# From Self-Fashioning to State Symbol

## *Empress Elisabeth's Aesthetic Agency, Posthumous Cult, and National Appropriation in Austria*

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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the life and posthumous transformation of Empress Elisabeth of Austria (1837-1898), challenging prevailing historiographical constructions that cast her as a passive consort constrained by the rigid formalities of the Habsburg court. Through an analysis of visual culture, gendered self-representation, and the processes of cultural mythologisation that followed her death, Elisabeth emerges as a figure who strategically cultivated a public persona that exercised aesthetic and performative agency in subversion of the symbolic constraints of her imperial role. After her assassination, however, this carefully constructed image was appropriated and reconfigured within Austrian cultural memory, as her acts of self-fashioning were systematically effaced and supplanted by a romanticised iconography that functioned as an ideological projection screen for the reconstruction of national identity in twentieth century Austria.

## Introduction

Elisabeth, Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary, occupies a paradoxical position in Austrian cultural memory: resolutely elusive in life, yet inescapably omnipresent in death. Born into the Bavarian Wittelsbach dynasty, she married Emperor Franz Joseph I in 1854 and ascended to the ceremonial apex of the Habsburg monarchy.[1] Her imperial career is widely perceived as defined by withdrawal, aesthetic extremity, and personal tragedy – most notably the suicide of her only son, Crown Prince Rudolf.[2] Yet this perception, shaped less by her imperial career than her posthumous image, obscures the complexity of her historical presence. Following her 1898 assassination, Elisabeth became an object of obsessive cultural fascination, centred on her mythologised beauty. Appropriated by mass media and popular culture, she was transfigured into an icon of romantic tragedy and abstracted into a symbol of idealised femininity.[3] This thesis intervenes in such narratives by reasserting Elisabeth as an agent of aesthetic self-fashioning who resisted the constraints of dynastic femininity. Tracing the processes of her posthumous mythologisation, it exposes how gendered iconography overwrote her self-fashioned image, effacing her agency and recasting her as a passive emblem of imperial femininity.

The historiographical scope of this study is defined by its engagement with English-language scholarship, facilitating an interrogation of Elisabeth's legacy within anglophone discourse. Central to this discourse is the image of Elisabeth as a tragic figure constrained by the ceremonial strictures of Habsburg identity – an image rooted in biographical accounts published posthumously. Marguerite Cunliffe-Owen inaugurated this tradition in 1899, portraying Elisabeth as "tormented by the oppressive sense of injustice which made her life a long martyrdom."[4] The same year, Alborough De Burgh entrenched this portrayal, framing the death of her son as the rupture that transformed Elisabeth into a spectral presence, "haunted…seeking in vain for rest."[5] Clara Tschudi's 1900 biography advanced the "sorrowing mother" motif, casting Elisabeth as the tragic embodiment of the irreconcilable tensions between dynastic obligation and desire for independence.[6] These early works established the "Mater Dolorosa" paradigm that shaped Elisabeth's cultural reception. Egon Corti's 1936 biography attempted a historiographical correction, denouncing the tradition of "romantic embellishment" and seeking to reclaim Elisabeth "from the realms of legend."[7] Yet, nostalgic undertones and Corti's neglect of her contemporary reputation limited this endeavour.

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[1] Dagmar C. G. Lorenz, "Gender, Imperialism, and the Encounter with Islam: Ruth Beckermann's Film *A Fleeting Passage to the Orient,*" in *Visual Culture in Twentieth-Century Germany: Text as Spectacle*, ed. Gail Finner (Indiana University Press, 2006), 191.
[2] Katrin Unterreiner, *Sisi: Myth and Truth*, trans. Neil Radford (Verlag Christian Brandstätter, 2005), 85.
[3] Matteo Tuveri, "Elisabeth of Austria: A Beauvoirian Perspective," *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* 24, no. 1 (2008): 5, https://doi.org/10.1163/25897616-02401004.
[4] Marguerite Cunliffe-Owen, *The Martyrdom Of An Empress* (Harper & Brothers, 1899), 4.
[5] Alborough De Burgh, *Elizabeth Empress of Austria: A Memoir* (Hutchinson & Co., 1899), 16-17.
[6] Clara Tschudi, *Elisabeth: Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary*, trans. E. M. Cope (E. P. Dutton & Co., 1901), 253.
[7] Egon Corti, *Elizabeth: Empress of Austria,* trans. Catherine Alison Phillips (Yale University Press, 1936), v-vi.

A decisive shift occurred in 1981 with Brigitte Hamman's landmark study. Enduring as the most comprehensive and methodologically sophisticated biography to date, Hamann reinterpreted Elisabeth as an ideologically-engaged figure who actively resisted the performative expectations of her role. Hamman's assertion that the true "tragedy of her life" stemmed from the fact that "self-realisation did not make her happy" challenged the prevailing perception of the empress as a passive victim.[8] In Hamann's wake, a wave of scholarship sought to recover Elisabeth from the margins of Habsburg history. The resultant body of work foregrounded her political influence, particularly her role in the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867.[9] Her affinity for Hungary inspired extensive study on her symbolic significance within that context. Comparatively, studies examining Elisabeth's cult within Austria remain largely absent. This lacuna is striking given the dramatic revaluation of her image that followed her assassination. Regarded with marked ambivalence during her lifetime, Elisabeth was recast postmortem as a figure of national veneration. That an empress of Bavarian origin, who articulated limited identification with Austria, would be reconfigured as a symbolic locus of national identity demands further scrutiny.

This historiographical imbalance is redressed through a gendered perspective, first substantively treated in Maura Hametz and Heidi Schlipphacke's 2018 edited volume. Reframing Elisabeth's transcultural resonance, they argue that successive reincarnations of her image constitute not an enduring historical legacy but a mutable cultural artefact, whose feminine appeal is repeatedly repurposed to legitimise the cultural imaginaries of the present.[10] The work of Olivia Gruber Florek offers a particularly significant contribution. Through engagement with visual analysis, Florek broadened the scope to recognise Elisabeth's cultural function, arguing for the centrality of visual culture in the production of femininity. Her 2022 monograph, the first concentrated study of Elisabeth's portraiture, uncovered the extent of Elisabeth's curatorial control.[11] While Florek focuses on Elisabeth's influence on modern female portraiture, her analysis critically illuminates Elisabeth's assertion of agency within a representational realm typically inaccessible to women.[12] This thesis takes Florek's methodology as a point of departure, shifting the analytic focus to the posthumous reframing of Elisabeth within Austrian cultural memory.

