

## Joseph Kyselak (1798–1831), the First Tagger and Local Patron of the Wiener Donaukanal Graffiti

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### Abstract

Joseph Kyselak (1798–1831) achieved fame during his lifetime on account of a strange habit: he left his name in huge black letters in many, perhaps hundreds of places. Since 2006, art historian Gabriele Goffriller and director Chico Klein have been collecting facts and figures on Joseph Kyselak. When we began, there were countless articles and stories about him, even novels and a play, but very few facts. After 16 years of research—what do we know about his aims? Is there a concept? Can Kyselak be seen as the first graffiti tagger in the world? In this paper, we want to give a short overview on the exquisite and endangered heritage of the local patron of graffiti.

### Keywords

Austria; Biedermeier; Habsburg monarchy; literature; Wanderlust

### 1. Kyselak's Journey and Book

In the summer of 1825, on the 12th of August, a young assistant officer named Joseph Kyselak left his hometown Vienna.

Accompanied by his white dog, he started his journey on foot. This journey led him to the most beautiful spots of the territories of today's Austria, Slovenia, Italy and Bavaria. For nearly four months, he hiked the Alps, visiting historic sites and places, and climbing various ruins. Kyselak collected enough impressions of nature, landscapes and people to write a book about his adventures.

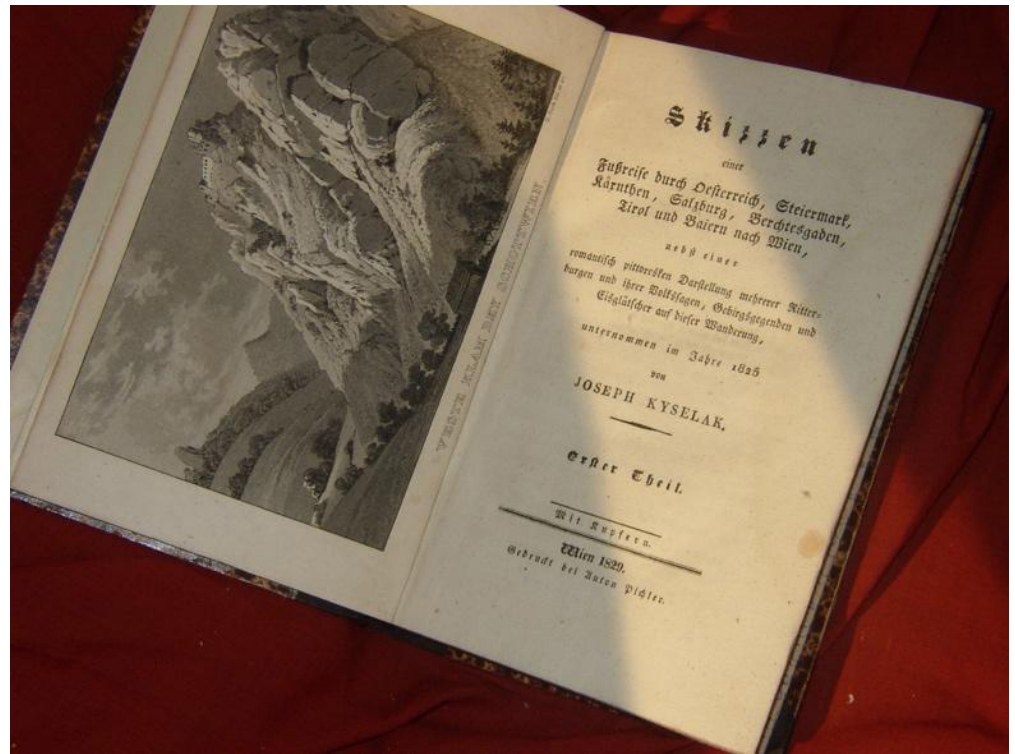
He completed the first part of his journey by stagecoach; then he hiked from Styria to Carinthia and Slovenia, north to Salzburg, south again and then high up in the Tyrolean mountains. The way back home was mainly a journey on the rivers. Kyselak's writings on nature and landscapes, of people and countless visits to historic sites were published four years later, in 1829.

We know little about what happened to his book "Skizzen einer Fußreise..." - "Sketches from a journey by foot...", we don't know how many books were sold. Only two years after its publication (Kyselak, 1829a, 1829b), in 1831, Kyselak died at only 32 years of age. The Cholera pandemic that spread throughout Europe claimed Kyselak as one of its victims. Although this book is important as part of the development of the Austrian Romantic Epoch's travel literature, Kyselak didn't gain notoriety for it, not even for his ambitious destinations in the mountains.

