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The *Wunderteam*, Painted in Oil: Insights of Images / Insights through Images in Sport Studies

Bernhard Hachleitner & Sema Colpan *

Abstract: »Das ‚Wunderteam‘, gemalt in Öl. Einblicke in (und durch) Bilder in den Sportwissenschaften«. In 1948, the Viennese city councilor in charge of cultural affairs commissioned a painting of the legendary Austrian football team of the early 1930s, the so-called "*Wunderteam*." Paul Meissner, the creator of the painting, chose to depict the team entering the pitch at Stamford Bridge football ground in London in 1932. Even though it was not publicly accessible for decades, the painting achieved the status of an iconic image in Austria's collective memory. Seeking to understand why particularly this group portrait gained such prominence, the article pursues a set of questions. First it looks at the event itself and analyses the contemporary visual media coverage of the game. In a second step, it discusses the painting, its composition, and what it reveals about the political agenda postwar Austria sought to set.

Keywords: Football, Nation Building, Austria, *Wunderteam*.

1. Introduction

In 2008, during the European Cup in Austria and Switzerland, many sport journalists came to Vienna, not only covering the football matches, but also looking for background stories. One of them, Phil Gordos, wrote on the BBC website:

I never knew Austria were once quite good at football. It took a painting – apparently a very famous one here – that opened my eyes to that fact. Paul Meissner's iconic image of the 'Wunderteam' of the 1930s is currently on show in the Wien Museum. (Gordos 2008)

Gordos's experience, as we will argue, serves as a good example for insights through an image. The journalist learned about Austria's colourful football past through this painting. What is the (his-)story Paul Meissner's *Wunderteam* painting is associated with? It is common knowledge among Austrian football fans and people interested in Austrian football history that this painting shows the Austrian national team of the early 1930s, widely known as the *Wunderteam*. Also well-known is that the painting depicts the team entering the pitch

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at Stamford Bridge football ground in London in 1932. Many people are also aware of the fact that this match against England was the most famous game of the Austrian *Wunderteam*. Some people, however, are surprised when they hear that Austria lost this game with 3:4.

In the following, we explore how a painting depicting a losing football team became such an iconic image. We start by looking at reports of the event itself, regarded as the “greatest match of the decade”¹ (*Das interessante Blatt*, December 8, 1932, 1) by the contemporary press, working through the illustrations. First, we determine what kind of images and pictures were shot by whom and for what purpose, which of them were used for the media coverage of the game, and how many types of media were involved. This touches upon the question about what could be depicted technically and what seemed worthy of being depicted. On the one hand, this allows us to understand and follow the “interpictorial” references that were at display in the coverage of that particular match at Stamford Bridge, which helped to lift the Austrian football squad into long-lasting prominence (Isekemeir 2013). On the other hand, the references also lead us to the painting itself, as they had a strong influence on the composition of the tableau. Beside the analysis of form and content, in the second part we also focus on the formation history of the painting as well as on the impact it had in the Second Republic.

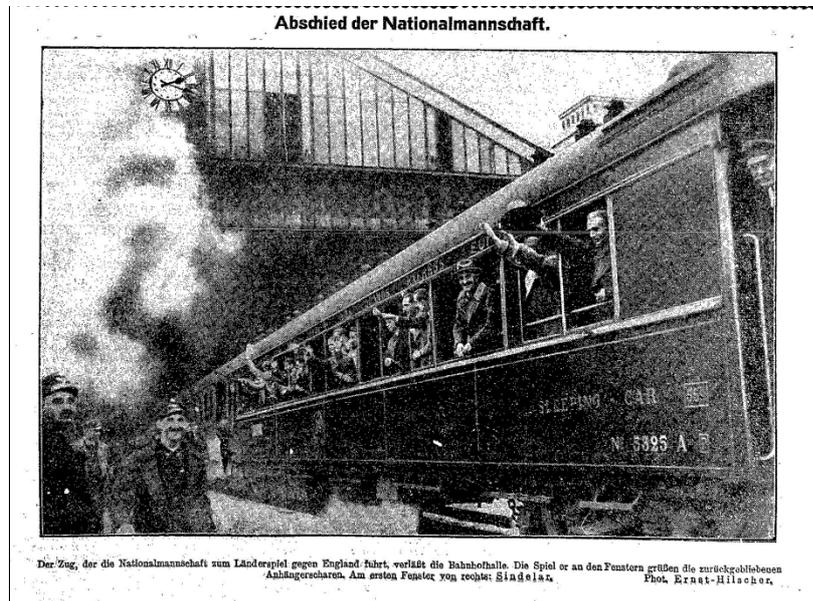
2. The Football Game as a (Mass-)Media Event

