

# Architectural history of Schönbrunn Palace

## Early history

The history of Schönbrunn and the previous buildings that stood on this site goes back to the Middle Ages. The whole estate was referred to as the Katterburg from the beginning of the 14th century and belonged to the manor of the monastery at Klosterneuburg. Over the following centuries the names of numerous tenants are documented, including a few prominent figures such as, in 1548, Hermann Bayer, who was mayor of Vienna and who extended the buildings, transforming the property into a manorial estate.

In 1569 the estate came into Habsburg possession through Maximilian II, and according to the title deeds included a house, a watermill and stabling as well as a pleasure garden and an orchard. Maximilian was primarily interested in extending the game park, which was principally intended for the breeding of native game and fowl. However, the pheasantry also contained exotic fowl such as peafowl and turkeys.

Following the sudden death of Maximilian II in 1576 the Katterburg passed to Rudolph II, who did little except sanction the necessary funds for its upkeep. Emperor Matthias used the estate for hunting, and according to a legend is supposed to have come across the Schöne Brunnen (meaning 'fair spring'), which eventually gave the estate its name, while on a hunting excursion in 1612.

His successor, Emperor Ferdinand II, and his wife, Eleonora von Gonzaga, both passionately keen on hunting, chose Schönbrunn as the venue for their hunting parties. After Ferdinand's death in 1637 the estate became the dower residence of his art-loving widow, who needed the appropriate architectural setting for her busy social life. She therefore had a *château de plaisance* built around 1642, which was accompanied by the renaming of the Katterburg as Schönbrunn, a change of name first documented in the same year.

In 1683 the *château de plaisance* and its deer park fell victim to the depredations of Turkish troops during the siege of Vienna. From 1686 the estate was in the possession of Emperor Leopold I, who decided that he would make the estate over to his son



Portrait medallion of Emperor Matthias, anonymous copper engraving after 1611



Imperial Pleasance and Game Park at Schönbrunn, Copper engraving by G.M. Vischer 1672



Emperor Ferdinand II, Oil painting by Caspar Della 1627

and heir, Joseph, and have a splendid new residence built for him. Soon afterwards the Rome-trained architect Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach arrived at court on the recommendation of aristocratic patrons. In 1688 he presented the emperor with a preliminary set of designs for a new palace, the so-called Schönbrunn I Project, with which he sought to display his architectural abilities and gain the emperor's interest. Fischer was promptly engaged as tutor for architecture to the heir to the throne in 1689 and subsequently enjoyed a brilliantly successful career as architect to the court and nobility.



The Schönbrunn I Project,  
Copper engraving by J.B.  
Fischer von Erlach 1721