

DOWN AND OUT AND DISABLED IN THE MIDDLE AGES? MEDIEVAL ATTITUDES, MODERN ASSUMPTIONS AND PUBLIC DIS/ABILITY HISTORY

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Abstract: With a focus on visual representations this paper introduces current research of the interdisciplinary research group *homo debilis* at the University of Bremen. When it comes to exploring medieval dis/ability, specific challenges such as fragmentary sources, vague terminologies and varieties of discourses have to be dealt with. A selection of main results of our research concerning premodern conceptions of dis/ability will be presented. Some of these findings prove both scientific and popular assumptions of medieval attitudes to be in part anachronistic. By curating an exhibition in 2012 the *homo debilis*-group disseminated its approaches and conclusions to a broader public in order to challenge common clichés. This early experiment of public dis/ability history was based on the cooperation of contributors with and without disability. Following the principle of accessibility it addressed a heterogeneous audience. Drawing on this experience I would like to reflect, from a medievalist's perspective, on how to communicate a fresh and more complete history of medieval dis/ability.

Keywords: premodern dis/ability history, public dis/ability history, accessibility, museums.

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INTRODUCTION

According to popular notions, living in the Middle Ages meant hardship for people with disabilities¹. Persons with impairments of the body, the mind or the senses, with deformities or chronic diseases are supposed to have been poor, living on the margins of society, dependent on charity, short-lived — if they survived at all and did not fall victim to infanticide. This bleak image is at least in part derived from premodern works of art as seen in museums, books and social media. Many paintings and sculptures do indeed show impaired figures as beggars and receivers of alms, as objects of pity, revulsion and spite².

Recently dis/ability historians have started to explore visual representations from a double perspective: They work on developing a specifically premodern dis/ability history on the one hand and on communicating this programme to the public on the other hand. Both premodern dis/ability history and public dis/ability history are rather new developments. In my paper I would like to introduce you to their objectives. After describing and defining some main characteristics of dis/ability history in general I will refer to the specific research project *homo debilis*. This interdisciplinary research group has been exploring premodern dis/ability for several years at the University of Bremen while being embedded in an international network of historians, art historians, historians of medicine and of literature, archaeologists and anthropologists. Team members focus on the centuries which according to traditional periodization are labelled «medieval» (500-1500) respectively «early modern» (1500-1800). This contribution informs about our collaborative work in progress which has been documented in several volumes but is far from being completed³. First I would like to point to specific challenges of premodern dis/ability history and to present some main results of our research. Next I will discuss how we tried to communicate our findings to an interested public by curating an exhibition. Finally I would like to share the experiences of this exhibition with you by commenting on difficulties and chances to transmit a fresh and more complete history of premodern dis/ability beyond popular prejudices.

DIS/ABILITY HISTORY AS A NEW PERSPECTIVE

Since the turn of the century, dis/ability history has been established in the humanities as an innovative, internationally recognized approach⁴. In the beginning research was conducted mainly on European and American societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Meanwhile its potential to investigate societies before 1800, to

¹ The title of this paper refers to an excellent essay by FARMER, Sharon (1998) — *Down and Out and Female in Thirteenth-Century Paris*. «American Historical Review», 103.2, p. 345-372.

² METZLER, 2015b: 55-61; JARITZ, 2014: 105-106.

³ NOLTE *et al.*, 2017.

⁴ BAÁR, 2017.

«go global» and to compare different cultures across chronological and spatial borders has become apparent⁵. Also, there are growing efforts to «go public» and address broader audiences outside of academia⁶. This seems obvious considering the origins of dis/ability history: It originated from dis/ability studies which themselves sprang up in the course of emancipatory movements and rights activism⁷. Dis/ability historians share the notion of other historians that historical knowledge is relevant and meaningful in many political and societal contexts even if it does not offer immediate lessons how to act.

Writing the history/histories of people with impairments or disabilities is an important part of dis/ability history's agenda. These histories, however, are considered as essential, if still missing elements of general history. According to its self-understanding, dis/ability history takes into regard entire historical societies and cultures. The analytical category dis/ability is applied in conjunction with other categories such as gender, class or race in order to explore basic questions which concern societies as a whole⁸. In what way, for instance, did past societies differentiate between «normal» and «different»? To what extent did they have a concept of «dis/ability»? By writing the word dis/ability with a slash, historians indicate that they focus both on abilities and disabilities and their interrelations. Abilities and disabilities are regarded as shifting elements within a continuum of conditions without polarity.

Dis/ability serves as a lens in order to explore the whole spectrum of historical phenomena from a new perspective: societal, political, legal and economic structures, the realms of education, work and power, daily life experiences of women, men and children, representation and images of individuals and groups in literature and works of art, the formation of identity — just to mention a few topics. In various studies it has been convincingly proven that dis/ability is a socio-cultural construction, a variable, flexible and fluid phenomenon whose characteristics and expressions change in interdependence with its environment⁹. As differences can be embodied, performed and enacted in manifold ways, dis/ability must not be mistaken for an ahistorical and invariable condition¹⁰.