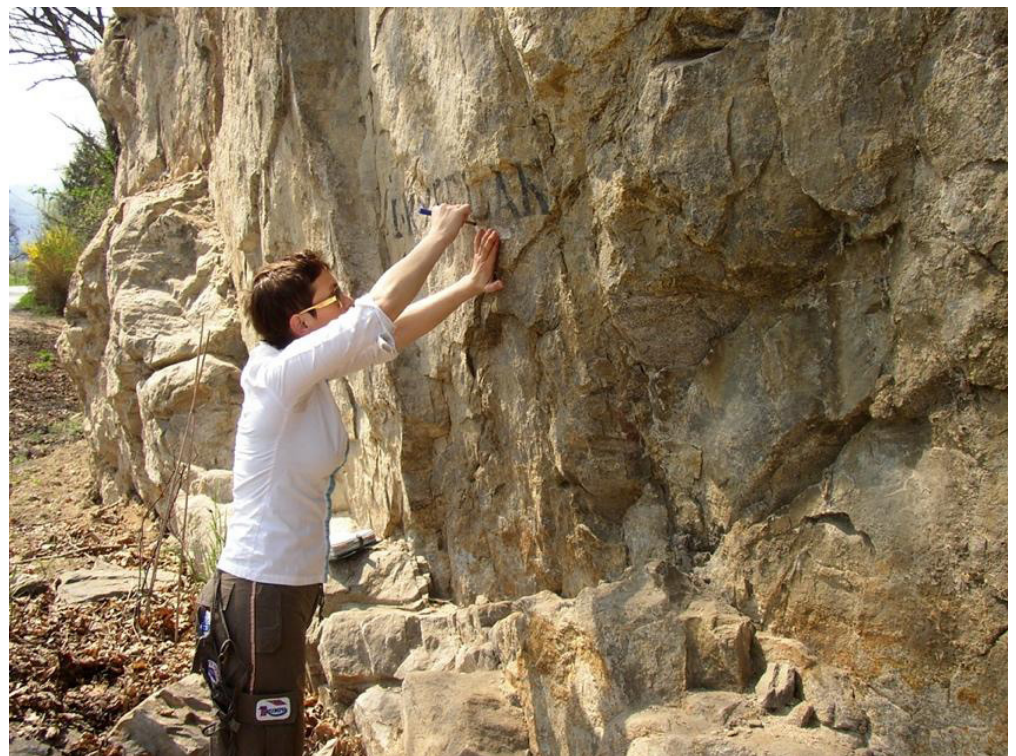
But he became famous for one strange habit—for inscribing his name wherever he could. According to contemporary witnesses, there were hundreds and hundreds of his 'tags'—and some of them still exist.

### 2. Since 2006: The Kyselak-Project

In a research project on Kyselak, which began sixteen years ago with director Chico Klein, we archived Kyselak's inscriptions that have been preserved over the last two centuries. We had to separate the stories and the notoriety,



