

Alfred Lichtwark, Inaugural Address as Director of Hamburg's Kunsthalle (December 9, 1886)

Abstract

Alfred Lichtwark (1852–1914) was a school teacher, an art historian, a prolific writer and speaker, and the first director of Hamburg's Kunsthalle (Art Gallery), which he led from 1886 until his death in 1914. (The Kunsthalle had opened in 1869 but operated without an official director for seventeen years.) Lichtwark became famous for his efforts to make the gallery accessible to a broader public, to support local artists, and to use aesthetic education to encourage Germany's art-loving public to appreciate Impressionism and other new artistic trends. (He was a close friend of the painter Max Liebermann and acquired some of his major works for the Kunsthalle.) Lichtwark delivered the following speech on the occasion of his inauguration as director. In it, he describes what he considered the guiding principles and objectives of a modern museum: to conserve art, to increase the size of its collections, and to enhance the utility of its collections for ordinary members of the public, especially youth.

Source

The Responsibilities of the Kunsthalle, Inaugural Address

At this hour, a new chapter in the organization of the Kunsthalle is being ushered in, and you are correct in expecting us to answer questions about the sense and manner in which we intend to solve the problems of administration. I have been given the honorable task of presenting you with our plans. I hope that I am doing as you wish by presenting the materials to you in an objective fashion, so that you may arrive at your own assessment.

Museum management is no longer an experimental field for dilettantism as it used to be in the past, but an independent discipline that requires a staff as thoroughly trained as that found in any other branch of administration. At the institutes in London, Paris, and Vienna—and also in Berlin, starting a decade ago—museum practice has undergone such a comprehensive and profound development that we have been spared the necessity of conducting costly experiments of our own. The principles of administration have been firmly established, and we have a preexisting model to follow.

This only applies, however, to the subject-specific basis of the administration. An institute upon which we might model the overall organization of the Hamburg Kunsthalle still does not exist. The reason is obvious, since it is precisely in big capitals that the basic prototype for the modern museum has developed. So far, the museums in smaller princely seats and provincial towns have limited themselves, virtually without exception, to emulating the example provided. But they are not completely justified in doing so, since the city museum has its own, wholly independent role. At this point, however, we do not wish to search for a general rule, but to shape the organism of our institute on the basis of our own local circumstances, not concerning ourselves with things that are either necessary or unnecessary in other places.

The museums of the capitals have increasingly limited themselves to collecting material in a systematic fashion and preparing it for multiple uses. With increasing frequency, the teaching activities of museum officials took a backseat to their administrative duties and were recently ruled out altogether. At the Berlin museums, officials are permitted to engage in teaching only in exceptional cases; they are regarded as scientific administrative officials of a difficult discipline and as such are supposed to

concentrate on their work. We lack the diverse educational institutions that a city like Berlin has at its disposal. In Hamburg, we have no university, no polytechnic, and no academy. If our art gallery understands its assignment properly, it is not only responsible for collecting works, making its treasures available, and thereby acting in a representative capacity in the noblest sense, it is also charged with developing a teaching organism that will inspire in various ways. It, too, has a share in the legacy of that old Hamburg educational institution, the Academic Grammar School, which once occupied the place of a university in the intellectual life of our citizenry. Using the overall organism [of the museum] as a framework, I would like to explain to you how these points can be understood in detail.

The activity of each museum administration is divided into three areas: It must provide for the conservation, the augmentation, and the utilization of the collections.

With respect to the first point, concern for the conservation of the collections, brevity may be permitted, since technical details will be of the least interest to you at this point. To the extent that our circumstances allow, we can take as our model existing facilities that have proven themselves over long years of use. This is particularly important with respect to the *Kupferstich-Cabinet* [engravings department], which, as you know, occupies a significant place among similar institutions in Germany. Our *Kupferstich-Cabinet* and all its facilities—like all collections of its sort until recently—operates at the level of a private collection that is touched only rarely and only by knowledgeable personnel. In its current state, it could not withstand public utilization for any length of time. The precautions taken to secure these valuable prints are most certainly inadequate. In this respect, a thorough reorganization is urgently needed. Up to now, limited visiting hours and other precautionary measures have prevented these types of collections from being utilized, and the public—and not only in Hamburg—has no idea that an inexhaustible source of artistic enjoyment is thus closed to it. After all, the holdings of the engravings department in question are not those large, unwieldy prints made by professional copperplate engravers after Old Master paintings and hung as wall decorations. It makes no sense to take such works from the walls for which they were intended and according to whose dimensions their pictorial effects were calculated. The folders of the *Kupferstich-Cabinet* include treasures of an entirely different sort. They are relatively small sheets that are meant to be held by viewers; their creators are not copy artists who merely reproduce the work of others, but are themselves great masters who carved the motif into the wood block with their own hands, transferred it to the copperplate or—in our century—the lithographic stone. Thus, these pieces are not reproductions executed by the hand of a stranger, but rather original works. In particular, it is impossible to appreciate our great Germanic masters, such as Dürer and Rembrandt, without knowledge of their personal engravings and etchings. In them, they put down their innermost thoughts. We will have to undertake a thorough reorganization of our *engravings department* at the very outset, so that each visitor can hold in his hand valuable engravings and original drawings (the individual pages of which are often worth many thousands) without damaging them. With respect to precisely this, various arrangements—whose details I beg to omit—have been experimented with in England, and they will prove immensely practical.

As regards conservation measures, the task of our Kunsthalle cannot be particular or unique. As regards the size and nature of acquisitions, however, it must be guided by principles that derive from our local needs.

