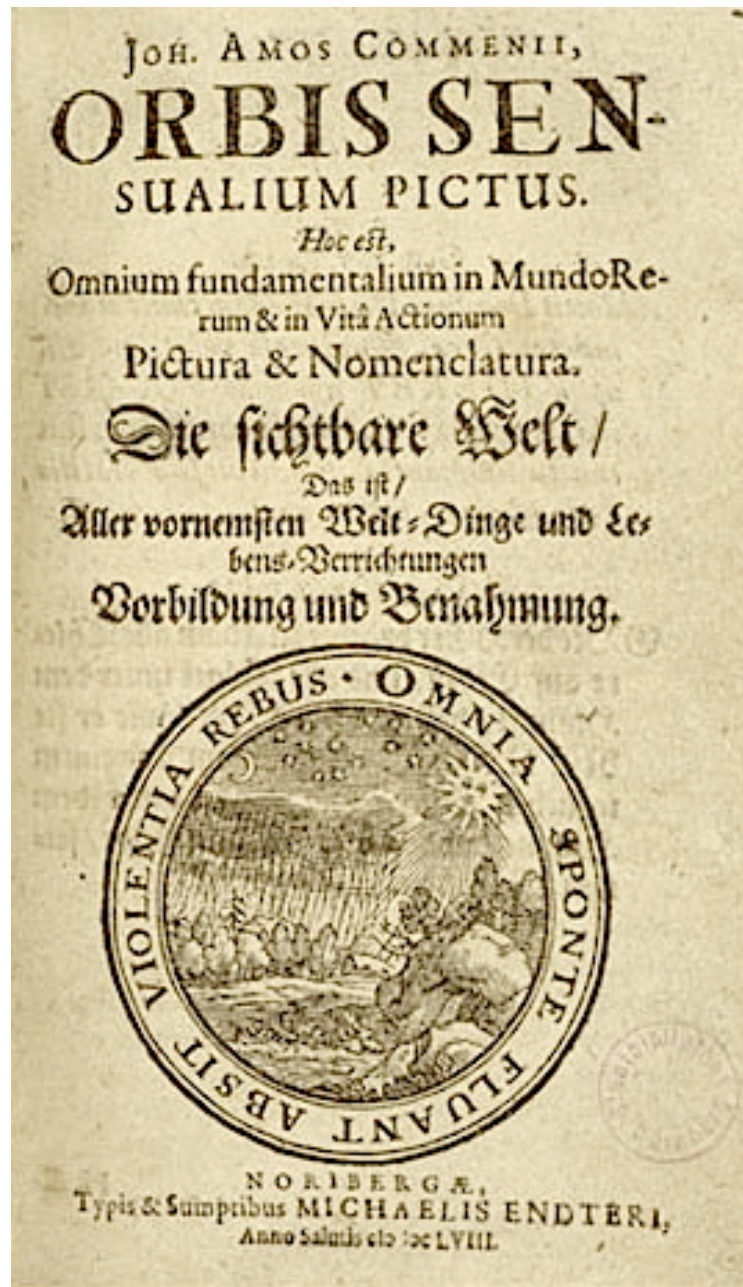


Secret Histories of the Sword:

# The Art of Fencing in the “Visible World” of Johann Amos Comenius

by J. Christoph Amberger



The ***Orbis Sensualium Pictus*** of Johann Amos Comenius was first published in 1653, by the printing house of Michael Endter in Nuremberg. The text of this first original edition was written in Latin, back then the *lingua franca* of science and education. A Latin-German edition followed in 1658.

Illustrated with 150 woodcuts, this early “non-fiction youth book” underwent over 200, printings, new editions and conceptual innovations, which, by the middle of the 19th century, had made it the most popular and most widely read primer or school book in Europe. The original bilingual edition was soon expanded to include English- and French-language explanations.

For the fencing historian, the *Orbis* is of limited interest as a primary, or even secondary source. Due to the “timeless” nature of the book’s conceptualization—and the ongoing use of the original plates by a series of cost-conscious publishers—the short and concise summary of the subjects *Palaestra* (*Fechtschule* or *salle d’armes*, depending on your reading), *Der Fechtmeister* (“The Fencing Master”) was dated, if not completely anachronistic, at the date of publication. The updating of the illustrative woodcuts may provide a feeling for the change and evolution of fencing practice and fencing weaponry. But unfortunately, the mere copying/updating of motifs created distortions in the historical