**Figure 1.** Frontispiece of Kyselak's only book 'Skizzen einer Fußreise durch Österreich...' from 1829



**Figure 2.** Documenting one of Kyselak's signatures in Lower Austria, Foto ©kyselakprojekt

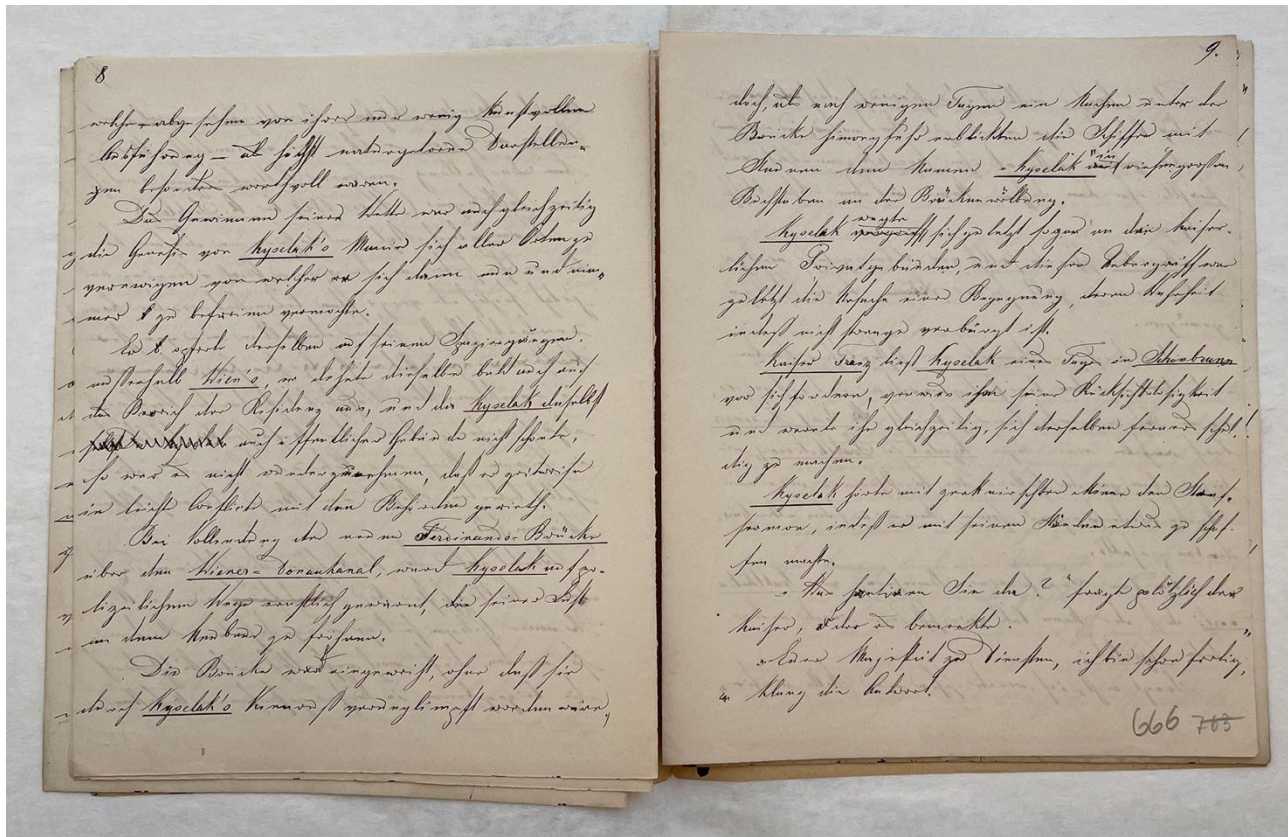


Figure 3. Anonymous manuscript on Kyselak - at the Donaukanal, Vienna, Haus, Hof- und Staatsarchiv. ©kyselakprojekt

which followed Kyselak's name through his lifetime, from facts and common sense. We've edited Kyselak's book and made a TV documentary about him.

We've found about twenty still existing inscriptions and nearly about as many visual citations from artists of his time. And, of course, we have noted hundreds of articles in journals and books — the findings in historic newspapers and books are increasing, thanks to digitisation and the internet.

Kyselak was an urban myth during his lifetime, and he constantly fascinated a broad public. Related to their interest in his ...let's call it "Œuvre", almost everybody who was

writing about him tried to find out what he intended with his 'tagging'. While tagging wasn't known by then, today it is defined as: "A writer's signature with a marker or spray paint, considered the most basic form of graffiti. Testimonial of the presence of a writer in a determined spot, usually executed quickly with connected letters. A tag is a writer's personal logo" (Caputo, 2010).

One of the countless stories that have been told about Kyselak, a particularly imaginative one, is about a new bridge built at the Danube Canal in 1819. Kyselak, already very well-known at the time, would have been warned by the police that he was not allowed to pursue his passion. The bridge was inaugurated without disturbance, but only a few



**Figure 4.** Eduard Gurk, Ruine Gutenstein, Wien Museum

days later, boatmen observed the famous signature at the bottom of the bridge arch.<sup>1</sup>

1 - Bei Vollendung der neuen Ferdinands-Brücke über den Wiener Donaukanal wurde Kyselak auf polizeilichem Wege ernstlich gewarnt, seiner Lust an dem Neubaue zu fröhnen. Die Brücke ward eingeweiht, ohne dass sie durch Kyselak's Nimbuß verunglimpft worden wäre, doch, als nach wenigen Tagen ein Nachen unter der Brücke hinwegfuhr, erblickten die Schiffer mit Staunen den Namen „Kyselak“ in riesengroßen Buchstaben an der Brückenwölbung“; When a new bridge over the Donaukanal was finished, Kyselak would have been warned by the police not to indulge in his hobby. The opening ceremony took place without

Compared to modern graffiti, our knowledge of Kyselak is quite contradictory. Unlike most modern writers and taggers, that see themselves as artists and prefer to work anonymously or use an alias, we have no idea why Kyselak wrote and presented his name. We don't understand his message; his intention remains enigmatic.

