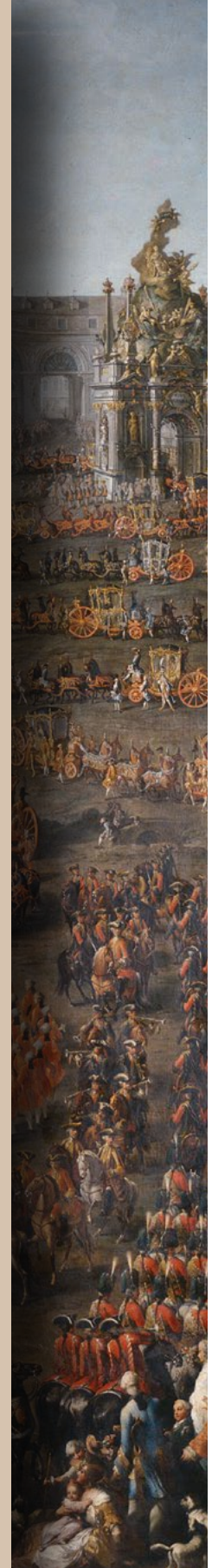
Imperial Weddings

WHEN HABSBURGS GET MARRIED

Highlights



Imperial Weddings

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In Love? Betrothed! Married.

MARRYING FOR THE GOOD OF THE DYNASTY

Martin Mutschlechner

Getting married was imperative for a ruler; a single monarch was the absolute exception. In contrast to today, a ruling couple at that time were not seen as mere celebrities, as today's royals often are. In the eyes of the time, the ruling family was the embodiment of the state: an imperial couple living an exemplary life keeping to the conventional social and religious norms was a symbol and representative of the functioning of the state as a whole. An exception to this was the widowed state, as long as the marriage had already provided for legitimate offspring.

The main reason for a marriage in the House of Habsburg was the continuance of the dynasty. The question of whether or not a male heir came into the world was crucial not only for the dynasty but also for the state and its population. The lack of a male heir led unavoidably to claims and conflicts with rival dynasties, as is confirmed by the many wars of succession interspersed throughout the history of Europe. And their continuing repercussions have shaped the map of Europe down to the present day: the emergence of many

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"The Double Marriage Feast".
Maria Carolina (left) leads her two daughters to the two sons of her brother Leopold. Likewise, at right in the background, two siblings embrace: Ferdinand of Naples as father of the brides and Maria Ludovica as mother of the grooms.
Engraving by Quirin Mark, 1790.

of the modern nations and states was all too often dependent on more or less successful marital alliances within the ruling dynasties.[1]

The focus on male offspring to secure the line of succession was founded in the law of succession, since the rights to rule were usually handed down through the male line – in the long history of the Habsburg Dynasty Maria Theresa, as heiress, is the great exception. The offspring inherited the rank and title of the father – and not of the mother; whereas, at marriage, women left their original family not only physically but also legally. In the case of the House of Habsburg this meant: only the offspring of a male Habsburg was validly an actual member of the dynasty. The offspring of a female Habsburg who had moved through marriage into her husband's family no longer belonged to the ruling house of Austria as legal heir or in its genealogy. So as to keep potential claims as few as possible, female members of the dynasty who married outside the House had to resign officially from their original family. This legal act was called renunciation. It meant that the daughters of the House renounced their claim to the throne and their inheritance both for themselves and also in the name of their offspring, who were perhaps not even born yet.[2]

Imperial throne in the privy council chamber of the Vienna Hofburg as scene of the ceremony of renunciation. Photograph, c. 1930.

Criteria in choosing a partner – who's good enough?

Besides the primary aim of the biological continuance of the family, it was also essential to take measures to maintain or enhance dynastic prestige. Hence the choice of a marriage partner in the House of Habsburg was determined by tightly set specifications. Here, a flawless family tree was the be-all and end-all. The basic requirement was a legitimate birth and status as a legitimate scion of sovereign ruling houses. Legitimacy was valid only for offspring conceived and born within a marriage sanctioned in church. Therefore any offspring of rulers who were descended from connections that were not legitimate or befitting social status, or indeed extramarital, were struck off the list of potential marital partners.[3]

Another fundamental criterion was the **denominational conformity** of both parties. In the case of the Habsburgs, this required descent from a Catholic dynasty. This intransigence in denominational issues was not particular to the Habsburgs. Two great denominational marriage circles existed in Europe that were in general alienated from each other: the Catholic dynasties on one hand, the Protestant on the other. Opening up to the latter since the eighteenth century was the Russian Tsarist dynasty, although the person marrying into the House had to convert to the Orthodox faith. This is the reason why there are hardly any Habsburg connections to the British or Prussian royal houses, or to the Scandinavian dynasties.

