MODERN GERMAN ART: ITS REVELATION OF PRESENT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS IN PRUSSIANIZED GERMANY: BY M. IRWIN MACDONALD

ONE of the best evidences we could have of the rapid development in this country of a feeling for that vital art which is a genuine outgrowth of national life and character may be found in the attitude of the American public toward the Exhibition of German Art now at the Metropolitan Museum. The fact that the exhibition was sent over here purely for the sake of bringing contemporary German art to the notice of the American people is interesting, and the keen discrimination shown by the Americans in their estimate of this art is no less significant, for the reason that the Americans possess in a marked degree the qualities of directness and daring which we so often hear attributed to the Germans. These pictures and statues,—many of them from artists hitherto unknown in this country,—are being judged without prejudice of any kind; indeed, they are rather approached with the eager interest of a people who hold their minds open to the reception of new impressions and who stand ready at any moment to cast aside even cherished ideals and prepossessions,—provided always that the new thing offers something of real and permanent value,—but they are being judged absolutely on their merits as truthful expressions of the ideals which dominate the Germany of today.

A quarter of a century ago the painters of this country, searching for what most appealed to them in the art of the old world, turned to the schools of Munich and Düsseldorf and sat at the feet of Knaus and Vautier, von Bremen, Defregger and the Achenbachs, whose pictures at that time filled our private galleries and stood high in the estimation of our dealers. Then came the revolt to the French school, which carried a much stronger and subtler appeal to the American mind,—so quick to comprehend the marvelous skill of the French painters in handling their medium and to sympathize with the efforts of the Impressionists to solve the problems of light and air. The strength of this appeal is best estimated by the character
of our own work today, which, although beginning to develop along definitely marked lines of its own, yet shows much of the impetus received from the French Impressionists and the Barbizon men. But with the spread of decadence in France came another turn of the tide, for morbidness and abnormality is as yet entirely foreign to the American temperament and American taste balks at it, no matter how cleverly the idea may be conveyed. Such revolts are always favorable to the development of original thought and expression and, with the waning of French influence, there has sprung up a new art expression along lines which are definitely our own; although as yet being very young and unaccustomed to freedom from leading strings, it is for the most part groping its way toward the light.

Herein lies the point of contact between the vigorous, revolutionary spirit in American art and the spirit of revolt from academic methods which has led to the Secession movement in Germany, and the recognition of this is the chief reason for the widespread and serious attention which has been paid to this exhibition of contemporary German art. In the first place the circumstances under which the exhibit was sent here are peculiarly calculated to appeal to all the art lovers of this country. That it was sent at all is largely owing to the unremitting efforts of Mr. Hugo Reisinger, the well-known collector and connoisseur whose private gallery is so rich in examples of German art. Mr. Reisinger has been working toward this end for three or four years and his efforts have been heartily endorsed and aided by Consul-General Bünz, who represents here the notable group of German officials who organized the exhibition, acting under the direct auspices of the Emperor himself. Great care was taken to secure a representative collection of pictures and statues, and although the work of a number of the younger men who are forging to the front in German art is not represented, the omission is probably due to the well-known conservatism that prevails in official circles everywhere. As it stands, the catalogue shows a truly imposing list of gold medalists, academicians and honor men, hardly one of whom lacks the title "professor." Judging by the record, titles and decorations of each man, this exhibition contains the very cream of the cream of German art. The National Gallery of Berlin, at the command of the Emperor, sent over some of its choicest treasures, and other galleries and museums have contributed in like measure. Famous private collections have been levied upon and even the royal galleries have sent their share. The Emperor, whose interest in art matters is as unflagging as his interest in Welt-Politik, not only authorized the exhibition but enriched it with a portrait of himself painted expressly for this purpose by Professor
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Arthur Kampf, president of the Berlin Academy. So, in spite of the many assertions made by critics that the exhibition after all is not fairly representative of the German art of today, there is really no reason for assuming that the seven galleries in the new wing of the Metropolitan Museum do not contain the best that German art can offer us.