But after some months of research, what we did have was

any sign from Kyselak, but a few days later, boatmen discovered his huge signature under the bridge.” S.n. (s.d.), The bridge was inaugurated in the presence of the imperial highnesses on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1819.

quite valuable information about who Kyselak was. There is a little portrait of him, picturing him signing a wall on the ruins of Castle Gutenstein. His friend, the painter and graphic artist Eduard Gurk captured his figure, so to say ‘*in flagranti*’. Kyselak, apart from what he is actually doing, is of immaculate appearance, wearing a silk top hat, elegant grey trousers and a blue frock coat. He was a young assistant finance officer from a well-documented officer’s family and worked as a true servant for his majesty Emperor Franz II/I (Goffriller, 2009; Lorenz, 2015).<sup>2</sup> When he was writing on walls, stones or bridges, Kyselak didn’t use a pseudonym, a *nome de guerre*, or an alias. ‘Kyselak’ was his real name.

### 3. Tags in Kyselak’s Time

When asking whether we should consider Kyselak the first tagger, I want to point out what I discovered about the habit of tagging in Kyselak’s time. We know that graffiti is significantly older than Kyselak, and we can be pretty sure that graffiti tagging appeared at the same time as human beings began to write. Names have been presented on walls simultaneously with our literacy, and our scriptuality.<sup>3</sup>

Famous examples of early taggers are travellers like Lord Byron and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Even Leopold Mozart, presenting his famous children to a German audience in the summer of 1763, didn’t hesitate to show his pleasant anticipation by scratching a short notice into one of the windows of his accommodation in Frankfurt.<sup>4</sup>

Not only travellers left their marks in the wild. An Italian research project has documented thousands of painted inscriptions in red ochre made by shepherds and goatherds

on the mountain cliffs, especially in the Valley of Fiemme (Trentino province). The writings, dating from 1650 until about 1950, use alphabetic signs and numbers and are significant evidence of the shepherds’ acquired ability to read and write (Bazzanella & Kezich, 2020).

### 4. Tags and Literature

Kyselak himself notes, when visiting a famous cave, that the walls of the cave are covered with names...in 1825! This cave became famous two centuries before Kyselak’s visit, when Emperor Maximilian I ended up being stuck in this cave while hunting. climbed to the cave and ended up being stuck there. Maximilian, thought to be doomed to die, was finally saved chivalrously. The dangerous sheer slope here is one of two illustrations of Kyselak’s book, a lithography that shows the bold rock face with the cave slightly left of the centre.<sup>5</sup> What did Kyselak find there?

“I measured the cave, maybe 25 steps in width, on both sides covered with hundreds of names from visitors, who had enjoyed themselves there. Even my friends’ names from my hometown were to be found. I welcomed them as if these loved ones were standing right before me. You’ Friendship Book’ given by nature, whom grateful empathy would love to donate much more, keep safe your contributors! No false obligingness, friendly hypocrisy and flattering symbols, where often the unknown donor calculates nothing but his payment, and the presentee only sees the pleasant form and shallow fashion of the giver’s mind. But here, at this visit, hearts brim over with love! Everybody gave his tribute, as nature and culture taught him, putting aside any bragging against successive generations.”

In the mountains, it is fashionable, even more so today, to leave a token as proof of presence. Perhaps just for safety reasons, or maybe to mark the happy arrival to a summit, maybe out of exuberant ‘Wanderlust’. But looking at tags

2 - Kyselak began to work as an assistant at the Kaiserlicher Hof, from 1818 until 1823, then was transferred to another department.

3 - Reisner (1971), especially on the ‘I-was-here-syndrome’; Kraack (1997), especially for Austria: Observations on conquering the landscape by signing were done by Kos (1992). A broad view on the history of tagging is presented in Birzin et al. (2022).

4 - CC-BY-SA: Historisches Museum Frankfurt, Foto: Uwe Dettmar; Retrieved June 20, 2022, from OS - Object - 144527 | Historisches Museum Frankfurt (historisches-museum-frankfurt.de).

5 - Kaiser-Max-Grotte bei Zirl, Tirol. Kyselak notes that students, mostly from Munich, frequently travelled to Innsbruck for climbing, see Goffriller (2014), Kyselak (1829b, p. 128), Goffriller (2009, p. 328).

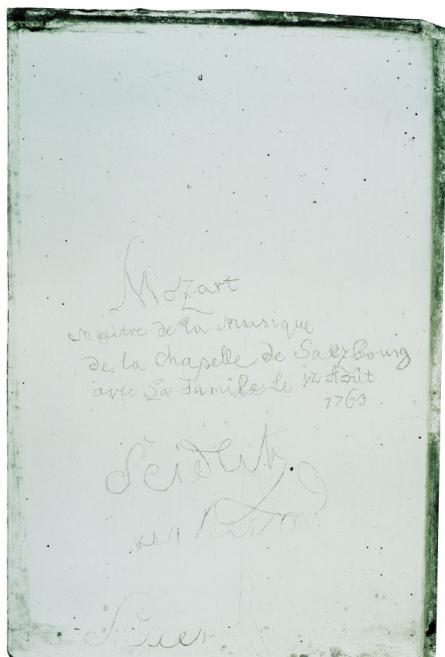


Figure 5. „Mozartfenster“: Windowglass from Frankfurt, Bendorgasse 3, Historisches Museum Frankfurt

Figure 6. Shepherds' writing in the Val di Fiemme.

