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# German Art Academies and their Impact on Artistic Style

Sabine Wieber

## Introduction

European art academies played an important role in the production and dissemination of nineteenth-century art. The academic model was based on the premise that 'good' art followed specific rules and could thus be taught through a rigorous curriculum. Education and training formed the core of the academy's rationale but the institution also organized regular exhibitions in the form of annual or biennial Salons. For much of the nineteenth century, Salons represented one of the few institutional sites for contemporary art. Academicians consequently set rigid stylistic standards against which contemporary art was judged and shaped public and private collecting practices. This essay examines the fascinating relationship between shifting academic pedagogies and stylistic developments such as naturalism and realism at particular historical junctures.

Although the German art world shared many features with Britain and France, it differed in one crucial aspect. Due to its complicated political make-up for much of the nineteenth century as a series of independent states rather than a unified nation state, Germany did not have a centralized academy that formalized standards in terms of education and taste like the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris (established in 1648) or the Royal Academy in London (established in 1768). Instead, Germany housed a series of fine arts academies that were spread across major urban centers such as Düsseldorf, Berlin, Munich, and Karlsruhe. In the context of an important early exhibition of nineteenth-century German art at Yale University in 1970, art historian Kermit S. Champa struggled with this diffuseness of Germany's institutional art world as a frustrating detractor for its study:

Germany had no central academy. Each major city had its own. [...] In any given period in the nineteenth century one or another local academy would gain a reputation for its emphasis upon a certain aspect or type of painting. For a young artist, whether German or foreign, the prospect of being able to

choose his place of study on the basis of his knowledge of the particular values it emphasized must have seemed very attractive. [...] Yet frustration was the most obvious historical result of the number and variety of academies in Germany. The situation had built into it a kind of aesthetic relativism, which undercut any possibility of continued artistic development. All artistic values seemed infinitely susceptible to change and to argument” (Champa, 11-12).

Champa’s observations are interesting on a number of levels; particularly with regard to his thinly guised modernist stance that advocated a progressive trajectory of (modern) nineteenth-century art that, in his view, would culminate in the historical avant-garde.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to Champa, this essay considers Germany’s polycentric nineteenth-century art world as a particularly fruitful constellation for the study of stylistic developments. In this context, the artistic rivalries between Germany’s three dominant academies (Düsseldorf, Munich, and Berlin) unveil the complex dynamics of German cultural politics. This essay therefore offers an institutional history of the stylistic developments in nineteenth-century German art told through the lens of the academy and the ‘fashionability’ of specific locations and teachers at particular moments in time.

### **Düsseldorf: Naturalism and Landscape Painting, 1826-1850**

Germany’s first important nineteenth-century art academy emerged during the 1820s in Düsseldorf and produced a new generation of landscape and genre-scene painters with international profiles, known as the Düsseldorf School. The Düsseldorf Academy was founded as a drawing school by the history painter Wilhelm Lambert Krahe (1712-1790) in 1762 and became the Academy of Painters, Sculptors and Architecture of the Electorate of the Palatinate in 1773. Although Düsseldorf was only a small town on the river Rhine with no more than 30,000 inhabitants, it was home to a vibrant cultural community and nourished literature, theater, and the fine arts. Count Palatine Karl Theodor’s (1724-1799) Düsseldorf Gallery, for example, represented one of Europe’s first picture galleries housed outside a sovereign’s palace and showcased his outstanding old masters. This collection was transferred

to Munich by inheritance in 1805 where it became the core of Ludwig I's famous Alte Pinakothek museum (Gaehtgens and Marchesano).

After the Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815), the Rhineland became part of Prussia and the Düsseldorf Academy fell under Berlin's legislation, a city over 300 kilometers (186 miles) east of the Rhine. Teaching recommenced in 1819 and the prominent Nazarene painter Peter von Cornelius (1783-1867) was appointed as the now Royal Prussian Art Academy's (Königlich Preussische Kunstakademie) first director in 1821.<sup>2</sup> Cornelius was born in Düsseldorf and trained at the city's old academy, but settled in Munich after his return from Rome in 1819. When Düsseldorf offered him the directorship, he was at the height of his artistic fame and had secured a number of prestigious public and private commissions in the Bavarian capital, such as the large fresco cycle for King Ludwig I's eminent museum of Greek and Roman sculptures, the Glyptothek, which was designed by Germany's 'star architect' of the day Leo von Klenze (1784-1864). Cornelius never properly settled in Düsseldorf and divided his time between Munich and the Rhineland. It was a well-known fact that he had no particular interest in teaching and often employed his students as cheap laborers on his fresco schemes. Although Cornelius's tenure in Düsseldorf was short – he gladly accepted the Munich Academy's directorship in 1825 – his fame infused the Academy with prestige and recognition.