If a candidate happened to come from a Protestant family, conversion to Catholicism was the rule; Maria Theresa's mother Elisabeth Christine of Brunswick-Wölfenbüttel (1691–1751) is an example. And this connection indeed introduced new family relations for the Habsburgs. It is not so well known that Maria Theresa was also related through her mother to the Russian Tsarist family and even to her archenemy, the Prussian king Frederick the Great.

Vice versa, there is no case of the conversion of a Habsburg princess to one of the other Christian churches. Denominational mixed marriages were avoided if possible; there are only few exceptions in the House of Habsburg. The most prominent case of a Habsburg bride who was allowed to marry

into the dynasty despite her refusal to convert was the marriage of Archduke Charles (1771–1847), the victor of Aspern, to Henriette von Nassau-Weilburg (1797–1829), a princess from a Calvinist royal house. But these were exceptions, and further denominational mixed marriages were prohibited in the House Laws of 1839. Marriage to someone of a non-Christian faith remained unthinkable for members of the dynasty right through to the end of the monarchy.[4]

One of the central issues in the choice of a partner was the **criterion of equal birth**. The élite society of the European ruling houses was dominated by strict distinctions. They remained amongst themselves and were exclusive in the truest sense of the word – the door was shut to others. Aristocrats who did not avail of sovereign rights to rule were also shut out from the highest circles. A strict separation held sway in marriage conventions between sovereign (=ruling) and the non-sovereign families of the rest of the aristocracy. Marrying an outsider from the middle classes or bourgeoisie was seen as absolutely impossible.

But even among the European ruling houses that regarded themselves in principle as equals, specific marriage coteries formed that encompassed only a handful of families. The phenomenon of endogamy, that is, marriages contracted within one's own narrowly limited social group, can be found in all European royal dynasties. Narrowly restricted marriage circles meant that the pool of potential partners was very small. Since this was practised for generations, the consequence was that the European ruling houses were related by blood or marriage to a complex degree

An extreme example of this is the spectacular Habsburgian triple wedding in 1790 between members of the Austrian Imperial House and the Neapolitan royal family. Vienna was the scene of this last dynastic spectacle of the ancien régime, whilst at the same time, the French Revolution was heralding in the beginning of a new age. This dynastic mass wedding has therefore remained memorable because the persons who got married were very closely related. Three children from the marriage of Emperor Leopold II with Maria Ludovica

**"Crown Jewels of Austria and Bavaria".
Depiction of the many marriages between members
of the Habsburg and Wittelsbach dynasties on the
betrothal of Franz Joseph and Elisabeth.
Lithograph by Franz Würbel
after template by Ferinand Tewele, 1853.**

of Bourbon Spain married three children of King Ferdinand of Naples-Sicily from his marriage with Archduchess Maria Carolina of Austria.
Archduke Francis (1768–1835; as Emperor Francis II/I) married Maria Theresa of Bourbon Naples (1772–1807). His younger brother, Archduke Ferdinand (1769–1824), married the younger sister of the bride, Princess Ludovica of Bourbon Naples (1773–1802). And to round off the trio, the youngest sister of the two Habsburg brothers, Archduchess Clementine (1777–1801), married the heir to the throne of Naples Prince Francesco Gennaro (1777–1830). Since the latter pair were just thirteen years old, their actual married life together began in 1797 when the two had reached their twentieth year.

Taking a closer look at this, it reveals well-nigh claustrophobically close relationships, since the bridal pairs were cousins of first degree on both paternal and maternal sides. The parents were already sibling pairs of the dynasty of Habsburg Lorraine and of the Bourbons ruling in Naples and Spain, who were married as part of Maria Theresa's alliance policy. Such an extreme case of inbreeding was very rare, even in the world of the old European feudal aristocracy.

The many marriages among the closest of relations led to cases of inbreeding. This was not regarded as particularly problematic at the time; indeed, from the genealogical point of view the advantages and the concentration of royal charisma and "blue blood" evidently outweighed any reservations when persons with the same ancestors married one another. The Catholic Church saw an impediment to marriage among blood relations up to the fourth degree of the collateral line, however, in justified cases, a pope could issue a dispensation – an exemption from this ecclesial precept – which, in the case of the Habsburgs, who were closely connected to the Roman Church, was usually just a formality.