Contemporary debates of societal challenges and practices of engagement and empowerment, especially concerning the accomplishments of inclusion, may be enriched by reflecting the historical and diverse nature of dis/ability. As historians in general, dis/ability historians wish to inform the public that/how our own experiences and practices came into existence through historical processes, and that they have been shaped by

⁵ BARSCH *et al.*, 2013; BLACKIE, 2013; TURNER, 2012; TURNER & VANDEVENTER PEARMAN, 2010.

⁶ TELFER *et al.*, 2011; WHITE, 2013; BARSCH *et al.*, [s.d.]; WALDSCHMIDT, 2017. See also FRASER, 2012-2014.

⁷ DISABILITY MOVEMENTS, 2015.

⁸ «Like gender, like race, disability must become a standard analytical tool in the historian's tool chest» (LONGMORE & UMANSKY, 2001: 15).

⁹ METZLER, 2017a; FROHNE, 2017; TURNER, 2017d; BARNARTT, 2010; HORN & FROHNE, 2013.

¹⁰ FROHNE, 2015. On the concept of «embodied difference» see Frohne (FROHNE, 2017).

former cultures. Thus, scholars hope to support the search for identity, to inspire critical reviewing of contemporary attitudes, to contribute to current ideas of social and cultural participation, and to encourage practical efforts to create inclusive and accessible structures in all areas of life.

THE *HOMO DEBILIS* EXPERIENCE: PREMODERN DIS/ABILITY HISTORY GOING PUBLIC

Source Material and Methodology

As mentioned above, until recently dis/ability history meant conducting research mainly on the so-called modern age since *ca.* 1800. When applying this new approach to earlier centuries, scholars face considerable challenges. Material surviving from the Middle Ages is disparate and fragmentary. It comprises all kinds of written texts (example given are miracle accounts, autobiographical narratives, medical recipes, administrative records), of visual representations, of human remains, that is skeletons found in graves, and of artifacts from burials or rubbish pits (Figs. 1-4). Whereas each kind of source material offers valuable information, none suffices to draw general conclusions or to create a coherent picture¹¹. In fact, evidence from texts, images, bones and objects must be put together like parts of a puzzle. Thus, it takes researchers from several disciplines who systematically analyze different material according to their specific methods. They may expect to obtain plausible results on a larger scale only by exchanging and sharing their necessarily limited interpretations.



Fig. 1. St. Gallus heals a blind man on crutches (ca.1460), Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen, Cod. Sang. 602, p. 134

¹¹ LEE, 2015.

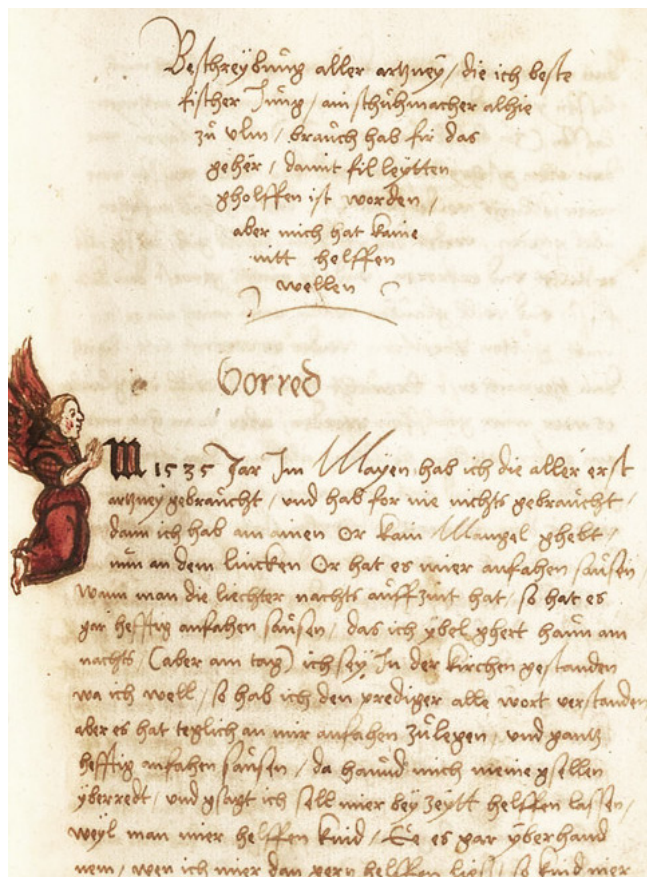


Fig. 2. First page of Sebastian Fischer's account of his hearing impediment and various (unsuccessful) attempts at a cure. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Cgm 3091, fol. 62r
Here Fischer informs the reader that he is going to describe all kinds of therapies he has tried in vain («Beschreybung aller artzney/die ich Beste Fischer Jung/ain schuhmacher allhie zu Vlm /brauch hab ir das geher/damit fil leyttten gholffen ist worden/ aber mich hat kaine nitt helfen wellen»)