There was broad media coverage in Austria, not only Viennese, papers, starting long before the game in London. In terms of contemporary national ascriptions, it was a story of the motherland of football against small Austria, a story of British strength against the playful skills of the Viennese team. Yet, it was also, more broadly, a story of England against Europe. This article will focus on visual imagery that supported the media reports.

In the week of the game, the coverage in Austrian media became huge. Front pages of daily papers were filled with the player’s departure from Vienna, numerous pictures showing the national team at Vienna’s Westbahnhof train station, or depicting the train leaving, with the team on board (*Sport-Tagblatt*, December 2, 1932). Reporters chronicled the team’s activities while in London and wrote background stories. Many daily papers even printed special issues (Schwarz 2008b).

¹ This and all further translations from German into English by the authors of this article.

Figure 1: Players of the Austrian National Team on Board of the Train Leaving Vienna on the Way to London



Source: Sport-Tagblatt, December 12, 1932.

According to historian Anton Holzer the request for picture stories rapidly increased around 1930 and photographs of sports events were in great demand. Photographers tried to “depict tackles and defining moments instead of the shots of the pitch as a whole” (Holzer 2013, 119). Therefore, it might come as a surprise that there are not many photographs that actually show the game itself and both teams in action. The first picture of the game – it shows the Austrians entering the pitch – was published the day after the match. It was highlighted as “the first wirephoto of the international game Austria England” (*Sport-Tagblatt*, December 8, 1932, 1).

In the need for up-to-datedness, daily papers utilized wirephotos offered by photo agencies such as Keystone, regardless of the poor quality. At the same day – as a kind of alternative – the daily *Sport-Tagblatt* released a drawing of the Austrian centre forward Matthias Sindelar being attacked by two English players (*Sport-Tagblatt*, December 8, 1932, 3). Presumably a scene from the game, it illustrates the continuing necessity to use drawings for up-to-date depictions of football games: On the one hand, due to the technical difficulty to provide a photo on time from abroad, on the other hand due to the difficulty of taking a good action photo.

If we look at the overall contemporary coverage of the match, there are far more photographs and films not showing the match itself, but the stories behind it. There are not only portraits of the team, the coach, and the officials, but also of supporters, masses of people in front of the stadium, masses inside the stadium, people listening to the match on the radio as well as the triumphant return of the team to Vienna and similar pictures.

According to Anton Holzer, depicting the mass gathered at an event, be it a sports event, a demonstration, or a strike, had become part of the spectrum of common photo scenes by the turn of the last century, as press photography and photojournalism started to focus on the *sensation* within the coverage (Holzer 2014, 11). Photos of masses were used to prove the importance of an event (or the power of a political party). On the other hand, scenes of masses illustrated the fear of uncontrollable masses.²

Around 1930, the request for picture stories rapidly increased while at the same time the stories themselves changed. Simple picture tableaux were replaced by more complex picture stories. Everyday life, “common people” came into the focus (Holzer 2013, 119).

