

## Exhibition Review

# Weimar: From Small Court to Cultural Great Power

---

BY HENDRIK ZIEGLER

(translated by Leonhard Horowski)

*The Weimar Moment: Anna Amalia, Carl August and the Birth of Classical German Culture 1757–1807* (April 1 to November 4, 2007, Schloßmuseum, Weimar).

A RECENT EXHIBITION IN WEIMAR, the former capital of the duchy (later grand duchy) of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach attracted many visitors. Organised by the Klassik Stiftung Weimar in co-operation with an eponymous long-term research project at the nearby university of Jena and held at the historic location of the Stadtschloß (the ducal town palace), this exhaustive exhibition was well worth seeing — not just for those whose interests are literary or artistic, but also for historians and anyone interested in the dynamic role small courts could play in the Holy Roman Empire. As the title indicates, the exhibition aimed to emphasise the crucial role of its two princely protagonists, Duchess Anna Amalia (1739–1807, ruled 1758–75) and her son Carl August (1757–1828, ruled 1775–1828), and to demonstrate how — with the help of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe among others — their support for the growth of Weimar into one of Germany's most important cultural centres was also a conscious political strategy.

This assumption informed both the lay-out of the exhibition itself, made up of twenty-three thematic sections spread over thirty-one rooms of the palace's first floor, and the accompanying catalogue.<sup>1</sup> Equally ample space was allotted to less obviously political subjects traditionally associated with the *Weimarer Klassik*, such as the Italian journeys of Goethe, Anna Amalia and Herder (rooms 14 and 15) or Goethe's activities as a reformer of the Weimar court theatre (rooms 23 and 24).

Yet the exhibition's special merit lay in the way it showed that the massive patronage accorded to the arts and sciences, particularly after Goethe's return

1 *Ereignis Weimar: Anna Amalia, Carl August und das Entstehen der Klassik 1757–1807* (catalogue for *The Weimar Moment: Anna Amalia, Carl August and the Birth of Classical German Culture 1757–1807*), ed. by Klassik Stiftung Weimar and special research unit 482, 'The Weimar and Jena Moment: Culture Around 1810', of the Friedrich Schiller University Jena, the catalogue of the exhibition held at the Weimar Castle Museum from 1 April to 4 November 2007 (Leipzig, 2007); Hellmut Th. Seemann, ed., *Anna Amalia, Carl August und das Ereignis Weimar* (Weimar, / Göttingen, 2007) is a supplementary collection of essays on the broader thematic context (albeit occasionally rather too tangential).

from Italy in 1789, was essentially a reaction to the tiny duchy's increasing irrelevance on the political stage. In the mid-1780's, Carl August and other rulers of middling German states such as Margrave Karl Friedrich of Baden and Prince Leopold III Friedrich Franz of Anhalt-Dessau had unsuccessfully attempted to found a *Fürstenbund* (Union of Princes) as a third and independent German power meant to check Austrian expansion without falling into Prussian dependency. Frederick II of Prussia, however, was no less adroit in exploiting princely fears provoked by Emperor Joseph II's repeated attempts (in 1778/79 and 1785) to annex the better part of Bavaria. In July 1785 he confronted his rivals with the Three Electors' Union made up of Brandenburg-Prussia, Hanover and Saxony. Their initiative thus pre-empted, the lesser princes had no choice left but to join this alliance, soon therefore renamed *Fürstenbund*, on Prussia's conditions and under its domination.

Having done so, Carl August became the most obsequious exponent of Frederick William II's German policies and eventually followed him into battle, as a Prussian major-general under the command of his uncle, the Duke of Brunswick, in the anti-revolutionary campaign of 1792 so well recorded in Goethe's war diary. Henceforth, this loss of diplomatic and military independence would have to be compensated for by cultural and scientific patronage, as was borne out in the exhibition's final section 'Dauer im Wechsel. Weimar als kulturelle Großmacht'. In order to make Weimar the cultural centre of Germany, Goethe, Christoph Martin Wieland and others would now gradually and systematically build up, reform or extend the University of Jena (established on territory belonging to Sachsen-Weimar, which ran it in conjunction with the other small Saxon duchies), with its numerous scientific departments as well as Jena's and Weimar's libraries and art collections. In the last resort these cultural achievements, universally acknowledged all over Europe, saved the duchy's independence and territorial integrity during the dangerous years of the Napoleonic Wars, the Confederation of the Rhine of 1806 to 1813 and the subsequent 'Wars of Liberation'. The concept Goethe successfully offered to his ruler and friend Carl August (who himself liked to dream of politics on a grand scale) could be summarised as culture in the service of political survival.

The Weimar exhibition and its readable catalogue fit in with an increasing number of exhibitions and publications on significant members of the ruling house of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, such as the exhibition on Grand Duchess Maria Pawlowna, daughter of Czar Paul I, which took place at the Weimar Stadtschloß in 2004 to mark the bicentenary of her wedding to Carl August's son, Hereditary Prince Carl Friedrich,<sup>2</sup> or recent works on the latter's two successors

2 Jochen Klauß and Joachim Berger, eds, *'Ihre Kaiserliche Hoheit': Maria Pawlowna, Zarentochter am Weimarer Hof*, exhibition catalogue for Stiftung Weimarer Klassik und Kunstsammlungen, 20 June to 26 September 2004 (Munich, 2004). The catalogue is supplemented by an excellent edition of the Princess's early diaries covering the years from 1805 to 1813: Katja Dmitrieva and Viola Klein, eds, *Maria Pavlovna: die frühen Tagebücher der Erbherzogin von Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach* (Cologne, 2000).

Carl Alexander (1818–1901) and Wilhelm Ernst (1876–1923).<sup>3</sup> It is increasingly apparent that the heirs of Anna Amalia and Carl August were equally successful in maintaining Weimar's status as one of the cultural capitals of Germany.

### Hendrik Ziegler

Hendrik Ziegler is a junior lecturer in the Art History department at Hamburg University. He was awarded a PhD by Berlin Free University in 1999 for his work on the Weimar School of Painting (published in 2001 as *Die Kunst der Weimarer Malerschule: von der Pleinairmalerei zum Impressionismus*). He has published several articles on German and French artistic patronage, and the iconography of rulership; was joint editor (with Isabelle Dubois and Alexandre Gady) of *Place des Victoires: histoire, architecture, société* (Paris 2003); and is currently finishing his habilitation thesis on *Sol Cave! Criticism of Louis XIV's Royal Imagery*.

3 Angelika Pöthe, *Carl Alexander: Mäzen in Weimars 'Silberner Zeit'* (Cologne, 1998); Lothar Ehrlich and Justus H. Ullbricht eds, *Carl Alexander: Erbe, Mäzen und Politiker*, papers of a conference held at the Goethe-Nationalmuseum, Weimar, 21 to 23 September 2001 (Cologne 2004); Bernhard Post and Dietrich Werner, *Herrscher in der Zeitenwende: Wilhelm Ernst von Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach 1876–1923* (Jena, 2006).