

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Jon Whiteley

exhibition review of

Max Liebermann und die Schweiz

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 13, no. 2 (Autumn 2014)

Citation: Jon Whiteley, exhibition review of *Max Liebermann und die Schweiz*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 13, no. 2 (Autumn 2014), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn14/whiteley-reviews-max-liebermann-und-die-schweiz>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).

Max Liebermann und die Schweiz

Oskar Reinhart Museum, Winterthur, Switzerland
4 July–19 October 2014

Catalogue:

Max Liebermann und die Schweiz. Meisterwerke aus Schweizer Sammlungen.

Editor Marc Fehlmann, with essays by Marc Fehlmann, Christina Feilchenfeldt, Johannes Nathan, and Gregor Wedekind.

Munich: Hirmer Verlag GmbH, 2014.

48 pp.; 125 color illustrations; bibliography; index.

CHF 49; \$58 (hard cover)

ISBN: 978-3-7774-2276-3.

By an analogy with a number of recent exhibitions—*Cézanne in Provence* or *Turner in Italy* for example—the title of *Max Liebermann und die Schweiz* [Max Liebermann and Switzerland] might have led visitors to expect an exhibition of paintings inspired by Switzerland. The theme of this exhibition, however, is a great deal more interesting than this. As Marc Fehlmann, Director of the Oskar Reinhart Museum, points out in a fascinating essay in the catalogue, Liebermann visited Switzerland but was not inspired by the experience to paint any pictures. The theme of the exhibition is implied in the subtitle *Meisterwerke aus Schweizer Sammlung* [Masterpieces from Swiss Collections], a phrase that sounds a great deal drier than the underlying theme of this exhibition—the reception of Liebermann by Swiss museums and Swiss collectors in his lifetime and in the ten years after his death in 1935—that has an interest far outside the narrow confines of art history.

The underlying point of this exhibition will not immediately strike visitors, most of whom will enjoy it as a survey of the work of a very pleasing painter. The large, long room built on top of the Oskar Reinhart Museum by Johann Frei in the 1990s has been divided into thematic sections to provide an effective overview of Liebermann's long career (fig. 1). On the right, on entering, is a section of genre scenes, mostly sketches, several of which are noticeably influenced by the artists of the Hague School especially by Josef Israels (1824–1911) whom Liebermann met for the first time in 1881 and who remained a life-long friend. The delightful sketch of a girl, seated on the dunes, painted in 1887, might (at a distance) be mistaken for a work by Israels although, on closer study, it is evident that the paint has been applied with a patchy touch that still bears a trace of the influence of Mihály Munkácsy (1844–1900), whom Liebermann knew and admired when he was a student in Weimar (fig. 2). Elsewhere, among these early sketches, are hints of Adolph Menzel (1815–1905), an artist whose works were collected by Liebermann from an early date. Although Liebermann worked in Barbizon during the years from 1873 to 1878 when he was based in Paris and although he admired the work of Jean-François Millet in particular, the impact of the French painters of the generation of Gustave Courbet and Millet seems to have been chiefly felt through the work of a second generation of painters, Munkácsy, Israels, Wilhelm Leibl (1844–1900), Franz von Lenbach (1836–1904), and others who, like Liebermann, were not French.



Fig. 1, Overview of exhibition, *Max Liebermann und die Schweiz*, Oskar Reinhart Museum, Winterthur.
Photograph by Silvio Näf. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Max Liebermann, *Girl and Goat*, 1887. Oil on canvas. Private collection. Photograph by Philipp Hitz, Swiss Institute of Art Research, Zurich. [\[larger image\]](#)

The genre pictures in the exhibition are followed by a section of portraits, which begins with a self-portrait of 1902, in which Liebermann appears in profile working on a large framed canvas. Nearly all his many self-portraits show him in the act of painting. Although he had a number of roles in life, he saw himself primarily as an artist who would, had he been able, have happily spent his life in detachment from the larger world. He admired Munkácsy's work but did not (like Munkácsy and many European artists of the time) attempt to engage with politics or with social reform. Despite his patriotic support for the German cause in the First World War, his chief response to the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 was to retire to his garden on the Wannsee and paint the flowerbeds recently laid out for him by Alfred Lichtwark (fig. 3).



