the officer somehow always reveals the hinterland from which he has come, and it is not difficult to guess what the man has been in peacetime and what he will be again. Besides, life out there has also uniformed the faces to a certain extent. But it is different with the airmen. Physiognomies that I could observe there, I have not come across before; here the war has created an absolutely new kind of human being.*⁵⁵

[28] The near-sighted portrait of Melzer (1892–1918) hints at this interest in physiognomy. The artist has zoomed in closer and made the facial appearance a key feature of the pilot and a sign of his distinctive personality, distinguishing him from the common soldier. His head with the leather cap appears as streamlined as the plane. His sleek facial features also stand out and are intended to show his cool-headed habitus. Physiognomy became a popular discipline in the 1920s, often associated with such quality judgements.⁵⁶ Philosophers and psychologists such as Ludwig Klages (1872–1956) and Ernst Kretschmer (1888–1964) took up 19th-century ideas that a person's abilities and identity, otherwise often hard to grasp, showed up in his or her facial features. Even though the interview draws from Sterrer's experiences in Trieste in 1918, the first signs of these concepts were already visible in his portraits in Galicia in 1916. Due to such ideas, Sterrer's focus can be seen as an almost phenomenological description of the pilots' mental disposition, from which a theory of wartime portraiture could be derived. The quote highlights the fact that the New Human Being is not characterised by uniformity, but bears distinct features that represent a new reality. Sterrer's words formulate a high standard. Melzer suffered a fatal accident at Aspern airfield in February 1918.⁵⁷ The spirit of adventure and the high mortality rate in aviation lay close together.

[29] It was not until February 1917 that another large portrait was created, the *Portrait of Rittmeister von Lehmann* (Fig. 10), again showing members of Flying Squadron 8. Sterrer executed it as a gouache with exquisite colouring – which makes it one of the most intriguing works in the entire series.

54 Marilaun (1918), 3.

55 "Die Physiognomie des Kämpfers, des Grabensoldaten, des Offiziers verrät irgendwie doch immer das Hinterland, aus dem er gekommen ist, und es ist nicht schwer, zu erraten, was der Mann im Frieden gewesen ist und was er einmal wieder sein wird. Ueberdies hat das Leben dort draußen gewissermaßen auch die Gesichter uniformiert. Anders ist es aber mit den Fliegern. Physiognomien, die ich dort beobachten konnte, sind mir zuvor nicht untergekommen, hier hat der Krieg eine absolut neue Menschengattung geschaffen." Quote from Marilaun (1918), 3.

56 Claudia Schmölders, ed., *Gesichter der Weimarer Republik. Eine physiognomische Kulturgeschichte*, Cologne 2000; see also Szczepaniak (2012), 34-39.

57 Zangerl (1999), 64.



10 Karl Sterrer, *Feldpilot Rittmeister von Lehmann, Beobachter Oberleutnant E. Schicht und K. Freiherr von Westenholz* (Rittmeister von Lehmann, Military Pilot, with Oberleutnant E. Schicht and Oberleutnant K. Freiherr von Westenholz, Observers), 1916, gouache, 44 × 61 cm. Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 2115/1997 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