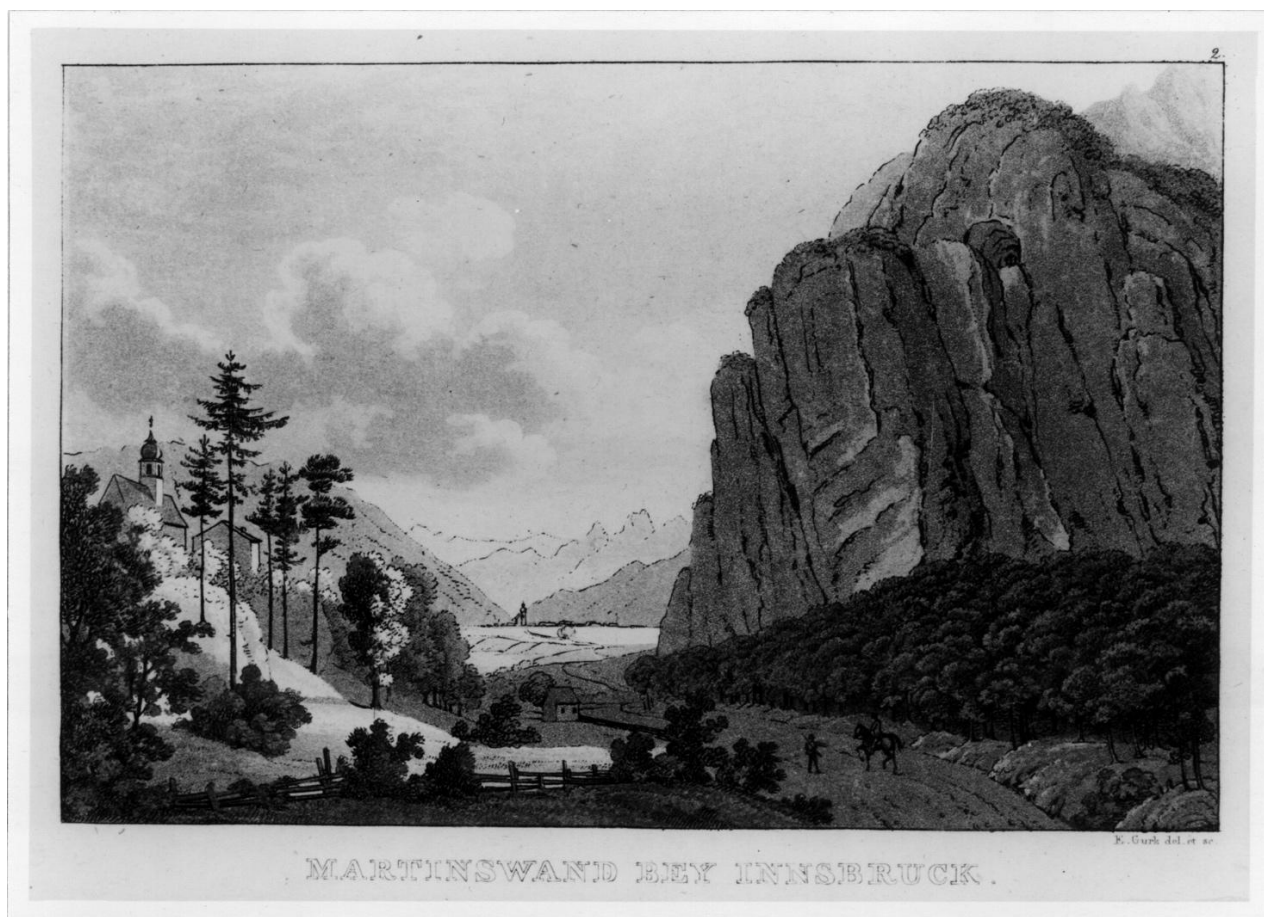


Figure 7. Eduard Gurk, Die Martinswand bei Zirl. Illustration in (Kyselak, 1829b).



**Figure 8.** Kaiser-Max-Grotte in the Martinswand, 2008

from days gone by, we would get an incomplete picture if we neglected the literature that came with the names. More than once, Kyselak found names and poems while hiking in the mountains. In Tyrol, up on an alpine pasture, he visited a waterfall.