Fig. 3, Max Liebermann, *Kitchen Garden in Wannsee to the West*, 1922. Oil on canvas. Private collection, courtesy Walter Feilchenfeldt, Zurich. Photograph by Philipp Hitz, Swiss Institute of Art Research, Zurich.
[\[larger image\]](#)

Next to the self-portrait in the exhibition hangs a portrait of Carl Bernstein, painted in 1892 two years before the sitter's death. Like many of Liebermann's early sitters, Bernstein was a close friend of the artist and also a figure of major importance in bringing the work of the French Impressionists to Germany. The Bernstein collection was the catalyst that prompted the sudden burst of color that appeared in Liebermann's art in the 1890s and defined the direction of his art for the following four decades. This is aptly illustrated in the next section of the exhibition that includes a number of the views of the garden in Wannsee painted with a new vigor and a strong sense of color that could only have been possible with a first hand knowledge of the work of the Impressionists. The Bernsteins, prompted by Carl's French cousin, Charles Ephrussi, led the way in bringing Impressionism to Berlin, followed by Hugo von Tschudi, Director of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin; Paul and Bruno Cassirer, joint founders of the famous Berlin gallery; Heinrich Thannhauser, proprietor of the *Moderne Galerie* in Munich (whose portrait is in the present exhibition); Thannhauser's son, Justin who ran a branch of the family business in Lucerne before handing it over to his cousin; and Siegfried Rosengart, father of Angela Rosengart who recently established a foundation in Lucerne for the preservation of the family art collection. Liebermann himself assembled one of the most important collections of French Impressionist works in Germany, including a fine *Poppy Field* by Monet (today in a private US collection) given to him by Carl Bernstein, and other works by Camille Pissarro, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Edgar Degas, and (above all) Edouard Manet, the artist with whom Liebermann felt the greatest affinity. Liebermann's garden scenes have often been compared to Monet's paintings, but the link with Manet's views of gardens is, perhaps, more telling.

Much of the remainder of the exhibition shows how his art evolved from his early interest in the sketchy brushwork of Menzel and Munkácsy into the near abstract energy of his *Hunter with a Pack of Hounds* (cat. no. 57) of 1913 or the atmospheric impasto of the sea views painted in Holland before the First World War (fig. 4). To judge from a number of his works, he did not varnish his pictures, giving them a somewhat dry appearance. He particularly liked to create a dappled effect of light with thick dabs of impasto that recalls, but does not imitate, the effects

of sunlight in the work of Renoir (fig. 5). Hands are always painted with long tremulous strokes of the brush, perhaps echoing his early love of Frans Hals and Rembrandt.



Fig. 4, Max Liebermann, *The Lifeguard's Horse and Cart*, 1908. Oil on canvas. Dr. Hans-Joachim and Elisabeth Bönsch Art Foundation, Wuppertal. Photography courtesy of Koller Auctions, Zurich. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 5, Max Liebermann, *"De Oude Vink" Restaurant in Leiden*, 1905. Oil on canvas. Kunsthau, Zurich. Purchased with contributions of Alfred Jöhr und Gebhard A. Guyer. Photo by Markus Bühler, Kunsthau, Zurich. [\[larger image\]](#)

It is a striking fact that it has been possible to create a comprehensive overview of Liebermann's art from Swiss collections alone. An exhibition like this, without foreign loans, could not have been put together in any other country besides Germany, not even in America where one might have expected to find an abundance of his works. Part of the reason for this is not because his art was too advanced for contemporary taste, but because he was classed as an Impressionist at the time, particularly in Britain and America, when enthusiasm for modern art, and for Impressionism in particular, was directed towards France. There was, in general, little opportunity outside Germany for selling the work of recent German artists. Liebermann's name was well known in many countries and his work was familiar—and awarded prizes—at various international exhibitions, but purchases were few. Two monographic exhibitions of his work, held in London in 1934 at the Leicester Gallery and in 1938 at the New Burlington

Galleries, did not alter this lack of sales significantly despite the support from almost every powerful figure in the London art world at the time. In 1931, the Tate purchased the *Memorial Service for the Emperor Frederick at Kosen*, painted in 1888, but did not respond to the opportunities to acquire more in the later 1930s. Liebermann's last self-portrait, painted a year before the artist's death, was offered to a reluctant Tate at the end of the 1934 exhibition, but was only acquired because Lord Marks bought it for the gallery.

In France, Liebermann's work was admired not least because of his obvious links with the Hague School which was very popular at the time in France. He exhibited at several major exhibitions, his work fit into the taste for Naturalism that dominated the late nineteenth-century art world and he was patronised by the major firms of Bernheim-Jeune and Georges Petit. The high point in his standing in France was reached in 1894 when the state acquired his *Beer Garden in Brannenburg* for the Musée du Luxembourg. But then, in part because of his revulsion over the Dreyfus Affair, Liebermann withdrew from France and rarely exhibited there again. By the 1920s, anti-German feeling, never far from the surface in France after the Franco-Prussian war, alienated French critics and collectors, especially because Liebermann had actively supported the German cause in 1914 and provided Paul Cassirer's magazine, *Kriegszeit*, with patriotic images of war.