IT IS certain that this collection of pictures,—the group of marbles and bronzes is hardly significant enough to count,—is calculated to give the visitor a concentrated impression of the direction,—or rather the several directions,—in which German artists are now working, and that therefore it carries out to the fullest degree its educational mission to the American people. It is a most interesting object lesson, not only of the art expression of a powerful people, but of the ethical and intellectual trend which stamps its character upon the national life and is inevitably reflected in the national art. In fact, to the close observer its chief value lies in the mute witness it bears of the lines along which Prussianized Germany is developing. The very lack of unity that first strikes the observer is the best evidence of the fearlessly truthful expression of conditions as they are, because there can be no unity in art where there is no deep underlying unity in the life of the nation, and because the false notes of exaggeration, artificiality and morbid imaginings are all struck by the younger men. The modern unrest and uncertainty is emphasized by the fact that the best in the exhibition comes to a focus in the group of paintings by four masters of German art who may be said to represent the feeling of an earlier time. These are Adolf von Menzel, Wilhelm Leibl, Franz von Lenbach, and Arnold Böcklin, who are represented among the living painters because of their influence upon the art not alone of Germany but of all Europe. It was originally intended that only the work of contemporary painters should find a place in this exhibition, but these pictures were sent over because it was realized that without the work of these four men no collection of modern German art could be said to be really representative.

Against the strength and calm and dignity of these men and of such living artists as Max Liebermann and Hans von Bartels, who are content to depict life and nature as clearly, simply and sanely as they see it, the efforts of the Secessionists toward originality and the expression of turbulent individuality beat like troubled waves against the rocks. Some of them seem to be honestly seeking to convey an impression of something which they themselves have not grasped. In other cases the impression is on the face of it morbid, theatrical and artificial, conveying nothing but a feeling of uncertainty.
on the part of the artist and the determination to be different from his fellows at whatever cost to the eternal verities of art and life. The older men, with, of course, the exception of Böcklin, may not have been imaginative, but they were at all events great craftsmen and they painted life as they saw it. The younger men, while showing at times a great deal of cleverness in the handling of their medium, have not yet attained the excuse for eccentricity given by the mastery of a broad and vigorous technique, and they too often paint life as they think it is seen by the decadent but subtle and imaginative Latin races.

The strange part of it is that it is all so academic. Of course, Menzel was never anything else, but he instilled new life and force into academic formulæ. Lenbach, while founding his art upon the old masters, became himself one of the greatest modern masters of portraiture. Leibl applied conventional methods to the strong presentation of solidly real people, and Liebermann, although he led the secession toward realism in the early seventies, has so little of the revolutionary about him that his work, in addition to showing strong traces of Dutch and French influence, is almost classical in its restraint and austerity. As to the self-declared revolutionists who seek the ugly, the bizarre and the morbid that they may thereby emphasize the extent of their reaction from the more conventional phases of life, it is so evident that their work is far from being the outcome of direct and vigorous thought that one can see in it little else than a desperate effort toward eccentricity,—an effort so strenuous that they never seem to realize that even their eccentricity is not their own. The pictures are truthful enough, but only as a revelation of the artist’s viewpoint, not of life. When the Frenchman goes into ecstasies over some specially unwholesome and morbid piece of ugliness, it is at all events a natural expression of a genuine feeling. But when the German does it, it is because he has based his mental attitude toward life and art on what he has learned from the French. This has been proven over and over again in the different phases of Secession art in Germany, just as it was proved in a former day by the reductio ad absurdum of the baroque and rococo styles in architecture and decoration. The Germany of today does not furnish favorable soil for the development of a vigorous national art,—at least along the lines of painting, sculpture and architecture. In her music, as in her science and philosophy, there is evident the true spirit of the race that overshadows all the restless efforts of the modern nation to make herself supreme in commercialism and in world-politics; but as yet she has not found herself in painting. Great creative thought belongs to her, and fathomless mysticism, but not the happy,
care-free understanding of natural things that find their spontaneous expression in such art as has been given us so freely by more simple and buoyant peoples. In a German picture the idea is always the thing, and the idea is just as obvious today as it ever was, the only difference being that it is not so healthy and natural.