Fig. 3a. Ins, grave 8 (in situ)

The medieval burial site of Ins contained the grave of a ten or eleven years old child who had suffered from long-term osteomyelitis (right lower leg). This painful disease made intensive care necessary and could not be cured. Source: In Susi Ulrich-Bochsler. *Kranke, Behinderte und Gebrechliche im Spiegel der Skelettreste aus mittelalterlichen Dörfern, Kirchen und Klöstern* (Bern/Schweiz). *Ausagemöglichkeiten zum individuellen Alltag*. In *Homo debilis. Behinderte – Kranke – Versehrte in der Gesellschaft des Mittelalters*, ed. by Cordula Nolte. Korb: Didymos-Verlag, pp. 183-202, figs. 1 and 2.

Photos: a) Archäologischer Dienst des Kantons Bern, b) Historische Anthropologie Bern.



Fig. 3b. The right tibia is visibly affected by osteomyelitis



Fig. 4. Bronze sleeve Bronze of a peg leg from Griesheim, Germany, ca. 700
In Kay Peter Jankrift
Mit Gott und schwarzer Magie. Medizin im Mittelalter. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, p. 77
Photo: WBG

The language of premodern written documents is a specific methodic challenge for dis/ability historians and philologists. The vocabularies of Latin and vernacular texts prove to be difficult as none of these languages know a term equivalent to our modern umbrella term «disability». Accordingly, documents indicate that impaired individuals were not regarded as forming a specific group with common characteristics among the population. Terminological vagueness and ambiguity of meaning characterizes many written statements on bodily and mental conditions. Actually, a term such as *debilitas*, which sometimes may have indicated an impairment or a disability had a large range of meanings in different discourses of medicine, law, literature and religion. It could signify weakness on a physical, mental, economic or moral level. From a theological perspective it referred to human frailty in general when earthly living and spiritual wellbeing were discussed. Sometimes impediments of the body and the senses were described with specific terms such as lame, crooked, deaf, mute, blind. Whether these conditions were considered as disabling must be learned from the context, example given from the statement that somebody's usefulness (*utilitas*) in the field of work was limited due to a lack of certain functions. In view of these findings historical semantics are still emerging as a major field of research with regard to premodern dis/ability.

SOME MAJOR FINDINGS

The mosaic obtained by interdisciplinary collaboration does not yet show a complete picture of premodern attitudes towards dis/ability. Nevertheless, some important features are clearly recognizable. Some of our main observations concern societal structures, functionality in the working world, interrelations between social status and dis/ability, religious ideas and medicinal, therapeutic and caring practices.

Premodern societies consisted of heterogeneous and unequal social groups; accordingly, they did not have a single, uniform idea of dis/ability, but various group-specific concepts. Whether a person was regarded as dis/abled depended on her social group and her environment and on the specific function and role this individual was expected to fulfill¹². Example given, an aristocratic girl with asymmetric shoulders may have had reduced chances to marry in accordance with her rank. This resulted from notions prevailing at noble courts that physical perfection and beauty promised fertility and qualified for political representation. Among peasants, however, such a condition would hardly have been of any consequence as long as it did not affect working capacities.

The ability to function was considered to be of highest importance. In this regard medieval societies were quite modern, actually. Maintaining or regaining one's ability to work, to sustain oneself and the family, to act in accordance with one's socio-economic position and to live up to the expectations of one's group played a major role in daily life. Discourses on health, illness, family relations, household obligations etc. often centered on questions of functionality and usefulness.

Just like today, social participation was mainly achieved by work¹³. Work meant earning one's living, shaping one's identity and ensuring embeddedness in social networks. Thus, each individual aimed at being part of the working world. In many areas of work and professional life persons with impairments actively participated and were integrated in pragmatic ways according to their abilities. If necessary they turned to different tasks or used personal assistance¹⁴. Persons who in spite of their efforts could not make a living due to chronic illness, impairment or old age received public financial support in addition to their small income. Those who were completely helpless and deserted petitioned to be admitted to hospitals. In late medieval cities, however, financial means and places of accommodation were scarce and thus reserved for needy as well as morally «worthy» individuals¹⁵.

Disability did not necessarily go together with poverty¹⁶. Due to urban records and visual representations of impaired persons begging alms it has been assumed even by

¹² TURNER, 2017a; HORN & KUULIALA, 2017.

¹³ METZLER, 2013: 36-91; TURNER, 2017c.

¹⁴ KUULIALA, 2017a.

¹⁵ BONFIELD, 2013.