This kind of photography must be seen in a broader development, connected to the mentioned problems of up-to-dateness of print media. The challenge posed by live radio broadcasting led to a different approach of covering an event – especially when abroad. Print press at times reacted to this fact by publishing pictures of people listening to the radio – most probably taken in advance (*Neuigkeits Welt-Blatt*, December 8, 1932, 1). About a week after the match, the journal *Das interessante Blatt*, for instance, showed people at the Viennese Heldenplatz listening to the radio broadcast next to one of the rare action photographs of the game itself (*Das interessante Blatt*, December 15, 1932, 3). Most of the published pictures were distributed by photo agencies. Historian Malte Zierenberg notes, that the

visible, the apparently neutrally recorded world of politics, sports, and other medial events, was produced in agencies and laboratories, in editorial departments and archives of professional players. (Zierenberg 2013, 45)

It is this mixture of pictures depicting the background stories, pictures of the game itself as well as the reception of the game back home that is also largely used for the post-match reporting (*Wiener Bilder*, December 11, 1932, 1, 4; *Das interessante Blatt*, December 15, 1932, 3). Some of these photographs show people in seemingly private or half-private situations, listening to the radio or playing cards.

² The topic of angst-inducing masses in regard to football was taken up by Elias Canetti, who lived in Vienna at that time. In his autobiography “Die Fackel im Ohr. Lebensgeschichte 1921-1931” Canetti (2005, 39-42) noted how important the sound of football crowds was for his book “Crowds and Power” (Canetti, 1960).

Figure 2: People at Vienna's Heldenplatz, Listening to the Live Radio Broadcast of the Match.



Source: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek. RÜ ZK 236/1, Bildarchiv Austria.

This leads to the next source of images that has to be considered when following the image trail of the famous *Wunderteam* painting: pictures that were collected by semi-private and private entities. The archive of the Viennese Football Federation offers rich and interesting source material when it comes to photographs of the Austrian team in the interwar years. Most of the photographs of the match in London in 1932 were put into photo albums, not displayed in public, but accessible for officials and, later, historians. Or, images of the game that are owned by the descendants of *Wunderteam* manager Hugo Meisl, the team's physician Emanuel Schwarz, and other officials or players.³ They show the team during breakfast at the hotel or while walking through London – photos similar to many holiday photos. Without inscriptions, in some cases it is not easy (especially if the copies are of bad quality) to recognize if a photo is private or not. One example is a photo of eight members of the *Wunderteam* during breakfast in London. There is a remarkable detail, suggesting that it was a private photograph: Matthias Sindelar is smoking a cigarette.

³ See the collection of Hugo Meisl (Andreas Hafer, Wolfgang Hafer and Heribert Meisl, Vienna, private) and Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv, Bestand 3.5.113 – Nachlass Meisl | 1858-1939; Nachlass Emanuel Schwarz (Thomas Schwarz, Vienna, private).

Figure 3: The Austrian National Team during Breakfast in London



From left (standing): Janda, Gschweidl, Nausch; seated: Hiden, Braun, Mock, Sindelar (smoking), Sesta. Source: Archiv Wiener-Fußball-Verband.

According to historian Matthias Marschik, photographs of smoking sportsmen had become uncommon in the media after the first decade of the 20th century:

By then, smoking sportsmen and -women were only seen off the pitch in semi-public spaces: at convivial gatherings such as Christmas parties, championship celebrations, and club jubilees, or when coaches, officials, and sportsmen/-women sat together, sometimes a cigarette made its way onto the photo. Such pictures, though, can almost exclusively be found in private albums. (Marschik and Sachsse 2017, 13)

But this particular photo was published in the weekly journal *Das interessante Blatt*. The caption stresses the anomaly: “Sindelar smokes an exceptionally allowed cigarette” (*Das interessante Blatt*, December 8, 1932, 5). The credits identify the picture as distributed by a picture agency: “Keystone-Willinger.”

