

The Emperor's Old Clothes
Avant-garde Art and Conservative
Reaction in Late Imperial Germany



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Cover

Historic postcard showing the monument by Alexander
Calandrelli to Friedrich II, Elector of Brandenburg on the
Siegesallee, c1902, private collection

AUCKLAND
ART GALLERY
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Above

Figure 1
Unknown photographer
Historic postcard showing a view of the Siegesallee
toward the Siegessäule (upper left) and the Reichstag
(building upper right), c1905, private collection

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In December 1901 the completion of a monumental sculptural project running along both sides of the Siegesallee (Victory Avenue) (fig 1) in the Tiergarten, a park in central Berlin, was marked with a speech by the German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II (1859–1941). The emperor's prescriptive remarks highlighted the antagonism toward the artistic avant-garde felt by conservative elements within Prussian and German society. In the context of this and similar royal pronouncements on art,¹ and in light of subsequent history, the Siegesallee project can be seen as a rearguard cultural action by reactionary forces. Such efforts asserted a narrow interpretation of the role of art in public life, evidenced by the choice of subject matter: conventional, historicising statues of deceased rulers. Further, the style in which the sculptures were executed is important evidence of the high-level opposition to developments in contemporary German art in the two decades before World War I.

The Siegesallee project and the emperor's remarks quickly attained notoriety and are used here to generate context around the earliest works in the exhibition *Age of Turmoil: Art in Germany 1900–1923* at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki (15 November 2014–31 May 2015). The exhibition surveys some key artistic developments in Germany during the first quarter of the 20th century, focusing on prints by a number of key artists.²

Running north through the Tiergarten park, the Siegesallee (Victory Avenue) was bisected by the Charlottenburger Chaussee (now Straße des 17. Juni) close to its origin at the Brandenburg Gate, before terminating at Königsplatz (now Platz der Republik), the plaza before the Reichstag building – then, as now, the seat of the German federal parliament. The avenue was aligned with the towering Siegessäule (Victory Monument) which dominated the Königsplatz and was itself flanked by monuments to Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898) and Field Marshal Helmuth Graf von Moltke (1800–1891), two Prussian heroes of the wars of unification which led to German federation in 1871. Enjoying such a prominent location in Berlin's largest urban park, and designed to coordinate with monuments and buildings recalling the unification of the German states, the Siegesallee was a politically freighted space in the heart of the new German capital. Acknowledging that the emperor was also king of Prussia (the largest of the federal states), the placement and composition of the Siegesallee sculptural project have been discussed in terms of a Prussian-centric policy which conflated German history with that of Prussia.³

Announced in 1895, the Siegesallee project was the emperor's personal gift to the people of Berlin and included 32 discrete sculptural groups each consisting of a marble hemicycle housing a larger-than-life-size statue of a former ruler of the Mark of Brandenburg (a historic polity within the Kingdom of Prussia) along with busts of two significant contemporary figures (fig 2). In keeping with the emperor's well-known opinion on what constituted art, the project was executed under the direction of Reinhold Begas (1831–1911), the leading Prussian academic sculptor. As a result, the statues of the emperor's predecessors conform with the theatrical, historicising tastes of the 19th century and show no evidence of more recent developments in European sculptural practice.

Pontificating on the 'eternal laws' of nature, the emperor argued that art, too, must conform to eternal and unchanging 'laws of aesthetics' which had been perfectly expressed in the work of the ancient Greeks and Romans.⁴ One extract from the speech is worth quoting at length:

Even the lower classes, after their toil and hard work, should be lifted up and inspired by ideal forces. We Germans have permanently acquired these great ideals, while other peoples have more or less lost them. Only the Germans remain, and are above all others called upon to guard these great ideals, to nurture and perpetuate them, and it is part of these ideals to enable the working and toiling classes, too, to become inspired by the beautiful, and to help them liberate themselves from the constraints of their ordinary thoughts and attitudes.

But when art, as often happens today, shows us only misery, and shows it to us even uglier than misery is anyway, then art commits a sin against the German people. The supreme task of our cultural effort is to foster our ideals. If we are and want to remain a model for other nations, our entire people must share in this effort, and if culture is to fulfil its task completely it must reach down to the lowest levels of the population. That can be done only if art holds out its hands to raise the people up, instead of descending into the gutter.⁵