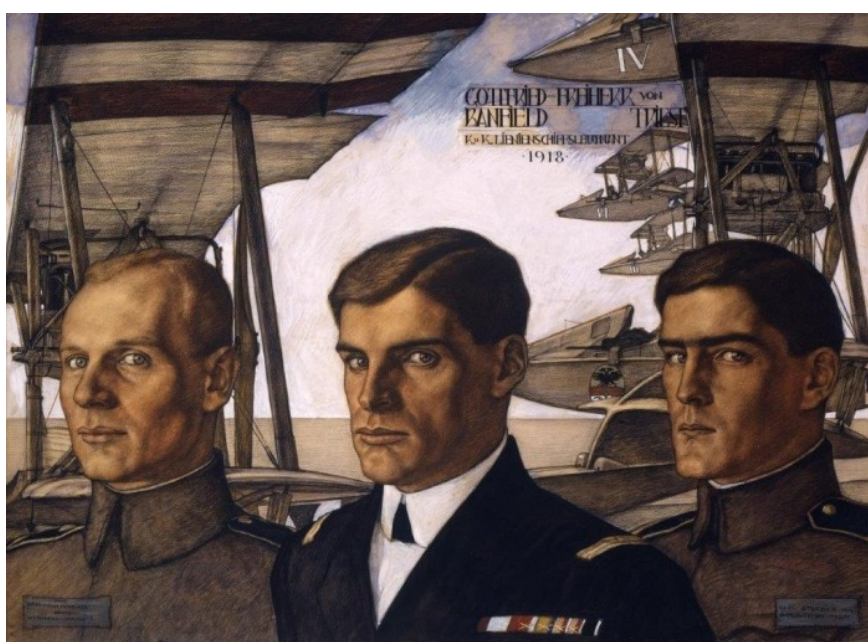
Set in a hangar, Sterrer presents Lehmann as a greying veteran in front of his younger comrades. His colleagues discuss the flight route or enemy positions while he oversees everything. Lehmann's striking facial features emphasise an atmosphere of professionalism. Doubts do not seem to play a role here, unlike with the younger pilots in the portraits presented above. Three experienced pilots are on display here. The close plane in the background accentuates the bravado with the flying machine, the camaraderie and the nearing battle. Yet, the older Lehmann stands out with his fur-trimmed jacket. Many pilots led luxurious lifestyles in bohemian-like circumstances. Photographs from this period often reveal a semi-dandyish military life.⁵⁸ Again, Hajduk's *Portrait of Hauptmann von Lux* (Fig. 3) provides a good comparison.⁵⁹ The loosely impressionistic portrait presents the pilot in full combat gear smoking a cigarette in front of his plane. His expression shows that he is nonchalantly facing danger. Lehmann displays a similar poised soldierly coolness. Sterrer presents Lehmann's companions as professionals, equipped with the much-needed technical expertise. The pilots seem to interact with each other and share detailed information regarding their next actions. Hence, the portrait of the three experienced pilots links the old and the new, the image of the extravagant elder statesman Lehmann and the technically skilled professionals Schicht and von Westenholz, to form a picture of the New Man. The focused interaction of Rittmeister von Lehmann and his comrades highlights the range from the youthful professionals to the distinguished officer habitus.

58 Hüppauf (2008), 588.

59 Popelka (1971), 26.

The Southern front and Trieste

[30] When Sterrer arrived on the Southern front early in 1918, he accompanied a squad from the Trieste Naval Air Base (*Seeflugstation Triest*), which refers to a unit with seaplanes capable of take-offs and landings in the water.⁶⁰ The air combat against the Italians, which dominated the late phase of the war, took place mostly over the sea in support of the fleets. At first, the Habsburg air forces were superior. Only later in 1918, they were outnumbered by the Italians.⁶¹ The *Triple Portrait with Lieutenant Banfield* (1918, Fig. 11), i.e. Gottfried Freiherr von Banfield, is a symbol of this success and one of the most striking of Sterrer's series of pilots. It demonstrates Sterrer's approach to further push the principles of representation found in Galicia. The artist again shows three pilots, similar to the *Portrait of Rittmeister von Lehmann* (Fig. 10), but now they stand side by side, shoulder to shoulder and parallel, as a sign of unity. The composition of the large canvas emphasises a sense of camaraderie not previously present in Sterrer's portraits. He develops a strong visual gesture that draws from Renaissance models and places its protagonist Banfield in the middle.