The search for the whys and wherefores as well as the visual inspirations behind the oil painting becoming such an iconic image also led us to take the cinematic coverage of the match into account. One film is in the holdings of British Pathé.⁴ Its full title reads: “Chelsea. A near thing! Austria play sparkling

⁴ British Pathé was a film production company that had specialised in newsreels. For its online archive see <<https://www.britishpathe.com/>> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

football and score 3 good goals against England's 4" (British Pathé 1932). Its beginning marks the game as a mass gathering event. The tracking shot follows hundreds of visitors walking towards and entering the Stamford Bridge Grounds in Chelsea. There is a big bustle in the streets. The pictures of the match itself suffer from the principal problem of depicting a football game with the technical means of the time – on a foggy London afternoon.

The second film was made by the *Klub der Kinoamateure Österreichs* in cooperation with the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers, London (Deimel 1932). This movie roughly follows the same dramaturgy as the press coverage: It starts with the departure of the team, followed by the days in London, and then shows the match itself. The media coverage, the event character of the match, and the enthusiasm are depicted, for example, by scenes showing people listening to the radio broadcast of the match. Taking into account this huge media coverage, the great number of pictures published, it does not come as a surprise that this very match was used as a model, as the key reference for the *Wunderteam* painting. On the other hand, however, there is not the one single iconic photo of this game (or the *Wunderteam* in general), which would qualify as a "natural" model for a painting. The wirephoto, which was used as main pattern for the painting was only one of many pictures of the *Wunderteam*. It became iconic only after its use for the painting.

3. Afterlife of the Game and the Genesis of the Painting

This leads us back to the painting itself. In 1948 Victor Matejka, a communist politician, survivor of the Dachau concentration camp, and by then Viennese City Councillor for Culture commissioned Paul Meissner to paint a group portrait of the *Wunderteam*, an oil painting on wood with a size of 200 by 160 centimeters (Letter to Meissner 1948). At that time, Matejka stressed the idea of using sports history as a means of Austrian nation building. At a press presentation in April 1948 he said:

How come that Vienna's sport, which has created the *Wunderteam*, about whose figure skaters and strong men the whole world is talking, how come that sport gets so little attention from Vienna's artists? (*Grazer Montag*, April 19, 1948, 10).

The painting was intended to be only part of a greater strategy: Matejka also wanted to realize a statue of Matthias Sindelar, the superstar of the *Wunderteam* who had died in 1939, and name a square after Hugo Meisl (Wögenstein 2008).

For Meissner, on the other hand, the painting was important in many ways: He needed the money, and at that time he was working on his personal denazification. He wanted to have his name deleted from the registration list that classified him as a "lesser offender" (Wögenstein 2008). For this purpose, an

official commission could be helpful. In March 1948, he wrote a letter to Karl Renner, Federal President of Austria, pledging for “remission of the liability” (Meisser 1948). He enclosed a letter by Victor Matejka wherein the politician calls Meissner one of Vienna’s most gifted portrait painters. And he added:

Although he, as a lesser offender, is allowed to work, an official discharge would help him; and it would help us commission him to do further portrait paintings. Therefore, a timely deletion of his name from the registration list would be appreciated. (Matejka 1948)

For Meissner – with the help of Matejka – the *Wunderteam* painting became a tool for his personal denazification – and it became a tool for the denazification of Austria as a whole.

We can read it as the production of a national icon with the means of history painting, using a defeat as the nucleus for nation-building. In history, it is not uncommon that military defeats are utilized for nation-building. An example would be for Serbian national identity the defeat at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 (Andric 2016, 205; Mock 2012). But there are some important differences. The *Wunderteam* – and so Austria – had lost a football match, not a war. Both Austrian and international media construed the match as a glorious defeat, not only in retrospect but already immediately after the match (Porter 2008).