Traditional scholarly treatment of the visual culture surrounding Elisabeth, which constitutes the primary source base of this study, has interpreted these materials within the reductive framework of her posthumous mythology, thereby obscuring her agency in self-representation. Repositioned within the context of their creation, these sources reveal Elisabeth's strategic negotiation of the visual codes of imperial femininity. The framework underpinning this analysis is informed by Judith Butler's theory of gender as performative, constituted through the "contingent construction of meaning."[13] Butler's model provides a critical lens for interpreting visual enactments of imperial

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[8] Brigitte Hamann, *The Reluctant Empress: A Biography of Empress Elisabeth of Austria*, trans. Ruth Hein (Faber and Faber Ltd, 2010), vii.
[9] Unterreiner, *Sisi*, 48.
[10] Maura E. Hametz and Heidi Schlipphacke, "'Sissi': The Convergence of Memory and Myth," in *Sissi's World*, ed. Maura E. Hametz and Heidi Schlipphacke (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 5.
[11] Olivia Gruber Florek, *The Celebrity Monarch: Empress Elisabeth and the Modern Female Portrait* (University of Delaware Press, 2022), 13.
[12] Ibid., 7.
[13] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2007), 190.

majesty as articulations of dynastic legitimacy. To examine Elisabeth's performance of this role, this study engages Pamela Robertson's "feminist camp" theory – an aesthetic defined by "oppositional modes of performance and reception" – which elucidates how stylised femininity could be reappropriated as resistance to hegemonic gender norms.[14] Within this framework, Elisabeth's mobilisation of visual codes of femininity emerges as a considered subversion of monarchical gendered performance. This interdisciplinary methodology, fusing visual analysis with gender theory, is anchored throughout by reference to Hamann's biography.

This thesis proceeds in three sections. The first explores Elisabeth's self-representation during her lifetime, arguing that she strategically employed aesthetic and performative tactics to subvert monarchical expectations. The second traces the posthumous transformation of this image, as it was reshaped to align with gender ideals in twentieth-century Austria. The final section examines the instrumentalization of Elisabeth's image within Austria's Second Republic, interrogating its role in the reconstruction of national identity. Through a gendered analysis of visual culture and cultural memory, this study reveals how Elisabeth was appropriated as a symbolic projection screen for the configuration of Austria's cultural and political identity.

## Self-Fashioning

In the visual economy of nineteenth-century monarchy, image operated as a crucial medium through which authority, legitimacy, and identity were constructed and conveyed. Female consorts were bound by an unwritten but immutable script of dynastic performance, in which fertility functioned as a fundamental aspect of visible governance, anchored in the production of a male heir.[15] A long-standing tradition of Habsburg imagery celebrating imperial motherhood inscribed this ideal. Elisabeth, however, appeared in only a single photograph with her children during her reign.[16] Moreover, she refused to sit for photographs beyond the age of thirty.[17] While her retreat from the public eye has traditionally been read as evidence of her victimhood, closer analysis of her visual statements reveals her awareness of female consort imagery as a codified performance grounded in gendered expectations – one she actively worked to control.[18] Drawing on Butler's model of gender as an "intentional and performative" act, Elisabeth's use of feminine aesthetics emerges as a self-conscious performance, preserved through her calculated withdrawal.[19] This performance sees Elisabeth engage in what Robertson terms "feminist camp practices."[20] By reappropriating aesthetic codes of femininity, Elisabeth reclaimed aestheticism as a means to dictate her public

[14] Pamela Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Duke University Press, 1996), 9.
[15] Joseph Roach, "Private and Public Stages," in *Enlightened Princesses: Caroline Augusta, Charlotte, and the Shaping of the Modern World*, ed. Joanna Marschner et al. (Yale University Press, 2017), 166.
[16] Florek, *Celebrity Monarch*, 14.
[17] Sylvia Schraut, "Sissi: Popular Representations of an Empress," in *Popular Historiographies in the 19th and 20th Centuries: Cultural Meanings, Social Practices,* ed. Sylvia Paletschek (Berghahn Books, 2010), 158.
[18] Beth Muellner, "The Empress Elisabeth of Austria and Her 'Untidy' Collection," *Women's Studies* 39, no. 6 (2010): 551, https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2010.490734.
[19] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 190.
[20] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures,* 9.

identity.[21] As such, she emerges as a conscious agent of self-fashioning who manipulated the representational schema of imperial femininity.

The image Elisabeth intended to preserve is encapsulated in a trio of portraits by Franz Xaver Winterhalter, the last officially commissioned portrayals of the empress.[22] Winterhalter, celebrated for his success in conveying the archetype of female monarchical representation, began his residency at the Viennese court in autumn 1864.[23] The resultant portraits, however, refuse to conform to the dominant canon of consort imagery. The most overt example is the formal portrait (Figure 1) that served as Elisabeth's official image, to complement Winterhalter's portrait of the emperor.[24] The dissemination of these portraits intended to glorify the emperor through visual splendour and, importantly, reinforce his patriarchal authority.[25] As Mary Sheriff has observed, the symbolic power of the female consort lay in her subordinate relationship to the emperor, precipitating the forfeiture of control over her body and its representation.[26] In light of this, it is striking that Elisabeth appears without the heraldry typical of imperial portraiture. Her white tulle gown, by Parisian couturier Charles Worth, evokes the image of a "queen of the ball" rather than a Habsburg empress.[27] Worth's renowned creations drew on elements of theatrical costume that ran counter to traditional aristocratic silhouettes.[28] In a further appeal to theatrical representation, Elisabeth's hair is adorned with diamond stars reminiscent of Viennese costume jewellery. By substituting imperial regalia for emblems of modern glamour, Elisabeth distanced herself from the responsibilities of her ceremonial role. Such distinct iconographic departures signal an unusual degree of intersubjectivity in the portrait's production.[29] Her appeal to theatrical portraiture enabled her to circumvent stylistic conventions and assert an individuality traditionally denied to female consorts.

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[21] Ibid., 34.
[22] Titia Hensel, "'Secret Pictures'? Staging Privacy in Franz Xaver Winterhalter's Portraits of Female Monarchs," in *Empresses and Queens in the Courtly Public Sphere from the 17th to the 20th Century*, ed. Marion Romberg (Brill 2021), 206.
[23] Florek, *Celebrity Monarch*, 32.
[24] Richard Ormond and Carol Blackett-Ord, eds., *Franz Xaver Winterhalter and the Courts of Europe 1830-70* (National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1987), 217.
[25] Olivia Gruber Florek, "Empress Elisabeth and the Painting of Modern Life," in *Sissi's World,* ed. Hametz and Schlipphacke, 137.
[26] Mary D. Sheriff, *The Exceptional Woman: Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun and the Cultural Politics of Art* (University of Chicago, 1996), 154.
[27] Juliane Vogel, "The Double Skin: Imperial Fashion in the Nineteenth Century," in *The Body of the Queen: Gender and Rule in the Courtly World, 1500-2000*, ed. Regina Schulte (Berghahn Books, 2006), 227.
[28] Abigail Joseph, "'A Wizard of Skills and Tulle': Charles Worth and the Queer Origins of Culture," *Victorian Studies* 56, no. 2 (2014): 257, https://doi.org/10.2979/victorianstudies.56.2.251.
[29] Florek, *Celebrity Monarch*, 7.

