

## **Visual Design and Architecture of German Fairs**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to extend a warm welcome to you all.

My name is Margit Ramus. I was born into a family of fairground showmen, and both my mother's and father's families have been running travelling and retail businesses for many generations.

As an active fairground show woman, I studied art history, history and German studies in the second half of my life and obtained my PhD in 2013 on the 'Architecture and Decoration of Fairground Stalls'. For more than 20 years, I have been engaged in intensive academic research into the history of the cultural heritage of the Volksfeste.

I would like to thank you once again for the invitation, even though 'musical practices at fairs' are not my area of expertise.

However, I am delighted to be here and to tell you something about German fairground and folk festival culture.

**As you may know, 'Fairground culture at folk festivals in Germany' was recognized as intangible cultural heritage by the German UNESCO Commission just under four weeks ago and has been included in the National Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage.**

It means a great deal to our profession.

This recognition will raise awareness that the work of us fairground workers – that is, our traditions, our way of life handed down through the generations, and our diverse knowledge and skills, which are practiced within communities and passed down from generation to generation – constitutes a cultural heritage that must be protected.

I am proud to have played a leading role in this application as founder and partner of Kulturgut Volksfest gUG.

I would also like to thank once again the two umbrella organizations for fairground operators, the Deutscher Schaustellerbund e.V. (DSB) and the Bundesverband Schausteller und Marktkaufleute e.V. (BSM), for the trust they have placed in me, allowing me to draft another application after three previous ones had been rejected. We have launched this initiative together and are delighted with its success.

**Looking back at our history**, it is almost inconceivable how long and arduous the journey has been from the 'Travelling People' of the Middle Ages to the fairground operators of today.

Since the Middle Ages, the ‘travelling people’ in German-speaking regions have moved from town to town to attend the annual fairs held there.

Among them were traders, barbers and merchants of various origins. They were joined by local confectioners, butchers, innkeepers and craftsmen such as blacksmiths, locksmiths and carpenters.

Comedians, including jugglers, musicians and performers, added to the colorful atmosphere of the fair.

By the end of the 18th century, however, they were required to leave the town as darkness fell. They spent the night in covered wagons or simple, homemade carts outside the town walls.

The travelling people did not have an easy life; no civil laws protected them, and they were not permitted to receive the sacraments. This meant no baptism, no communion, no church wedding, and no pastor was allowed to conduct their funerals.

It was not until the ‘Prussian General Land Law of 1794’ that conditions improved for them. For the first time, limited licenses were issued to travel within a specific territory for a set period. Some 70 years later, the trade regulations for travelling showmen were laid down in the Itinerant Trade Ordinance.

**And now, almost 250 years later**, the work of the approximately 6,000 fairground families who live and work at 9,750 large and small folk festivals in Germany during the season has been officially recognized by the UNESCO Commission as a cultural asset worthy of protection, and is thus safeguarded for all time.

**The culture of fairground showmen – and, closely linked to it, our folk festivals** – has been a reflection of our society from the Middle Ages to the present day. For centuries, people have been coming together, even from beyond Germany’s borders, for the annual folk festival.

A key feature is the provision of amusement and entertainment for the public, as well as the opportunity for multicultural exchange. The tradition of the festival programme, for example with a parade and the tapping of the first keg, brings people of all nationalities together.

The origins of folk festivals often date back to the 9th century, and depending on their origins, they take various forms and have different names.

They preserve the memory of church consecrations, veneration of relics, patron saint’s days or ancient markets. In addition, there have been marksmen’s festivals since the 12th century, followed later by court festivals, which began with the famous Munich Oktoberfest in the 19th century.

In the early days, travelling performers enlivened the festivals with acrobatic displays and exhibitions of unusual people.

As ballad painters and singers, they spread news and curiosities.

Later, they presented new achievements in music, art, the natural sciences and technology in show booths, panoramas and on travelling stages, e.g. the Laterna Magica, the phonograph, the cinematograph and mechanical musical instruments.

The ballad singer was accompanied by a barrel organ, and later contemporary record players replaced the gramophone. For music at the fair had always played an important part in the atmosphere.

After the Second World War, the organs that had accompanied rides on the carousel for decades suddenly became old hat.

The first vinyl records were making their way into the lives of young people back then. Rock 'n' roll and pop songs rang out across the fairground. Still often frowned upon by mothers – as many fathers had been lost in the war – rock 'n' roll became, in the mid-1950s, the soundtrack of a young generation fascinated by the American way of life and yearning for new beginnings and freedom.

At the Raupe, young people could listen to the music of Bill Haley and Elvis Presley. They stood crammed onto the surrounding walkway and watched as the girls' new petticoats billowed in all directions in the wind.

And today, the latest hits from all over the world are streamed digitally through sound systems. Fortunately, many organs were passed down through families and are still maintained and cherished to this day.