There is another point that played in favour of the acceptance of the defeat in London: The *Wunderteam* was famous not only for the games they won, but also for their witty and playful style. When there was contemporary criticism of the *Wunderteam*, usually it referred to the exaggerated playfulness of its players. Their way of playing was criticized as lacking purpose. In 1948, after the Second World War, this playing style could easily be read as a sharp contrast to Prussian militarism and National Socialism. It offered a reading that saw the playfulness as “typically Austrian,” strongly associated with Vienna as a city of good living, a city of music, especially of Johann Strauss and his famous waltzes.

An intended message of the use of the *Wunderteam* as a means for nation-building might have been that the Austrians, a people being so playful, so different, could not have been an integral part of German or National Socialist extermination policy: a subtle message that suited the nation’s victim theory (Kos 1996).

Yet, employing the *Wunderteam* for nation-building purposes was not even a new idea in 1948. As early as 1932, the Austrian chancellor – and later dictator – Engelbert Dollfuß received the team after their arrival at Vienna Westbahnhof. Numerous photographs show him at games of the *Wunderteam* – not only standing at the officials’ gallery, but also on the pitch and next to the players. The games of the *Wunderteam* were some of the rare occasions in Austria’s First Republic which crossed the borders of political parties and overcame the dichotomy of the metropolis Vienna versus provincial, mainly

rural Austria. Even papers in Vorarlberg (the most western part of Austria) shared the euphoria (*Vorarlberger Volksblatt*, December 3, 1932, 5).

But let us get back to the painting itself: It is simply called “Das Wunderteam.” The connection to the match at Stamford Bridge is evident in the background, where, among other details, we can see the Austrian flag and the Union Jack, which clearly refer to the photos of this specific match.

Figure 4: Paul Meissner: Das Wunderteam



Source: Wien Museum.

We found some photos, which might have been the template for the *Wunderteam* painting, especially the already mentioned wirephoto.

Figure 5: The First Wirephoto of the International Game Austria–England

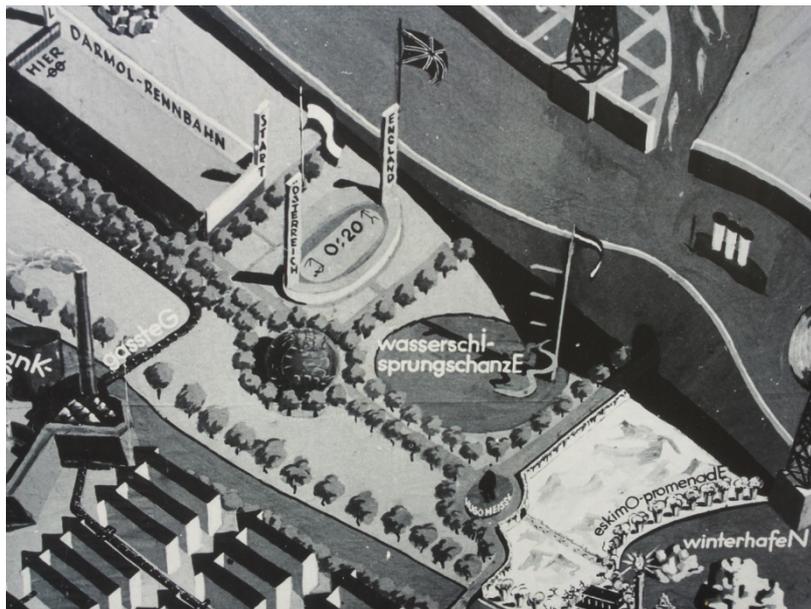


Source: Sport-Tagblatt, December 8, 1932.