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1. Franz Xaver Winterhalter, *Elizabeth, Empress of Austria*, 1865, oil on canvas, 255 x 133 cm, Hofburg, Vienna.

The individuality Elisabeth achieved through unconventional aesthetic expression is enhanced when her portrait is viewed in tandem with that of Franz Joseph. In contrast to Elisabeth, the emperor employs the typical imperial accoutrement that affirm his status.[30] Despite this, Elisabeth's commanding presence, emphasised by the expanse of her gown, dominates the composition. The emperor's gaze mirrors, and encourages, a visual trajectory leading to the body of the empress. While Franz Joseph looks at Elisabeth, she stares directly at the viewer.[31] Her posture obstructs the emperor's view of her figure, denying him access to her body and, thus, undermining its prescribed function as a vessel for the future dynasty. The paradoxical subjectivity of Elisabeth's expression is telling: while her eye contact reveals awareness of the viewer's gaze, the barriers to her body and her implied movement into the recessional landscape convey control over her objectification.[32] Her image is thus preserved in a moment of evanescent presence that destabilises the authority of the emperor.[33] Viewed through the framework of gender performativity, Elisabeth's refusal to conform to iconographic

[30] Ibid., 32-4.
[31] Ibid., 34.
[32] Florek, "Elisabeth," 148-9.
[33] Vogel, "Double Skin," 227.

tradition demonstrates her awareness of the power inherent in subverting conventional tropes of female consort portraiture. By transcending reliance on the symbolic capital of her status, Elisabeth enacted a vision of authoritative femininity detached from the representational role demanded of an empress.

Winterhalter's two additional portraits depict the empress in a strikingly informal setting. The first of these is an oval-shaped canvas (Figure 2) that captures Elisabeth in an apparent moment of intimacy.[34] Commissioned personally by Franz Joseph, it has traditionally been relegated to the private sphere. This classification, however, obscures the portrait's public function through its display in the emperor's Hofburg office.[35] Demonstrating that the image was well-known to contemporaries, Franz Joseph's 1898 biographer noted, "when the emperor raises his gaze, he looks straight ahead into the wonderful face of the Empress, whose famous portrait by Winterhalter stands on an easel."[36] As such, the portrait's visibility invites analysis of its utility as a tool through which Elisabeth constructed her public image.

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 2. Franz Xaver Winterhalter, *Elizabeth, Empress of Austria*, 1864, oil on canvas, 122 x 100 cm, Hofburg, Vienna.

[34] Florek, *Celebrity Monarch*, 71.
[35] Hensel, "Secret Pictures," 208-9.
[36] Max Herzig, *Viribus Unitis: Das Buch vom Kaiser* (Verlag von Max Herzig, 1898): 10, qtd. in Titia Hensel, "Secret Pictures," 208.

Here, her modes of self-representation discard the elaborate costuming of the state portrait and she appears authentically unadorned. Although such compositions were not without precedent in Winterhalter's repertoire – in 1843 he produced a portrait of Queen Victoria with unbound hair as a gift for Prince Albert – Elisabeth's differs markedly in affect.[37] Whereas Victoria gazes passively away from the viewer, Elisabeth maintains direct eye contact and the scale of her hair dominates the scene.[38] Interlaced at her chest, her ostensibly un-styled hair obscures access to the sexual elements of her body; her neck, her breasts, and her figure are usurped by her hair.[39] As a result, Elisabeth evades the passivity of contemporary female portraiture and wields her hair as a barrier to her body. This is achieved through deployment of the "female masquerade," which, as advanced by Robertson, deliberately reproduces cultural stereotypes, simulating femininity based on an awareness of "the activity of gendering as an enactment."[40] For Elisabeth, the masquerade is deployed as a strategy of opposition to patriarchal patterns of representation. In this example, she appeals to the convention of hair as a symbol of naturalized femininity yet implements it in such a way that she retains authority over her sexual body.

Biographical evidence for Elisabeth's hair rituals informs the argument for her authority in positioning her hair as the dominant visual motif. It is well-documented that Elisabeth developed rigid beauty routines, and Hamann details that "the daily regimen of hair care could not be accomplished in much less than three hours."[41] Elisabeth's Greek instructor, Konstantin Christomanos, describes this regimen as a "sacred ritual."[42] The value Elisabeth placed on preserving the beauty of her hair extended to almost all aspects of her appearance and her devotion to this so-called "cult of beauty" is traditionally interpreted as a manifestation of vanity. Karen Owens embodies this in attributing Elisabeth's "obsessive concentration on her beauty" to her persistent attempt to gain recognition as "the most beautiful woman in the world."[43] Her subversive use of aesthetics in the Winterhalter portraits, however, complicates such a reductive reading of these practices. As she manipulated her femininity as a currency of power, Elisabeth demonstrated her engagement with beauty as a tool to renegotiate gendered frameworks of representation. Thus, her commitment to preserving this beauty emerges as an effort to withstand the co-option of her body by her role as empress.

Elisabeth's construction of her public identity emerges as an articulation of her private identity, or sense of self, revealed through her collection of *carte-de-visite* albums. In the nineteenth century, women across Europe engaged in album production, a practice that intensified after A. E. Disderi patented the *carte-de-visite* in 1854. As Anne Higonnet has illuminated, assembling these albums offered women "a means both

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[37] Olivia Gruber Florek, "'I Am A Slave To My Hair': Empress Elisabeth of Austria, Fetishism, and Nineteenth-Century Austrian Sexuality," *Modern Austrian Literature* 42, no. 2 (2009): 7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24649766.
[38] Florek, *Celebrity Monarch*, 76.
[39] Florek, "Slave To My Hair," 9.
[40] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 12.
[41] Hamann, *Reluctant Empress*, 133.
[42] Konstantin Christomanos, *Tagebuchblätter* (Mortiz Perles, 1899): 58., qtd. in Hamann, *Reluctant Empress,* 136.
[43] Karen Owens, *Franz Joseph and Elisabeth: The Last Great Monarchs of Austria-Hungary* (McFarland & Co., 2014), 112-5.

to learn and perform an identity."[44] Shaped by individual understandings of femininity, the nature of album curation uncovers "women's definition of themselves as it was structured by gender conventions."[45] Evidence for Elisabeth's engagement in this trend exists in the form of eighteen albums personally assembled by the empress.[46] Three of these, known as the 'Albums of Beauty', exclusively contain images of women and stand out as representational of Elisabeth's disengagement from the methods of collecting adhered to by her contemporaries.[47] The traditional approach to these albums focuses on the individual photographs and, consequently, overlooks the complexity that emerges through addressing their place in the wider collection. This method obscures Elisabeth's curatorial role and endorses the popular perception of her albums as evidence for her superficial obsession with beauty. To appreciate them as a site for Elisabeth's construction of identity, it is essential to heed Higonnet's reminder that "each individual picture works toward the meaning of the album as a whole."[48] Through the Albums of Beauty, compiled in the years preceding Winterhalter's residence, Elisabeth's collecting is illuminated as an act through which she developed her sense of self that was then publicly disseminated through portraiture.