11 Karl Sterrer, *Linienschiffskapitän Gottfried von Banfield und seine Kampfflieger* (Gottfried von Banfield, Captain, and his Fighter Pilots), 1918, watercolour and chalk drawing, 709 × 957 mm. Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 9797/2010 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

60 Walter Blasi and Bernhard Tötschinger, *Die k.u.k. Luftfahrttruppen. Zur Geschichte von Österreich-Ungarns "Luftakrobaten"*, Schleinbach 2017, 37-38. See also Peter Schupita, *Die k.u.k. Seeflieger. Chronik und Dokumentation der österreichisch-ungarischen Marineluftwaffe 1911–1918*, Koblenz 1983. The most important Habsburg airbase on the Adriatic was Pula. The base in Trieste was established later, in 1916.

61 Erwin Pitsch, *Italiens Griff über die Alpen: die Fliegerangriffe auf Wien und Tirol im 1. Weltkrieg*, Vienna 1994.

[31] Banfield, the "Eagle of Trieste", whose ancestors came from Ireland, was one of the Habsburg Empire's most famous flying aces, with countless battles over the Adriatic.⁶² After Italy entered the war in 1915, he built up the naval air base of the *k.u.k. Seeflieger* in Trieste and subsequently served as its commander. Sterrer thus visited a division of the *k.u.k. Kriegsmarine*, which supported the ships in the Adriatic with reconnaissance flights. Moreover, due to its early air advantage over the Italians, the Austrian pilots could bomb targets almost at will.⁶³ Banfield was among the pilots who scored the most kills. Seen almost as a sporting achievement, the successes in close combat gave rise to the hero myth of the pilots. Sterrer describes in the 1918 interview that Banfield personally flew in each new aircraft. The commander appears as a great, mysterious figure who fearlessly faces any danger.⁶⁴ This habitus and their flying achievements as a whole contributed to a certain pride of the pilots, which Sterrer tried to capture in this portrait. In contrast to the images the artist produced in Galicia, this painting is not about introspection or the youth of the pilots, but rather a depiction of a successful squad on the Adriatic coast in grand, classical tones; men brimming with pride and acting as pioneers in the combined operations of air and naval combat. Accordingly, Sterrer highlights Banfield in his naval uniform with a black coat and white shirt and the long row of insignia.

[32] During the same time, Sterrer portrayed the naval officer Julius Nickl in Trieste in front of battleships in the harbour, which were part of the so-called *Donauflotte* (Danube Flotilla).⁶⁵ The old pride of the navy, which is on display there, and its noble appearance, became part of the identity of the supporting flying units in Trieste that Banfield commanded.⁶⁶ In front of the airplanes with bulking hulls, his look draws from this appeal of the navy, from his comrade Nickl and others.⁶⁷ Banfield became a seafarer of the skies.⁶⁸

62 Gottfried von Banfield, *Der Adler von Triest. Der letzte Maria-Theresien-Ritter erzählt sein Leben*, Graz 1984. See also, Aurelia Kundmann, "Linienschiffleutnant Gottfried Freiherr von Banfield (Seeflugstation Triest)", in: Thomas Albrich and Nikolaus Hagen, eds., *Österreich-Ungarns Fliegerasse im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914–1918*, Innsbruck 2019, 75-91.

63 However, Emperor Charles forbade the bombardment of Venice, to protect the art treasures. Bombing had a stigma among the public even before the war. The Austrian writer Bertha von Suttner (1843–1914) started agitating against the use of aircrafts in the military as early as 1912.

64 Marilaun (1918), 3.

65 Karl Sterrer, portrait of *Linienschiffsleutnant Julius Nickl*, gouache, Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 854/2008.

66 Ernst Hanisch, *Männlichkeiten. Eine andere Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Vienna 2005, 22-25.

67 It is difficult to determine which type of the so-called flying boats Sterrer depicts here. From 1916 to 1918, Lt. Banfield flew the "Lohner-Jagdflugboot A11", see <http://www.doppeladler.com/kuk/seeflieger.htm> (accessed March 1, 2022).