Deeply impressed by the cascade's power, he finds a poem written on a stone with a red pencil: "Well done, you raging cascade, hiding yourself in this neglected abyss." This poem was brand new, as it was signed "A. Strenhelm, 1825"—the same year that Kyselak was travelling. He himself writes: "Next to this, I wrote with black oil paint: 'Whose bosom is beating with joy, whose heart is moved by gratefulness: He will win even wilder fights and will always be happy to see the beauty of God's creation.'"

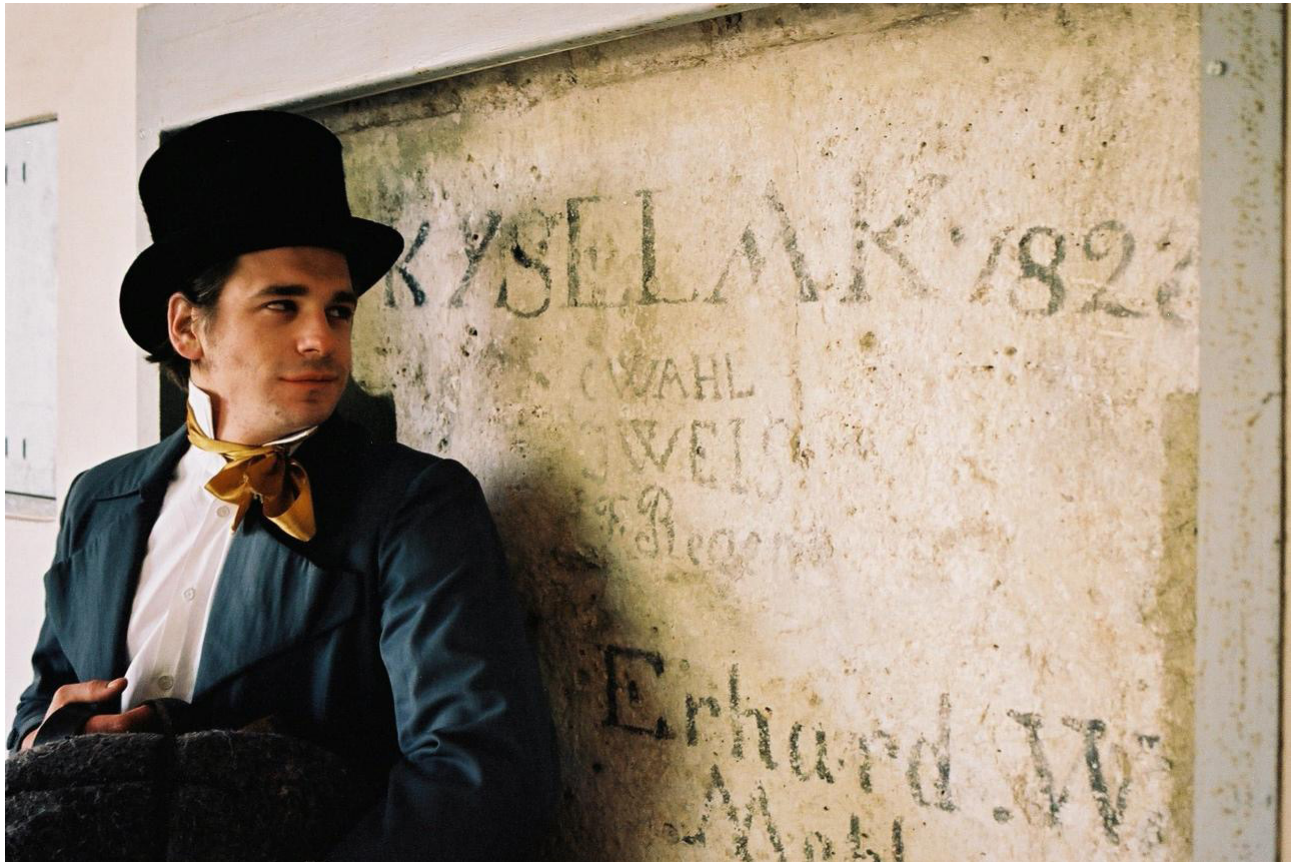
This is, in my view, the most interesting part of the book: Kyselak discovers a poem written on a stone at an altitude of 1800 metres above sea level, and he isn't surprised at all—and at the same moment, he grabs his painting utensils,

and comes up with a poem himself. Only some days later, he refers to another poem he wrote down, sitting high above the city of Innsbruck.

*"Mag das Schicksal gleiten wie es will  
Ich erfuhr der Seligkeiten Ziel.  
Raubt mich auch der nächste Augenblick,  
Diese Stunde schuf mein Lebensglück."*

I want to find out if this kind of 'open-air literature' was an established custom in Kyselak's time. What did it mean to place down poems and one's name in the great outdoors, and which class of society was playing this game? In my opinion, the addition of poetry indicates that this is to be seen as a form of greeting from one educated man to another, as an upper-class sport, or maybe as an artistic fashion.