Elisabeth's album curation aligned with her absence from the Viennese court in the early 1860s. It was from Venice, in March 1862, that she penned her request to her brother-in-law, Archduke Ludwig Viktor, for photographs, "only of women."[49] This request was then extended to foreign diplomats and Elisabeth's only criteria was "pretty faces," irrespective of social status.[50] In disregarding delineations of social class and selecting women who occupied the public sphere, Elisabeth utilised her albums to construct a vision of femininity that operated outside the realm of domesticity.[51] In one instance, Elisabeth placed an image of Empress Eugénie amongst erotic photographs of Parisian performers that would have been regarded as pornographic by contemporaries.[52] Hamann concludes that the Parisian consulate's submission of these "scandalous" photographs was intended as a gesture of "mockery."[53] Elisabeth, however, juxtaposed these images with the French empress to dissolve the established hierarchy between the worlds of monarchy and theatre.[54] Further, the sexuality of both these subject categories was inherent in the role they were expected to perform. While the sexuality of the Parisian dancers was available, and intended, for public consumption, that of Eugénie manifested in her dynastic reproductive obligation. By grouping these images together, Elisabeth symbolised the tension between the presumed modesty of imperial consorts and the public expectation of reproduction.[55]

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[44] Anne Higonnet, "Secluded Visions: Images of Feminine Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude (Routledge, 1992), 179.
[45] Ibid., 171.
[46] Uwe Schögle. "'Now I am Collecting Photographs': Miriam Szwast in conversation with Katrin Unterreiner about Elisabeth of Austria's *carte-de-visite* collection," *Photoresearcher* 36 (2021): 5, ESHPh.
[47] Florek, *Celebrity Monarch*, 42.
[48] Higonnet, "Secluded Visions," 177.
[49] Corti, *Elizabeth*, 104.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Florek, *Celebrity Monarch*, 42.
[52] Ibid., 47.
[53] Hamann, *Reluctant Empress*, 130.
[54] Florek, *Celebrity Monarch*, 43.
[55] Ibid., 47.

This awareness of the performative nature of her role extended to representations of "normative" models of beauty. She included, for example, a photograph of Archduchess Sophie posing with an album beside a photograph of an anonymous bourgeois woman, smiling while viewing an album. While Sophie looks anxiously towards the camera, the unidentified woman is absorbed in the album, conveying a sense of ease and confidence.[56] In this self-reflexive compilation, Elisabeth explores the act of spectatorship. While her duties as empress posited her as an object of public spectacle, she was also an astute spectator and demonstrably aware of the art of self-staging in the performance of her monarchical image.[57] Through the visual language of these albums, Elisabeth interrogated the role of women in the public realm and fashioned her individual identity against gender conventions before embracing this identity to fashion a public image detached from her role as imperial wife and mother.

**The 'Sissi' Myth**

Elisabeth's intellectual agency in shaping her self-representation has been largely occluded by the mythologising narratives generated through posthumous reappropriations of her image. These reconstructions diverged markedly from the discourse perpetuated within Austria during her lifetime, where her failure to fulfil the prescribed public role of empress provoked disillusion and resentment.[58] Citing health concerns as justification for her absence, Elisabeth elicited little sympathy amongst the Viennese aristocracy. In the early 1860s, Archduchess Therese remarked, "I feel infinitely sorry for [Francis Joseph] for having a wife who prefers to leave her husband and her children for six months instead of leading a quiet life in Vienna."[59] Within the Viennese court, Elisabeth was regarded as a consummate failure in both her imperial duties and her duties as a wife and mother. Among the wider population, Elisabeth became a veritable stranger over the course of her life.[60] Given that strict Habsburg censorship suppressed overtly critical voices, the empress was virtually ignored by the press, especially in her later years. On her fiftieth birthday in 1887, *Die Neue Freie Presse* devoted a mere seven lines to the occasion and, a decade later, mention of her sixtieth birthday was limited to the observation that she spent it in Paris.[61] The subsequent transformation of public opinion appeared to forget not only the criticism of her character but her active defiance of Habsburg expectations.[62]

The tragedy of Elisabeth's death provided fertile ground for the reconstruction of her image in line with established gender ideals. Her violent assassination instigated her dramatic return to the public stage and proved a pivotal moment in the construction of her posthumous myth.[63] Austrian media coverage ubiquitously emphasised her outstanding beauty, compounded with the tragedy of her death, to style the empress as a

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[56] Muellner, "Elisabeth," 549.
[57] Ibid., 550.
[58] Maria Kendler, "Sisi: A Figure of Multiple Projections," in *Cultural Complexes in Europe*, ed. Jörg Rasche and Thomas Singer (Routledge, 2025), 162.
[59] Papers of Archduke Albrecht, Hungarian State Archives, Budapest, quoted from the microfilm in Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Vienna, November 4, 1860, reel 32, qtd. in Brigitte Hamann, *Reluctant Empress,* 100.
[60] Kendler, 'Sisi," 162.
[61] Susanne Hochreiter, "Sissi: A Double Reflection on a 'Queer Icon'," in *Sissi's World*, ed. Hametz and Schlipphacke, 160.
[62] Unterreiner, *Sisi,* 106.
[63] Kendler, "Sisi," 163.