68 See later Militaria which emphasise this affiliation, such as, Ernst Peter, *Die k.u.k. Luftschiffer- und Fliegertruppe Österreich-Ungarns 1794–1919*, Stuttgart 1981.

[33] His two comrades, *Seeflugzeugführer* Welker and Niedermaier, have no less striking appearances.⁶⁹ Sterrer has carefully constructed the painting and inscribed the pilots with a formula of dignity. The synchronous gaze and posture exemplify their professionalism and the ability of their unit to steer the machines as one.⁷⁰ The clean and static composition of the image and the low-contrast colouring give the portrait an official, almost stately appearance. The cold elegance supports the modern appearance of the pilots. The painting does not show reality, where much more was at stake. Welker died in February 1918, before Sterrer could complete the painting, during a training flight with an aircraft captured from the Italians. Niedermayer went missing after a battle over the Adriatic in May 1918. Nonetheless, Sterrer continued his work and greatly expanded the formula of the portraits developed in Galicia, now combining them into a large composition which creates an almost auratic appearance. The painting presents a pilot squad at the height of their success and accentuates their roles as New Men. The triple portrait of Banfield and his comrades is the principal work of Sterrer's portrait series.

[34] In the latter half of the 1918 interview, Sterrer makes Banfield the prime example of the pilot as a New Man:

*I will mention only one and at the same time probably the most representative type of these new men: the aviator Banfield. I have seen him often and in the most diverse surroundings, and nothing was more interesting to me than to notice that he was a completely different person every time.*⁷¹

As mentioned before, in contrast to the uniformity of the ordinary soldier, Banfield appears as the most charismatic pilot on the scene. He seemed to be able to adapt to any new situation. This sense of mutability stimulated the artist and made Banfield interesting for his portraiture. In the interview follows another almost phenomenological description, now of Banfield in various everyday situations. Wherever he went, whether to the officers' mess or to the café, he behaved appropriately and yet differently. This passage is partly reminiscent of a literary reportage, but above all it shows the great reverence for the flying ace. Banfield appears as an almost mythical figure, indomitable and mysterious. In an article from 1915, the art critic Arthur Roessler (1877–1955) highlights the monumentality and 'male lyricism' of Sterrer's work.⁷² The latter characterisation seems similarly fitting for the paradoxical figure of the new pilots, something

69 Nils Büttner, "Avantgardisten im Schützengraben. Zur visuellen (Selbst-)Inszenierung soldatischer Coolness 1914–1918", in: Annette Geiger, Gerald Schröder and Anne Söll, eds., *Coolness. Zur Ästhetik einer kulturellen Strategie und Attitüde*, Bielefeld 2010, 105-126.

70 On the power of the uniform in military societies, see Elizabeth Otto, "Real Men Wear Uniforms. Photomontage, Postcards, and Military Visual Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Germany", in: *Contemporaneity. Historical Presence in Visual Culture 2* (2012), no. 1, 18-44, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5195/contemp.2012.44>.

71 "Ich will da nur einen und zugleich wohl den repräsentativsten Typ für diese neuen Menschen nennen: den Flieger Banfield. Ich habe ihn oft und in den verschiedensten Umgebungen gesehen, und es war mir nichts interessanter, als festzustellen, daß er jedesmal ein vollständiger anderer Mensch war." Quote from Marilaun (1918), 3.

72 Arthur Roessler, "Karl Sterrer", in: *Die Kunst für Alle* 31 (1915), no. 7/8, 154-158.

strong and unheard, yet surrounded by a poetic feeling. Sterrer found in them genuine heroism and idealism.⁷³ Apparently, the pilots with their elitist habitus and noble masculinity offered the painter an alternative to the morally indecent world and a model for his artistry.