For his interpretation of the *Wunderteam* Meissner had received some support by Robert Brum und Maximilian Reich, two sports editors of the daily paper “Kurier” (Wögenstein 2008, 136). As sports journalists they had been close followers of the *Wunderteam*, and were supposed to ensure historical correctness. But the painting differs in important aspects from the photographic images of the *Wunderteam* showing the same defining match in the team’s history. It shows 16 Austrian players, not only the eleven actually playing at Stamford Bridge. The players on the painting wear white shirts and black shorts, the traditional home colours of the Austrian national team. At Stamford Bridge, however, they wore red shirts and white shorts, the traditional away colors. The third major difference is the presence of Hugo Meisl. While photographs and movies of this particular moment do not show Hugo Meisl, in Meissner’s tableau he is the key figure. This is a particularly interesting point: Hugo Meisl was the long-time secretary general of the Austrian Football Association, and manager (or “father”) of the *Wunderteam*, responsible for its line-up. A renowned person in Vienna and a very good self-promoter, Meisl had been depicted in countless photographs and a large number of cartoons in the newspapers (more about Meisl’s presence in news in Marschik 2018, in this issue). From the mid-1920s onwards, he always wore a bowler, a coat, and a walking

stick in public, very often accompanied by a newspaper in his hand (Hafer and Hafer 2007, 206). Meisl's popularity and strong connection to the *Wunder-team's* success is indicated by a picture from 1933. It was the poster for the carnival party of the *Künstlerhaus* (an association of visual artists), featuring a vision of Vienna in the year 2999 (Planen für Hitler 2015). Among other things we see a football stadium, with the Austrian flag and the Union Jack, and a scoreboard displaying Austria 0, England 20. Next to the stadium we see a statue of Hugo Meisl.

Figure 6: "Stadtplan von Wien im Jahre 2999", Gschnasfest Künstlerhaus 1933



The statue of Hugo Meisl can be found between „wasserschisprungschanzE“ and „eskimO-promenade“. Künstlerhaus, Wien.

Meisl was imagined to play an iconic role in the future of the country; embedded as a memorial in the fictive urban space of its capital city.

A rather different aspect of remembrance was ascribed to him by the painter or the commissioning body. Matejka staged the making of the painting as a big event. After receiving the first sketches, he presented them to the press: They show a man with hat, walking stick, and coat: Hugo Meisl. Giving Meisl this important role on the painting is interesting in another way. Hugo Meisl died in 1937, a year before Germany annexed Austria. Being Jewish, Meisl would have been persecuted during National Socialism. In 1941, the German sports periodical “Kicker” released a special issue called “Das Wunderteam. Rise and

glory of the most famous European football team” (Der Kicker 1941). This was a somehow strange publication. Inside, the team is referred to as “Wiener Wunderteam” (Viennese Wunderteam). As Austria did not exist as a state during the Nazi era, and furthermore, the use of the term “Österreich” was forbidden, for the classification of the national team, the “Kicker” alternates between continental importance and its anchoring in Vienna. Hugo Meisl is not mentioned or depicted once.

So, the painting brings the Jew Meisl back into focus. It reinstalls him as the ‘father’ of the *Wunderteam*. Looking at the players on the painting, this opens another interesting narrative: One famous player of the team, Walter Nausch, emigrated to Switzerland in 1938, together with his Jewish wife (Schwarz 2008a). Hans Mock, another player, on the other hand, was a member of the SA (*Fußball-Sonntag*, April 3, 1938, 6). The choice to depict the team in a moment in history, in which the brutal repression and annihilation policy of the National Socialist regime and the horrors of the Second World War were unimaginable, could be read as an appeal to the Austrians to forget the years between 1938 and 1945 and work together, building the new Austria.

Another remarkable aspect of the painting is that it became part of the country’s collective memory, although it was hardly displayed in public. It was depicted on the cover of books (Skocek and Weisgram 1996; Weisgram 2006) and featured in numerous publications. In 1950 it was shown in an exhibition, afterwards it went into the depot of the City of Vienna’s history museum. In 1964 it was lent to the Austrian Football Federation, which displayed it in its meeting room, as a photograph by Margherita Spiluttini from 1994 shows (Eppel et al. 2008, 139).