"Mater Dolorosa."[64] The trope of motherliness as a system of reference in memory politic provided a tool to implant women into memory culture by assigning them national and social importance.[65] Elisabeth's unjust death as an act of self-sacrifice enhanced the symbolic power of this image. In an appeal to the familiar figure of the Virgin Mary, Elisabeth came to allegorise the beautiful, suffering mother.[66] This sentimental reimagining offered the public a figure of ideal femininity and motherhood as a site of collective identification.[67] In death, therefore, Elisabeth emerged as an idolized figure whose image was appropriated to reaffirm defined notions of feminine beauty in Austrian cultural discourse.[68] Her loss of agency over her portrayal facilitated the projection of a romanticised image that suffused the narrative of her reign in line with the Habsburg court's desire to enforce a positive association between the empress and the empire. As a symbolic surrogate, the empress now fulfilled her dynastic function as the allegorical representation of hegemonic imperial power.[69] In crafting a commemorative narrative that "obfuscated Elisabeth's problematic behaviour," the monarchy effectively replaced the provocative empress with a "compliant duplicate."[70]

Immediately after her death, Elisabeth's body was assimilated into the ritual of iconographic public ceremony that she had avoided during her lifetime. Upon its arrival in Vienna on September 15, her coffin was placed on display in the Hofburg's Palace Chapel until the funeral procession on September 17 delivered the empress to the Church for burial.[71] These public displays invoked expressions of collective mourning and re-focused the empress as a symbol of state unity.[72] Media coverage reinforced the visual language, as in an excerpt from *New Freie Presse* that reads, "We are one people and one family…in this widespread and ethnically rich monarchy, hardly a heart beats now that is not in accord, in grief and compassion, with the so terribly stricken monarch."[73] Focusing on nationalistic loss, personified by the suffering of the emperor, memorial passages espoused the image of Elisabeth as *Landesmutter*.[74] This narrative aligned with the paternalistic interpretations of Habsburg rule that had long acted as a centrifugal force for the image of the dynasty.[75] Coinciding with Franz Joseph's Golden Jubilee, the ceremony surrounding Elisabeth's death was conducive to creating a

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[64] Lena Nighswander, "Seeing Sisi: Contemporary Portrayals of Empress Elisabeth of Austria on Page and Screen" (MA Thesis, Bowling Green State University, 2004), 12.
[65] Sylvia Paletschek and Sylvia Schraut, "Introduction: Gender and Memory Culture in Europe – female representations in historical perspective," in *The Gender of Memory: Cultures of Remembrance in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe,* ed. Sylvia Paletschek (Campus Verlag, 2008), 24.
[66] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester University Press, 1992), 67.
[67] Regina Schulte, "The Queen – A Middle Class Tragedy: The Writing of History and the Creation of Myths in Nineteenth-Century France and Germany," *Gender & History* 14, no. 2 (2002): 284, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00266.
[68] Anita McChesney, "Imagining Austria: Myths of 'Sisi' and National Identity in Lilian Faschinger's *Wiener Passion,*" in *Sissi's World*, ed. Hametz and Schlipphacke, 284.
[69] Hochreiter, "Sissi," 261.
[70] Olivia Gruber Florek, "The Absent Empress: Photomontage, Monarchy, and Celebrity in the Nineteenth Century," in *Representing the Habsburg-Lorraine Dynasty in Music, Visual Media, and Architecture, 1618-1918*, ed. Werner Telesko (Böhlau Verlag, 2017), 92.
[71] Daniel Louis Unowsky, "The Pomp and Politics of Patriotism: Imperial Celebrations in Habsburg Austria, 1848-1916" (PhD Thesis, Columbia University, 2000), 208.
[72] Ibid., 207.
[73] *Neues Wiener Tagblatt* (Vienna), September 11, 1898, qtd. in Nighswander, "Seeing Sisi," 8.
[74] Nighswander, "Seeing Sisi," 8-9.
[75] Scott O. Moore, "Vaterland, Heimat, and the Family of Nations: Education and Identity Formation in Late Habsburg Austria," *Nationalities Papers,* Special Issue (2015): 9, https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2024.100.

genuine feeling of identification with the emperor and, therefore, the intensification of dynastic unity.[76] Alongside the image of Elisabeth as *Landesmutter*, Franz Joseph embodied the loving father who would serve as a palliative for the suffering of the Austrian people.[77] After her death, therefore, Elisabeth as the virtuous empress served as an integrating symbol, inserted into the paternalistic narrative of Habsburg rule to bolster affinity with the monarchy in Austrian national consciousness.

The legend attached to the image of Elisabeth inaugurated by the rhetorical interventions of the Habsburg court gained renewed vitality in the 1950s with the release of the sensationally successful *Sissi* film trilogy. Directed by Ernst Marischka and produced by Vienna-based Erma-Film, the series charted Elisabeth's life up to the 1860s.[78] Caitlin Gura has credited the trilogy with igniting a European-wide "Sissi phenomenon," driven by their romanticised portrayal of the "fairy tale" empress.[79] This cinematic rendition of Elisabeth, as Sissi, is inseparable from the cultural context of postwar Austria, specifically the crisis of traditional gender order. The period between 1945, when Austria suffered political and military defeat with the fall of the Third Reich, and 1955, when Austria regained national independence, proved formative for the reconstruction of gender roles.[80] An atmosphere of masculine insecurity accompanied economic and social shifts post-1945 that saw many men experience a loss of social status, while women had comparatively enhanced their position.[81] The need to provide stability through positive gender role models based on distinctly Austrian ideals thus grappled with the destabilisation of traditional gender order. Popular cinema provided an avenue to promote a revived image of masculinity while simultaneously reinforcing traditional gender relations.[82] Within this context, the character of Sissi acted as a foil for the reconstruction of gender relations in Austrian society.

The audience is introduced to Sissi in the Bavarian countryside at Possenhofen, her family home, when she enters the frame riding a horse.[83] This idyllic portrayal situates Sissi as the embodiment of innocence and natural virtue that persists throughout the narrative. These values are established as key moral stabilisers in the initial dialogue, when Sissi's father advises her, "Whenever sorrow and trouble enter your life, open your eyes and take a walk…and every flower will remind you of the