JUST as the portrait of the Emperor seems to dominate the exhibition, so his restless, turbulent and aggressive personality seems to draw to a focus the national feeling that is there represented. He aims at supremacy along all lines. He plays at painting, sculpture, music, oratory, poetry and architecture as he plays with the dream of being War-Lord of the world, and the nation, or a part of it, follows his lead; the part that does not follow eats out its heart in smouldering bitterness or open discontent, and all this conflict of warring elements in the nation, all this grasping after false ideals, shows on the walls of the seven galleries at the Metropolitan. The national attitude toward art is summed up in this sentence from Professor Clemen's introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition: “From an age of intellect Germany, once the nation of thinkers and dreamers, emerged and entered on a period of natural sciences and technology and it yearns to quit this for a new artistic age.” When a national art grows up as a spontaneous and inevitable expression of national life, it is never because that nation “yearns to quit” any former period of development, but because the time has come when the strong life within it must seek some new and vigorous outlet. As the life is, so will the art be, in spite of schools and cults; and there could be no stronger evidence of the lack of unity in the national life of Germany than exists in the utter lack of homogeneity that we feel in the work of the modern German painters. One sees that it would be impossible for any group of them to work together toward a common end, as did the French Impressionists toward the solution of the problem of light and air and as a group of our American painters are doing now in the effort to depict the true spirit of our national life.

It is curious that the national foible of overdoing everything is most relentlessly shown by that wonderful realist, Adolf von Menzel, whose paintings are all records of priceless historical value as well as marvels of brilliant technique. No more vivid picture of Court life in Germany a generation ago could be given than exists in his “Ball Supper.” It is a tour de force of draftsmanship and microscopic painting that shows every detail of the brilliant and artificial scene. The rooms are overloaded with decorations; the women’s dresses are overloaded with frills and furbelows; the men’s uniforms are overloaded with bullion and the whole company is evidently
overloading its capacity with enormous quantities of food. We are not spared even the sight of gorgeously clad ladies and magnificent officers stooping low over their plates to facilitate the transfer to their mouths of the delicacies thereon. The picture fairly burns into the mind the idea of self-indulgence and self-seeking, for in addition to the over-eager consumption of food, one can almost hear the buzz of the gossip and scandal that circulates among the chattering groups. This is German court life, as recorded by a man famed for telling the whole truth just as he saw it.

The peasant Leibl saw the other side of German life, and his presentation of the solid, honest, unimaginative country people of old Germany is as truthful as any record of court festivities made by the microscopically faithful brush of Menzel. Leibl worked on a broader and simpler scale. His people are placidly alive and give the impression that, if they moved at all, they would move slowly and deliberately. One of his most famous paintings is that of the “Dachauer Women,” a picture of two peasant women, gaily dressed and evidently well to do, who are sitting side by side, discussing some village happening. It is one of those pictures which is above all else a human document, for no one could study it closely without gaining some insight into the character of these people. The portrait of “Burgomaster Klein” shows the same quality of sincerity and the same clear, strong brush work, as do also the other two pictures from Leibl’s brush which are included in the exhibition. Coming after Leibl, and in many ways overshadowing him, is Liebermann, who was equally attracted by the humbler side of life and whose greatest pictures are those of peasants and work-people. Liebermann, although he led what is called the Berlin Secession from academic limitations, never swung to the extreme of rebellion, but developed a style which, although it shows frankly the influence of Munkacsy and later of Israels, yet stands entirely as his own in the expression of clear, sane, direct perception of the life about him. Of the Liebermann pictures included in this exhibition the most notable is “The Flax Shed at Laren,”—a picture which attracts one to it again and again because of the noble severity of its composition, the large restful spaces and freedom from unnecessary detail, and because of the beauty of the cool gray light that is diffused throughout the shed. The figures of the workers are quiet and dignified, giving the impression of serene and well-controlled movement. There is an excellent portrait also of Dr. Wilhelm Bode,—Director-General of the Royal Museum at Berlin and a prominent member of the commission which sent this exhibition to America,—and a delightful little canvas showing polo players in an open field, which was loaned
by Mr. Reisinger from his private collection. Another picture that is not listed, but is nevertheless a good example of Liebermann, is "The Lace-Maker," an old woman quietly busy with the bobbins and threads on the lace pillow that she holds in her lap.