Cornelius passed the baton to his fellow Nazarene brother Friedrich Wilhelm von Schadow (1789-1862), who had been teaching at the Berlin Academy as well as running a highly successful studio in the Prussian capital. Schadow started his directorship at the Düsseldorf Academy in January 1826 and his appointment heralded an era of pedagogic innovation and artistic inspiration until he was forced to retire due to ill health in 1859. Some of Schadow's most promising Berlin students such as Carl Friedrich Lessing (1808-1880), Theodor Hildebrandt (1804-1874), Carl Friedrich Sohn (1805-1867), Eduard Bendemann (1811-1889), and Christian Köhler (1809-1861) followed him to the Rhineland and soon formed the core of the Düsseldorf School. Although Schadow had been a Nazarene, he privileged portraiture and religious painting over their more favored fresco cycles. In part,

Schadow recognized that Germany could not generate sufficient public commissions to support all of the Nazarenes's artistic careers. These economic considerations partially informed Schadow's vision for the Düsseldorf Academy as he changed its curriculum from Cornelius's idealist vision anchored in fresco painting into a more flexible and market driven focus on easel paintings (genre scenes, local landscapes, and portraiture) for which the Düsseldorf School eventually earned its international reputation. Schadow of course did not entirely escape his Nazarene background - as well as the academy's hierarchical structures - and still valued history painting above all else. But he was certainly a more pragmatic director than his predecessor.

Two years into his directorship, Schadow published an important essay conveying his 'thoughts on the appropriate education of a painter' (*Meine Gedanken über eine folgerichtige Ausbildung des Malers*, 1828). This document reveals Schadow's progressive pedagogy, which he soon implemented through a series of reforms at the Düsseldorf Academy. Students undertook a methodical three-step curriculum that began with preparatory studies and culminated in master classes directly supervised by academy professors for the most talented students. Upon successful completion, members of this elite group (the so-called Eleven) were given in-house studios, where they could work and serve as paragons for the incoming cohort of students.

Schadow's reforms proved so successful that they were soon adopted by art academies across Germany and underpinned academic training well into the twentieth century. His curriculum created a friendly but competitive environment and once students progressed to the level of master classes, Schadow became a *pater familias* of sorts: he invited students to social gatherings at his home, they went on excursions together, and they regularly discussed artistic practice. In many ways, Schadow implemented the Nazarenes's vision of an artistic brotherhood intended to nourish its members rather than enforcing stiff institutional hierarchies. But Schadow's pedagogy also had its critics who felt that Schadow's artistic vision left no room for any kind of critical intervention. The painter Müller von Königswinter, for example, complained in relation to the Düsseldorf Academy that "the ripe

fruit usually detaches from the tree, but in this case, everything remains affixed to the branch!” (Baumgärtel, 28).

Schadow’s concerted efforts soon met with success, and art critics praised Düsseldorf’s submissions to the 1828 Academy Exhibition in Berlin (Börsch-Supan). By the 1830s, the Düsseldorf Academy constituted Germany’s premier teaching institutions and was described by the dramatist Karl Leberecht Immermann in 1833 as follows:

“How surprised I am that this school [...] managed to forge such a great reputation across all of Germany in the short timespan of six years that many young people who were studying under other masters [elsewhere] left them to come to Düsseldorf; so that the halls can no longer accommodate the daily-growing number of students” (Baumgärtel, 30).

Schadow’s new curriculum produced outstanding students across a range of academic genres – from still life to history painting. It also attracted new talent to the Düsseldorf Academy’s faculty, such as the landscape painter Johann Wilhelm Schirmer (1807-1863) who arrived in 1829. Schirmer liberated German landscape painting from primarily serving as a setting for historical, mythological, or religious scenes and achieving respect as an independent category of painting. He was a passionate advocate of the direct and detailed study of nature as it appeared to its observer at different times of the day, under varying weather conditions and during changing seasons. Always open to new ideas and approaches, Schirmer employed the new medium of photography (‘invented’ in 1839) to aid his efforts. This comes as no surprise considering that the Rhineland was home to some of Germany’s earliest photography studios such as the Fotoatelier Wilhelm Severin, which was founded in Düsseldorf in 1844. In many ways, Schirmer was an early advocate of plein-air painting (outdoor painting, Freilichtmalerei), but contrary to the later Impressionists, most closely associated with this mode of representation, Schirmer had no interest in the unmediated presentation of his observations. While we might think of his atmospheric nature sketches as beautiful artworks, Schirmer considered them as mere means to an end. These studies were

intended to hone his skills as a studio-landscape painter and often did not even serve as preparatory sketches for specific paintings.

During the 1830s and 1840s the Düsseldorf School became best known for landscape and, to a lesser degree, genre painting. Schirmer, Schadow and their circle of students embraced a new type of landscape painting that gradually shifted away from well-tested classical formulae and presented specific topographies at particular moments in time based on direct and accurate observation. This type of landscape painting falls within the art historical category of naturalism because of its makers's commitment to a faithful depiction of carefully chosen, although not staged, natural phenomena. The Düsseldorf School broke with German Romanticism practitioners such as Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) and Philipp Otto Runge (1777-1810) who endowed their topographically identifiable landscape paintings with an all-encompassing religiosity and spirituality. In Friedrich's famous *Tetschen Altarpiece* (1808; Galerie Neue Meister, Dresden), for example, nature first and foremost served as a physical conduit of the divine.