[35] The large, monumental painting of Banfield has always received the most attention among Sterrer's works because it seems to directly express Sterrer's aspirations for the pilot as a New Man – predominantly for his spirit of adventure, heroism and virtue. In the early 20th century, the term New Man found its expression in a wide variety of utopian ideas for the transformation of the human being.⁷⁴ In the case of the soldiers, it can be seen as an adaptation to modern warfare. The aviators were able to defy any danger in harmony with their machine, floating seamlessly in the air above the dirt of the battlefields and trenches. Thus, they provided the template for a new heroism that could adapt to any situation. In the 1918 interview, Sterrer refers to situations in everyday life, in which the flexible attitude and adaptability of the heroic individual, which distinguishes him from the common soldier, can also be observed. The normal infantrymen were just pawns in the war machinery. Banfield was no ordinary man. His noble habitus suited him everywhere and could therefore also be depicted in the portrait. Following these observations, Sterrer's theoretical and artistic aspirations came together most sharply in this artwork, as it refers to his observation of the New Man in Trieste. The only thing that remains unanswered is the question of why Banfield and his comrades were portrayed so classically despite the modern observations.

[36] The concept of the Knight of the Skies harkens back to older military tropes of cavalry and its chivalry. Sterrer points out this new sense of pride by aligning and linking the heads of Banfield and his wingmen parallel in a straight line, as if they were acting in a coordinated manner with mutual respect. This pose underlines the camaraderie and pride of the soldier community that was so prominent in the late 19th century (*männerbündisch* in German), especially among officers, which was to continue during the First World War and afterwards.⁷⁵ The pilots now took the leading position in the troop hierarchy. They even perceived themselves as comrades across nations.⁷⁶ George Mosse states:

Fighter planes, until fairly late in the war, flew in single combat against the adversary, and once an enemy had been shot down, actual gestures of chivalry were not unknown: captured pilots were entertained at officers' mess, and at times a wreath was dropped behind enemy lines to honor the fallen. The 'knights of the sky' were a new race of men

73 Millenkovich-Morold (1927), 19.

74 Jean Clair and Pierre Théberge, eds., *The 1930s. The Making of the 'New Man'*, exh. cat., Ottawa 2008.

75 Hüppauf (2008), 585. See also, Bernd Widdig, *Zur Krise männlicher Identität in der Literatur der Moderne*, Opladen 1992; Ute Frevert, "Soldaten, Staatsbürger: Überlegungen zur historischen Konstruktion von Männlichkeit", in: Thomas Kühne, ed., *Männergeschichte – Geschlechtergeschichte. Männlichkeit im Wandel der Moderne*, Frankfurt 1997, 68-87; Sebastian Zilles, *Die Schulen der Männlichkeit. Männerbünde in Wissenschaft und Literatur um 1900*, Cologne 2018; Ulrike Brunotte, *Zwischen Eros und Krieg. Männerbund und Ritual in der Moderne*, Berlin 2004.

76 Szczepaniak (2010), 246.

*in their flying machines and, at the same time, embodied the traditions of male honor and chivalry.*⁷⁷

[37] As Mosse notes, despite the hard fighting, the pilots paid tribute to the enemy, following both the old idea of honour and the new culture of sportsmanship. In his image of Banfield and his crew, Sterrer highlights these aspects of the pride of an elitist group of officers, a noticeable turnaround to the scenes from Galicia. It is therefore no coincidence that the work is associated with New Objectivity.⁷⁸ New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) is a neologism created by the museum director Gustav F. Hartlaub (1884–1963), who used it in response to realist trends in German art after 1918 and presented it in a major exhibition in Mannheim in 1925. It was seen as a direct reaction to the First World War, and its traditional forms were meant to restore confidence in society. However, the often-utilised sleek style soon revealed the coldness of the post-war period, especially in the metropolises and its anonymous inhabitants. Portraits were an important aspect of New Objectivity, and like Banfield's, they often featured clear, uncluttered forms and an almost classical look. In this respect, the comparison is apt, even though it was to take a few more years until the advent of New Objectivity and Sterrer never became part of the movement. In fact, the style often underlined the coolness and detachment of those portrayed, the New Man, even if for a different reason than to present the elitist habitus of aviators. There were both left- and right-wing versions of the new classes in the modern era.