This startlingly nationalist and reactionary position stemmed from the assumption that all art should be measured against classical models: only those subjects clothed in either classically-inspired forms or idealised academic Realism were suitable expressions of the cultural tradition to which German artists were the ostensibly loyal successors. Further, art was required to fulfil a didactic function through the choice of morally uplifting subject-matter: statues depicting idealised historical figures met this requirement, serving both as ornaments in the public park (to be enjoyed by all classes at their leisure), and informative lessons in a reaffirmed dynastic history which doubled as the history of the modern German (not merely Prussian) state.⁶ By the time the emperor made his remarks, such assumptions had been questioned in Germany for upwards of 30 years. Seen at the 1869 Munich International Art Exhibition, the paintings of the French



Above

Figure 2
Unknown photographer
Historic postcard showing the monument by Alexander Calandrelli to Friedrich II, Elector of Brandenburg on the Siegesallee, c1902, private collection



Left

Figure 3
Franz Sturtzkopf
The Hermit, c1876
oil on canvas
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
gift of Isidore Alexander, 1891

Realist Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) had a profound impact on the young German painter Wilhelm Leibl (1844–1900) who eventually abandoned urban life for the countryside where he painted coolly observed rustic scenes devoid of social critique. Despite its evident lack of political commentary, Realism courted controversy either because 'low-life' subjects were not considered sufficiently elevating, or an otherwise appropriate subject was not treated in the reverential fashion which tradition demanded. Thus *The Hermit*, c1876, by Franz Sturtzkopf (1852–1927), showing a semi-naked elderly man with varicose veins and weathered features, seated in the wilderness and reading from the Gospels, was roundly criticised for its 'atrocious naturalism' ('abscheulichem Naturalismus') when it was exhibited at the Academy in Berlin in 1877 (fig 3).⁷

The circle of Realist artists that formed around Leibl included Wilhelm Trübner (1851–1917) who despite his early forays into

Right

Figure 4
Wilhelm Trübner
Dame in violetterm Kleid (Lady in Violet Dress), 1911
oil on canvas
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
gift of Dr Myer, 1957



similarly rustic subjects eventually became a society portraitist, enjoying great success toward the end of his career. By then his brushwork had become looser, the paint being applied in a broad strokes, with more refined modulations of tone reserved for the face alone (fig 4). Significantly, in his 1898 book *Die Verwirrung der Kunstbegriffe* (The Confusion of Artistic Ideas), Trübner categorically rejected the link between narrative content and artistic significance, dismissing the attachment of lay commentators (including the emperor) to rousing subject matter and instead arguing that artistic significance lay only in the manner of representation.⁸ Trübner's opinion was anathema to artistic conservatives, but his critical success points to the shifting appetite for modernist work, particularly among the wealthy middle class.

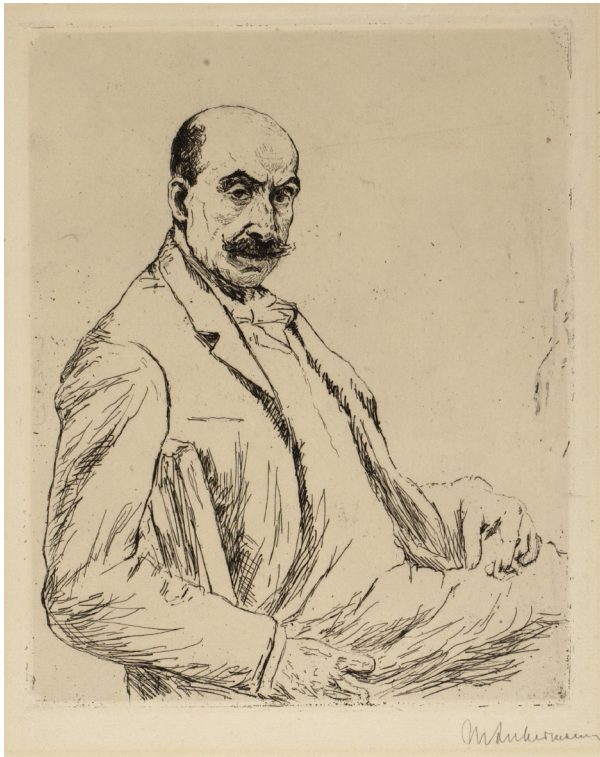
Leibl's ideological retreat into the countryside was countered in the work of Max Liebermann (1847–1935), one of the leading German Impressionists (fig 5). Informed by 17th-century Dutch models, Liebermann began his career in a Realist vein with controversial studies of low-life subjects, including his early *Women Plucking*

Geese, 1872 (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), and rural scenes encountered during the summers spent in the Netherlands. But by the 1890s, and much like the French originators of Impressionism during the 1870s, Liebermann had turned to the city for inspiration. His images of modern urban life depict the milieu of the middle class, including the public parks and gardens in which they disported themselves (fig 6).⁹ The two Liebermann prints exhibited in *Age of Turmoil* depict just such settings; indeed, *Reitweg im Tiergarten* (Bridle-path in the Tiergarten), 1914, is set in the very park used by the emperor as the backdrop for his Siegesallee project (fig 7).