The Düsseldorf School drew on Romanticism's painterly strategies of creating drama through light effects, color variations, and perspective, but its landscapes were primarily secular and tapped into more mundane emotions such as nostalgia or sentimentality. Lessing's painting *Gorge with Ruin* (1830) serves as an early example of the Düsseldorf School's hugely successful lyrical landscape paintings (Fig. X-1). Lessing loosely based his painting on a novel by the Scottish Romantic poet Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and offered his viewers a seemingly 'generic' Neo-Gothic fantasy. Upon closer inspection, however, Lessing's painting includes topographic details such as the distinguished mountain peaks in the background and their jagged rocks, scarce vegetation, and a castle ruin that was typical of the Rhine River valley. Lessing no doubt observed the Rhine valley's characteristic features during his many sketching excursions in the area. While scrutinizing each topographical detail, he never lost sight of the organic whole, which he infused with a sense of drama.

Lessing successfully exhibited a very similar painting called *Castle on the Rock* two years prior at the 1828 Berlin Academy Exhibition where it was a huge critical success and

subsequently entered the collection of the Berlin banker Joachim Heinrich Wilhelm Wagener. Wagener is a critical figure in German art history because his extensive art collection formed the nucleus of the Alte Nationalgalerie (Old National Gallery). But Wagener is also relevant to a discussion of the Düsseldorf School because he represented the kind of upper-middle class, educated and moneyed patron who advanced an emerging art market dependent on portable easel paintings. Members of this increasingly self-conscious social stratum developed a clear taste for landscapes, genre scenes, and portraiture to hang in their salons and domestic interiors. Easel paintings produced for this largely private market supported generations of nineteenth-century artists and ultimately generated a dealer- and auction house system that drives the art market to the present day.

The Düsseldorf School's reputation thrived throughout the 1830s and many of its members attained international fame. Collectors across central Europe were eager to add works by Schadow's students to their collections. After Johann Boeker (aka John Geoffrey Boker) opened his Düsseldorf Gallery in New York in 1849, American collectors also became very interested in acquiring works by the Düsseldorf School. As a result of this far-reaching reception, the Düsseldorf Academy attracted international students from Scandinavia, Russia, the U.S., and the Baltic States who literally flocked to the city on the Rhine. Müller von Königswinter observed in 1854, for example, that "the school not only received, it also gave. Countless colonies had their roots in the school, which transplanted its beliefs, ideas and experiences into new contexts" (Baumgärtel, 37). A prominent example of this transmission of ideas into new artistic and geographic contexts was the Hudson River School in the United States. Several of its more prominent members including George Caleb Bingham (1811-1879), Eastman Johnson (1824-1906), Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910), and Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) had trained in Düsseldorf (although Bierstadt famously failed to be admitted into the Academy).

Even though the Düsseldorf School continued to draw students well into the 1860s (the famous Hungarian painter Mihály Munkácsy, for example, arrived in 1868) and remained popular with German and international collectors, its popularity gradually waned. By the late



1840s, a once vibrant school of lyrical landscape painting had mutated into a conventional mix of history and landscape painting with very little regenerative force. Key innovators and teachers such as Lessing, Schirmer, and Adolf Schröder (1805-1875) left the Academy after a series of political disputes that presaged Schadow's dismissal in 1859. In a way, the Academy reverted back to being a 'conventional' academy with all the power struggles and artistic strongholds that this term characteristically implies. This created an artistic and pedagogic vacuum, which enabled ambitious academy directors from across Germany to step in and enhance their own institutional profiles. The Munich Academy under Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1805-1874) serves as a case in point as it became central Europe's leading artistic training ground from the 1850s onwards. This development was underlined by a high-profile exhibition system that drew ever more artists to the Bavarian capital.

### **Munich: Colorism and Staged History, 1849-1886**

In 1825 Bavaria's King Ludwig I appointed Cornelius as his chief artistic advisor and the Academy's new director. Cornelius held this post until 1841 when he departed for Berlin to work on Frederick William IV's royal mausoleum.<sup>3</sup> Although Cornelius laid the foundation of the so-called Munich School, his tenure was controversial. With his loyal fellow Nazarene Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794-1872) by his side, Cornelius promoted an ambitious program geared towards a revival of idealist history painting. This steered him onto a collision course with two of Munich's most beloved and renowned landscape painters, Johann Georg von Dillis (1759-1851) and Wilhelm von Kobell (1766-1853). The Academy was soon divided into two factions, Idealists versus Naturalists. For a while, it looked like the Cornelius camp would prevail because they gathered enough political clout to actually terminate the Academy's prestigious chair for landscape painting in 1828. But their victory was short lived and led to a curious constellation whereby Munich landscape paintings were highly sought after on the (international) art market but training opportunities in this genre were limited to private study.