¹⁶ HORN & FROHNE, 2013: 18-29; TURNER, 2017b; METZLER, 2017b.

academic mediaevalists that individuals with disabilities were usually part of the poor population at the margins of society. Disability was considered to cause social descend. Our findings clearly disprove a simple equation of disability and poverty. Impaired persons were to be found in all social strata, even in powerful and leading positions. They kept their position and rank as long as they functioned according to their specific roles and were members of families, neighbourhoods and other social networks. It took a coincidence of several factors to endanger this status. Impaired individuals were at risk of having to beg if they dropped out of networks, losing their parents by death or being deserted by friends who might care for them, if they lost their working ability completely and permanently, if they lacked any resources and were not admitted to hospitals. By the way, begging could also be practiced as a kind of regular work in addition to or alternating with other jobs to make a living.

Popular notions describe medieval attitudes as having been shaped by ecclesiastical norms of piety, by fear of sin and religious explanations for all kinds of phenomena, including bodily conditions. Some scholars also point to «associations of sin and disability»¹⁷. This notion of God punishing sinners was propagandized by some clerics in sermons and other normative and didactic texts. Yet, this interpretation did not dominate medieval attitudes, modern assumptions notwithstanding. Actually, the idea of dis/ability being a divine punishment for sin seems to have had little effect in daily life practices when it came to experiencing impairments of one's own or of others. Religious interpretations coexisted and intermingled with other discourses, some of which proved to be particularly important in terms of coping with incapacities. Pragmatic approaches prevailed in all social environments. If possible, medical treatment, care-giving, assistance, rehabilitative therapies and devices were provided in order to restore a person's mobility and working capability. As mentioned above, circumstances of living and working were arranged as well as possible in accordance with a person's (remaining) functions and abilities. In short: Pragmatism characterized premodern societies at least as much as religious orientation. It certainly should be considered as another «modern» feature of that epoch.

The emerging picture of energetic efforts and creative solutions to improve the well-being and participation of individuals may be surprising, especially in view of the poor image of medieval medicine and our little knowledge of caregiving practices¹⁸. In fact, there were a lot of conditions which could neither be healed nor improved by learned doctors or empirics. At the same time male and female experts and practitioners successfully dealt with a wide range of phenomena which threatened to permanently reduce a person's capabilities¹⁹. For instance, they performed cataract and hernia operations,

¹⁷ WHEATLEY, 2017; METZLER, 2015a.

¹⁸ GREEN, 2009b; HORDEN, 2009; GREEN, 2009a.

¹⁹ KUULIALA, 2017b.

removed bladder and kidney stones and trepanned skulls in order to avoid brain damage after injuries. According to recent studies, caregiving and support by paid or unpaid persons, in domestic and institutional settings, on short notice or long-term was organized and provided in multiple ways²⁰. These ranged from injured servants being cured in their master's household to mentally disturbed and violent persons being taken into custody in separate rooms or buildings.

THE MAKING OF AN EXHIBITION: *LEIBEIGENSCHAFTEN*

In 2012 our research group and its partners curated a public exhibition in order to disseminate some of our results, especially those which questioned common clichés and which seemed apt to contribute to a new, more differentiated image of premodern societies²¹. Visitors were invited to reflect on and discuss today's attitudes by being confronted with complex and diverse historical practices.

This project of communicating dis/ability history to a broad public was guided by two main principles concerning the «making of» and the audience. First, team work was organized as a participative collaboration of different groups and individuals: persons with and without disabilities, students and lecturers from different disciplines, academic scholars, practitioners and representatives of several institutions and initiatives, professional curators and designers. Secondly, the exhibition aimed at a maximum of accessibility for a heterogeneous audience with various needs and preferences. We wished to address individuals of different cultural education and knowledge, persons with and without disabilities, with bodily or sensory impairments or with learning difficulties, visitors of all ages, from young pupils and school classes who need space to move and interact to elderly people who like to find occasions to rest. Thus, the exhibition was meant to employ the ideas of Universal Design (Design for All) in order to produce «science for all».

Due to an extremely low budget our team faced considerable challenges and had to find many inventive solutions in order to realize this ambitious concept. A collaborative volume which gives details on how we managed in spite of financial problems may serve as a guide for similar projects²². Fortunately, we did not intend to show original works of art and, apart from a few artifacts, did not have to pay for insurance. Thus, we could spend nearly all the money on the architecture, technical devices and installations which provided accessibility. All rooms and objects were made accessible for visitors with wheelchairs or walkers and allowed resting on seats in case of reduced mobility

²⁰ FROHNE, 2014: 189-281.

²¹ LeibEigenschaften. Der «beschädigte» Körper im Blick der Vormoderne. Bremen, Haus der Wissenschaft, 1.3.-30.4.2012. We invented the composite term «LeibEigenschaften» which alludes both to bodily features and to feudal dependence. The subtitle refers to the «defect» body in a premodern perspective (NOLTE & KINZLER, 2012a).