Many writers asked for the motif of Kyselak's famous tags.



**Figure 9.** Nikolaus Barton as Kyselak—filmstill from “Kyselak war da! Graffiti anno 1825” (Klein & Goffriller, 2008)

Many argued that Kyselak was a maniac, that it was pure narcissism or even that he might have been suffering from unrequited love. Or that he simply wanted to advertise his book. But all this seems to be pure guesswork. The locations of his many original signatures speak against these theories.

Many signatures are high up in hidden valleys, in the mountains, in caves and so on. We were full of hope to find the answer in his book, which was nearly forgotten and hard to get. The “Sketches on a journey by foot...” might suggest that Kyselak wrote and gave information on his tagging. But he wouldn’t say a word about his vision or his concept. Only once, when visiting Styria and climbing the dangerous

ascent of the Kapfenberg ruins, he refers to leaving signs. But this doesn’t yield any concrete statement about his reasons—he simply does it: “Ich bezeichnete diese merkwürdige Wand, an der ich mich nun fest anklebte, groß mit schwarzer Jahreszahl” - “I inscribed this strange wall, to which I now firmly stuck to, large with a black date”. After 16 years of research, I must confess that this is still an enigma. The historical and philological analyses don’t give an answer.

### 5. The Tag Itself Is Key

But I have always been fascinated by the approach of art historians and their consistent belief that the key to all an-

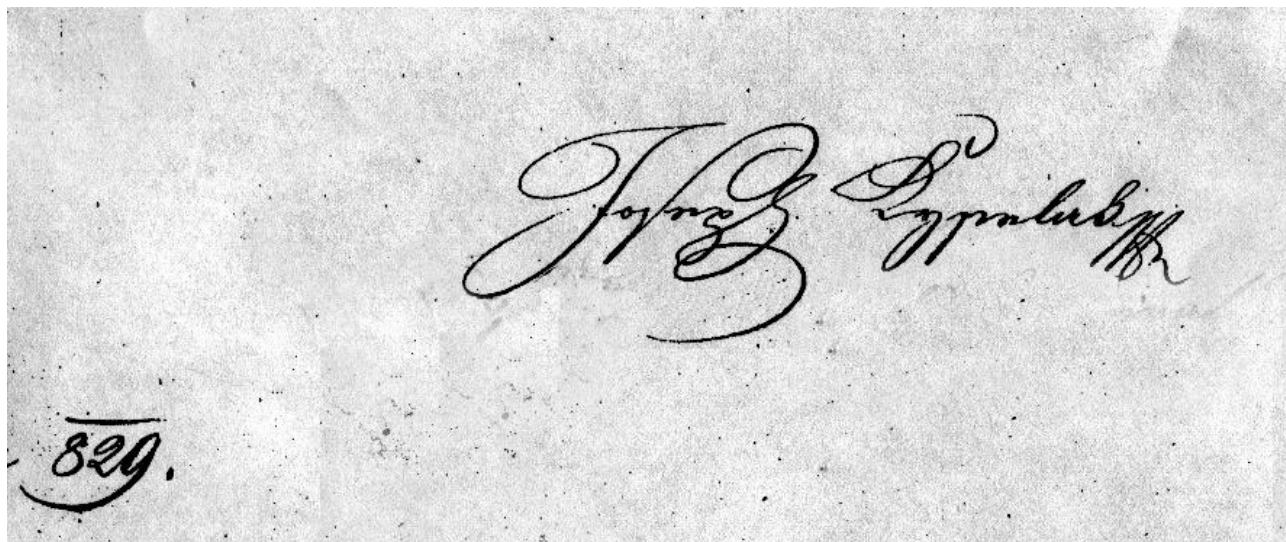


Figure 10. Kyselak presents his book to Erzherzog Carl, ÖNB Austrian National Library, 1829