Ludwig I was a great supporter of the arts and under his reign (1825-1848) Munich advanced to the position of Germany's leading artistic center (Kunststadt). He instigated

ambitious building programs for which he was able to entice some of Germany's most sought after nineteenth-century architects (Friedrich von Gärtner and Leo von Klenze) to the city. These projects kept the Cornelius School busy with fresco commissions depicting epic scenes from Bavarian history in public venues such as the Ludwig Church, the Glyptothek, and the Court Garden Arcades. Like many monarchs of his day Ludwig used art and architecture to underscore his political authority, but he also believed that art could only have its desirable aesthetic and educational efficacy if presented publicly. He thus created a number of important new museums: the Glyptothek (1830) for his own antiquities, the Alte Pinakothek (1836) for the Wittelsbach family's famous collection of old master paintings, and the Neue Pinakothek (1853) for paintings executed after 1800. Until the opening of the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 1876, the Neue Pinakothek was Germany's only museum space dedicated to art by living or recently deceased artists. This included a substantial contingent of international artists, which was very progressive for this era. Unfortunately, Ludwig rarely consulted his government about his ambitious cultural initiatives, yet expected the public purse to cover their costs. This caused a series of public controversies and, as the tide turned against him during the 1848 revolutions, Ludwig was forced to abdicate in favor of his son Maximilian (1811-1864).<sup>4</sup>

Maximilian II was less interested in the visual arts than his father and focused his patronage on literature and science. He was, for example, responsible for Bavaria's prestigious Maximilianeum, a school for gifted students founded in 1857 and still active today. But his reign coincided with a series of changes in the dissemination (exhibitions) and consumption (market) of art that transformed Munich from a city of art (Kunststadt) into a city of artists (Künstlerstadt). In Munich, artists exerted much greater influence over their careers than was common in other cities. The 1850s and 1860s represented two decades of relative political stability and economic growth in Bavaria and across Germany. Most Munich artists lived comfortably from incomes generated by the art market and by their international clients. Some artists were so successful that they became 'princely painters' (Malerfürsten) with aristocratic titles and lavish lifestyles.<sup>5</sup>

This shift away from royal patronage to a more commercial art system impacted the Academy, and by extension the Munich-School, in interesting ways. Under Cornelius, the Munich School was essentially harnessed to an idealist vision of history painting best expressed in monumental fresco cycles financed by official patronage. After the 1848 revolutions, Germany's upper middle classes, who had recently acquired wealth through banking, commerce, and industry, strove for increased political and social recognition. Art and culture became important bargaining chips in this struggle for (social) legitimacy and the Munich School soon adapted to this new cultural-political landscape by producing easel paintings – not unlike the Düsseldorf School. But it is important to keep in mind that although genre and landscape painting dominated the art market, history painting retained an important place in on-going debates over national identity and unity.

In 1849, the history painter Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1805-1874) became the Munich Academy's new director and successfully steered the institution through a challenging time period. Its role as an arm of royal power had been questioned by the 1848 revolutions, while an increasingly vibrant art market exerted pressures on this age-old institution. When Maximilian I (1756-1825) founded the Munich Academy in 1808, its charter stipulated that the Academy was responsible for organizing a public art exhibition for its students, professors, and invited (international) artists at least every three years (Zacharias). By the late 1840s, however, the Academy was no longer the only exhibition venue for contemporary art, and its monopoly was seriously challenged by a series of bourgeois initiatives such as the German Art Associations (Kunstvereine) founded from the 1820s onwards in many German cities. The Munich Art Association was established in 1823 and its regular exhibitions soon became the most important vehicle for contemporary art in the Bavarian capital.

Kaulbach was keenly aware of the waning prestige of the Academy's exhibitions and instigated a series of reforms of its exhibition system. He ultimately failed to revive the Salon's importance and relinquished the Academy's exhibition responsibilities to the Munich chapter of the recently constituted German Art Guild (Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstgenossenschaft, established in 1856). Henceforth, Munich artists were solely

responsible for organizing international Salons in the city's legendary Glass Palace (Glaspalast, built in 1854), and their exhibitions attracted international art 'stars' such as Gustave Courbet, Camille Corot, Edouard Manet, and Claude Monet (their First International Art Exhibition was held in 1869). Although the Academy's surrender of its contemporary art exhibitions to the Munich Artists' Guild signalled a certain loss of cultural-political clout, it was able to retain its status as Central Europe's premier teaching institution.

