Picturing Gauss

Judith Saunders

In this portrait, etched on an old ten-Mark bill, you wear a velvet cap and sport white sideburns, your earnest gaze directed far beyond the world of getting and spending. Symbols of your legacy adorn the worthless paper, lending it antique dignity: a normal curve, a sextant, the university buildings at Göttingen, where you calculated the orbit of Ceres, invented the telegraph.

The currency that paid you homage is obsolete. Your picture no longer makes commercial rounds, traveling hand to hand or nestling securely in German wallets. Serenely indifferent to your displacement, you do not mourn the Deutsche Mark, that blip on the screen of numismatic history.

*Let each new state
of human affairs, however great or glorious,
be represented on the graph of time as one
small point, insignificant in itself. Now
plot those points, which assume meaning
in the aggregate-emphatic patterns.
Disregarding individual example
(the claims of an Ozymandias) calculate
the distribution of many instances.
Let welter yield to elegant design,
a bell-shaped principle that replicates itself
reliably, outlasts all application, squeezes
sense from recalcitrant data. Stand
by this, the currency of the mind, which remains
negotiable and never ceases to circulate.*

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