Kathy of Heilbronn
The History of Heilbronn’s Symbolic Figure.

It is thanks to the five-act drama “Kathy of Heilbronn or the Ordeal by Fire”, written by poet Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) in 1807-08 and first staged in Vienna in 1810, that the City of Heilbronn became known all over the world. The superb historic knight play combines a wealth of fairytale-like and romantic elements with a fairly colourful and impassioned plot. The play's fifteen-year old main character, Kathy, is one of Heinrich von Kleist's most endearing dramatic characters, who has been both a symbolical and real personification of female beauty, virtue and unconditional devotion for a long time.

“The question as to why Heinrich von Kleist chose the city of Heilbronn of all places to set his play in has not been convincingly answered to this very day. An acquaintance of Kleist’s, wrote in 1819 that Kleist had found “the entire story of Kathy as a folk legend” and had kept “the printed pamphlet”, “which he had bought at a funfair”. However, said pamphlet has not been found so far. It is widely believed in Heilbronn that Kleist found the material for his play in the medical records of a Heilbronn girl. There is no single historical character that the central figure of the play might be modelled on.”

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“Be it to accompany you on a guided tour through Heilbronn or to represent the city at your event – we will be happy to be there!”

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Madeleine
Emilia
Daphne

Kathy Contest and Festival
As early as in 1843, printed guidebooks referred to a medieval-style building bordering the market square as “Käthchenhaus” (Kathy’s House). It is said that Kathy jumped to her death through its bay window. ‘Real’ girls, acting as Kathy and dressed up in historic costumes, have represented the city since at least 1872. During the 1920s and 1950s, “Kathy Festivals” were held on the Deutschhof grounds, Heilbronn’s former monastery. From 1950 onwards, Kathy has been re-established as a symbolic figure for the city. Since 1970, a new Kathy girl and her two stand-ins have been elected every two years.

Since 23rd October 2020, Madeleine Sackmann, Emilia Felder and Daphne Schietinger, have been the new Kathys of Heilbronn. They have been representing the city as its symbolic figure in an authentic and likeable manner at official events at home and abroad.

Sembdner Kleist Archive
The Sembdner Kleist Archive, run by the City of Heilbronn since 1991, is based on the collection of Kleist researcher and editor Professor Dr Helmut Sembdner (1914-1997) and constitutes an important port of call for people interested in German playwright Heinrich von Kleist.

A principal field of work is the figure of Käthchen, also known as Catherine of Heilbronn, covering various facets, from historical theatre productions to the popular local history of reception, influence and impact. The Sembdner Kleist Archive organizes both academic conferences and events for the general public on Kleist, his times and his reception.

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