[38] Conservative and reactionary political attitudes, more often found in military circles or men's unions, coexisted with progressive forms of modernity and made up a large part of the cultural field, as Janek Wasserman has lately examined for the intellectual history of interwar Vienna.⁷⁹ They are important for understanding the cultural developments of the era. For our context, this means discussing the role of the soldier in society during and after the war. Modernisers and many social democrats in Vienna saw the soldier after the lost war as a relic of an old time. Conservatives still envisioned him as the role model for the (male) population. Yet, the soldiers' experience in the trenches had altered the once noble image. With his pilot portraits, Sterrer tried to avoid the extreme experiences, as for instance the German conservative writer Ernst Jünger captured in novels like *Storm of Steel (In Stahlgewittern, 1920)*. Jünger elaborated on the shock trooper, who was carried by a tough, war-affirming masculinity and a heroic realism, ready to embrace modern warfare.⁸⁰ Due to the k.u.k. Empire's different militaristic tradition, the soldiers of the multi-national state never became machine-men and never grew beyond traditional soldierhood. In my opinion, however, the portraits of the elegant and determined pilots of the *k.u.k. Luftfahrttruppen* have a lot in common with the image of the New Man and presented a role model between the two ends of the military.⁸¹

77 George Mosse, *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, Oxford 1996, 118.

78 Zangerl (1999), 71-73.

79 Janek Wasserman, *Black Vienna. The Radical Right in the Red City 1918–1938*, Ithaka, NY 2014.

80 Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, Berlin 2019.

81 Hanisch (2005), 33.

The last phases of the war

[39] The portraits Sterrer created in Galicia in 1916 and 1917 show facets of a fragile and nuanced soldierly masculinity. When Sterrer moved to the Southern front, the tone shifted towards a stronger presence of the pilot – notably in the portrait of Banfield and his comrades. Toward the end of the war, a third phase can be discerned. When Sterrer began preparing the portfolio *Flieger im Hochgebirge*, there was a visible change in his production as he began to create the pilot portraits as lithographs.⁸² The dark lines and overall gloomy look of the printing technique lead to a dignified tone that suits the heroic pilots. The coloured works from the first period in Galicia seem more accessible in comparison, but Sterrer now went for a much different effect. The foreword of the portfolio emphasises that the pilots should not be consigned to oblivion after the war.⁸³ They were, according to the text, true heroes of the war and should be remembered as such. The portrait of military pilot *Oberstleutnant Ferdinand Deutmoser* (Fig. 12, 1918) from the Southern front is characterised by a previously unknown monumentality, which Sterrer seemingly employed to increase the impact of the series. At the time, a document was circulating in the Art Group to strengthen propaganda for the airborne troops.⁸⁴ Besides, the thought of their commemoration after the end of the war was already emerging.

82 Weixlgärtner (1919), 30. See also, Max Eisler, "Karl Sterrer", in: *Die Kunst für Alle* 33 (1917), no. 3/4, 69-76; id., "Neuere graphische Arbeiten Karl Sterrers", in: *Die Graphischen Künste* 46 (1923), 73-76, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.3632.9>.

83 Geleitwort in: *Flieger im Hochgebirge. 12 Original-Lithographien von Karl Sterrer*, Avalun-Verlag, Vienna/Leipzig 1919.

84 Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Vienna, AT-OestA/KA FA AOK KPQ Akten 35 Kunstgruppe, Luftfahrttruppen Kommando, "Besprechung in Angelegenheit verstärkter Propaganda d. Luftfahrttruppen", meeting protocol, not dated, ca. 1918. See also, Popelka (1971), 50.