Munich's international reputation as a *Künstlerstadt* enticed artists from across Europe and the U.S. to establish themselves in the Bavarian capital. This appeal was enhanced by the Munich School's growing international fame for its emotionally charged and theatrically staged history paintings that focussed on 'nature and color' rather than intellect alone. After liberalism's hopes for a unified German nation had once again been dashed after the 1848 revolutions, art became a key site for the commemoration and/or projection of the educated middle classes' patriotic dreams. As a result, history painting experienced a revival, albeit situated in a new socio-economic constellation. History painting was no longer considered the exclusive domain of representation for the ruling classes (aristocracy and royalty), but was seen as also embodying bourgeois dreams of a once unified German nation. Its style began to accommodate artistic conventions that were anchored in the genre and landscape paintings so popular with the upper middle classes. Color, emotion, and naturalism played an even more important role in the Munich School's (academic) conception and execution of history painting than had been the case in the earlier Düsseldorf School. Even history painting's subject matter changed from erudite scenes designed to educate and inspire viewers to more intimate and emotionally charged episodes that frequently illustrated human fallibility rather than heroism. Kaulbach experimented with this (for Germany) new type of history painting, which he felt formed the basis of all painterly practice: "we have to paint history, history is the religion of our time, history alone is timely" (Wolf, 76).

But it was Kaulbach's younger colleague Carl Theodor von Piloty (1826-1886) who perfected this new type of history painting. Piloty's carefully staged, highly theatrical scenes, complete with historically accurate costumes, props, and settings, combined historical

knowledge with a technical mastery of painterly and compositional effects. Schadow had already postulated the key difference between Idealism (Cornelius School) and Colorism/Naturalism (Munich School) in 1854: “While the Idealists begin their work with precisely delineated drawings and cartoons, the Naturalists make a color-sketch and then employ a life model when composing their final canvas” (Mai, 138). Viewed from this perspective, Piloty’s much celebrated painting *Seni before the Corpse of Wallenstein* (1855) represents a painter at the height of his abilities (Fig. X-2). Piloty studied under Schnorr von Carolsfeld and the lesser-known history painter Karl Schorn (1800-1850), who had links to the Düsseldorf Academy. After some early flirtation with genre painting, Piloty dedicated himself to history painting from circa 1854 onwards. The sensational success of his *Seni* painting at the Munich Salon of 1855 reinforced his decision and led to his appointment as professor of history painting the following year and, eventually, as the Academy’s director from 1874 to 1888.

Piloty is a key figure in central European art history because he trained a series of painters who are now icons in their own right: Hans Makart (1840-1884), Franz von Defregger (1835-1921), Wilhelm Leibl (1844-1900), Eduard von Grützner (1846-1921), and the American painter William Merritt Chase (1849-1916). His (commercially) most successful student was Franz von Lenbach (1836-1904) who became perhaps the century’s wealthiest ‘painter prince’.<sup>6</sup> The Munich Academy grew so exponentially under Piloty’s leadership that he was able to argue for a new academy building, which was designed by the historicist architect Gottfried von Neureuther and inaugurated in 1885. But more importantly, Piloty allowed his students considerable latitude in their artistic development, even if this meant they would renounce history painting - usually in favor of animal or genre painting.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the Munich School generated a diverse range of painting - alpine motives, vernacular episodes from the past and present (*Heimat*), animal scenes, portraiture, and more conventional genre scenes. This heterogeneity was supported by Munich’s strong art market as well as Bavaria’s growing importance as a tourist destination (Lenman).

Under Piloty, the Munich School became one of Europe's most important representatives of 'colorist' history painting (Kolorit). As a young artist, Piloty was strongly influenced by the Belgian painters Edouard de Bièfve (1808-1882) and Louis Gallait (1810-1887), two leading representatives of a new type of history painting that was taking European audiences by storm: technically brilliant canvases that 'accurately' staged historical events by appealing to their viewers' emotions rather than their intellects. In 1841-42, Bièfve and Gallait sent two of their major works, *Compromise of the Nobles* (1841; Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels) and *The Abdication of Charles V* (1841; Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels) on a European tour. Munich was on the itinerary and the exhibition drew large crowds. Both paintings were monumental in scale (each weighing 170 kilograms/375 pounds) and garnered favorable responses in the German press. The famous cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), for example, admired the Belgian paintings' lifelike energy and colorism, which he felt stood in stark contrast to the "feeble" and "concept-less" German history painting of the day – a not so subtle critique of the Cornelius School (Heilmann, 47). In Burckhardt's view, history painting should convey the breath of history and animate the past through 'local color'. This had become German historiography's rallying cry since Leopold von Ranke's famous demand to write history 'as it happened' (wie es eigentlich gewesen ist) and Burckhardt embraced the Belgian's history paintings as visual manifestations of this novel way of depicting history (Beiser).

Painting was of course an ideally suited medium to convey history in all its color and detail, and Piloty took up Burckhardt's challenge. In *Seni before the Corpse of Wallenstein*, for example, Piloty represented the famous Bohemian military leader's loyal astrologer and personal physician Giovanni Battista Seni paying final respects to his murdered friend, whom he had implored to flee the city of Cheb (now in the Czech Republic), but to no avail. In this painting, Piloty united the controversial historical figure of Wallenstein with one of Germany's most beloved poets of the day, Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805). Schiller's *Wallenstein Trilogy* (1798-1800) evoked strong patriotic feelings in mid nineteenth-century audiences and was extremely popular at the time. Piloty's painting was the sensation of the

1855 Academy exhibition, and Ludwig I bought the canvas for the New Pinakothek straight from the artist's studio. This kind of Belgian-influenced colorism dominated the Munich School of (history) painting during the 1860s and 1870s.