Image 1

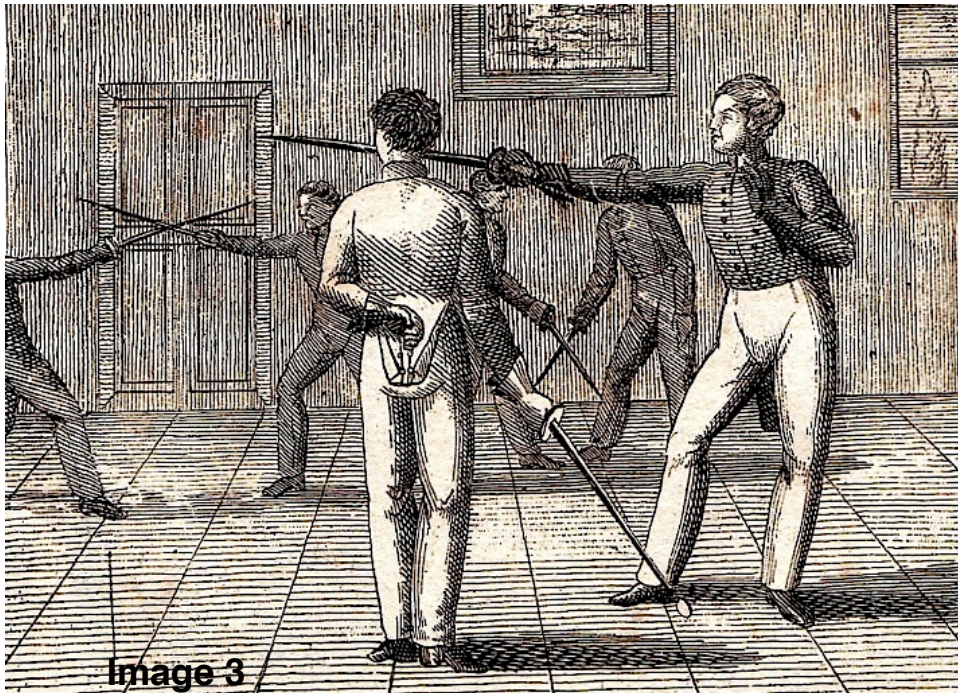


retrospective that may lead over-eager scholars to incorrect assumptions regarding the longevity of certain weapons in Central European usage.

Thus, the updated costumes in a mid-18th-century woodcut (**Image 1**) create the impression that the “Fechtschule” of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance—with its traditional weapons Dussack and Bidenhänder (great sword or two-handed sword), and its integration of wrestling, was practiced far longer than it really was. In reality, the depicted scene is a limited variant of an illustration, which had been used in Sebastian Münster’s *Cosmographia* of 1544 (**Image 2**).



**Image 2**



**Image 3**

In later editions, however, the “updating” especially of the locality and/or the weaponry (while maintaining the original parameters of the illustration) provides some insight into changing fashions and fencing traditions.

**Image 3** is taken



from an edition dating to the early 1800's. Under the subject head "Fechtmeister" we see the master in the process of instructing his students in the use of thrusting weapons—then called "Rappiere" in German. These forerunners of the modern foil are equipped

with shallow bell-guards or even dish-shaped guards ("Tellerrappier") and thus reflect the usage of the weapon in Germany ("nach Kreußler schen Grundsätzen"—according to Kreußler's principles) rather than the far more popular and widespread methodology of the

French School of Fencing, which preferred the foil (flore) with *lunette* guard.