ALTHOUGH this exhibition has given to stay-at-home Americans their first glimpse of the work of many noted German artists, this can hardly be said concerning the portraits of Franz von Lenbach, whose reputation as one of the foremost portrait painters of the age is world-wide. That the representation of his work might be complete, Mr. Reisinger loaned to the exhibition his famous portrait of Prince Bismarck, which has been so often reproduced in this country. There is a portrait of von Moltke that ranks with the Bismarck, and two gorgeously painted portraits of women. But the best of all,—in fact, the picture that is head and shoulders above anything else in the exhibition,—is the portrait of Theodor Mommsen, which is owned by the Royal National Gallery in Berlin. This picture shows Lenbach at his most powerful and it is an unusually marked example of his favorite method of working,—which is to concentrate all the life in the head, and particularly the eyes, and to leave the rest of the figure somewhat sketchy. In this case it is very sketchy, being hardly more than outlined, but the head is wonderful. In a rather less degree the same may be said of the pastel portrait of Ignaz Dollinger, where every minor detail seems to fade away before the doubt and question in the eyes.

Friedrich August von Kaulbach is represented by two brilliant portraits, one of Geraldine Farrar and the other of the dancer, Ruth St. Denis. Both are gorgeous in color and spirited in pose. A third painting of a child with some cherries is more sugary and conventional. The sacred pictures of Fritz von Uhde are fairly well known in this country, principally through reproduction, for the subjects he chooses are always popular. His "Suffer little children to come unto Me" has been loaned to this exhibition from a private collection in Worms. But another picture less obvious in the story it tells,—and therefore more stimulating to the imagination,—is a better example of his work. This is called "Going Home" and it represents two peasants, with a sleeping child, returning from the day's work along a muddy country road. The picture is filled with a misty gray twilight deepening into dark and the only gleams of light come from the reflection of the water in the road and the little stream beside it, and in the faint glow around the child's head. It is a fair-haired German child carried by a fair-haired German woman, and yet there is the suggestion of the Christ child. Possibly it symbolizes the
sacredness of all childhood and of all the simple family life of the workers out in the open who live close to the soil. It seems natural to mention in connection with von Uhde that other painter of sacred subjects, Eduard von Gebhardt, although the latter has nothing like the imagination of von Uhde and by no means his command of technique. Von Gebhardt’s “Christ and Nicodemus” is not especially significant as a painting, but there is no question but it tells the story so dear to the German heart, and the same may be said of his “Death of Lazarus.”

Arnold Böcklin, who lived in a world of fantasy,—of strange, unearthly landscapes filled with fauns, dryads, and uncouth, joyous monsters that have not left off being animals and yet some day may be human,—is not especially well represented in this collection. There is the portrait of himself with Death fiddling at his shoulder,—a picture that is well known through reproduction and is sufficiently well painted not to disappoint the expectations when one comes to see the original; but this is the best Böcklin in the exhibition. The two other paintings come close to the trivial in the fancy they express and give an impression of artificiality that one does not like to associate with Böcklin. In one of them a nude young woman with elaborately dressed hair, and a body that is much more suggestive of the cramping of modern clothes than of pagan freedom, is standing by a little stream which trickles from the side of a cliff and trying to catch the water in her hands. In the other picture an equally ineffective young woman, clad in a piece of flowing purple gauze, leans against a harp which is apparently placed in a niche in the side of a cliff, and the surf dashes up at her feet. She does not seem to be a siren nor does there seem to be any special meaning conveyed by the presence of the lady and the harp upon such a very inhospitable bit of shore. But even these examples of Böcklin are subtlety itself compared with the collection of horrors which represents his chief follower, Franz von Stuck. These paintings are placed in a group which centers in an extraordinary vision of the infernal regions, a picture meant to be terrifying in the extreme but which to the prosaic American mind comes dangerously close to being funny. One lady writhes in the coils of an iridescent serpent, gorgeous enough to tempt any daughter of Eve, and another gazes straight in front of her with pale fixed eyes that are more suggestive of boiled gooseberries than of spiritual despair. “The Listening Fauns” is rather more agreeable, although harsh and brutal as compared with similar fantasies by Böcklin, and “Pan” is a brute pure and simple. Stuck explains himself through his own portrait, which tells the whole story. It is that of a young man,—smart, military, conventional, official,—paint-
PORTRAIT OF EMPEROR WILLIAM II:
ARTHUR KAMPF, PAINTER.
"GOING HOME": FRITZ VON UHDE, PAINTER.
SKETCHES FROM GERMAN PERIODICALS BY RENÉ REINICKE AND EDUARD THÖNY.
"OXEN IN WATER": HEINRICH ZÜGEL, PAINTER.
“CHRIST AND NICODEMUS”: EDUARD VON GEBHARDT, PAINTER.
"THE DANCE": TWO PANELS FOR MURAL DECORATION: LUDWIG VON HOFMANN, PAINTER.
ing a very unattractive nude lady in a studio that is decorated like a bad dream. The portrait of his wife, while the cleverest piece of painting in the whole collection, evidences only a similar desire to show the morbid and bizarre side of things.