12 Karl Sterrer, *Feldpilot Oberstleutnant Ferdinand Deutmoser (Lieutenant Colonel Ferdinand Deutmoser, Military Pilot)*, 1918, chalk lithograph, 543 × 383 mm (sheet 698 × 502 mm). Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 1364/2008 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

[40] The artist now develops an even closer, singled-out view of the pilot and his airplane. The chalk lithography of Deutmoser builds up a dense, auratic tone as the pilot stands expectantly in front of his aircraft. The strict chiaroscuro creates a sublime effect that captures the heroism and exemplary nature of the early aviators in the medium of graphics. Here again, the physiognomy is strikingly pronounced in thick lines. The pilot's cap and the high collar with insignia give it a warlike countenance. The leather caps became fashionable accessories for women and men in the interwar period. Their streamlined shape makes people look as effectively constructed as the machines they pilot.⁸⁵ The realistic depiction of the propeller next to him underlines this idea, as does the large, riveted steel fuselage of the plane behind him. Details such as propellers or machine parts appear in elementary, archaic-looking forms. Sterrer lets the viewer literally feel the rust and oil of the engines, yet it is also a reference to the rationalised unity of man and machine.⁸⁶ The dark tone of the print helps creating this symbiose by emulating an older drawing or etching style, loosely reminiscent of Albrecht Dürer and other Old German masters. In utilizing this retrograde style, the pilots and their new flying machines deliberately appear as something venerable. This was an important legitimising strategy at a time when the war efforts almost came to an end. Once established as the New Men, the pilots were envisioned as an integral part of the army and not to be disbanded.

85 Hüppauf (2008), 591.

86 Szczepaniak (2010), 243. Similar are Sterrer's portraits of *Feldpilot Hauptmann von Eccher* (HGM, Vienna, no. 1251/2008) and *Aufklärungsflieger Feldpilot O. Wehofer* (HGM, Vienna, BI 31653/2), who were both part of Flying Squadron 10.

[41] Sterrer's late lithographs set the new mechanised warfare in somber and monumental tones. *Feldpilot Deutmoser* (Fig. 12) is one with his machine, one with the new technology, as he carries the same pride as Banfield and his comrades. Sterrer relegates Deutmoser's comrades to the upper left corner, where he depicts the life on a modern airfield, seen through classical arches. Not integrated into the background of the portrait anymore, like in Galicia, the arches further enhance the appearance of the scene as something archaic. In this way, Sterrer established a dignified feel, a glorified memory of the New Man that was not present in the coloured scenes of 1916 and 1917 in Galicia.

[42] In another lithograph, the portrait of fighter pilot *Oberleutnant Fritz Nawratil* (Fig. 13), Sterrer focuses even more on the pilot and his striking physiognomy.



13 Karl Sterrer, *Fritz Nawratil, Kampfflieger der Fliegerkompagnie 3* (Fritz Nawratil, *Fighter Pilot of Flying Squadron 3*), 1918, lithograph, 77 × 62 cm. Heeresgeschichtliches Museum, Vienna, no. 1293/2008 (photo © HGM, Vienna)

The artist singles out the head, which appears almost sculpturally elaborated. There is nothing in the background, no landscape vista or airplane. A single, framed portrait that only displays the pilot. It again sports striking facial features and a sleek look. The aviator's cap with its appliqués seems large and protective, almost like a modern war helmet, indicating the fusion of man and technology.⁸⁷ Sterrer affirmatively displays Nawratil as the mechanically gifted and combative pilot. His somber lithographs from the final stages of the Southwest front embrace the identity of the tough and noble soldier. By presenting the aviators in a traditional tone, he highlights the prominent role of pilots in the late phases of the war. As Sterrer had already introduced with the portrait of *Rittmeister von Lehmann* (Fig. 10), this linking of the old and the new, ideas of

87 Hüppauf (2008), 590-591.

knighthood and honor versus the cold professionalism of technological experts, allowed him to preserve traditional manhood in modern warfare. His path during the war years led him from the daring, but also agitated young pilots in Galicia to Banfield's self-confident elite troops in Trieste to the experienced fighters of the late phase, soon to be remembered as heroes after 1918. In the lithographs from the last year of the war, the pilots carry the aura of war-proven soldiers. While in the other branches of the armed forces, this sentiment was gradually lost in the trenches, Sterrer's series of portraits shows through the pilots' appearance as honourable soldiers and technical experts that it could be preserved and that the aviators were a vital part of the troops.