By the time the Siegesallee sculptures were unveiled, the breach between the avant-garde and the Berlin establishment was well established. That conflict stemmed in part from the non-conformist work of both Realists and Impressionists who, nonetheless, remained members of artists' organisations such as the Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstgenossenschaft (General German Art Co-operative) and the Verein Berliner Künstler (Association of Berlin Artists). Differences became pronounced during the so-called 'Munch Affair' in 1892 when the solo exhibition of Norwegian painter Edvard Munch (1863–1944), hosted by the Verein, closed after only one week following a vote by the general membership. And while those events threatened to split the Verein, it was not until the 1898 founding of the Berlin Secession that avant-garde artists withdrew from and defined themselves in opposition to the Verein. This division antagonised conservatives wedded to the academic work promoted by leading members of the Verein and the Berlin chapter of the Kunstgenossenschaft (the two were virtually identical¹⁰) which, together with the Prussian Academy of Arts, had administered the annual Berlin salon since 1892. The management and format of that exhibition were among the several grievances of the new Secession. After negotiations failed on questions of separate spaces and an independent jury for its artists' submissions, the Secession raised the funds necessary to establish its own premises, holding its first, highly successful exhibition in May 1899.

Rather than sharing stylistic affinities, the artists of the Secession were united in their opposition to the policies of the Verein which had come to enjoy a close relationship with the Prussian state in a compromise reached in the aftermath of the 'Munch Affair'.¹¹ However, German Impressionism effectively defined the Secession, particularly in the person and work of Liebermann who headed the organisation from 1898 until 1911. Despite his undoubted success, Liebermann laboured under a dual burden. As an advocate of Impressionism, a style with its origins in France, Liebermann encountered the hostile nationalism of the new German state which was forged in conflict with France.¹² As a Jew, Liebermann was also a target of the anti-Semitism which punctuated the debate over modernity in Germany, both in relation to art and industrial capital.¹³

Questions about the desirability of aspects of modernity were connected to the place of art in public life. This was particularly the



Above

Figure 5
Max Liebermann
Self Portrait, 1906
etching with drypoint
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 1955



Above

Figure 6
Max Liebermann
Im Garten (In the Garden), 1910
etching and drypoint
courtesy of the Alfons and Marie Blaschke Art Trust



Above

Figure 7
Max Liebermann
Reitweg im Tiergarten (Bridle-path in the Tiergarten),
1914
drypoint
courtesy of the Alfons and Marie Blaschke Art Trust

case as the emperor made art, and especially the art of which he did not approve, the subject of personal interventions which did not go unnoticed in artistic circles or the press. As already indicated, for the conservatives who shared his views, art played a vital role in asserting European and specifically German values, promoting public virtues and supporting the state. Within this framework, the pedagogic and nationalist purpose of art left little room for either stylistic innovation or freedom of expression.¹⁴

In addition to public interventions such as the Siegesallee, the emperor was able to exercise his influence through the Prussian and federal agencies responsible for state patronage, including the Prussian Academy of Arts and its related school. He reacted angrily to the acquisition of international avant-garde and non-academic art for the Berlin Nationalgalerie by its enlightened director Hugo von Tschudi (1851–1911), a friend of Liebermann. In a byzantine plot, in 1908 the emperor attempted to dismiss Tschudi in order to install as director the leading academic painter Anton von Werner (1843–1915), who was also the head of the conservative school of the Prussian Academy of Art. While the emperor was not opposed to the acquisition of foreign art per se, he aligned himself with those who believed that Berlin's national gallery should represent only the work of German artists and, moreover, only those artists who were free of the internationalist tendencies of modernism.¹⁵

Similarly, following the 1892 agreement between the Academy and the Verein, the emperor's patronage of the annual salon permitted him to act with direct consequences for individual artists.¹⁶ In 1898 the jury of the Berlin salon recommended a small gold medal for Käthe Kollwitz's series of prints, *Ein Weberaufstand* (A Weavers' Revolt). Like much of Kollwitz's work, *Ein Weberaufstand* was a charged commentary on social conditions in the empire, making her one of the few members of the soon-to-be-formed Secession who engaged directly with politics (fig 8).¹⁷ However, despite the jury's recommendation, the responsible government minister appended a note advising the emperor against the award as he did not consider the subject-matter suitable – advice which was readily accepted.¹⁸