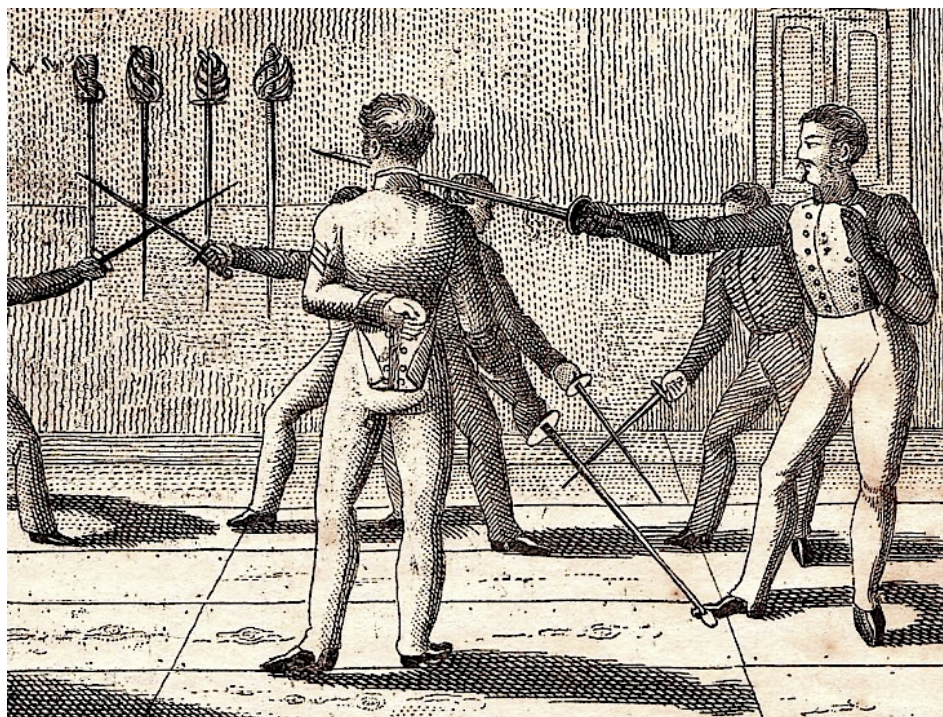


Image 4

**Illustration 4**, published after 1840, reflects the shift in the practice of fencing at the German universities. It supplements the thrust weapons in the hands of the fencers with a rack of basket-hilt broadswords—Hieber or Korb-schläger—which by then had been introduced as the weapon of choice for the students' Mensur. (**Illustration 4a**).

The German text (see the facsimile reproduction in the **Appendix**) clarifies:

"Bei diesen Übungen bedient man sich

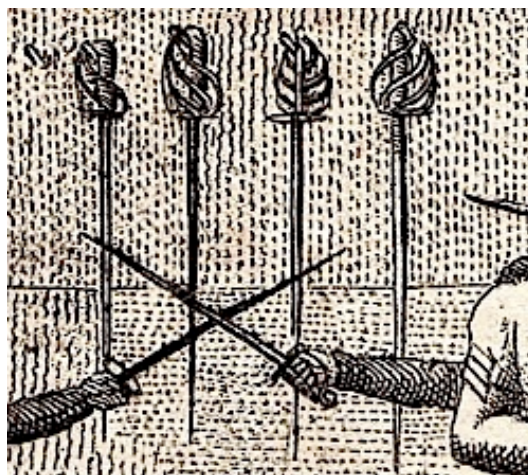


Image 4a



*des Rapiers; wenn die Sache aber ernst wird, bei einem Duell oder Zweikampf, der leider! zur Verhöhnung der besten Gesetze immer noch vorkommt, wird der Raufdegen oder Schläger, oder der Hieber, oder ein Dolch gebraucht."*

The English translation is just a tad shorter and does not differentiate between the two German cutting swords:

*"At this exercise the foil is used, but when in earnest and the affair proceeds to a duel, alas in derision of the best of laws, the sword, or broad sword, or dagger is used."*

(The German term "Raufdegen" corresponds to the straight-bladed French *épée de combat* or dueling sword, predecessors of the modern *épée*. It is alien even to the serious German student or collector of European edged weapons. In fact, except for very few exceptions, it remains limited to the "*studentisch*" (i.e., related to German student fraternities) historical research, which began toward the end of the 19th century.)

Yet again, we're reminded that this source needs to be approached with caution: There is no *code duello* in civilized Europe in which the dagger is considered a proper "weapon of honor". (To the contrary: The dagger is the very symbol of dishonorable "Latin" assassins.)

The ***Orbis pictus*** is important to the serious student of fencing history in that it provides us with an idea about the general state of knowledge about the Art of Fencing among educated non-practitioners, as is reflected in contemporary written accounts of duels or the Art's depiction in fiction.

The most important aspect of this source, however, is that it provides us with a "key" regarding the various terms used for the weapons in different languages:

**Rappier** = foil = fleuret = gladius praepilatus

**Raufdegen** = sword = longue épée = gladius praelongus

**Hieber, Schläger** = broadsword = sabre = ensis latus

**Dolch** = dagger = poignard = pugio



(The Latin terminology appears to be a “retrofit” based on the descriptive requirements of the modern term.)

### **Bibliographie:**

Comenius, Johann Amos      ***Orbis sensualium pictus (...): Die sichtbare Welt***, Nürnberg: Michael Endter, 1653 et al.

### **Illustrations:**

Amberger Collection, Baltimore (USA)

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# Appendix

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## Der F e c h t m e i s t e r .

*The fencing master.*

*Le maître d'armes.*

Among the exercises serving to encrease the perfect growth of the body, the art of fencing holds a pre-eminent situation; for it makes a person not only nimbler but also healthier.