The Viennese history museum – Wien Museum as it is called now – was not interested in the painting for decades. In 2008, Peter Eppel, Bernhard Hachleitner, and Werner Michael Schwarz curated an exhibition at Wien Museum on legendary places of Viennese football. It went without saying that this painting would play an important role in this exhibition. Stamford Bridge became one of the “legendary places of Viennese football.”

The painting – and displaying it in the exhibition – was widely covered by Austrian media. The reactions of journalists and visitors of the exhibition can be amalgamated: A big majority seemed to know the painting (because they had seen photographs of it or knew stories about the painting and its history). After the exhibition, the painting went back to the depot. The museum wanted to keep the painting this time, not give it away again. Probably the painting will be part of the permanent exhibition, which will start after the reconstruction of the museum within the next few years.⁵ The *Wunderteam* painting now is not only seen as a piece of art, but also as a document of Viennese, and Austrian

⁵ The reconstruction has been delayed several times. It probably will start in 2018, see <<http://www.wienmuseumneu.at>> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

history. The painting is regarded as an example for nation-building with the help of the image of a popular football team: an object that offers insights into a defining moment of Austrian history.

Figure 7: The *Wunderteam* Painting as Part of the Exhibition "Wo die Wuchtel fliegt. Legendäre Orte des Wiener Fußballs" (Legendary places of Viennese football)



Source: Wien Museum, Klaus Pichler.

4. Conclusion

We tried to contribute to the discussion on the role of visuality in sport, especially football, played in a broader context, with some insights into images which are important for the analysis of Austrian sports history.

The oil painting of the so-called *Wunderteam* served as an ideal starting point, as it allowed to uncover different aspects that interact during the process that makes an image iconic. The painting of a football team that was clearly referencing a singular event, but at the same time was composed in a way that implied a classic dimension to it. Instead of radiating this timelessness by naturalistic precision, the choice to depict more people on the field than actually possible lent the painting a rather mystical and glorifying touch.

The contemporary coverage of the match consists of far more photographs and films not showing the match itself, but the stories behind it. All in all, the analysis of different (visual) media involved in the reporting of the game shows

that there was no single iconographic image of the *Wunderteam*, which could have been the 'natural' pattern for a painting.

There was one photograph that provided the frame for Meissner. But the painting was not a copy of one photograph: According to W.J.T. Mitchell, it was the combination of photographic pictures and the mental image(s) that were associated with the squad (Mitchell 1984).

The impetus for the painting and the associations it was going to trigger did not come from an artist, but from a politician. It served as a means of nation-building in the early years of the so-called *Zweite Republik* (Second Republic). And, also important in the early postwar era, it was a means of denazification: Personally, for the painter Paul Meissner, and for Austria as a whole. Choosing the *Wunderteam* at the beginning of its most famous game for this purpose seems obvious for a number of reasons. Firstly, the *Wunderteam* was one of the very rare foci for Austrian national identification in Austria's First Republic. Secondly, the team's praised playfulness provided a perfect counterpoint to the brutality of National Socialism, supposedly symbolizing the difference in attitude and mentality. This notion was fostered by the prominent depiction of Matthias Sindelar and Hugo Meisl, two of the squad's main proponents who had died before the beginning of the Second World War. Bringing the Jew Meisl, whose memory had been suppressed during National Socialism, but who, at the same time, had not been a victim of the Holocaust, back into focus is a particularly interesting aspect that offers various readings of the self-representation of the country. Choosing the squad's entry of the pitch brings another subject into sight: at this moment, the result of the match is still unknown and everything is still possible. Politically we can read this as a metaphor for a new beginning. Another remarkable aspect is that a painting can become part of a country's collective memory, although it has hardly been displayed in public. The story of the painting's (non-)displaying and its rediscovery in a museological context shows a change in the attitude towards the importance of popular culture, especially sports, for the history of a city or even a country. At least we have got two insights through images:

Matthias Sindelar smoked cigarettes, but even back in 1932 the picture of a sportsman smoking a cigarette needed an explanation.

And: Austria was quite good at football.

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