While the emperor sought to exercise personal authority in the arts, his interventions increasingly prompted criticism in the press. His attempt to dislodge Tschudi from the Nationalgalerie in Berlin had resulted in a public scandal which damaged the reputations of both the emperor and Werner; while his scuppering of an innovative and inclusive selection process for Germany's art exhibit at the 1904 St Louis World's Fair (the Louisiana Purchase Exposition) had exposed him to criticism in the press and prompted debate in the Reichstag.¹⁹

Further, though the emperor might dictate to federal and Prussian agencies, the constitution of the empire left cultural policy to the governments of each of the federal states.²⁰ An informative example of just how independent regional artistic centres could be was the award to Kollwitz of a gold medal for *Der Weberaufstand* at the salon

Right

Figure 8
Käthe Kollwitz
Die Pflüger (The Ploughmen), 1908
etching, aquatint, soft-ground etching, drypoint
from: *Der Bauernkrieg* (The Peasants' War)
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 1982



in Dresden just one year after the débâcle in Berlin. Quite unlike the cultural dominance exercised by the British and French capitals, many of Germany's regional cities enjoyed distinguished histories as artistic centres; indeed, for most of the 19th century the Bavarian capital, Munich was considered the leading artistic centre in what would become the German Empire. And beyond the sway of Berlin's policy, royal patronage continued to manifest in novel ways which challenged the narrow perspective of the emperor and his circle. These included the Grand Duke of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach's support for both an innovative school of applied arts led by the Belgian Henry van der Velde (1863–1957) and the new Deutsche Künstlerbund (German Artists' League), a national contemporary arts organisation which ultimately broke the stranglehold of the Kunstgenossenschaft.²¹

Royal patronage, however, was not alone in either setting or supporting new directions in the arts. Following federation in 1871, Germany had rapidly industrialised leading to the growth of the urban middle class. As this class came to challenge the traditional aristocracy in wealth (though not in political power) it became an important source of income for artists beyond that traditionally offered by the state academies and the exhibitions of artists' organisations. Instead, new and diverse elements of a modern art market were emerging, including dealer galleries whose premises and regular exhibitions provided valuable alternatives to the annual exhibitions, and civic patronage (including museums) which was dominated by the liberal middle classes.²² This shift in the traditional form of the art market reflected in part the weakening of the traditional artists' associations. Challenged by the rise of secessions and other artists' exhibiting groups in Munich (1892), Berlin (1898) and elsewhere, the Academy, the Berlin Verein and the regional chapters of the conservative Kunstgenossenschaft lost their hold on the selection and marketing of art.²³

This short account of some of the challenges confronting the German avant-garde can only point to the complexity of the rapidly developing



Above

Figure 9
Hermann Max Pechstein
Badende VII (Bathers VII) 1912
hand-coloured woodcut
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki
purchased 1963
© Pechstein Hamburg/Tökendorf /Bild-Kunst.
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situation in the visual arts. The Siegesallee project represented not only resistance to modernity, but the emperor's active hostility to the work of artists who did not conform to the strictures of academic art. The bombastic statues that lined the Siegesallee may have exemplified the emperor's narrow interpretation of art and its purpose, but this could not hold back the changes wrought by Realism and Impressionism, nor the liberating effect of the secessions in Berlin and elsewhere.

As significant as the developments recounted here were, the situation was to change still more radically within four years of the emperor's Siegesallee speech: in 1905 a group of four architecture students established in Dresden the *Künstlergruppe die Brücke* (Artists' Group The Bridge), the founding movement of Expressionism in the German visual arts. Whatever concerns Realism and Impressionism had raised for artistic conservatives must have paled in significance against the forthright rejection of the artistic canon and traditional art education by the *Brücke* artists. This small coterie was largely self-taught and their work reflects the innovations that came with experiment. Bold linear construction and brilliant colours mark much of their work (fig. 9) all of which is in marked contrast to the artificially smooth surfaces of contemporary academic painting or the loosely defined forms of German Impressionism (fig 10). And while its members participated in exhibitions managed by the Berlin Secession (of which they were members), the antagonism between that organisation and the new generation of the avant-garde was too great to contain, resulting in the founding of the short-lived New Secession in 1910 and the further fragmentation of the artistic community.



Right

Figure 10
Hans Meid
Lichtenthaler Allee in Baden-Baden (Lichtenthaler Avenue in Baden-Baden), 1918
drypoint
courtesy of the Alfons and Marie Blaschke Art Trust

¹ See, for instance, a translation of a passage from a speech given by the emperor in 1902 in the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Prussian Academy of Arts, cited in Helen Boorman, 'Rethinking the Expressionist Era; Wilhelmine Cultural Debates and Prussian Elements in German Expressionism' in *Oxford Art Journal*, vol 9, no 2, 1986, p14 (note 13).