This art is taught in the fencing school by the master, and the principal thing is to use the sword to advantage either to inflict a thrust on the adversary, or to defend one's self dexterously against his thrusts.

The Fencing master must first of all accustom his scholars to a good position, previously to their proceeding to the thrust or stroke.

At this exercise the foil is used, but when in earnest and the affair proceeds to a duel, alas! in derision of the best of laws, the sword

<sup>1</sup>Unter den Uebungen, wodurch man den Körper vollkommener zu machen sucht, verdient die Fechtkunst eine vorzügliche Stelle; denn sie macht ihn sowohl gesünder, als auch gesünder.

<sup>2</sup>Diese Kunst lernt man auf der Fechtschule oder dem Fechtboden bei dem Fechtmeister, und die Hauptsache besteht darin, daß man sich des Degens oder Schwertes mit Vortheil bedienen lernt, um entweder seinem Gegner einen Streich beizubringen, oder sich gegen denselben bei seinen Anfallen geschickt zu vertheidigen.

<sup>3</sup>Der Fechtmeister muß daher seine Scholaren vor allen Dingen an eine gute Stellung gewöhnen, ehe sie sich entweder auf den Stoß, oder den Hieb einlassen.

<sup>4</sup>Bei diesen Uebungen bedient man sich des Rappiers; wenn die Sache aber ernst wird, bei einem Duell oder Zweikampf, der, leider! zur Verhöhnung der besten Geseke immer noch vorkommt,

Parmi les exercices qui perfectionnent le corps, l'escrie tient un des premiers rangs, parcequ'il contribue tout à la fois à son agilité, et à sa santé.

Cet art s'enseigne par un maître d'armes dans une salle d'armes. Il consiste principalement à faire connaître le maniement de l'épée ou du sabre, à porter des coups à son adversaire, et à éviter les siens.

Avant de leur apprendre à tirer, le maître d'armes accoutume d'abord ses élèves à prendre une belle position.

Dans ces exercices on se sert du fleuret, mais s'il y va du sérieux, si c'est un duel, comme, hélas! à la honte des loix les plus sages, cela n'arrive que trop souvent, alors on prend une longue



or broad sword, or dagger is used.

The most important is to place oneself in a position which shall hinder the adversary from thrusting at the body; feints must therefore be distinguished from real thrusts or strokes, and the one as well as the other must be parried with effect.

The gladiators of the ancient Romans are well known.

wird der Raufbegen oder Schläger, oder der Hieber, oder ein Dolch gebraucht.

<sup>5</sup> Das Wichtigste ist, sich in eine Stellung zu setzen, die den Gegner hindert, uns auf den Leib zu kommen; man muß aber dabei die Finten von den rechten Streichen und Stößen unterscheiden, und die einen, wie die andern, gut pariren.

<sup>6</sup> Befahnt sind die Gladiatoren der alten Römer.

épée, un sabre, ou un poignard.

La position du corps doit être telle qu'elle empêche l'adversaire de presser son rival. Il faut surtout bien distinguer les feintes et les coups droits, et bien parer les uns et les autres.

Les gladiateurs des anciens Romains sont assez connus.

### *Digladiandi magister.*

<sup>1</sup> Exercitiorum, quorum beneficio perfectius reddere allaboramus corpus, primum iere locum obtinet armorum usus, non agilitatem ejus modo, sed sanitatem quoque promovens.

<sup>2</sup> Addiscimus artem hanc in palaestra a digladiandi magistro, summæque ejus huc redit, ut ad artis praescripta prudenter utamur ense vel gladio, ad ictum adversariis inferendum, vel ad tuendum nos, arte adjutos, ab eorundem impetu.

<sup>3</sup> Armorum tractandorum artifex ergo tirones gladiatorios adsuefaciat ante omnia decōro corporis statui, antequam certamen, quod vel punctim, vel caesim fit, ineant.

<sup>4</sup> Utuntur in hoc exercitiorum genere gladio praepilato; in re seria vero, cum certamen singulare suscipitur, quod, proh dolor! in ludibrium aequissimarum legum et etiam nunc fieri videmus, gladius adhibetur praelongus, vel ensis latus, vel sica seu pugio.

<sup>5</sup> Juvabit, corpus ita componere, ut adversarium, quo minus nos aggrediatur, impediamus; sed necesse est, falsos ictus ac percussiones a veris distinguamus, eosque ad unum omnes arte declinatos avertamus.

<sup>6</sup> Satis noti sunt gladiatores priscorum Romanorum.