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[76] James Shedel, "Emperor, Church, and People: Religion and Dynastic Loyalty during the Golden Jubilee of Franz Joseph," *The Catholic Historical Review* 76, no. 1 (1990): 129, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25023203.
[77] Christian Wolf, "Representing Constitutional Monarchy in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Britain, Germany, and Austria," in *The Limits of Loyalty: Imperial Symbolism, Popular Allegiances, and State Patriotism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy*, ed. Laurence Cole and Daniel L. Unowsky (Berghahn Books, 2007), 213.
[78] Erica Carter, "Sissi the Terrible: Melodrama, Victimhood, and Imperial Nostalgia in the Sissi Trilogy," in *Screening War: Perspectives on German Suffering*, ed. Paul Cooke and Marc Silberman (Boydell and Brewer, 2010), 81.
[79] Caitlin Gura, "The Austrian Aschenputtel: Empress Elisabeth of Austria as an Icon of Austrian National Identity," *Trinity College Digital Repository*, Trinity Papers (2013): 7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.38593922.
[80] Maria Fritsche, "Austrian Men 'Do Everything with Feeling!': Representations of Masculinity in Post-War Austrian Cinema (1946-1955)," in *Continued Violence and Troublesome Pasts: Post-War Europe Between the Victors After the Second World War*, ed. Ville Kivimäki and Petri Karonen (Finnish Literature Society, 2017), 86.
[81] Ibid., 87.
[82] Ibid., 86.
[83] Heidi Schlipphacke, "Melancholy Empress: Queering Empire in Ernst Marischka's *Sissi* Films," in *Sissi's World*, ed. Hametz and Schlipphacke, 224

almighty power of God, and you will find solace and strength."[84] Sissi repeats this homily verbatim in her initial romantic encounter with Franz. The relationship between Franz and Sissi is set up as a highly romanticised love story, beginning with a chance encounter at Bad Ischl, where Sissi has travelled for the intended betrothal of her sister and the emperor. Not recognising Sissi, Franz is enraptured by the beauty of this "ordinary" girl.[85] Set against the backdrop of nature, the circumstance of their meeting serves to authenticate their love in contrast to the matchmaking orchestrated by their mothers.[86] Subsequently, Franz declares his love for Sissi during a private conversation. Responding to her initial rebuttal of his proposal, Franz laments the burdens of his position and confides that "I don't know if it is a joy to be married to me."[87] This admission marks the last occasion where Franz readily admits weakness.[88] With Sissi on his side, Franz's masculinity is revitalised and he is empowered to firmly rebuke his mother in the following scene.[89] The moral influence of Sissi, therefore, is a rejuvenating force that inspires the emperor's victory over the undue influence of the Archduchess.[90] In this narrative Sissi actuates the remodelling of Franz's masculinity that, while grounded in traditional patriarchal relations, is tempered by the gentle authenticity associated with femininity that Sissi exhibits.

The conflict between Sissi and the Archduchess frames the central narrative of the second instalment, *Sissi: The Young Empress*. Following the birth of Sissi's first child, a protracted power struggle ensues when the Archduchess insists on taking charge of the infant.[91] Sissi, positioned as the protective mother, engages in a furious defence of the mother-child dynamic and reacts against the domineering authority of the Archduchess by fleeing to Possenhofen.[92] At her parental home, extended scenes of familial intimacy recast Sissi's rebellious "masculine" nature in the feminine form as a longing for mother-child symbiosis.[93] Sissi's ultimate return to Vienna, and her reconciliation with the imperial court, facilitates the mediation of political tensions between the Austrian monarchy and Hungarian nationalists through her charm and empathetic disposition, positioned as redemptive forces. The film thus concludes with the coronation of Sissi and Franz as King and Queen of Hungary.[94] The resolution of this dual conflict, both personal and political, is achieved not through statecraft, but through Sissi's feminine virtues of motherliness and affective sincerity.[95]

This message is strongly reaffirmed in the culminating sequence of the final film, which unfolds in the politically volatile atmosphere of Venice.[96] In the face of the Italians' burgeoning nationalist rebellion, Franz calls on his wife for succour and Sissi, debilitated

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[84] Carter, "Sissi," 84.
[85] Schlipphacke, "Melancholy Empress," 231.
[86] Sabine Müller, "'Finally a Human Being in this Palace': How 'Sissi' Deals with the Past," *New Readings* 9 (2008): 5, https://doi.org/10.18573/newreadings.63.
[87] Maria Fritsche, *Homemade Men in Postwar Austrian Cinema: Nationhood, Genre and Masculinity* (Berghahn Books, 2013), 83.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid., 80.
[91] Schlipphacke, "Melancholy Empress," 218.
[92] Carter, "Sissi," 97.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Schlipphacke, "Melancholy Empress," 218.
[95] Schraut, "Sissi," 167.
[96] Schlipphacke, "Melancholy Empress," 218.

by illness, joins her husband for the imperial procession.[97] A pivotal moment occurs when Sissi is reunited with her daughter, forgoing etiquette and embracing her in her arms. The previously hostile crowd erupts in a cheer of "*Viva la mamma!*" at this display of maternal sentiment.[98] Here, Sissi's maternal appeal, rather than her imperial status, becomes the conduit through which dissent is neutralised and the imperial image rehabilitated.[99] The films' consistent recourse to the domestic sphere as the site of resolution has important connotations for Austrian gender relations in the postwar period. The influence of Sissi's naturalness and authenticity, imbued with symbolic maternal power, effectively dissolves the energy of rumbling political rebellion against the imperial regime.[100] Yet, these reconciliations are contingent upon Sissi's acceptance of her roles as empress and wife; thus, personal and political harmony is only achieved through the re-inscription of patriarchal gender codes.[101] In this configuration, Elisabeth's cinematic representation mobilises her image to stabilise postwar Austrian identity through a nostalgic invocation of hegemonic gender norms. These portrayals stand in direct contradiction to the image Elisabeth actively cultivated and worked to preserve during her lifetime, underscoring the extent to which her posthumous legacy was shaped by external ideological imperatives rather than her own self-fashioned identity.

**State Symbol**

The figure of Elisabeth in the *Sissi* trilogy performed a critical ideological function in the construction of Austrian national identity in the wake of World War II. The war's denouement precipitated a crisis of national identity when, as Franz Mathis has identified, "Austria experienced something which seems so vital for the creation of national identity, but which the country had never experienced before: the liberation from a suppressive regime that it had finally learned to hate."[102] Austria faced the task of conceptualising itself as a modern nation with an identity distinct from that of Germany. Intimately connected with the quest for a new national identity on political grounds was the quest for a unique cultural identity.[103] This ideological project derived significant rhetorical impetus from the Allies' 1943 Moscow Declaration.[104] The Declaration defined Austria as "the first free country to fall a victim to Hitlerite aggression."[105] Selective appropriation of its wording propagated the so-called "victim-doctrine," which became the hegemonic narrative in the construction of a collective Austrian identity.[106] Returning to full sovereignty as a neutral republic with the signing of the State Treaty in

[97] Carter, "Sissi," 97.
[98] Schraut, "Sissi," 167.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Cater, "Sissi," 99.
[101] Müller, "Finally a Human Being," 10.
[102] Franz Mathis, "1000 Years of Austria and Austrian Identity: Founding Myths," in *Austrian History Memory & National Identity*, ed. Günter Bischof and Anton Pelinka (Routledge, 1997), 23.
[103] Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger, "Beyond 'The Sound of Music': The Quest for Cultural Identity in Modern Austria," *The German Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (2003): 289, https://doi.org/10.2307/3252083.
[104] Christian Karner, "The 'Habsburg Dilemma' Today: Competing Discourses of National Identity in Contemporary Austria," *National Identities* 7, no. 4 (2005): 417, https://doi.org/10.1080/14608940500334382.
[105] "The Moscow Conference; October 1943," *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, Yale Law School, accessed April 25, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20230402080630/https:/avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/moscow.asp#expand.
[106] Martin Tschiggerl, "Significant Otherness Nation-building and Identity in Postwar Austria," *Nations and Nationalism* 27 (2021): 783, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12677.

