

# C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

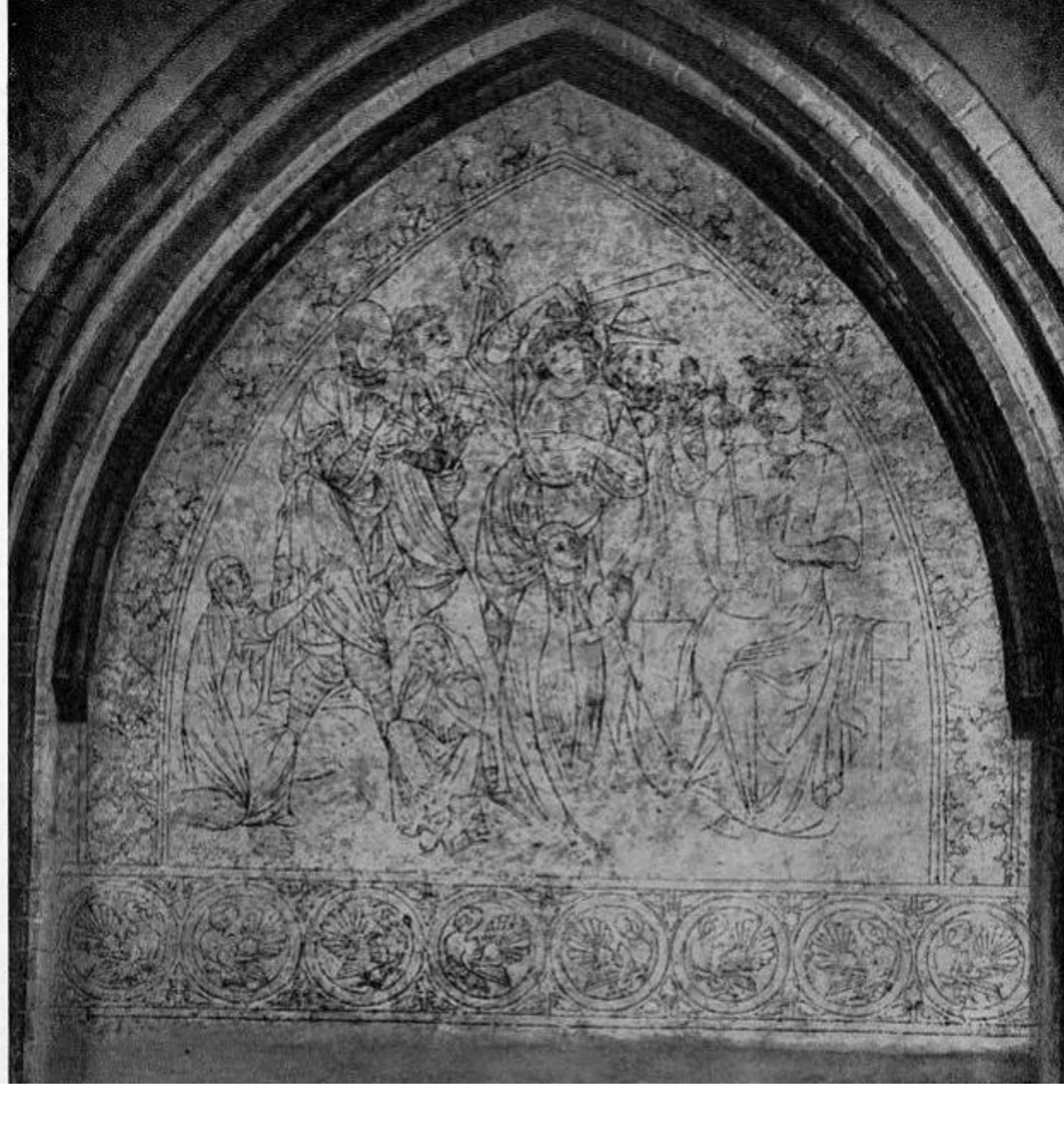
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The cathedral of Schleswig, way up in northern Germany close to the Danish border, is adjoined by a cloister built in the early fourteenth century. Completed under the reign of Bishop Johannes II Bokholt (1308–1331), it was lavishly decorated with frescos. Due to the harsh and damp northern climate and the fact that the open arches of cloisters can only provide limited protection from the elements, the wall paintings suffered severely over time. By the end of the nineteenth century, their poor state of preservation made a restoration unavoidable. It was undertaken by the painter August Olbers during the late 1880s. True to the prevailing historicism of the time, he let his imagination prevail over what was actually left of the original frescos in an attempt to evoke how the medieval decoration of the cloisters *might* have looked. His approach was not unsimilar to that found at today's medieval festivals, where history comes with fantasy, and where the most popular staple at the food stands is the turkey leg—despite the fact that turkeys did not arrive in Europe until the 1520s, when a Yorkshire trader brought the first ones across the Atlantic to sell in England. Or did they?