Epilogue

[43] Back home in Vienna after the war, Sterrer published his lithograph portfolio *Flieger im Hochgebirge*. The title, *Aviators in the High Mountains*, seems to highlight the aspect of mountainous flying and sporting challenges rather than the war effort. The publication summarised a trajectory that led from self-reflective portrayals in Galicia, through the glorification of Banfield in Trieste, back to the traditional tones of the lithographs – for a continued support of the pilot squads as well as their remembrance. As seen in many magazines of the interwar period, flying remained popular as a sport. The ideal of the heroic soldier took a back seat for some time. A huge anti-war exhibition in Vienna in 1924, "Nie wieder Krieg", accompanied by demonstrations, used much of the former war propaganda for its pacifistic message.⁸⁸ It was only a few years later, when propaganda for national strength resurged, that the image of the manly soldier returned to centre stage.

[44] Sterrer never commented publicly on the pilot portraits after the interview in 1918. As a young artist, he already enjoyed success before the First World War and was never keen on being a soldier. After the four years of privation during the war and the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, the soldiers and officers of the army found themselves in an ambiguous position. The public held them responsible for the defeat, but on the other hand, they still believed in the soldier and a strong army as a possible path to revenge and national pride. Sterrer's aviator portraits had their share in the preservation of soldierly masculinity, which continued to be part of visual culture, posters, illustrations, but also fine art.⁸⁹ Many of his artworks are also to be understood as war propaganda that perpetuated a warlike habitus. In the end, the commissioned images were too conventional to receive much of an echo in the interwar period. Whether they prefigured the aesthetics of fascism and National Socialism in their celebration of soldierly coolness remains to be discussed. The production of the KPQ artists quickly disappeared again and remained in the depots of the Heeresgeschichtliches Museum in Vienna. After 1945, they again received greater interest and were shown in exhibitions.

[45] Sterrer's portraits of pilots remain an important reference point for the changes in soldierly masculinity. After World War I, pilots soon became a regular part of the war machine and no

88 Bertsch (2015), 25.

89 Elizabeth Otto, "Uniform. On Constructions of Soldierly Masculinity in Early Twentieth-Century Visual Culture", in: Martina Kessel, ed., *Kunst, Geschlecht, Politik. Männlichkeitsentwürfe in der Kunst des Kaiserreichs und der Weimarer Republik*, Frankfurt 2005, 17-42.

longer appeared as heroic as they had before. The Knights of the Air are a relatively short-lived phenomenon, a cross between old and new, that emerged in the noble early years of aviation. They stimulated cautious experiments in portrayal, accompanied by reflections on the New Man. However, these portraits had little impact beyond the events of war. Military art in general had a similar fate, reportage was more highly valued than artistic experimentation. Soon it was superseded by photography.

About the Author

Christian Drobe is a research fellow at the Art History Department at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. He studied art history, German literature and history at the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg. His research focuses on figurative painting, New Objectivity, art during the Nazi era, and the conservative branches of modernism. He has published on artists such as Emil Nolde, Rudolf Schlichter and Ernst Wilhelm Nay, and on Magic Realism. His dissertation on the reception of Classicism in German Modernism was published in 2022 (*Verdächtige Ambivalenz. Klassizismus in der Moderne 1920–1960*). Among his recent interests are representations of youth, masculinity, and other strands of traditional imagery in Austrian, Hungarian and Czech art. In this context, a book project is underway on "Recovering from the War? Masculinity and Identity in Central European Art after 1918".

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