1955, Austria sought to evade association with the controversial legacy of its immediate past by invoking a unique, non-German, cultural patrimony.[107] Consequently, the Second Republic was symbolically, and ideologically, configured as the successor of the Habsburg neo-absolutist monarchy.[108] In reactivating this imperial legacy, Austria's film industry came to the fore.

Austrian cinema's most efficacious genre in the 1950s was the *Kaiserfilm*, an Austrian variant of the German *Heimatfilm* tradition. The ideologically charged *Kaiserfilm* emphasised Austria's historical grandeur through the prism of Habsburg imperial splendour, projecting a vision of a culturally coherent Austria rooted in a glorified imperial past. Marischka's *Sissi* trilogy, released in the same year as the signing of the State Treaty, is often heralded as the apotheosis of this genre.[109] *Sissi* combines the opulence of Habsburg Austria with bucolic alpine landscapes, allowing audiences to vicariously inhabit the benevolent word of a bygone Austrian utopia.[110] Through charting the story of Elisabeth as the Bavarian Princess and young empress, Marischka succeeded in constructing a "fairy tale."[111] However, the explanatory notion of "nostalgic escapism" risks obscuring the trilogy's ideological function in shaping postwar Austrian identity.[112] Throughout, Sissi provides a reference for a modern Austria anchored in traditional cultural values.[113] Her simplicity and affinity with nature are staged as humane and democratic traits, implicitly contrasting with the ossified Habsburg court.[114]

Establishing the ideological binary, the first film intercuts scenes of Sissi in the Bavarian Alps with Viennese court scenes depicting Franz Joseph burdened by responsibility. In one such scene, when asked to approve death sentences for young Prague dissidents, the emperor replies, "you cannot expect me to make a snap decision on the lives of eight young people."[115] Establishing visual association with the pastoral world of the benevolent Sissi signals that the emperor will decide in favour of leniency.[116] Because of Sissi's influence, the generational conflict with the authoritarian Archduchess is repeatedly resolved in favour of the young protagonists. In a pivotal confrontation between Sissi and her future mother-in-law, Sissi declares: "I have no intention of changing my way of living. I want to life free, without constraint."[117] Here, Sissi espouses the tenets of the new Republic of Austria as her character is equated with truth, freedom, and democracy. It is the advent of these ideals that is expressed in the visual organisation of the finale, when Sissi makes her journey down the Danube to marry Franz Joseph.[118] Initially, Sissi is framed from behind, aligning the audience with her view of the castles and churches lining the riverbanks. Alternating shots reverse this

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[107] Robert von Dassanowsky, *Austrian Cinema: A History* (McFarland & Co., 2005), 158.
[108] Tschiggerl, "Otherness," 790.
[109] Gura, "Aschenputtel," 9.
[110] Mary Wauchope, "Sissi Revisited," in *Literature, Film, and the Culture Industry in Contemporary Austria*, ed. Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger (Peter Lang, 2002), 173.
[111] Mike Peters et al. "Empire and Romance: Movie-Induced Tourism and the Case of the Sissi Movies," *Tourism Recreation Research* 36 no. 2 (2011):170, https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2011.11081317.
[112] Müller, "Finally a Human Being," 2-3.
[113] Wauchope, "Sissi," 173.
[114] Ibid., 175.
[115] Cater, "Sissi," 85.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Wauchope, "Sissi," 175.
[118] Ibid.

perspective to offer the gaze of the cheering Austrian populace. This visual interplay constructs a dialogic rapport that fuses the iconography of Habsburg grandeur with the democratic ethos of postwar renewal, and Sissi is framed as the rightful representative of the Austrian people.[119] As a symbol of leadership and authenticity, Sissi embodies a renewed image of Austria that provides the means to generate a new notion of national identity.

Marischka's use of masquerade scenes in the following films empowers the fashioning of Sissi as a figure of identification for the postwar generation of Austrians. The overemphasised splendour of the imperial court is simplified in comparison to panoramic scenes of the countryside, which praise the beauty of nature as the paradise that Sissi longs for. This is exemplified in the second film, when Franz travels to Possenhofen to retrieve Sissi after she has fled the Hofburg. Rather than returning directly to Vienna, the imperial couple detours through southern Austria. While hiking through the mountains of Tyrol, an impending storm sees the couple seek refuge in a local chalet. Masquerading as ordinary Austrians, Franz struggles to decipher the dialect of their host, prompting Sissi to tease him for "not understanding his own people."[120] Sissi's confidence and comfort in this simple, rural environment is reinforced when she expresses her wish that they were "no longer the Emperor and Empress, but people of the mountains."[121] In such instances, the pageantry of Habsburg royalty is backgrounded, and Sissi and Franz are positively reduced to the status of ordinary Austrians.[122] The fantasy of this pastoral idyll functions as a defence against traces of turmoil and loss in the Austrian imagination, such that the temporal space of the pure rural community could be imagined as a potential future.[123] Sissi becomes the ideal historical figure to articulate this postwar iteration of national identity, and, as a result, the cinematic character emerges as a cultural icon, transforming the empress into a contemporary heroine – an Austrian Aschenputtel.[124] In an image divorced from historical reality, Elisabeth was thus co-opted as an allegory for 1950s Austria who did not merely reflect but actively contributed to shaping the identity of the new Austrian Republic.

The conflation of Elisabeth with Austrian identity that began in the decade following the Second World War was reanimated in the 1990s. The catalyst for this resurgence was the so-called "Waldheim Affair," which coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Anschluss and sparked political debate over Austria's level of involvement in the Third Reich, challenging Austria's "victim status."[125] In 1986, Kurt Waldheim, former UN Secretary General and Austrian President, was accused of personal involvement in the Nazi occupation of the Balkans.[126] Contemporary commentators alleged that Walheim's historical "amnesia" was paradigmatic of wider Austrian reluctance to confront its past, which engendered a heated transnational debate concerning Austrian complicity in the pan-European aggression of Hitler's

[119] Müller, "Finally a Human Being," 10.
[120] Gura, "Aschenputtel," 11.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid., 12.
[123] Carter, "Sissi," 90.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Lutz Musner, "Vienna – Urban Memories and the Reification of Culture," *Human Affairs* 12, no. 2 (2002): 122, https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2002-120203.
[126] Ibid., 908.

regime.[127] Austria's carefully constructed modern identity was thus destabilised, forcing Austria to mediate between determining its role in the European community while confronting its Third Reich past.[128] Once again, the figure of Elisabeth provided a means to resurrect the image of Austria as a neutral state with a rich history.[129] In its revived form, the idealised image of Sissi as a cultural icon was sensationalised to construct the image of Elisabeth as a royal celebrity.