Physical and psychological criteria for the choice of partners

Once the family background was acknowledged as coequal and the dynastic and political background conditions were assessed to be suitable, there were still some individual criteria to be taken into account: factors such as age and individual physical and psychological characteristics had to be considered in order to regard the future status as a member of the Imperial House as fitting. As far as the **marriageable age** is concerned, the bride should ideally be somewhat younger than the bridegroom. It is evident that brides frequently married at a very early age. According to the conventions of the time, there was a relatively tight time slot in the life of a young daughter from the highest aristocratic class in which a marriage had to be decided. The betrothal should be announced at the latest in her eighteenth year. The marriageable age was set at the start of menstruation, only then did the official search for a spouse begin. Men were usually older at their first marriage, but here, too, there were instances of a male marrying very young. In some cases – above all when a match was of crucial political importance – great differences in age were accommodated.

In cases of extreme age differences, the primary tendency that stands out is the re-marriage of widowers, who often married much younger wives, especially if a male successor was lacking. Because of the relatively high risk involved in pregnancies and births, many wives died very young. In general, re-marriages were conspicuously more frequent for men than for women – there were simply more young widowers than young widows. Even men of an advanced age occasionally ventured into a new marriage after their spouse's death, since the marital state was important in fulfilling social norms. Here we often encounter extreme age differences, the wives being considerably younger.

Besides the suitable age, another important factor for the future role as member of the ruling house was the compliancy of character. The foundation stone for this was already laid in education, especially for daughters. It was drummed into princesses from their earliest age onwards that their most important task in life was to present to the dynasty into which they married numerous and – ideally – male offspring, and to be a paragon for their people as spouse and princess.[5]

The personality of an ideal princess should be flexible and adaptable and after her marriage fit in with the new family as smoothly as possible. As soon as the court was determined into which a girl would be married, her education chan-

ged course, primarily as regards language; in the case of Marie Antoinette the French court even intervened directly and sent language and dance teachers to make a perfect *Française* out of her.[6]

A rare example of a sympathetic preparation of a son for marriage can be seen in Francis Stephen's documented advice to Archduke Leopold (1747–1792) on his marriage to Maria Ludovica of Bourbon Spain (1745–1792) in 1765: since perfect concord between two married people is an illusion, the principle of a happy life together is based on forbearance and gentleness, courtesy and mildness. The endeavour to attain harmony should always be upheld, inner poise should be the highest aim. The husband should not always insist on the enforcement of his own opinion, and he should always concede his partner a certain freedom of scope. It is interesting that in this discourse there isn't one word about love; however, respect and consideration for the female partner should hold sway; in the words of Francis Stephen: *"douceur"*, which may be translated as amicability, meekness and sympathy.[7]

Last but not least, **physical aspects** were also an important criterion in the choice of partners. Besides a certain degree of attractiveness in line with the contemporary ideal of beauty, this included the presence of physical requirements conducive to propagation because of the fundamental importance of producing offspring for the dynasties of Europe. In addition to medical examinations performed in case of doubt to establish fertility or the ability to give birth, an important criterion was descent from families traditionally blessed with many children without conspicuous hereditary diseases.

According to the religious and moral ideals, both partners should be "virgin" at the first marriage; however, in reality it was accepted that men would gather sexual experiences prior to the marriage. With women, things were distinctly more rigid; here, unequivocal virginity was required. Many women were kept so ignorant that the first sexual act was a traumatic experience for them.[8]

**Emperor Francis I at an advanced age.
Engraving by Theodor Benedetti after a painting
by Franz Amerling, c. 1830.**
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**Caroline Augusta of Bavaria.
The fourth wife of Emperor Francis was,
at twenty-four, half the age of her bridegroom;
she was to outlive him by thirty-eight years.
Engraving by Blasius Höfel after a template
by Joseph Karl Stieler, 1819.**

Affairs of the Heart

LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN THE IMPERIAL HOUSE

Martin Mutschlechner

"It is not a rare occurrence that those who otherwise control lands and subjects control their own will as regards their marrying and must bind themselves to a spouse not as the natural and free motives of their heart would choose, but are forced to act in compliance with their special intentions of State."[1]

In the world of the great dynasties romantic love was never a criterion when choosing a partner. And the House of Habsburg was no exception. The plan of life for an Austrian archduke or archduchess – and thus the crucial issue of marriage as well – was determined by political and dynastic considerations. The fact that this involved sacrifices that ignored personal wishes and inclinations was drummed into members of the dynasty from earliest childhood. The ideal archduke or ideal archduchess should accept the planned marriage fatalistically, "function" with a strict sense of duty, and renounce individual happiness in love in favour of the well-being of the dynasty and the state.[2]

Marriage in ruling dynasties was a grand affair of pomp and circumstance and therefore not about the bond between two individuals but of two families, who first and foremost saw "dynastic capital" in their children. Scouting for potential marital partners in the dynastic sphere was always dependent on the

← **Maria Theresa of Austria and Francis Stephen of Lorraine in the circle of ten of their children. Miniature painting on ivory, circle of Antonio Bencini, 18th C.**