²² NOLTE & KINZLER, 2012b.

or fatigue. An orientation system for blind people was fit into the floor (Fig. 5). At the entrance a touchable miniature model of the architecture allowed a quick tactile orientation before walking through the rooms.

Texts which introduced into the sections of the exhibition and explained individual objects were presented in several languages. Whereas the Braille alphabet (embossed printing) was used only occasionally because not all blind people can read it, we installed listening stations where visitors were audibly informed. We put up written texts both in Standard German language and in easy-to-understand German language. The advantages of the latter for all audiences soon became evident: actually, as other curators before, we came to learn that many visitors without learning difficulties, both adults and children, prefer to read easy-to-understand language in museums. Objects were also described and explained by sign language on screens next to them (Fig. 6). Audible information was sometimes supported by visual effects: Parts of paintings were highlighted while being described, thus guiding the listening visitors' eyes.

One of the main exhibits, the copy of a painting from the sixteenth century which shows a man with a deformed body, was turned into a three-dimensional sculpture (Fig. 7). This object and many other exhibits explicitly invited visitors to touch and sensorially explore them. Replica of reading stones, eyeglasses and mobility devices could be tested in order to gain hands-on experience on how medieval people used historical technology (Fig. 8).

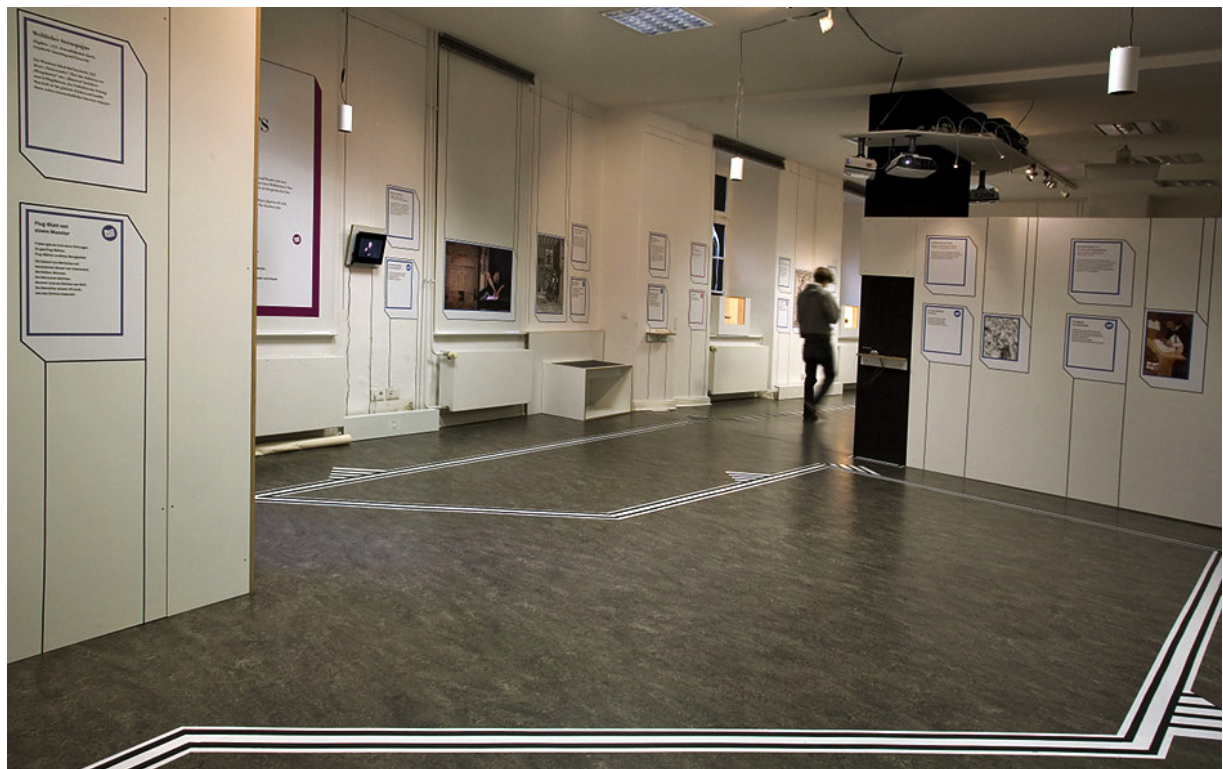


Fig. 5. Exhibition «LeibEigenschaften» with sufficient space for wheelchairs and walkers, an orientation system for blind visitors, seats to rest, height of exhibits adapted to the perspective from wheelchairs



Fig. 6. Exhibition «LeibEigenschaften» with audible information by headphones, screen with sign language performed by a deaf guide, written texts explaining objects in Standard German and in easy-to-understand German language (this latter version visibly marked by a symbol)



Fig. 7. Exhibition «LeibEigenschaften»: Bildnis eines behinderten Mannes (portrait of a disabled man), Kunstammer Ambras (cabinet of curiosities), Kunsthistorisches Museum. Wien Ureol sculpture of the painted figure, inviting the visitors «please touch!» («Bitte berühren!»)