The term 'showman' arose from these exhibitions. Soon, showmen began designing and building mechanical rides and carousels, until around 1870 specialised carousel-building firms emerged, often founded by showmen, such as Friedrich Siebold and Hugo Haase. Industrialisation introduced steam engines and later diesel generators for propulsion, leading to the modern form of the festivals with their technical innovations.

To this day, the folk festivals have never lost their appeal and charm, and have managed to maintain a balance between tradition and progress.

Decoration of fairground attractions can be divided into two major stylistic periods!

'Baroque' and 'Modern'

### 1. Baroque

From the beginning of professional carousel construction in 1883 until the Second World War, all structures in the fairground trade were designed with references to the Baroque, Rococo or Art Nouveau styles.

They drew their inspiration from the lifestyle of feudal society.

This included riding on decorated horses or travelling in gilded gondolas and carriages.

The design of the decorations invites comparison with the interior decoration of 18th-century palace architecture or the festive architecture of the 19th century.

(rectangular wall and door panels and supraports with curved, finely interlaced moulded frames)

The pictorial content of the paintings depicting fairground decorations during this period drew inspiration from 18th- and 19th-century painting. Fragonard's 'The Swing' was particularly popular.

## II. The modern era begins after the Second World War

I would like to illustrate the transformation in decoration using examples from three different building projects and draw a comparison with art.

### **Bumper cars**

In 1947, Herbert Sommer painted geometric shapes onto the decorative roof edge of a bumper car for the first time.

With each subsequent model in this series, the use of neon tubes and light strips increased, and the painting receded further and further into the background.

But the shapes also changed. Concave, curved roof edges.

In the model by the Pötzsch company, the painting once again takes centre stage. With a little imagination, one can see the works of Kandinsky or Miró as the inspiration for the graphic patterns.

In the early 1960s, the organically curved aircraft canopies or the geometrically raised corner solutions of contemporary architecture became the inspiration for the formal design of the decorative roof edges.

Role models: JFK Airport (1956–62) in New York by Eero Saarinen

or the Neue Philharmonie Berlin (1956–63) by Scharoun

Let's jump forward to the 1980s.

The painted graphic patterns are emphasised by the formal design of the panels and the fitted light strips.

These colour fields can also be found in art.

Frank Stella, as the embodiment of a rejection of tradition, also influenced the artist Heinz-Werner Opitz, who applied these colour fields to many decorative roof edges on various building projects by the firm Heinrich Mack.

It is interesting to note that these compositions of graphic colour fields have also carved out a place for themselves over many decades right up to the present day

We find this in classical art as well.

For example, in the work of Michel Majerus or Franz Ackermann

### **Walk-through amusement arcades**

The painter Herbert Sommer achieves a decisive break with conservative Baroque decoration in his design for the walk-through amusement arcade 'Hollywood macht Spaß'.

Sommer depicts the cliché of the American way of life in a collage-like manner. It is reminiscent of the collages of the Dadaists, such as Edward Burra's work from 1929.

Or Richard Hamilton's from 1956

But visitors to this type of shop tend to prefer the caricature of Bavarian revelry.

**In the mid-1960s, the façades of the young painter HARRY KNORRN made a sensation.**

His penchant for Expressionism, his radical simplification and distortion of form and proportion, as well as his use of solid colours set against each other in stark contrast, was to be understood as a provocation against the realistic style of his fellow painters SOMMER and OPITZ.

He himself told me that Salvador Dalí had been his great role model.

There is much more to tell, but the development of the façade design for this building project would go beyond the scope of this account.

## **Carousels**

Carousels that have almost achieved cult status as a meeting place for young visitors.

Caterpillar          Baroque          Non-figurative painting

Music Express   Flower Power   Non-figurative painting — Pop Art

Break Dance          Pop Art

Pop Art, comics and street art come together on the back panels of the Break Dance carousel.

Various scenes from pop culture and American cityscapes of the 1990s are juxtaposed and combined to form a single large image. This new style of decoration marks a milestone in the design of fairground stalls.

Whilst in AFAW the individual scenes are partly separated by frames and the background areas are set apart from one another by colour contrasts, in COURTOIS the scenes merge into a single entity through flowing colour gradients in the background.

This is also the case with James Rosenquist, who gained new experiences whilst working as a sign painter for cinemas.

A prime example here is the magical realism of Neo Rauch. In his multi-figured paintings, figures are often depicted in bright, vivid colours within overlapping spaces.

Magical realism represents the fusion of real reality (tangible, visible, rational) and magical reality (hallucinations, dreams).

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope I have managed to inspire you a little with the stylistic diversity of the various decorative styles found in popular entertainment. What is special is that, whilst strolling through Germany's major folk festivals, one can still experience the coexistence of these individual styles.

Thank you for your attention

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