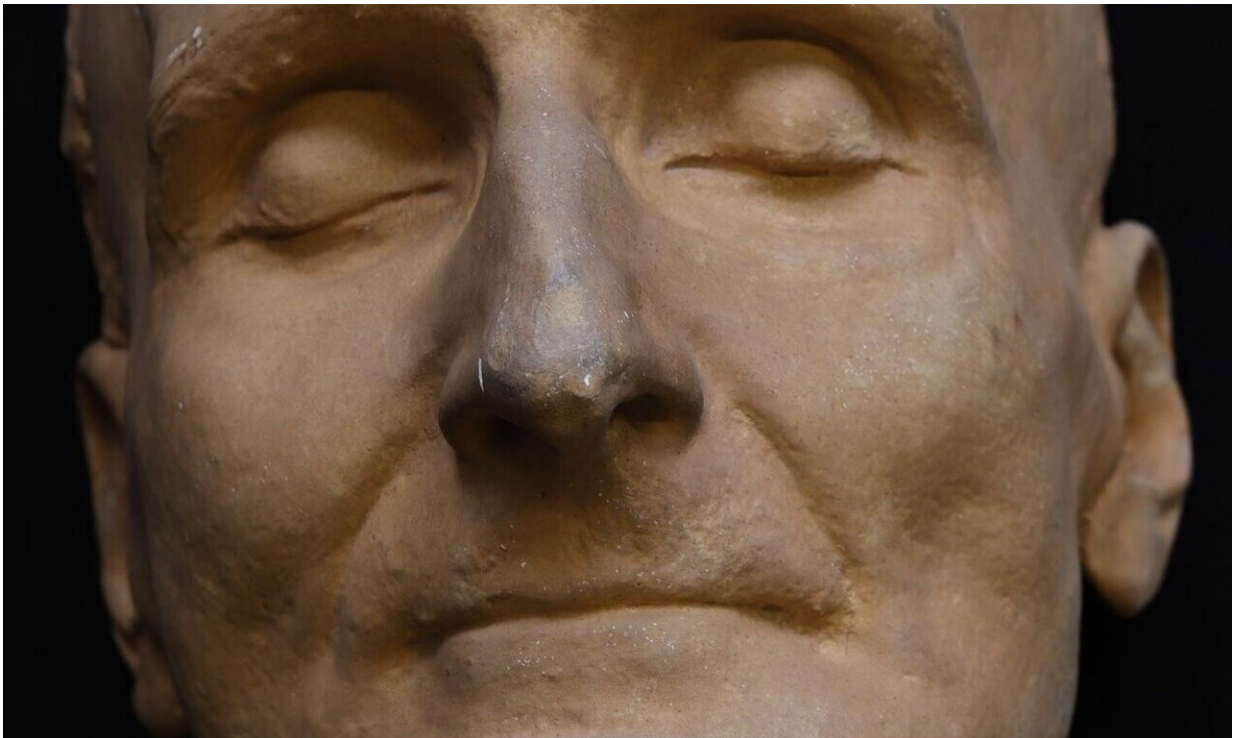


The journey of a death mask of German playwright Frank Wedekind

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Death mask of Frank Wedekind: Over 100 years after the writer's death, Wedekind expert Professor Ariane Martin received this cast of the mask from New Zealand. Credit: © Editions- und Forschungsstelle Frank Wedekind

A death mask of the German writer Frank Wedekind has unexpectedly reappeared after decades abroad. It was recently returned to Germany by the previous owner in New Zealand over 100 years since Wedekind's

death. "The mask not only had a long journey to New Zealand and back, but it also tells an extraordinary history of exile," said Professor Ariane Martin, head of the Editions- und Forschungsstelle Frank Wedekind (EFFW) at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU), the leading center of research on the author. "This hugely interesting cultural object, which until now we knew next to nothing about, has an almost unbelievable backstory." Frank Wedekind, one of the most important modern German playwrights, is perhaps best known internationally for his tragedy "Spring Awakening" ("Frühlings Erwachen"). He died in 1918 at the age of 53 from complications following an appendectomy. Immediately after his death, a number of death masks were prepared using plaster, of which only a few are still known to exist. It is worth noting that the cast from New Zealand is particularly well preserved.

Uncovering the mask's journey in the luggage of Jewish emigrants

After periods in Switzerland, Paris, London, and Berlin, Frank Wedekind finally settled in Munich, where he died on March 9, 1918, and was buried in a well-attended ceremony on March 12 at Munich's Waldfriedhof. The [death](#) mask was made immediately after his death and friends of the deceased had the opportunity to request a cast. However, according to Wedekind expert Professor Ariane Martin, it is difficult to estimate how many copies were made or still exist today. One copy of the death mask was originally kept in the writer's former study in Munich, where visitors were able to view it. The writer Karl Kraus and Wedekind's friend and biographer Artur Kutscher were also likely to have each owned a plaster cast respectively. Today, one copy is located in the Munich City Library and another in the German Literature Archive in Marbach; another copy was previously held by the National Gallery in Berlin.

Now a further copy has emerged, which—in the light of its history—is of great cultural significance: In September 2020, Peter Oettli, Emeritus Professor of German at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand, contacted the EFW by email to say that he would be offering them a version of the death mask. Several years ago, he himself had been given this copy of the death mask while acting as head of the university's German department. Over the following weeks, Professor Ariane Martin began researching in detail what had happened to this mask after Wedekind's death. "The search for clues was extremely exciting. I am very grateful to Peter Oettli, who has entrusted the mask to us and helped me to research its history," emphasized Martin.

Wedekind's death mask as an important object in the culture of remembrance

According to Professor Ariane Martin's research, it is unclear exactly when one of Frank Wedekind's sisters gave the death mask to a friend, but it was probably before the National Socialists came to power in January 1933. This friend fled Nazi Germany with his wife at the end of 1936. "The mask was apparently so valuable to this Jewish emigrant by the name of Kurt Philips that he took it with him when he fled Cologne, going via London into exile in New Zealand," added Martin. When he died, the mask was inherited by his sister, Margot Philips, who also lived in New Zealand. At the age of 80, she gave it to Peter Oettli in order to preserve it for posterity. A similar impulse has now led Oettli, who was born in Switzerland and is himself 80 years old, to part with the mask. "Wedekind, or at least his death mask, has kept me company in my study for quite a few decades now. I think it's time now for him to find a new home where he is known and appreciated," wrote Oettli in his email back in September 2020.

"This copy of Wedekind's death mask is a very important object in

terms of the culture of remembrance," Martin pointed out. This mask symbolizes not only a long-forgotten fate in exile, but also the European Modernism embodied by Wedekind. Now the death mask has returned over 100 years after Wedekind's death and more than 80 years after its former owner fled from Germany. After 13 days traveling by air mail, the mask arrived safely in Germany and in remarkable condition.

Provided by Universitaet Mainz

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