Fig. 8. Exhibition «LeibEigenschaften»: Hands-on replica of a reading stone and of eyeglasses, inviting the visitors «please touch!» («Bitte berühren!»)

All elements of the exhibition — the architecture, the written, spoken and signed texts and the ways they were presented and performed, the lighting, the sound-system — were developed and tested by members of the team with different abilities of seeing, hearing, moving and understanding. Finally, persons with specific abilities were trained as guides for various groups of visitors. Students for instance created didactic programs and guided tours for school classes, a colleague with learning difficulties guided mixed groups of visitors with and without disabilities and so on.

It was one of our main objectives to invite visitors to detect and discuss both parallels and differences between premodern and modern cultures. Thus, the exhibition focused on the one hand on topics we are all familiar with in our contemporary world: daily life experiences, access to public spaces, participation in the world of work, inclusive education, caregiving in domestic and institutional settings, personal assistance, availability of supportive devices etc. On the other hand the exhibition gave insight into ways of thinking and practices most of us do not share anymore. Especially religious phenomena such as pilgrimages, cults of saints and strategies to obtain miraculous healing have disappeared from the Western world whereas they are still traditional elements of cultures elsewhere.

In terms of communication we faced challenges many professionals in museums are familiar with. How can audiences without specifically historical education be encouraged to grasp and discuss historical subjects from a distant past? By which didactic strategies can a research-based vision of the past be plausibly transmitted, so that popular anachronisms and outdated, stereotyped opinions are put aside? Medieval art and artefacts, visual and textual representations are often difficult to understand. Also,

they seem to suggest that religion dominated all aspects of life. It is crucial to select and present them in a way that takes into regard the ecclesiastical origin and religious purposes of many works as well as the audiences they addressed. Their symbolic content and their iconic tradition must be explained. At the same time, critical reading and contextualization should be offered. Interaction with the audience should be open for various interpretations yet aim at offering precise instruction. Furthermore, the current canon of works considered worthy to exhibit should be extended by hitherto unknown or disregarded material.

SELECTED IMAGES AND (CON)TEXTS

Some exhibits from «LeibEigenschaften» are chosen here as examples in order to discuss how images of different genres can be offered as sources of historical information on imageries, practices and material culture. If contextualized carefully, they can contribute to a new narrative of dis/ability.

The motif of Lucas Cranach's work showing Saint Elisabeth and Saint Magdalene (Fig. 9) is well known. Many saints were depicted performing works of charity on needy persons, thus calling for their veneration and the imitation of their exemplary behavior. This painting for instance shows Saint Magdalene and Saint Elisabeth of Thuringia offering ointment and food to a man crouching on the ground. His feet are missing, perhaps due to an amputation. His legs are strapped to wooden devices and his right hand grips another wooden tool (hand-trestles); these gadgets enable him to move along. We identify him at once as begging by the way his partly defect body, his mobility devices and his gesture of seizing the loaf of bread in Elisabeth's hand are put on scene. This representation obviously supports popular notions of impaired people having been poor, forced to beg, marginalized, reduced to being passive, dependent receivers of alms. Yet discussions with audiences may also point to other aspects in order to avoid the confirmation of stereotypes. The figure of the man must be regarded as a symbol which combined with other visual elements incorporates the idea of charity. In fact, he serves as a human attribute to the saints, next to their other attributes like the jar of ointment and the loaf of bread. At the same time he is depicted in a quite realistic fashion in terms of his physical appearance, his clothing and the tools he uses. As these tools appear in many other paintings we may conclude that they were regularly used as means to stay mobile. We thus come to know a detail of daily life practices. In terms of material culture we may assume that everybody could be equipped with tools which were cheap, simple and easily manufactured. Further information should be given that begging in the Middle Ages was generally accepted and regarded as a mutual giving, the beggar actively praying for the soul of the almsgiver. Even more, begging was considered to be work, sometimes even professional work. People often had several jobs at the same time, one of them begging, in order to survive.



Fig. 9. Lucas Cranach, Saint Elisabeth und Saint Magdalene (1519)
Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg,
Inv. M 037
<www.kunstsammlungen-coburg.de>

The idea of collecting alms being regular, active work can be corroborated by other images. An illumination in the Luttrell Psalter shows a male figure with deformed hands and a contorted leg on a pushcart, in front of him a bowl to put money in (Fig. 10). The cart is pushed by a man who has strung a rope around his neck and shoulders in order to put up with the weight. On the right hand a man opening his purse is about to donate money to the man on the pushcart. The sitting and the pushing men appear to be a team that as a matter of routine moves around for begging, sharing work and being technically well equipped with their innovative mobility-aid to do this job a long while and across spatial distances. We may assume that both of them earn their living this way and that their cooperation is of reciprocal advantage. The setting also suggests that the impaired person is not marginalized but, as part of the couple, socially embedded. Unlike other depictions of begging this one underlines the agency of the figures; their active partnership enables them to include themselves socially and economically. Of course, this scene does not aim at describing a concrete historical situation but at promoting charity. Yet, in a beautifully stylized fashion it refers to medieval attitudes towards dis/ability in a plausible way.



