

## **MEDIEVAL MAJESTY**

### **GOTHIC MASTERPIECES FROM ST. STEPHEN'S CATHEDRAL**

Palace Stables, Lower Belvedere

From 14 May 2019

**St. Stephen's Cathedral in the heart of Vienna is the city's most famous landmark. It is adorned with works of medieval stonemasonry reflecting an exceptional quality. Six of the most impressive sculptures, the famous figures of rulers from the west façade and High Tower, are currently on display in the Palace Stables. They number among the masterpieces from the collection of Wien Museum and, while this is being renovated, are on show at the Belvedere.**

*"The Belvedere's collection of medieval art in the Palace Stables comprises a multitude of precious works from this era, ranging from a Romanesque crucifix to Gothic panel paintings and sculptures, to winged altarpieces from the Early Modern period. The famous 'Fürstenfiguren' (figures of rulers) from St. Stephen's Cathedral are presented here in a fitting setting and are sure to enrich visitors' experience of the museum,"* said CEO Stella Rollig.

The famous "Fürstenfiguren" from Vienna's St. Stephen's Cathedral belong to the very best among Austria's cultural assets. They were created in the course of the cathedral's extension under Duke Rudolf IV, the Founder, who power-consciously presented himself with his wife, the Emperor's daughter Catherine of Bohemia, and both his and her parents in this monumental sculptural ensemble.

Curator Veronika Pirker-Aurenhammer: *"More than any of the Austrian rulers before him, the young, ambitious duke knew how to use the arts for self-display. The 'Fürstenfiguren' from St. Stephen's reflect Rudolf's lofty ambitions as ruler of Austria to secure greater recognition in the Holy Roman Empire. They are some of the first examples of portrait statues showing a reigning sovereign and his family. These outstanding works of Viennese courtly art are therefore also highly significant from a cultural historical perspective."*

In the course of the first major restoration of the cathedral, these valuable sculptures were replaced by copies in the years 1858 and 1870/71 and transferred to the city museum. They are now major works in the collection of Wien Museum, which is currently closed for renovation. It is rare for them to be moved, owing to their fragile condition, but while Wien Museum is being renovated, they have found a temporary home at the Belvedere. The two museums are taking the opportunity to present the figures to the public, under strict environmental monitoring and control, and to pay fitting tribute to them in an accompanying documentation.

Matti Bunzl, Director of the Museen der Stadt Wien: *"We are delighted that this important ensemble from St. Stephen's will remain accessible to the public while Wien Museum is being renovated and extended. We would like to thank our colleagues at the Belvedere for this important collaboration."*

#### **Background history to the "Fürstenfiguren" at St. Stephen's Cathedral**

Between 1137 and 1160 a large church dedicated to St. Stephen was built at a location outside the city walls of Vienna at the time. Roughly one hundred years later, this was replaced by a Romanesque building of which the west façade, with the Riesentor (Giant's Doorway) and the Heidentürme (Heathen Towers), still survives

today. The Gothic remodelling of the church began in 1304 with the construction of the Albertinischer Chor (Albertine Choir), completed in around 1340. In 1359, Duke Rudolf IV, the Founder, laid the foundation stone for the extension of St. Stephen's comprising the nave, the south tower, and the two double-storey west chapels. Rudolf, who was born in Vienna in 1339 and died in Milan in 1365, governed Austria from 1358 to 1365 and was one of the most energetic Habsburg rulers. Along with remodelling St. Stephen's, his achievements also included the foundation of the University of Vienna.

This presentation in the Palace Stables shows six monumental figures that were once on the west façade and High Tower of St. Stephen's and date from the time of the Gothic remodelling under Rudolf IV. The sculptures depict three couples. The thematic focus is Rudolf IV and his wife Catherine of Bohemia, who are grouped with their parents Duke Albert II and Joanna of Pfirt, and the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV and his wife Blanche de Valois. They should highlight the duke's prestigious status and grand political aspirations for he shows himself in a sequence with his Habsburg ancestors and his imperial father-in-law in Prague. The pointed crown with a hoop that he "invented" identifies him as holding the rank of archduke, a status he sought to achieve by forging the document *Privilegium maius*. The artistic qualities of these tall, fashionably attired figures – elegantly poised, standing on symbolic lions – include their sensuous presence and lifelike traits.

When Rudolf IV died at the age of twenty-five, after reigning for seven years, the Gothic remodelling of the nave and the south tower of St. Stephen's was only in the initial stages. Whether the figures were actually intended for the positions they were to occupy for centuries is therefore an unresolved matter.