Piloty and his like-minded colleagues at the Munich Academy (including Wilhelm von Diez, Ludwig von Löfftz, Paul Hoecker, and even the much younger Franz von Stuck) employed faithful costume and props to stage historical events with maximum veracity and psychological impact. Color and light were used to draw viewers further into the emotional narrative of the depicted scene. To achieve these effects, many of these paintings were composed like a theater stage. The most important figures were positioned closest to the viewer, and a diagonal composition instilled the scene with energy and tension. Overall, audiences and critics responded enthusiastically to these pictorial strategies, and Piloty's paintings were among the most celebrated works exhibited at the 1867 (Paris) and 1873 (Vienna) Universal Expositions. But despite the Munich School's far-reaching success, some critics worried that this type of history painting was becoming too anecdotal, thereby preempting history's important moral and philosophical lessons. Others, of course, altogether rejected history painting as an unsustainable mode of representation in their on-going search for a modern style and subject matter. For the latter, history painting was tied to morose institutional hierarchies and to a pictorial language (Bildsprache) that contemporary audiences could no longer relate to.

### **Berlin: Technicolor Realism and Propaganda, 1875-1892**

For much of the nineteenth century, Berlin's art world lagged behind Munich's thriving cultural system. The Bavarian monarchs founded public art institutions to enlighten their subjects and fostered a political entity that built on notions of a shared cultural heritage (Kulturnation). In Prussia, on the other hand, artistic sponsorship continued to be deeply entrenched in the Hohenzollern monarchy's public declarations of political supremacy. This paralysed Berlin's artistic communities. The city's Academy of Fine Arts, founded by King Friedrich I in 1696, was further hampered by the Düsseldorf Academy's international success

(it is important to remember that Düsseldorf was part of Prussia).<sup>8</sup> For a long time, Adolph Menzel (1815-1905) was Berlin's only internationally recognized artist.

But Berlin's reputation as an artistic backwater changed dramatically when the city became the new German Empire's capital in 1871. The Prussian King was declared German Emperor (Wilhelm I) and Berlin was chosen to house the national parliament - although the iconic Reichstag building was only completed in 1894. Culture played a key role during Berlin's rapid transformation into the Empire's economic and political center because it provided an ideological scaffolding that legitimized Berlin's new status as the Empire's capital.<sup>9</sup> For example, the artistically conceived, triumphal entry of victorious German troops into Berlin on 16 June 1871 following Germany's victory in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), was a carefully staged bid to establish Berlin on the Empire's cultural map and to challenge Munich's position as one of Europe's premier art centers. Berlin's representative boulevard Unter den Linden was decorated with monumental canvases - so called 'velaria' due to their size and allusion to Roman awnings - that depicted heroic scenes from the Franco-Prussian War, a conflict that had finally led to the founding of the German Empire.

During the heady early years of the German Empire, also known as the *Gründerjahre*, attention focused on the Academy, and a series of long-overdue reforms were initiated in 1875. Most importantly, the painter Anton von Werner (1843-1915) became the Academy's director. When he arrived, the institution was in terrible shape. It numbered only 70 students, offered virtually no painting classes, and drawing from live models was unheard of. Instead, students conducted anatomical studies through plaster casts or prints. Werner studied at the more progressive academy in Karlsruhe (under Lessing, who was so influential at the Düsseldorf Academy) and he was horrified by the Berlin Academy's condition. He secured the support of Prussia's cultural ministry to hire new members of staff, build master studios, institute life-drawing classes, and organize regular Salons. He raised the standard of entry exams and infused the institution with an almost military-like discipline. Most importantly, the Academy as a whole was restructured and the fine arts (painting, sculpture, and etching)



were split off as a separate conglomerate, the so-called Hochschule (essentially an academy within the academy).

In no other German academy were the biography and career of a director ever as tightly interlaced with the trajectory of the institution as that of Anton von Werner and the Berlin Academy between 1875 and 1915. Werner was an imposing figure in the German capital's art world and he forged solid relationships with the Hohenzollerns as well as with key members of Prussia's political elite such as the Empire's first Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and his Military Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke, the Elder. Werner also moved in the same social circles as Berlin's economic and political elites. Predictably, Werner's canvases projected an officially sanctioned vision of the new Empire that focused on military achievements and a personality cult around the Emperor and his entourage. Werner has often been called a careerist because he so readily embraced his role as a mouthpiece for imperial art politics. During the height of his career, he could make or break artistic careers by, for example, excluding individuals from important exhibitions such as the German Pavilions at various Universal Expositions (as head of the Prussian Landeskunstkommission he had a deciding vote). Indeed, Werner had so much political clout that Wilhelm II declared him Court Painter in 1888. Werner's close involvement with Berlin's cultural politics supposedly prompted his older colleague Adolph von Menzel to ask 'when does he ever paint?' (Fig. X-3).