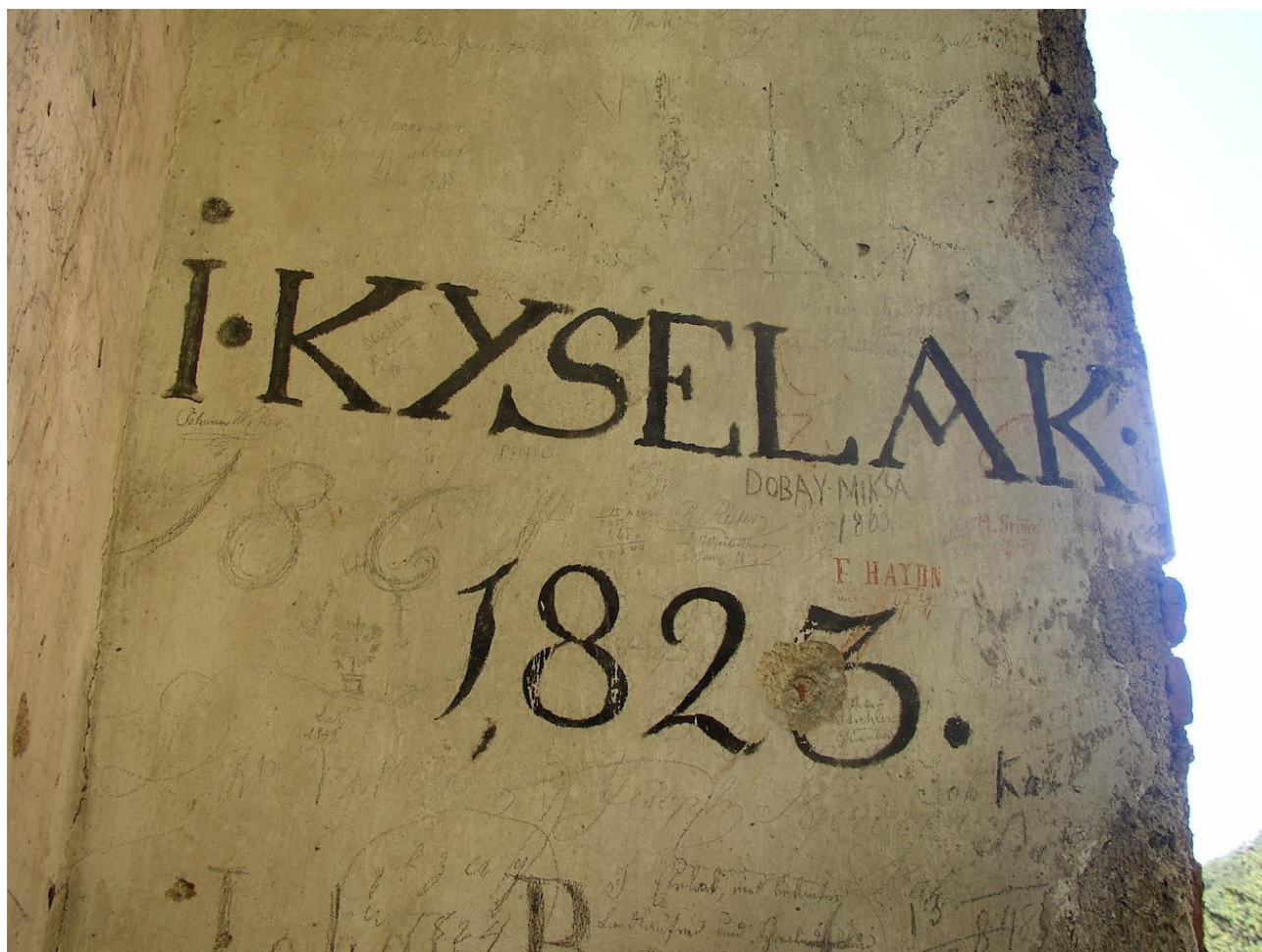


Figure 11. I-KYSELAK, 1823 Lower Austria

swers is hidden in the work itself. Let's try this.

Let's raise the question if Kyselak considered himself an artist. A close view of his work gives a hint of a higher motif. It's hidden in the form of his name itself. The comparison with his written signature, here on a letter in which he presented his book to Erzherzog Carl, makes clear that his tags took quite a different form.

The tag "I KYSELAK" was always written in large and memorable characters. His name appears in Latin Capitals with serifs and varying stroke widths. The name begins with an I—for Joseph—that has, despite being given as a capital letter, a dot above it as if it was a lowercase. Another dot follows and separates name and surname. This is followed by an upright K, which is facing a strange Y, that is drawn from the upper right to the lower left. The S answers this slope and is tilted slightly to the right, followed by the almost monolithic E, L and A. The second K shows the same shape as the first one; the angular parts of the Ks meet at one point in the middle of each letter.

This is the shape of the tag that Kyselak used for almost a decade. He scratched or painted the letters, measuring up to 11.5 cm in height, and he did this freehand. We couldn't find any evidence that he had used a stencil. We realised that his duality, as a graffiti writer and an author, as a literary man as well as an illustrator designing his logo, could be the key to his intentions. Why he was spreading himself about that much, writing his name on any possible occasion, we just do not know. And I wonder if anybody has done this before him?

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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