It might appear strange to mention turkeys in this context but it is the week of Thanksgiving and the fowl is the holiday's traditional meal. (If Benjamin Franklin had had his way, the turkey would even have become the national bird of the United States.) In Schleswig during the 1930s, new and more purist ideas of building preservation took command. In 1937 the father-and-son restoration team of Ernst and Dietrich Fey were commissioned to restore the Schleswig cloister to its "true" original beauty and brought along the painter Lothar Malskat. Their zeal for authenticity was such that, in addition to reversing Olbers's work, they removed all that was left of the original medieval decorations, which created a problem, to say the least. Malskat came to the rescue and did what Olbers had done before, only this time in a way that was stylistically much more in line with the expectations of the time. And since forgeries are usually best camouflaged by adhering to the *Zeitstil* during which they are created, it helped that Malskat modeled the faces of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and some of the saints not just on family members but also on contemporary movie stars. He would later tell the *Hamburger Abendblatt* in an interview: "I had to paint the apostles as long-headed Vikings because one did not want Eastern round-heads." To frame the biblical scenes, he introduced a row of turkeys along the bottom of the scene showing the *Massacre of the Innocents*, thinking he could rely on timeless motifs of flora and fauna.



The "recovered" frescos were met with great acclaim. In 1940 Alfred Stange, the doyen of the history of early German painting, published a monograph on the Schleswig Cathedral and its murals. In it, he explicitly praised the naturalism of the depicted animals but also noticed that the turkeys are indeed *merkwürdig* (peculiar) since "according to our knowledge they were only brought from America to Europe in the sixteenth century." While withholding final judgement in the main text of his book, Stange accompanied the passage with a lengthy footnote that extrapolates on the question of the *Truthahnstreit* (turkey dispute).

Here is what happened: When Olbers heard about all the praise lavished on the job of his successor for having finally restored the paintings to their true Germanic splendor, he was understandably chagrined and came forward to explain that it was he who had added the animal friezes in parts where the medieval decorations had been totally lost, including—mistakenly—the turkeys. That, of course, *could* not be true. After all, the frescos had not only been recognized by the scholarly community, the upper echelons of the *Reich* were equally enthralled. Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler had already recommended Stange's book to be distributed to every German school. For us today it is easy to understand the historical dilemma of state-sanctioned medieval turkeys thanks to Kellyanne Conway, former counselor to the president; on January 22, 2017, a mere two days after Trump's inauguration, she helped to conceptualize such perspectival discrepancies by simply labeling them "alternative facts." Stange did a valiant job toeing the line as the good German art historian he was, explaining that what really weathered away between 1890 and the 1930s was Olbers's work and not what those Germanic masters had created six hundred years earlier. His trained connoisseur's eye was even able to distinguish Olbers's "lame hand" and to recognize the plaster underneath the turkeys as truly old.



"The turkey dispute" was fought out in such scholarly organs as the *Schleswiger Nachrichten* from 1939 and *Die Woche* from 1940 but, to be fair, Stange also references the opposing academic opinion published in the *Ornithologische Monatsberichte*. What was at stake here was nothing less than the existence of the "pre-Columbian turkey"! After all, opposite the Schlei, an inlet of the Baltic Sea where the city of Schleswig is situated, archeologist had discovered Hejðabýr (Hedeby, in Danish, or Haithabu, in German) around the time Olbers worked on the frescos. The place was found to be one of the largest known Viking trading posts, settled between the eighth and eleventh centuries. What else can those Gothic turkeys in Schleswig therefore be but another proof that the Arian Vikings (and not the Genoese adventurer in pay of the Spanish crown) were truly the first Europeans to discover the Americas? Some of the gobblers brought onto the ships as provisions must have survived the return trip (which, thanks to the Gulf Stream, turned out to be shorter than expected) and, unbeknownst to modern ornithologists, probably still roamed the rolling hills along the Baltic coast near Schleswig when Bishop Johannes's painters set to work.



Sadly, though, those pre-Columbian turkeys must have finally met their fate sometime between the early fourteenth century and the Dürer period, and we were hence unable to find them depicted in any other pre-sixteenth century artworks. What we have to offer, therefore, are merely substitutes showing indigenous European fowl. Properly prepared, however, they can also be quite tasty.

Wishing everyone a (well-distanced) Happy Thanksgiving!

fowl in print



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