

WILHELM LEIBL

THE ART OF SEEING

Exhibition Facts

Press conference	30 January 2020 10 am
Opening	30 January 2020 18.30 pm
Duration	31 January – 26 July 2020
Venue	Colonnade Hall
Curator	Dr. Marianne von Manstein Bernhard von Waldkirch
Works	ca. 60
Catalogue	Available for EUR 39.90 (German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via www.albertina.at

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Opening Hours
Daily 10 am – 6 pm
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Annual Partner



Partner



Wilhelm Leibl

The Art of Seeing!

31 January – 26 July 2020

Encouraged by Courbet, influenced by Manet, and esteemed by Van Gogh, Wilhelm Leibl (1844–1900) was among the most important representatives of realism in Europe. His work as an artist centered on human beings in their everyday realities. And with his retreat from the city to the rural world, Leibl founded a style of modern figural painting in which the truth of nature took priority over the idyllic and narrative tendencies of traditional genre painting. Wilhelm Leibl's guiding principle was not that his models be beautiful, but that they be "well perceived." Leibl painted primarily portraits and indoor scenes featuring rural figures, with his emphasis consistently on the "how" of painterly execution.

The Cologne native studied in Munich, where he quickly made a name for himself with his talent. And it was while still a student, at Munich's *1st International Exhibition of Fine Arts* in 1869, that the 25-year-old artist achieved his breakthrough. He was discovered there by no less a figure than Gustave Courbet and invited to Paris, where he won his first gold medal at the subsequent year's Salon. In 1873, this passionate painter and hunter withdrew to the country. And from then on, his works would center primarily on the rural populace of Bavaria—which earned him the frequently misunderstood moniker of "peasant painter."

At the Paris World's Fair of 1878, the Second Empire's star critics were miffed at the naturalism of his genre painting *Peasants in Conversation* (referred to by contemporaries as *The Village Politicians*), but this event was nonetheless an unmitigated success for Leibl. His finest works also include portraits of artist-friends, relatives, and personalities from both the landed gentry and the cosmopolitan *Gründerzeit*-era bourgeois circles to whom he was close. Thanks to his regular participation in international exhibitions, Leibl was also viewed as one of the leading European realists in Vienna, Berlin, Hamburg, München, Budapest, Basel, Winterthur, Zurich, New York, and Washington. And even Van Gogh expressed how deeply touched he was by *Three Women in Church*, one of Leibl's masterpieces.

With his rigorous quest for reality, Wilhelm Leibl founded an independent and modern style of figurative painting in which the entirety of natural truth is rendered via the artistic medium. Leibl's work was motivated by his urge to "perceive well"—and thus represent reality in an unembellished manner. And with his artistic stance, in which self-criticism, destruction, and innovation were the driving forces, he has influenced artists all the way into the present.

This exhibition, which includes loan works from Germany, Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, and the USA, was conceived in cooperation with the Kunsthaus Zürich.

Walltexts

Academy years and first compositions

Equipped with a distinct talent for drawing, Wilhelm Leibl already received lessons as a boy in his native city of Cologne. Thus, he already displayed basic skills in academic drawing after plaster casts and nudes when he began to study at the Munich Academy in 1863. From 1866 a master student of Arthur Freiherr von Ramberg and later of the renowned Karl Theodor von Piloty, he created his first multiplefigure compositions such as *Concert Study*, for which he produced the preparatory work shown in the exhibition. It echoes the theatrical tone of contemporary history and genre painting appreciated by his teachers. The young artist, however, toned this tenor down in favor of finely nuanced coloration.

Leibl's sense for coloration recalls the old masters of the seventeenth century whom he admired. Similarly, his interest in the tactile appeal of different materials brings to mind Velázquez, Hals, Rembrandt, and Rubens. He dedicated himself intensively to these models in detailed copies and received important impulses for his art that were more formative for him than much of what was taught at the Academy. Works such as the likeness of a *White-Bearded Old Man* are a direct result of the artist's thorough study of Rembrandt's portraits. Beyond the serenity of their designs, their preference for composing with light, and their painterly grasp of the almost tangible qualities of beard, hair, skin and textiles, Leibl and the great Dutchman shared the ability to achieve rich depth without psychologizing.

From Leibl's early beginnings as an artist, when he created portraits of his closest relatives, the depiction of the human being, preferably in a calm single portrait without pose and decorative framing narrative, remained the pivot of his art.

From the International Art Exhibition in Munich to the gold medal at the Paris Salon

Leibl showed four works at the epoch-making *First International Art Exhibition* in the Munich Glass Palace in 1869. The gold medal was denied to him since he was still an academy student. But no less an artist than the Frenchman Gustave Courbet became aware of the young man and invited him to come to Paris. Leibl accepted the invitation in November 1869 and promptly received the well-deserved gold medal at the Paris Salon.

In Paris, Leibl maintained lively contact with Courbet and the circle of artists around Manet. Whether he was personally acquainted with Manet has not been proven to date. Leibl met not only like-minded artists, but also found greater appreciation for the way in which a work was executed. "Here, in Paris, one looks less at what does not belong to painting than at painting as such," he enthusiastically wrote to his brother. In this milieu, Leibl soon had success with his art and was signed on by Parisian art dealers. Already in the summer of 1870, however, he had to leave Paris again due to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War.