In a way the most marked evidences of cleverness that appear in the exhibition are shown in some of the small water colors and drawings in black and white, for these intensify the characteristics of which I have already spoken. There is a beautiful group of Menzel’s drawings which gives one a most interesting insight into his method of working. Max Klinger contributes eighteen engravings, forming a series that is entitled “A Sequel to Brahms’ ‘Fantasia,’” and these show a phase of the same desire for the grotesque and fantastic that appears in some of the paintings. Scenes from peasant life form the subject of a group of drawings by Eduard Thöny, who in addition to his broad and virile method of handling shows a delightful sense of humor in his portrayal of the character of these simple folk. René Reinicke sees another side of life, and somewhat cruelly depicts what he sees. The little water color entitled “In the Studio” is as severe a stricture upon family pursuit of “the higher life” as could well be imagined, and “Five Ladies in a Café” might form a campaign document against the suffragettes.

It is a relief to turn from this expression of the modern spirit to the wholesome outdoor life depicted by Heinrich Zügel and his pupil and follower, Rudolf Schramm-Zittau. Zügel ranks as the first of the animal painters in Germany, but while there is force and life in the swing of his big oxen through the water, and plenty of movement in the crowding of his scurrying sheep, yet neither have the life and rush of Schramm-Zittau’s “Old Woman Feeding Hens.” This is a large canvas painted in broad, free, dashing style and full of quiet gray light. A sturdy old woman stoops from a doorway throwing grain to a tumultuous crowd of fowls that swamps her to the knees. That is all. Yet it is a bit of real life in the open country and among the simple people.

The German landscape men do not seem significant to us, used as we are in late years to some of the best landscape work in the world. Atmosphere seems to be a problem as yet unsolved by the German brush, and there is an almost ludicrous lack of values, so that the landscapes are more like maps or charts of a given stretch of country than the record of a vision of nature’s ever-varying charm. When they are not charts they are mere scumbles of paint in which the attempted wedding of mismated and entirely uncongenial colors sets the teeth on edge. The same effort to convey an impression of something which never had its like on sea or land is seen in the deco-
rative, and even in the portrait, work of those painters who claim to represent "the turbulent art spirit that is now bursting through all bonds in vigorous young Germany." The trouble is that a vigorous and sincere spirit never expresses itself in this way, and if this exhibition speaks the truth, every struggle of modern German art toward the coveted freedom and originality only carries it farther from the honest simplicity that appears in the examples shown of the art of a former day. Whether excrescences such as the more exaggerated examples of Stuck and the amazing decorative pieces of Erler and Hofmann merely represent a phase of growth similar to the knees-and-elbows of boyhood, or whether they are the ephemeral expression of a passing extravagance of spirit, remains to be seen. At all events, this new art gives at least the impression of being very insincere and theatrical painting, so that we are glad to turn from it to the most unimaginative pictorial records of an honester Germany.

It is said that Mr. Reisinger's plan is to follow up the exhibition in this country of German art by taking a similar exhibition of contemporary American pictures to Berlin next summer. If he does, it will be interesting to hear what the Germans think of it.

**WORKING SONG OF A COUNTRY WOMAN**

The linen's blowing in the sun,
The orchard's all a-bloom,
The step is white, the bread is light,
And garnished every room.

Then sing, sing, sing,
While the goodly bread I knead.
The world is wide; on every side
There's a-many mouths to feed.

The sun-bleached linen's gathered in,
The cows wait in the lane;
The evening falls, the night-bird calls,
And my man is home again.

Then sing, sing, sing,
While the snow-white cloth I spread.
The sun sets clear; there is naught to fear
With our Father overhead.

*Elizabeth Blandin.*