Fig. 10. Luttrell Psalter, first half of the fourteenth century. London, British Library Add MS 42130, fol. 186v.

In order to visualize that dis/ability was a phenomenon of all social strata I suggest to have a close look at images from secular contexts. Most of them are more or less unknown to public audiences and neglected by art historians due to their modest artistic quality. Nevertheless, they provide valuable insight into daily life experiences and pragmatic ways to cope with illness and impairment. An illustration from a manual of medicine by the surgeon Caspar Stromayr is supposed to demonstrate how a doctor should care for a patient after a hernia operation (Fig. 11). According to our research hernias frequently afflicted men (less often women) of all social groups. Many persons suffering from hernia used ligatures to keep the tissue from bulging, but this, of course, meant living with a disabling condition in terms of physical work, ability to perform and fitness in general. Such disabling effects could be prevented only by having surgery done. The illustration shows a well-fed, muscular man in bed, the doctor standing next to him. It can easily be discerned that this domestic scene reflects wealth and comfort. The wooden bed is broad and decorated with carvings. Pillows, sheet and bedspread look clean and cosy. The floor is covered with expensive tiles. The window is made from costly bull's eye glasses and lets in sufficient light. Precious silver or copper plates are exhibited on a shelf. A piece of bread and a spoon on the table indicate proper nourishment. The patient holds

on to a sling made of cloth and fixed to the ceiling, and apparently tries to sit up. This scene is accompanied by an advice to the doctor: «Cover him carefully so that he does not suffer from the cold/fix a hook with a hanging towel above his bed/so that he can sit up and turn independently as he wishes». Modern spectators will be reminded of our contemporary ways to ensure that bedridden people get mobile again as soon as possible. In our exhibition this representation proved particularly apt to stimulate discussions on past and present attitudes concerning dis/ability, care and medicine. This illustration shows surprisingly modern aspects of premodern behaviour. At the same time it inspires us to think about historical differences, and, example given, to ask who could afford such doctors and therapies in societies without modern health systems.



Fig. 11. Recovery after hernia surgery
The sling affixed to the ceiling is meant to help the patient sit up and turn around independently. Caspar Stromayr: *Practica copiosa von dem Rechten Grundt Deß Bruch Schnidts*, 1559, Lindau, Ehemals Reichsstädtische Bibliothek, P I 46, fol. 106r.

The last example from «LeibEigenschaften», a votive panel, belongs to the world of religious images again. It is from the chapel of Altötting in Bavaria dedicated to the Holy Virgin Mary, a cult center which attracted many pilgrims in the Middle Ages. In some publications the image is reproduced under the title «Raving mad female in chains»

(«Wahnsinnige Frau in Ketten», «Tobsüchtige in Ketten», Fig. 12)²³. At first sight this representation seems to confirm common assumptions of mentally disturbed persons having being locked away. Actually, this young woman looks dangerous, her hair wild and somehow statically charged, her big hands like claws in a gesture that might evoke threat and fear, her large feet naked, one foot chained to the wall. At second sight, however, she does not appear to be caged like an animal, isolated and neglected and excluded. She is well-dressed, one of her shoes lying in front of her on the floor. The room is part of a rather fine building according to its architecture. There are decorated arches on the rear wall, tiles on the floor and two grated windows. Two pots or jugs on the floor indicate that the inhabitant is supplied with food and drink and that wastes are carried away. A person kneeling and praying on the right side embodies some kind of care for the young woman. The image forms the upper part of the votive panel. Beneath there is a text in German language which we have to read in order to understand the depicted scene. According to this narration a mentally disturbed girl was miraculously cured after her brother had prayed to the Holy Virgin. It may be translated that Margret, daughter of Hanns Eyselei of Mundraching, was rather deranged for four years. Her brother promised Our Lady to have a mass sung. Instantly Margret regained her good sense thanks to the intervention of the Mother of Grace. The votive panel thus illustrates different aspects of dealing with mentally disturbed family members. It shows how custody was organized as a measure of protecting themselves and others in case that they got out of their mind. And it gives evidence of material and spiritual care for them. This complex message of custody, protection and care in the frame of religious propaganda is not at all expressed in the modern title «Raving mad female in chains». Such a label evokes gruesome notions without considering the original intention and the complex composition of the work. It certainly corroborates anachronistic and simplistic ideas and is thus misleading.

²³ SIGNORI, 2007: 68, fig. 4; NOLTE & KINZLER, 2012a: 41.