² Most of the works were selected from the Gallery's own modest collection of German modernist art, predominantly examples of Impressionist and Expressionist printmaking. These works include a small group of striking woodcuts by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884–1976) which came to the Gallery in 1956 by way of a gift from the estate of Dr Rosa Schapire (1874–1954). An early supporter and historian of Expressionism, Schapire was the author of the 1924 *catalogue raisonné* of the graphic work of Schmidt-Rottluff. The Gallery is grateful to show also a small number of prints from the Alfons and Marie Blaschke Art Trust. The Trust's holdings of early 20th-century German printmaking represent two collections which were combined through the marriage of two exiles from the National Socialist regime – one of them Jewish – who later settled in New Zealand. Together with those works which belonged to Schapire (herself a Jewish refugee from Nazi persecution), the prints from the Blaschke Trust connect the viewer with the deeply conflicted world of the visual arts in Germany – the turmoil within which was symptomatic of ultimately more pressing threats.

³ Jeffrey R Smith, 'The Monarchy versus the Nation: The "Festive Year" in 1913 in Wilhelmine Germany' in *German Studies Review*, vol 23, no 2, 2000, p 259; and Peter Paret, *The Berlin Secession: Modernism and Its Enemies in Imperial Germany*, The Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA, 1980, p 26.

⁴ Paret, *The Berlin Secession*, p 25.

⁵ As above, p 26–7.

⁶ For a useful analysis of public art and ceremonial as strategies employed by the imperial regime, see Smith, 'The Monarchy versus the Nation: The "Festive Year" in 1913 in Wilhelmine Germany', pp 257–74.

⁷ See 'Die akademische Kunstausstellung in Berlin, II' in *Kunst-chronik*, no 2, vol.XII, 1877, pp 18–19.

⁸ Françoise Forster-Hahn (ed), et al, *Spirit of an Age: Nineteenth-century Paintings from the Nationalgalerie, Berlin*, National Gallery, London, 2001, p 154.

⁹ Marion F Deshmukh, "'Politics Is an Art": The Cultural Politics of Max Liebermann in Wilhelmine Germany' in Françoise Forster-Hahn, *Imagining Modern German Culture 1889–1910*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1996, p 169.

¹⁰ Paret, *The Berlin Secession*, p 13.

¹¹ For the relationship between the state and the previously independent Verein, see Peter Paret, 'Art and the National Image: The Conflict over Germany's Participation in the St Louis Exposition' in *Central European History*, vol 11, no 2, June 1978, pp 173–83.

¹² Deshmukh in Forster-Hahn, *Imagining Modern German Culture 1889–1910*, pp 175–6.

¹³ This included the rise of centralised commerce, particularly the department store, which impacted heavily on the small traders and artisans who had until recently characterised the German marketplace. The significant number of such stores owned in Berlin by German Jews was a further complicating factor. See Kenneth D Barkin, 'The Crisis of Modernity, 1887–1902' in Forster-Hahn, *Imagining Modern German Culture 1889–1910*, pp 27, 31–2.

¹⁴ Peter Paret, 'The Tschudi Affair' in *The Journal of Modern History*, vol 53, no 4, 1981, p 592.

¹⁵ As above, p 595.

¹⁶ Paret, *The Berlin Secession*, pp 20–21

¹⁷ Paret, 'Art and the National Image', pp 178–9.

¹⁸ Paret, *The Berlin Secession*, pp 21, 24.

¹⁹ For more on this episode see Peter Paret, *The Berlin Secession*, pp 92–155; and Paret, 'Art and the National Image', pp 173–83.

²⁰ As constituted at federation in 1871, the German Empire included four kingdoms, six grand duchies, six duchies, seven principalities, and three free cities. Delimiting the responsibilities of the imperial government, Article 4 of the imperial constitution excluded cultural policy, which remained the responsibility of state governments. See Charles E McClelland, “Young Germans, Not Young Greeks and Romans”: Art, Culture, and Educational Reform in Wilhelmine Germany’, in Forster-Hahn, *Imagining Modern German Culture 1889–1910*, p 42.

²¹ Theodore Fiedler ‘Weimar contra Berlin: Harry Graf Kessler and the Politics of Modernism’ in Forster-Hahn, *Imagining Modern German Culture*, pp 115–16.

²² Wolfgang J Mommsen, *Imperial Germany 1867–1918: Politics, Culture and Society in an Authoritarian State*, Arnold, 1997, pp 120–22, 133.

²³ McClelland in Forster-Hahn, *Imagining Modern German Culture 1889–1910*, p 45.

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