The loosening of his brushstroke, which had already become obvious before his stay in Paris, especially in *Portrait of the Painter Szinyei Merse*, intensified.

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In addition, his palette changed from the dominant brown-ocher to black, white, gray, and red tones, which suggest an affinity to Manet. After the artist returned to Munich, the so-called Leibl Circle established itself in 1871, which comprised Leibl's friends from the Ramberg class as its core who were joined by, among others, Carl Schuch and the Hungarian Szinyei Merse depicted here.

End of the creative crisis and renewal through drawing

The failure of *Poachers* plunged Leibl into a deep creative crisis that overshadowed the second half of the 1880s. Two exhibitions in 1889 initiated the turnaround: one in the Gurlitt Gallery in Berlin and the other during the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, where he was the only German artist to be awarded a gold medal. From fall 1892, Leibl lived and worked with Johann Sperl in Kutterling in Upper Bavaria. His important late oeuvre dates from the time there.

Leibl's increasing recognition as an artist on the threshold to the twentieth century was not least due to his devotion to genre painting between 1890 and 1893, although the artistic impulse arose from his unremitting dedication to drawing. In contrast to his first detailed drawings executed with a hard pencil or pen, Leibl chose coarser and at the same time softer drawing media such as charcoal and chalk, which allowed for freer strokes, in the 1890s. His preoccupation with light, but above all his preference for effective backlit situations, led him toward abstraction. The frayed line of his stroke also ties in with the intended dissolution of form by light. Stumping and erasing add to his portraits' painterly softness. This haptic quality characterizes most of Leibl's late drawings, some of which have been described as "black-and-white paintings."

Light and the color black

After Leibl had moved to Kutterling, the color black came to gain even more importance in his work. Preferably given in backlit situations at a window, his figures merge atmospherically with the surrounding darkness of the room. It is the incident light that Leibl relies on to develop his forms in a sometimes toilsome, sometimes facile way. Particularly his later drawings impressively show how he increasingly strove to avoid the line and build his compositions from surfaces, which he juxtaposed by means of denser or looser hatchings. The last two years of his life reveal a further peculiarity that can only be observed in his drawings. The surfaces depicting masses and bodies take on angular, geometric forms. Like the distortions in Leibl's *Poachers* drawings, this penchant anticipates Expressionist art and, in a way, even Cubist ideas.

The drawings of peasant girls left as sketches testify to the artist's interest in the contrast between round and angular forms. Considering such creative details, it cannot come as a surprise that Leibl's art was highly regarded as a model by younger artists.

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His basic conviction that the subject of a picture plays a subordinate role and merely serves as a pretext for purely artistic endeavors was absorbed by the younger generation of artists. Leibl influenced a wide variety of artists ranging from Adolf Hölzel, Alfred Kubin, Max Liebermann, and Lovis Corinth to Max Beckmann, Bernhard Heisig, and even Maria Lassnig. In his rejection of conventions, his contempt for an art that is “only a very superficial copy of what is already there to the point of annoyance,” Leibl has lost nothing of his relevance to this day.

Plein air painting

Leibl's art shows its most debonair streak in his landscape drawings, in which he studied light, air, shadows, and textures outdoors in front of the motif. The artist produced a first small group of seven, mostly undated landscape drawings between 1877 and 1880. He preferred close-up views with meadows and trees, which he structured by stumping and with single powerful strokes.

Leibl, who as a mature painter used all his skills to depict people in interiors, devoted himself once again to landscape drawing between 1893 and 1897. Yet the total number of works remained small. This marginal, though not unproductive interest in landscapes resulted in rare attempts to combine figure and landscape in the open air. However, uncompromisingly working in front of the motif and frequently dispensing with preliminary studies and sketches in order to capture a lively and realistic impression in situ, remained one of Leibl's main concerns.

The peasant genre

The modern peasant image was developed in France in the artists' colony of Barbizon, where a handful of plein air painters had taken up residence in the first half of the nineteenth century. The peasant genre had been an integral part of French painting recognized by the Paris Salon since 1850. What had begun with some highly controversial works conceived by bold pioneers grew into an international movement in the second half of the century.

However, the social and political reality had to be excluded from the pictures as far as possible or at least subtly disguised to see the peasant genre catch on with the general public. People expected visions of a timeless, politically naïve and inwardly unbroken peasantry inspired by late romantic ideas. This inevitably led to extremely questionable idealizations of the peasants' harsh everyday life that disregarded their actual working and unhygienic living conditions, misery, and diseases.

Leibl's retreat to the countryside cannot hide the fact that his paintings that now depicted predominantly rural figures were primarily aimed at an educated and art-loving urban middle class. The longing for a casual contact with an unspoilt breed of people in natural surroundings was something the artist shared with his urban clientele.