But Werner did find time to paint, and over the course of his career he produced around 500 canvases and 6,000 drawings. His monumental canvases glorifying Prussia and its (military) heroes became the principal yardsticks for the German Empire's official canon of art. Werner therefore was an art politician (Kunstpolitiker) in the truest sense of the word: he directed the German Empire's official art system through his art (aesthetics) and through his opinion (politics). Artistically, he cast himself as a direct heir to Titian, Raphael, Dürer, Holbein, and Rembrandt. But his canvases never reached their aesthetic power because they were too tied to academic realism, in terms of both his mode of representation and subject matter. This was already considered problematic by some of his more critical contemporaries.

Menzel, for example, dismissed Werner's canvases as sycophantic. And yet, as the director of the Academy and the German Emperor's favourite painter, Werner's artistic vision became the Empire's official style and was emulated by those who were keen to secure official government commissions.

Werner's *Proclamation of the German Empire* (1877) is undoubtedly his most famous painting and provides good insight into his working process as well as artistic convictions (Fig. X-4). The painting exists in a number of versions and the one discussed here was produced in 1882 (second version) for the Zeughaus' pantheon to the Prussian Army, which was destroyed during the Second World War. Werner was called to Versailles in 1871 to witness the declaration of the German Empire in the Hall of Mirrors as preparation for producing a history painting of this foundational moment in German history. The large painting (14 feet x 24 feet/427 x 732 cm) was executed in a photo-realist style to 'truthfully' record the event and its key actors. Werner included no less than 128 individual portraits that he subsequently catalogued so that they could be readily identified amidst the large crowd of soldiers and dignitaries. Despite Werner's painstaking attention to detail in terms of physiognomy, costume and setting, the painting remains static. Indeed, the military figures almost overshadow the event's key actor - Wilhelm I, who has just been proclaimed German Emperor. The only animation in the scene comes from a group of young officers who raised their helmets to cheer.

This painting reveals Werner's infatuation with military culture, which he was never able to experience first hand due to ill health. But more importantly, *The Proclamation of the German Empire* also shows that he was not interested in representing the grit and violence of actual combat. Instead, Werner glorified Prussia, and by extension the German Empire, as a nation of heroes to be honored and revered. It is no surprise that this canvas became a patriotic cult image (Kultbild) in the German Empire (1871-1918) and was reproduced countless times in print and in the press. As all of Werner's other paintings, this work functioned like a photograph in its documentary realism, but it could also be read as pedantic in its strive for accuracy and perfection. During Werner's career, photography already posed a

thread to the ‘truthful’ reportage of historical events through painting. But Werner argued that painting had a clear advantage over photography because a painter could focus on particular figures or groups through his control of color, light, composition, and perspective. This, according to Werner, was the patriotic mission of the painter. He believed that nature always served as a point of departure, but painters brought out the best in it. Werner had clearly learned a lesson from the Munich School in terms of staging theatrical scenes in his history paintings but contrary to Piloty, for example, his hyper-realist canvases remained curiously vacuous of emotion and drama. Werner’s realism was equally far removed from a French-inspired, socially critical mode of representation that had also been adopted by members of the Munich School such as Wilhelm Leibl (1844-1900) or Wilhelm Trübner (1851-1917).

The majority of late nineteenth-century German audiences gladly embraced the socio-political directions of the new Empire and keenly supported Anton von Werner’s monumental representations of Germany’s glorious past and present. Patriotism thus filtered heavily into Werner’s contemporary reception and secured him a place in the pantheon of German painters until the advent of modernism in the early twentieth century. Indeed, the Berlin press championed Werner as single-handedly retrieving Berlin’s position as the Empire’s artistic capital. The prominent pathologist Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902), for example, emphatically stated: “at this precise moment, when the German nation finally found unity after so many grand events, there is no other place than in Berlin, the new Empire’s capital, for art to find its secured place of honor ...” (Mai, 283).

By the 1880s, the Academy had become one of the institutional vehicles through which Werner and Prussia’s cultural ministry instrumentalized their often-repressive art politics. In 1886, for example, Werner and the Association of Berlin Artists (Verein Berliner Künstler, founded in 1841) organized a major exhibition of contemporary art at the Lehrter Bahnhof to commemorate the centennial of the Berlin Academy’s art exhibitions. The event glorified the Hohenzollern monarchy and openly challenged Munich as the nation’s cultural center by showcasing Berlin’s rejuvenated academy, prestigious museums and exhibition venues, lively journal culture, and immense wealth derived from commerce and industry. The

1886 Centenary Art Exhibition left little doubt that Germany's cultural future depended on a successful fusion of art, money, and politics that could only be materialized in the national capital. Berlin had finally unseated Munich from its role as the Empire's art capital.

