

## MAX LIEBERMANN: AN ARTIST'S CAREER FROM EMPIRE TO THIRD REICH

Symposium at the GHI, March 24, 2006. Jointly organized by the GHI, the Goethe Institut (Washington), and George Mason University. Made possible by grants from Deutsche Telekom and Volkswagen, USA. Conveners: Marion Deshmukh (George Mason University) and Kelly McCullough (GHI).

Participants: Timothy Benson (Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies, Los Angeles County Museum of Art), Jay Clarke (Art Institute of Chicago), Matthias Eberle (Kunsthochschule Berlin-Weissensee and the Max Liebermann Archiv, Berlin), Françoise Forster-Hahn (University of California, Riverside), Barbara Gaetgens (Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte/Centre allemande d'histoire de l'art), Steven Mansbach (University of Maryland, College Park), Christof Mauch (GHI), Margreet Nouwen (Max Liebermann Archiv, Berlin), Peter Paret (Emeritus, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ), Christopher With (National Gallery of Art, Washington DC).

The symposium was held to coincide with the first-ever U.S. retrospective exhibition of paintings by the late-nineteenth-century German modernist artist Max Liebermann. This exhibition took place from September 15, 2005 to January 29, 2006 at the Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, and from March 10, 2006 to July 30, 2006 at the Jewish Museum, New York. In addition to the retrospective, a graphics exhibition curated by Marion Deshmukh and featuring prints from the National Gallery of Art and private collections, as well as book illustrations and facsimile letters from the Leo Baeck Institute of New York, was held at the Goethe Institut Washington, DC from March 16 through April 28, 2006. Marion Deshmukh opened the exhibition with an illustrated lecture on "Max Liebermann: Art and Politics in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Germany." Peter Paret presented a lecture on the evening preceding the symposium on "Max Liebermann: The Artist as Cultural Politician."

The symposium aimed to highlight features of the artist's career and milieu that have not been explored in other venues or publications. Peter Paret's lecture on Max Liebermann preceding the symposium highlighted the politicized nature of contemporary art in Wilhelmine Germany and the relationship between Liebermann's art and his organizational efforts on behalf of multiple artists' associations during the

Imperial period and on behalf of the Prussian Academy of Art in the 1920s. The symposium began with a lecture by Marion Deshmukh on “*Sonderwege* Historical and Art Historical: The Case of Max Liebermann,” wherein she explored how both historians and art historians have configured master narratives around the issue of Germany’s problematic past. In his lifetime and after, Liebermann’s art was often reflected through the lens of nationhood and the constitutive elements of German culture. She summarized the way historians and art historians have problematized Liebermann’s art and his cultural activities on behalf of international modernism. Her talk was followed by Françoise Forster-Hahn’s discussion of the pivotal year 1906 in her paper “How Modern is Modern? Max Liebermann and the Discourses of Modernism.” That year Berlin’s *Nationalgalerie* mounted a comprehensive exhibition of nineteenth-century German art. Through its display, it introduced a new history of German painting. Forster-Hahn also described and analyzed the 1906 Berlin Secession exhibition wherein its jury rejected a work by Max Beckmann. The *Brücke* Manifesto, the clarion call of an emerging group of expressionist artists, was also published in 1906. Liebermann exhibited in the *Nationalgalerie* show and the 1906 Berlin Secession show, as well as in an international exhibition of modern art by Jewish artists at London’s Whitechapel Gallery that same year. Forster-Hahn employed these three exhibition venues and their reception to “trace [Liebermann’s] place in the emerging narratives of a history of modern art.”

In “Reading between the Lines: Max Liebermann as Printmaker,” Jay Clarke discussed the critical reception of Liebermann’s printmaking, focusing on the “perceived Germanness and/or Jewishness in his work at the turn of the century.” She described the distinction made by critics between the foreignness of his paintings and the Germanness of his graphics. She also illuminated the critical consensus, seeing Liebermann’s graphic works as a crucial marker of the artist’s intentions, privileging his printmaking to a far greater extent than later art interpretations have done. Using the extensive collection of wartime publications housed at the Rifkind Center, Timothy Benson’s paper “*Kriegszeit*: German Artists and the Great War” discussed how the First World War was “both intentionally and inadvertently constructed in the public forum” by such journals as *Kriegszeit*, *Der Bildermann*, *Die Aktion*, *Der Sturm*, and others. Liebermann provided numerous illustrations for *Kriegszeit*, and his changing imagery reflected ambivalent responses to the conflict, ranging from enthusiastic support to worrisome hesitations about the war’s human toll on the nation.

Margreet Nouwen described Liebermann’s portrayal of women in her presentation “Gender and Representation: Women in the Work of

Max Liebermann." She discussed three groups of women: the Dutch peasants prominently and objectively featured in his early works through the turn of the century; portraits of his wife Martha, daughter Käthe, and granddaughter Maria; and finally, commissioned portraits of prominent Imperial and Weimar individuals. She noted that Liebermann often had difficulty in portraying women in an intimate, personal manner. She contrasted the portrait of Martha Liebermann painted by the artist's Swedish colleague Anders Zorn, which featured Martha as a vivacious, glamorous beauty, with Liebermann's portrayal of her as sober, reflective, and understated. Barbara Gaehtgens's paper "Liebermann and Monet: The Conceptual Garden" contrasted the famous garden of Claude Monet in Giverny, with its abundance of flowers, its Japanese footbridge, and pond, with Liebermann's meticulously designed garden at his summer home in Wannsee, conceived as a series of outdoor rooms. While Monet often concentrated on patterns of reflection created by his waterlily pond, Liebermann's imagery tended to focus on greenery—his birch trees, garden paths, and grassy knolls, with family members sitting on benches. Comparisons were made in analyzing the bright palettes of both artists' paintings. Gaehtgens also discussed the two artists' intimate knowledge of every corner of their gardens and their desire to paint virtually all the garden areas. She also noted that the artists' twilight years were focused on their gardens.

Matthias Eberle's presentation "The Making of a *Catalogue Raisonné*" outlined the various obstacles surrounding the construction of the *catalogue raisonné* of Liebermann's oil paintings and oil studies. His discussion centered on the efforts to track down the provenance of paintings, many of which were scattered by two wars, economic uncertainties of the Weimar Republic, the politics of the Nazi regime, which branded Liebermann a "degenerate artist," and finally the postwar divisions of Germany during the Cold War. Approximately a third of Liebermann's art is missing. In often humorous fashion, Eberle recounted his many travels across Europe and the United States in tracking down information on various paintings' whereabouts. Finally, Christopher With's paper "German Art and American Sensibilities: Collecting German Art at the National Gallery of Art" detailed the often idiosyncratic reasons for the paucity of German art in the National Gallery. Several key collectors and benefactors, notably the Mellon, Widener, and Kress families, tended to collect Italian and French art, though several German Renaissance Old Masters such as Holbein did enter the collections. Only recently has the National Gallery purchased a Caspar David Friedrich painting. Liebermann prints were donated to the museum primarily by the Rosenwald and Marcy families, but no Liebermann painting is in their collection. Thus U.S.

narratives of modern art history have often been written based on the narratives of museum display.

Following discussions of the papers by participants and a large audience, including the great-granddaughter of the artist, Steven Mansbach, the symposium's moderator concluded the enriching conference. The symposium highlighted the many cultural, political, and artistic facets that Liebermann's life and works reflected in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

*Marion Deshmukh*