The Kutterling kitchen: figure and space

In 1892 Leibl found the ideal place to work in the remote Upper Bavarian village of Kutterling, a three-hour walk from Bad Aibling. Together with his friend Sperl, he increasingly moved his life there. The two artists first occupied the tailor's house before they resided in the Oberwalchenhaus, which they rebuilt according to their needs and to which they even added a small studio window on the north side. However, this did not really change the fundamentally sparse lighting conditions in the rooms of this traditional farmhouse with its low ceilings and small windows.

It was precisely this twilight that appealed to Leibl as an artist and which the sooty old kitchen offered in an enhanced form. He dealt with one and the same figure in several series of drawings. Leibl found his very own answer to the plein air painting of French Impressionism in this almost serial working process: his study of changing light conditions concentrated on figures and portraits in interiors. His housekeepers, who went down in art history as "Malresln," served as his models. The silent figures are anything but integrated into a genre-like plot. Rather, the figures, deeply immersed in their seemingly casual everyday actions, are rendered with a sublime inwardness.

The artist's final creative phase

Leibl's late works reveal how intently the artist searched for new motifs. Whereas the number of figures, the kind of perspective, and the chosen details change, the interiors remain sparsely lit and defined by marked light-dark contrasts. Strong, vigorous strokes alternate with hatched parts and light areas, some of which have been left completely white. The artist's stroke appears restless to nervous like the shimmering incident light.

We can also observe a tendency toward angular, almost geometrized forms. This new, in a way cubic abstracting style can be observed exclusively in Leibl's drawings from 1898 on. The motifs are divided into differently hatched angular areas that capture the changing play of light and shadows on the bodies depicted.

A calm comes to pervade some drawings from Leibl's penultimate year of life 1899, such as *Peasant Girl with Hat*. The hatchings intensify even more to form rich black shadows that often fill the sheets completely, closely enveloping the figures. The drawings are extremely self-contained. Hardly any individual strokes can be discerned. The artist often used the charcoal's or chalk's broad side to lay out the composition in a generous way. Stumping the sheets added to their peculiarly soft, velvety tone.

Biography

WILHELM LEIBL (1844–1900)

- 1844 Wilhelm Leibl is born in Cologne on October 23, 1844. From 1854, he receives his first training in drawing and painting there.
- 1863–1869 Attends the Munich Academy of Fine Arts.
- 1869 Leibl participates in the *First International Art Exhibition* in Munich's Glass Palace. Meets Gustave Courbet with whom he maintains friendly contact during his stay in Paris from November 1869 to summer 1870. The artist presents his works at the Salon and is awarded a gold medal.
- 1870–1872 Founds the so-called Leibl Circle in Munich together with artist friends.
- 1873 Withdraws to the Bavarian countryside: its population becomes the predominant subject of his work.
- 1873–1877 Dedicates himself to printed graphic work. Does nineteen etchings.
- Spring 1875 Paints *The Village Politicians* in Unterschondorf on Lake Ammer.
- 1876–1877 Short and only known love relationship with Therese Bauer. Leibl takes up residence in the Chiemgau.
- 1878–1882 Works on *Three Women in Church*: together with *Girl with Carnation*, which Leibl will cut into four parts, culmination of the artist's mode of fine painting, also called "Holbein manner."
- 1881–1886 *Poachers*. Leibl cuts the painting up as exhibitions in Paris, Cologne, and Berlin fail to earn esteem.
- 1889 A show of twenty-six paintings presented at the Gurlitt Gallery in Berlin brings a hollow victory. Leibl is the only German artist to receive a gold medal at the *Exposition Universelle de Paris*.
- 1892 Leibl is awarded the title of professor. He does not take up a teaching position and influences subsequent generations of artists through nothing but his work.
- Fall 1892 Lives and works together with Johann Sperl in Kutterling near Rosenheim, where he creates his important late oeuvre around the group of works *In the Kitchen*. Leibl is appointed honorary member of the Berlin Academy of Arts.

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- 1895 Presents thirty-eight works at the *Große Berliner Kunstausstellung* and receives the gold medal. From now on, the Berlin art collector Ernst Seeger ensures Leibl's financial security by arranging sales and exhibitions.
- 1898 Leibl and Seeger visit Holland, where works by Hals and Rembrandt fascinate the artist.
- 1898–1900 Focuses on the representation of backlit situations at windows, atmospherically concatenating figure and space.
- 1900 Wilhelm Leibl passes away in Würzburg on December 4, 1900.

Quotes

“For my whole life long, I want to do nothing but paint portraits with beautiful hands.”

Wilhelm Leibl to Julius Mayr

“Paint people just as they are; the soul is there regardless.”

Wilhelm Leibl to Julius Mayr

“We are more intimately connected to exterior nature than we think.”

Wilhelm Leibl to Julius Mayr

“One should not think that I want to paint what is ugly. I just want to paint what is true, and that's considered ugly because one is no longer accustomed to seeing anything that's true.”

Wilhelm Leibl to Julius Mayr

‘What?’ Leibl exclaimed passionately. ‘See beautifully? No, see well! And seeing well is something. In each century, there are perhaps only six people who can see well; the others see beautifully, and that means falsely.’

Wilhelm Leibl to Ludwig Speidel