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All the Pretty Little Horses:

the Spectacle of Power in the Ladies' Carousel of 1743

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Abstract:

As the queen of the Habsburg lands, Maria Theresa (1717-1780) and her reign raises questions of female rulership: what it looked like and how it functioned in eighteenth-century Austria. Drawing on ideas of self-affirmation and self-fashioning discussed by scholars such as Kristiaan Aerecke, Melissa Hyde, Regina Schulte, and Michael Yonan, as well as Roy Strong's work on spectacle, this paper explores the ways that Maria Theresa used court spectacles to portray certain monarchical images and support her rule. Examining court spectacles highlights some of the narratives of female rulership that she created and presented to her court and the world.

Court entertainments, such as the Ladies' Carousel of 1743, offer a prime place to explore the ways that Maria Theresa used court spectacle for political purpose. This equine-based entertainment, which Maria Theresa herself participated in, celebrated Austria's recent victory in retaking Prague. By examining the various accounts by Khevenhüller-Metsch and the älteren Zeremonialakten, a commemorative painting, and the history of similar events at the Austrian court, this paper looks at the possible meanings and narratives in the Ladies' Carousel. This event not only celebrated her recent victory, but drew on aspects of ceremonial entries, medieval tournaments, and baroque horse ballets to present an image of a strong, capable monarch to the court. The elements of allegorical meaning and self-fashioning employed in this spectacle apply to other court entertainments and demonstrate some of the ways music, spectacle, and theatre functioned in court life by disseminating ideas to court and the world.