Fig. 12. Die Mirakelbilder der Hl. Kapelle in Altötting, ed. by Administration der Hl. Kapelle, Altötting 2007, p. 29 (Mirakeltafel II, n.º 12)

CONCLUSIONS

This cited example of problematic labelling leads back to the question how to communicate a more differentiated, less stereotyped history of dis/ability to the public. Summing up this paper I would like to stress the ideal or better: the necessity that first of all museums and cultural institutions transfer knowledge in participatory ways and in fully accessible surroundings.²⁴ Thanks to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities the agenda of participation gets a lot of attention, but it takes time, money and innovative ideas to effect concrete changes. Fortunately, consciousness is rising that access for all means more than building ramps. With regard to the premodern era I tried to underline that visual representations and imageries must be accompanied by elaborate analyses based on current research. Sufficient explanation provided, audiences will be inspired to discuss differences, similarities and continuities of past and present attitudes. Further, unknown material from collections, archives and libraries which often uncovers unfamiliar aspects of historical dis/ability should be

²⁴ MARTINS, 2016; TOUCHDOWN, 2016; TELFER *et al.*, 2011; FLIEGER & SCHÖNWIESE, 2007; DEUTSCHES HISTORISCHES MUSEUM, 2017-2018.

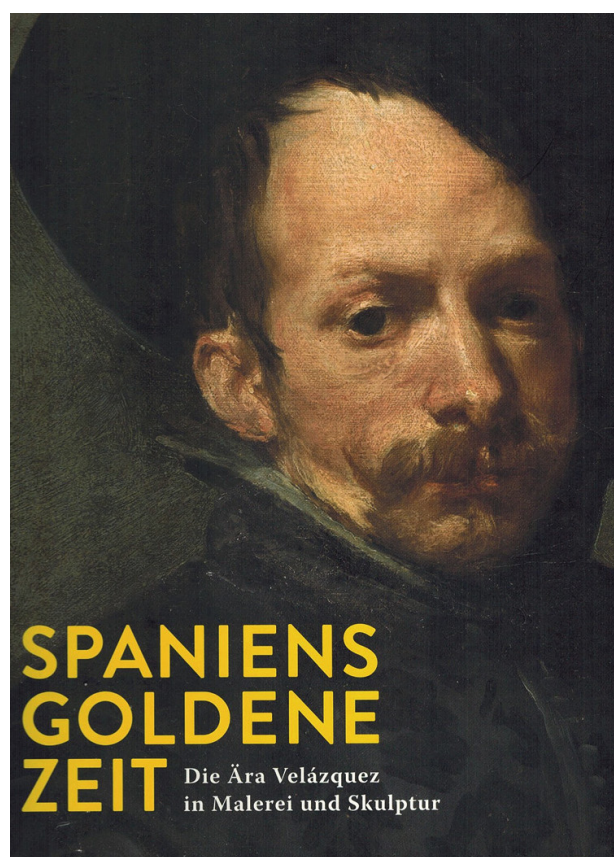
added to the canon of exhibits. Thanks to ongoing interdisciplinary research, hidden treasures are being found all the time. Finally, we should do without titles that favour ahistorical categorization. In my opinion, the misleading labeling of visual representations in museums and cultural institutions, in their catalogues and other publications perpetuates stereotypes concerning dis/ability. Many modern titles of premodern works of art refer in a one-sided and anachronistic way to bodily, sensorial, mental and psychic characteristics which from a modern medical perspective are called disabilities. If further information and contextualization is missing, this labeling prevents audiences from getting acquainted with more complex histories. Why, for instance, is Velázquez' portrait of an anonymous man called «Buffoon with Books» (Hofnarr mit Buch auf den Knien, Fig. 13) in the Prado and accordingly in an exhibition and catalogue of 2016? Whereas it can be assumed that this man was a member of the Spanish court, his name and his function have never been identified. Being of short stature, he may or may not have been a buffoon. In contrast to former notions many «dwarfs» at courts did not serve as «natural fools» or professional jesters²⁵. So why not simply present this man as a court member? Fortunately, in this catalogue the portrait is accompanied by a detailed analysis. And, even better, without any categorization the man's face has been put on the cover of the catalogue (figure 14). Thus, finally he just appears as a dignified individual inviting us to exchange glances with him.



Fig. 13. Spaniens goldene Zeit/El Siglo de Oro
Die Ära Velásquez in Malerei und Skulptur
Catalogue of an exhibition in 2016
(Gemäldegalerie. Staatliche Museum zu Berlin
Kunsthalle München), Berlin 2016,
p. 189, figure 59. (I did not have access to the English version of the catalogue)

²⁵ SEEMANN, 2018.

Fig. 14. Spaniens goldene Zeit/El Siglo de Oro
Die Ära Velásquez in Malerei und Skulptur
Catalogue of an exhibition in 2016
(Gemäldegalerie. Staatliche Museum zu Berlin
Kunsthalle München), Berlin 2016, cover



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