### **Conclusion**

With Wilhelm II's ascension to the throne on 15 June 1888, Anton von Werner became the German Empire's premier art consultant and further involved himself in national art politics, especially in relation to exhibitions in Berlin and beyond. It is well known that Wilhelm II liked to meddle in artistic affairs and fancied himself the Empire's highest authority of taste. Aesthetically, he was a staunch conservative and hated the international avant-garde, especially French Impressionism, which was only gradually entering German collections. He famously stated that "art that ignores my laws and barriers is no longer art but factory work or merchandise, and that is something art must never become!" (Mai, 292). These views were put to the test in the so-called Munch Affair of 1892, which not only heralded the demise of the academies' reign over artistic production, but also proved detrimental for Berlin's hard-earned status as the Empire's artistic capital.

The Association of Berlin Artists invited the Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (1863-1944) to exhibit a selection of his works in the Künstlerhaus. The exhibition opened on 5 November 1892 and caused great controversy among the Association's more conservative members. They declared Munch's works "inferior, preposterous (läppisch), abominable" (Teeuwisse, 184), and forced the exhibition's closure only one week after its opening. The Munch Affair was preceded by the Association's refusal to exhibit Impressionist and Symbolist works at their 1891 and 1892 exhibitions, and Munch's supporters responded to these acts of censorship by forming the Free Artists' Union (Freie Künstlervereinigung). This was not a formal break with the Association, but over the next few years, exhibition politics continued to create friction among Berlin's artists. When the Association's jury rejected a Symbolist landscape painting by Walter Leistikow for the 1898 Salon, 65 artists seceded in protest and formed the Berlin Secession with the German Impressionist painter Max

Liebermann (1847-1935) at its helm. This event signalled an unbridgeable rift in Berlin's artistic fabric and initiated Anton von Werner's 'dethroning'.

The 65 Berlin's artists followed suit in a pan-central European phenomenon that witnessed visual artists seceding from mainstream associations to form their own alliances throughout the 1890s (Munich 1892, Budapest 1896, Krakow 1897, Vienna 1897). Art historical literature tends to see these Secessions as avant-garde groups but their members actually embraced heterogeneous artistic positions. The main driving force behind late nineteenth-century Secessionism was a growing discontent over the institutional art world's exhibition politics. In the context of this essay on the relationship between German academies and stylistic developments, the Secession movement is important because it finally opened up alternative exhibition opportunities and fostered an internationalisation of artistic debates, all of which signalled an irreversible break with the academies' age-old monopoly over German art and artists.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Champa's bias is further revealed by the selection of canonical artists for the exhibition. In all fairness, he was very much a man of his time and in 1970, revisionist art history was still in its infancy.

<sup>2</sup> The Nazarenes were a group of early nineteenth-century German and Austrian painters who admired early Renaissance artists (Dürer, Perugino, the young Raphael) for their inherent morality and purity. Key members of the Nazarenes were Peter Cornelius, Johann Friedrich Overbeck, Franz Pfors, and Friedrich Wilhelm Schadow. They formed the Brotherhood of St Luke (Lukasbrüder) in 1809 and lived a monastic lifestyle at the former Roman monastery of S. Isidoro. For an excellent recent analysis of the Nazarenes see Cordula Grewe, *The*

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*Nazarenes: Romantic Avant-Garde and the Art of the Concept*. State College: Penn State University Press, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius proposed a fresco cycle representing the apocalypse and although Frederick Wilhelm abandoned this project after the 1848 Revolutions, Cornelius worked on the cartoons until his death in 1867.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig's on-going and very public affair with the Irish actress Lola Montez (1821-1861) actually forced his abdication but his reign had been under fire for a long time before that.

<sup>5</sup> Export tariffs introduced by the German government in 1883 severely curtailed sales to the U.S. market; it is also important to note that from the 1870s onwards, a so-called artists' proletariat (Lenman, 114) emerged in Munich because the city simply could not absorb the ever-growing number of artists arriving from across central Europe to make their careers in the Bavarian capital. Many of them had to substitute their artistic career with commercial work or jobs outside their fields.

<sup>6</sup> Lenbach's grand home now houses one of the premier German Expressionist (Blue Rider) painting collections in the world and British architect Norman Foster recently extended the building (2013).

<sup>7</sup> During the 1870s and 1880s, the Munich School was internationally renowned for its animal paintings depicting domesticated cows, sheep, and sometimes horses in recognizably Bavarian landscapes. The Academy's professorship for animal painting was a prestigious and fought-over position.

<sup>8</sup> This is not to suggest that the Berlin Academy did not play a role in nineteenth-century German art prior to 1871. Under the directorship of Johann Gottfried von Schadow between 1815 and 1836, for example, the Berlin Academy made important contributions to post-Enlightenment culture and society.

<sup>9</sup> Berlin's economic boom during the Empire's Founding Years (Gründerjahre) was in part fuelled by substantial reparation payments from France and generated numerous commissions for local artists, architects and sculptors from private and public patrons. Discussions around



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the building of a national collection for living or recently deceased artists art on the prestigious Museum Island were reignited and finally resulted in the opening of the Alte National Gallery in 1876.