Switzerland, however, was the exception, chiefly because large parts of Switzerland had cultural and family ties with Germany and had developed an art market that originated, not in Paris or London, but in Munich and Berlin. The story of his reception in Switzerland, told in the exhibition catalogue in four essays by Gregor Wedekind, Marc Fehlmann, Christina Feilchenfeldt and Johannes Nathan, runs parallel to his emergence in Germany as one of the most respected artists of the time. His work in both countries became a staple part of collections of art by modern German and French painters. Several of these eventually passed into Swiss public collections: the early study of a Sephardic Jew belonging to Richard Schwarzenbach (cat. no. 9) was acquired with his bequest to the Kunsthaus in Zurich in 1920; Georg Reinhart's *Horse Race at Cascina* (cat. no. 52) was given to the Kunstmuseum in Winterthur in 1924; three works in the exhibition, the *Self-Portrait* of 1902 (cat. no. 37), the broadly painted *Hunter with a Pack of Hounds* of 1913 (cat. no. 57), and the floral terrace at Wannsee of 1916 (cat. no. 61), all found their way to the art museum in Solothurn with the collection of Gertrud Dübi-Müller. The portrait of Heinrich Thannhauser (cat. no. 60) was bequeathed to the Kunstmuseum in Bern by Hilde Thannhauser, Heinrich's daughter-in-law. Two works, a pastel of the garden in Wannsee (cat. no. 74) and a sketch of the Tiergarten in Berlin (cat. no. 76) from the Rosengart collection are now in the Rosengart Foundation in Lucerne; and three paintings, an early *Mother and Child*, cut down from a much larger composition (fig. 6), the spirited *Children in a Munich Garden* (cat. no. 10) and the appealing *Child with an Apple* (cat. no. 15) were acquired by Oskar Reinhart, Georg's brother, and became part of the Oskar Reinhart Museum when it opened in 1951. In both Germany and in Switzerland, the dissemination of Liebermann's work, as Christina Feilchenfeldt notes, was assisted by his friendship with the dealers Paul and Bruno Cassirer who sold his work and published his writings.



Fig. 6, Max Liebermann, *Mother and Child*, 1878. Oil on canvas. Oskar Reinhart Museum, Winterthur, Switzerland. Photograph by Philipp Hitz, Swiss Institute of Art Research, Zurich. [\[larger image\]](#)

The disaster of 1933 that destroyed the careers of Liebermann and his Jewish friends and supporters in Germany only consolidated his reputation in Switzerland. Two days after the book burning of May 10, 1933, Liebermann, supported by Walter Feilchenfeldt, sent twelve paintings from his collection to the Zurich Kunsthau for safekeeping. Several of his friends and patrons, like Lola Leda, whose affectionate portrait is in the exhibition (cat. no. 64) or Justin Thannhauser, son of his Munich dealer, eventually went to America, but others, like Fritz Nathan and Walter Feilchefeldt went to Switzerland. It is a remarkable reflection on the importance of the emigrants that about one third of the works in the present exhibition were brought to Switzerland by Jewish refugees. As Switzerland has been harshly criticised in recent years for harbouring looted art, it is apt to recall the immeasurable service that it offered as a haven for refugees. No one, however, would underplay the need for restitution, certainly not the Oskar Reinhart Museum that held a special conference at the end of August on *Fluchtgut: History, Law and Morality* to coincide with the exhibition.

In a world of blockbusters and crowd pleasers, the Oskar Reinhart Museum is to be congratulated for mounting an exhibition that engages with serious matters and deals with them with real scholarship. It underlines the place of the Oskar Reinhart as a museum of international standing, a place that it occupies already as one of Europe's great collections of art.

Jon Whiteley Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK
jon.whiteley@ashmus.ox.ac.uk

Illustrations

All photographs provided by the Oskar Reinhart Museum, Winterthur, Switzerland.



Fig. 1, Overview of exhibition, *Max Liebermann und die Schweiz*, Oskar Reinhart Museum, Winterthur.
Photograph by Silvio Näf. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Max Liebermann, *Girl and Goat*, 1887. Oil on canvas. Private collection. Photograph by Philipp Hitz, Swiss Institute of Art Research, Zurich. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Max Liebermann, *Kitchen Garden in Wannsee to the West*, 1922. Oil on canvas. Private collection, courtesy Walter Feilchenfeldt, Zurich. Photograph by Philipp Hitz, Swiss Institute of Art Research, Zurich. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Max Liebermann, *The Lifeguard's Horse and Cart*, 1908. Oil on canvas. Dr. Hans-Joachim and Elisabeth Bönsch Art Foundation, Wuppertal. Photography courtesy of Koller Auctions, Zurich.

[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Max Liebermann, *“De Oude Vink” Restaurant in Leiden*, 1905. Oil on canvas. Kunsthaus, Zurich. Purchased with contributions of Alfred Jöhr und Gebhard A. Guyer. Photo by Markus Bühler, Kunsthaus, Zurich. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Max Liebermann, *Mother and Child*, 1878. Oil on canvas. Oskar Reinhart Museum, Winterthur, Switzerland. Photograph by Philipp Hitz, Swiss Institute of Art Research, Zurich. [\[return to text\]](#)