

## Images on the Move

### Early Modern Alba Amicorum as Pictorial Networks

In early modern Europe, students, humanists, collectors, naturalists, soldiers, merchants, civil servants, and women compiled friendship albums — *alba amicorum*, in Latin; *Stammbücher*, in German — containing paper traces of social networks, friendships, travel, and professional contacts. These albums brought past and future, manuscript and print, people and places, and texts and images together in potent and significant combinations. They were taken on academic, commercial, and artistic travels through Europe as far as the Near East and contain traces of these travels and encounters along the way. Albums were seen and shown and imitated by others: truly interactive and highly visual microcosms, *alba amicorum* were fundamentally »mobile« objects.

The album amicorum emerged in the 1540s in the Habsburg empire in predominantly male academic and aristocratic circles; the oldest ones share a Wittenberg university provenance. Their origins most likely lie in older types of manuscripts in which visual elements were integral. Late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century *Wappen-* or *Stammenbücher* containing histories of noble families, as well as heraldic visual materials in the so-called *libri gentili*-tradition, are well known forerunners. In the early years of the tradition, students and professors manifested their presence and relationships through a system of inscriptions, epigrams, and signatures, often embedded in a printed illustrated book, like a Bible or emblem book.

This cultural practice of social and visual exchange was soon adopted by other social and professional groups throughout northern and central Europe. Album keeping soon became a fixture in the lives of literate citizens. An early modern form of social media, friendship albums are mementoes of social, cultural, and political connections and rich repositories of inscriptions (name, date, place) and mottoes (quotations, adages, personal dedications) gathered locally and internationally from friends (peers, family) at home and while traveling — as well as a vibrant diversity of pictures. Miniature paintings, costume studies and emblems in watercolour, and artists' »signature« drawings, figure alongside numerous and often unaccounted for printed images.

Pictorial elements formed an integral part of album culture from the very beginning — and are of course equally important in similar social media today. In the initial decades of the emergence of the friendship album, printed illustrated books such as Bibles or emblem books were used to record inscriptions. Soon, »prefab« albums were published for the expanding market, containing emblems, empty pages with decorative borders, and engraved templates for heraldry, facilitating both the spread of the genre and the production of a highly personalized album of hybrid origins. From the late sixteenth century onward, most albums consisted of blank pages filled with hand painted or drawn pictures or, occasionally, prints that were glued in and hand-coloured, turning these books into »mixed media« works. Specific visual motifs that were widely distributed through print images — from single sheets to playing cards — served as models for album pictures, which were then individually adapted and modified by, or for, the album owners. Rich and vivid images make up a substantial part of albums: not only heraldic devices and all kinds of allegorical, biblical, mythological or emblematic pictures, but also examples of intricate calligraphy, marbled and »Turkish« papers, and inscriptions in non-Roman script, which can be also thought about as visual contributions. Some images were explicitly connected to inscriptions: heraldic devices in particular, which were painted by local artists and craftsmen or by contributors themselves. Yet other gouaches and drawings in albums seem to have functioned »independently« of any inscription and were probably selected, executed, and inserted at the initiative of the album owner, or as a special gift from a contributor.

The crucial role of pictures as a gift or token of friendship from a contributor is evident, for example, from the album of Thomas Wanderer. In a wonderfully calligraphed poem he urged his future contributors to »offer me your coat of arms out of love / or in any case have something painted herein / a beautiful picture that is agreeable / but not obscene, / rude, suspicious or lewd«. And indeed, the entry of Joachim Friedrich Berthold to Wanderer's album on 28 November 1624 consisted of a motto with an emblematic image, which he had »ordered to be painted for your Stammbuch«.









Album of Theodor Exhagen van Ruijven,  
kept 1604–1607, fol. 20r (Signature Stb 437)

But who painted these pictures? In some friendship albums we can find traces of the artistic process, such as partly finished sketches, pencil outlines and partly coloured images. In the album of Hans Christoph Teuffel von Guntersdorf (kept between 1585 and 1617), we find an unfinished sketch of a person bearing a coat of arms. Another contributor and/or artist never completed the colouring of his work in pencil and pen in the album of Theodor Exhagen van Ruijven (1604–1607). Such images are almost never signed, unless tied to an inscription by the artist himself, or when these pictures substituted an inscription (were the inscription, so to speak). A rather beautiful example of this is the album by Johann König, an artist, which he kept during in the period 1647–1653 — also preserved in the *Stammbuch-Sammlung* of the Herzogin-Anna-Amalia-Bibliothek, the largest collection of friendship albums in the world.

Friendship albums have been traditionally studied as textual documents of social and intellectual networks, but

these pictures have not been subject of systematic study yet. As a Fellow of the Weimar Klassik Foundation, I was able to look at a variety of *alba amicorum* in the Herzogin-Anna-Amalia-Bibliothek in the Summer of 2023, and analyse the incredibly rich visual culture of these books. Album pictures, I suggest, functioned as networks through which the migration of pictorial motifs between print and manuscript genres in the early modern period can be traced. As »travelling objects« between friends, such albums were just as crucial channels for the dissemination of heraldic, emblematic, costume-, allegorical- and other imagery, as single-leaf woodcuts, illustrated books or other forms of image printing. Looking at album pictures thus can tell us much about the way such images moved across time and space, and the shared visual language they embodied.

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Album of Hans Christoph Teuffel  
von Guntersdorf, kept 1585-1617,  
fol. 138r. (Signature Stb 169)

J 5 153

Vivit post funera virtus



138

88

Wolff Dietrich v. Tattenbach zu  
Hainburg für die zu Vanao  
den 8. Octobr. 1609.