Austrian cultural and tourist institutions commercialised this renewed image of Elisabeth to promote a popular and unproblematic vision of Austria for domestic and international audiences.[130] It should not be overlooked that the proliferation of the empress's image in tourism campaigns performed an important function as discursive terrain for the negotiation of issues of Austrian identity.[131] In Vienna, in particular, Elisabeth was intimately tied to Habsburg landmarks, encouraging tourists to engage nostalgically with the Habsburg past through the romantic figure of the empress.[132] Indeed, the "Sissi ticket" offered a package for tourists to experience Vienna exclusively through exhibits centred on the empress. As well as viscerally experiencing Elisabeth's life through a shared location, tourists could purchase her image on innumerable souvenir objects.[133] The immortalised image of Elisabeth on such objects as plates, fans, and bells, ascribed a domesticity unto the empress that misrepresented her reality to serve the needs of contemporary society.[134] Heidi Schlipphacke identifies Viennese marketing of "Habsburg nostalgia" as constituting more than a reactionary retreat into the past. Rather, it generates "nostalgic affective responses that are radically displaced from the location and time of Habsburg Vienna," enabling the empress to become a pliable signifier of cultural stability.[135] As in the 1950s, the sensationalised figure of Elisabeth was mobilised to connect an irrecoverable imperial past with the cultural present, while deflecting contemporary issues of Austrian identity.[136]

The centenary of Elisabeth's death in 1998, officially commemorated as the "Sissi Year", marked a climax in this promotional campaign, generating an estimated equivalent of fifty-million German marks in tourist and consumer expenditure.[137] Numerous features and facilities were launched in her honour, such as the "Walking Tours of the Empress" that enabled participants to retrace her footsteps to Baden and the Vienna Forest.[138] The Winterhalter portraits, encountered at the beginning of this study, were ubiquitously reproduced on banners and postcards, amongst other forms of

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[127] Karner, "'Habsburg Dilemma'," 414.
[128] Wauchope, "Sissi," 177.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid., 178.
[131] Gundolf Graml, *Revisiting Austria: Tourism, Space, and National Identity, 1945 to the Present* (Berghahn Books, 2020), 2.
[132] Susanne Kelley, "Sisi in the Museum: Exhibits in Vienna and the US," in *Sissi's World*, ed. Hametz and Schlipphacke, 357.
[133] Ibid., 358
[134] Beth Muellner, "The Remains of the Stay: The Corporeal Archive of Empress Elisabeth in the Hofburg," in *Sissi's World*, ed. Hametz and Schlipphacke, 75.
[135] Heidi Schlipphacke, "The Temporalities of Habsburg Nostalgia," *Journal of Austrian Studies* 47, no. 2 (2014): 14, https://doi.org/10.1353/oas.2014.0023.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Wauchope, "Sisi," 179.
[138] Oliver Haid, "'Eternally Will Austria Stand…': Imperial Tourism in Austria Between Timeless Predisposition and Political Statement," in *Royal Tourism: Excursions around Monarchy*, ed. Philip Long and Nicola J. Palmer (Multilingual Matters & Channel View Publications, 2008), 117.

visual media, often accompanied by the caption "Eternal Beauty."[139] In this context, her state portrait projected the former opulence of the Habsburg monarchy, while the informal portrait provided evidence of Elisabeth's status as the epitome of timeless feminine beauty.[140] It is precisely this dissemination of her image, stripped of its historical specificity, that occludes Elisabeth's agency in constructing her self-image through the processes of commodification and nostalgia. Thus, the image of Elisabeth emerged as a palimpsestic memory site within Austrian cultural imagination, one whose symbolism consistently overrode historical veracity. Idealised in the 1950s through the *Sissi* trilogy as the youthful embodiment of a rehabilitated Austrian Republic, and later reimagined in the 1990s through sensationalist mythmaking, her image functioned not as an index of lived history but as a symbolic vehicle for the negotiation of national identity and commodified nostalgia.

## Conclusion

The paradox at the heart of Empress Elisabeth's cultural legacy lies in the disjunction between her strategic manipulation of her image in life and the ideological instrumentalization of that image after her death. In defiance of the dynastic codes that prescribed imperial femininity as maternal visibility and ceremonial compliance, Elisabeth fashioned an aesthetic persona that eluded such prescriptions. Her visual self-fashioning, rooted in calculated absence, aesthetic extremity, and the mobilisation of beauty, exploited and subverted the very codes it inhabited. Refusing to be reduced to a reproductive cipher within the visual economy of monarchy, she enacted a form of feminine resistance that was at once deeply embedded in and critically distanced from the imperial stage.

Yet in death, Elisabeth transformed into a cultural palimpsest: a figure retroactively inscribed with qualities that reinforced conservative gender ideals and national mythologies. The Habsburg imaginary reconfigured her into an icon of serene maternity and imperial loyalty, an ideological construct at odds with the historical record. Through the twentieth century, the qualities projected onto Elisabeth were repeatedly mapped onto Austria itself, as her image became a symbolic linchpin in the mythologisation of imperial nostalgia. In her reimagined form, Elisabeth no longer resisted the visual regime – she became its posthumous muse.

[139] Jeffrey L. Sammons, "Previewing Sisi: A Congratulatory Album on the Marriage of Emperor Joseph and Elisabeth of Bavaria," *The Yale University Library Gazette* 74, no. 3/4 (2000): 135, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40859233.
[140] Florek, "Elisabeth," 131.

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Figure 1. Winterhalter, Franz Xaver. *Elizabeth, Empress of Austria*. 1865. Oil on canvas, 255 x 133 cm. Hofburg, Vienna. In *Franz Xaver Winterhalter and the Courts of Europe 1830-70*, edited by Richard Ormond and Carol Blackett-Ord. National Portrait Gallery, 1987: 217.

Figure 2. Winterhalter, Franz Xaver. *Elizabeth, Empress of Austria*. 1864. Oil on canvas, 122 x 100 cm. Location unknown. In *Franz Xaver Winterhalter and the Courts of Europe 1830-70*, edited by Richard Ormond and Carol Blackett-Ord. National Portrait Gallery, 1987: 56.

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