It cannot be the responsibility of the Kunsthalle to strive for completeness in all the various areas of its collection—if such a thing is possible at all, then it must be left to the institutes of the great central cities. What matters in our case is not acquiring as much as possible; rather, we have to emphasize the artistic value of each individual item. Beyond that, no other principle can be established; each section must arrive at its own approach to acquisitions on the basis of its own individual character.

Of the two sections of our painting gallery, it will be possible to augment one—the Old Masters' section—with an acquisition only in exceptional cases. A comprehensive expansion would entail funds

whose granting we cannot expect at the outset. We must pursue as a focus the careful development of our gallery of modern art. Its level appears to be very low, and probably could not be otherwise, since so far it has rarely been possible to spend a substantial sum on any single work. In future, the available funds will have to be concentrated on a few significant works. A picture of the first order means more than an entire gallery of middling pieces. To this should be added the fact that up to this point a systematic approach to acquisitions was prevented by the very nature of the subject. Therefore, no one should be surprised that we are totally lacking a great number of German masters. The administration will have to be on careful watch for characteristic works by masters of previous epochs and then arrange for their purchase. We have no Ludwig Richter, no Overbeck, no Cornelius, no Schwind, no Rethel, no Steinle, and no Führich. Moreover, the administration will have to pay close and continuous attention to the current artistic production in all of Germany. No significant work that is taking shape at the moment may go unnoticed by the administration of the Kunsthalle. But in this context, too, the goal is to hold onto funds tightly—[we want to purchase] not a lot, rather only the very best. If there is an opportunity from time to time to acquire an excellent English or French work, then this will prevent our collection from becoming monotonous and will direct the gaze of our population beyond the borders of our homeland in the field of art as well.

Acquisitions in the plastic arts section need to be expanded dramatically.

Concerning the collection of plaster casts, a start has already been made. We have been able to augment our existing collection of casts of ancient works by acquiring several reproductions of original works of artistic and historical interest and by establishing a new section for Christian-era sculpture that places special emphasis on our national art. Soon, we hope to open the halls dedicated to this purpose to the public.

Up to now, no acquisitions of original works of plastic art have been made. Our small holdings are the result of incidental donations. If our art gallery is to fulfill its educational responsibility, it must take vigorous action in this area. It cannot be our intention to collect sculptures on the same scale as paintings. From time to time, however, we must attempt to purchase a particularly magnificent bronze, an accomplished work of marble, which we will display not alongside the plaster casts, but up in the picture gallery in a spot of architectonic significance. Over the long term, a city like Hamburg would do itself a dishonor by declaring itself too poor to incorporate sculpture into its collections as well. The educational value of some modern marble and bronze sculptures of the first order is virtually inestimable. One single ornamented column to which a great master applied the full extent of his talents can convey a standard to the entire population. For this very reason, however, acquiring only the very best works is just as important here as it is in painting.

The collection of plastic works is followed by the coin collection [*Münz-Cabinet*]. Here, we have to strive for completeness in the section pertaining to Hamburg. For ancient coins and medallions, for those from the Renaissance and the Baroque periods, our approach is to work towards a standard presentation of the very best examples ever created. Wherever our funds preclude the purchase of superb originals, we have to direct our attention to electroform reproductions, with virtually original pieces, especially in this particular section.

Moving on, the next point is augmenting the holdings of the *Kupferstich-Cabinet*. We intend to expand it gradually beyond its current scope and turn it into an extensive department for graphic art. — In the same manner as before, we will continue to collect works from older epochs up to the end of the 18th century, taking as our motto: Only the best of everything! Completeness will be the aim only with regard to, say, the works of Dürer, Schongauer, and Rembrandt.

As far as the accomplishments of our own century are concerned, we have an entirely different obligation. Our aspiration must be to supplement our modern gallery by collecting anything that can lay

claim to artistic value in the area of printmaking technique. Mere reproductions or items created expressly as wall decorations would be generally excluded here.

Nevertheless, our field remains rich enough. What immense treasures can be found in the German wood engraving of the past era alone! I would like to remind you of the life's work of Ludwig Richter, of the unforgettable creations by Rethel, Führich, and Schnoor, of Menzel's illustrations. To have a nearly complete collection of all this and to make it available to the public at any time is the obligation of any *engravings department* associated with a modern gallery. Unfortunately, etching was cultivated to a lesser extent in our parts, but we have to be able to feature the humoristic prints of Schrödter and Neureuther as well as the work of Menzel and his successors. The holdings of the English gallery place a particular obligation on us. In England, as you know, the heyday of painting in this century was followed by a very sophisticated and peculiar development in wood engraving and etching. The English wood-engraving technique has become the model for production in all of Europe, occupying the same role held by the fundamentally different German wood-engraving technique in the sixteenth century. Ownership of the most important examples of illustrated artists' books produced in England, and of the most important illustrated newspapers that have appeared since this form developed—they, too, have been a model for the entire civilized world—would allow us to make a necessary addition to our English section.

The same would apply to a collection of English artistic etchings. One day, by exhibiting a private collection, I hope to be able to show you what this peculiar art means, this art that has altered the whole realm of modern English life. Wherever circumstances prevent us from increasing our collection of English pictures on a regular basis, we must acquire only etchings, which, after all, have the full value of an original. To date, there is no systematically maintained collection [of etchings] in Germany. Furthermore, in no other place is there as much cause to establish one. — Additionally, Germany also lacks a public collection on the history of modern wood engraving and modern etching in France. In our case, the character of our engravings department would require such a collection as a natural supplement to our holdings in German and English art. A comprehensive collection of this sort could still be assembled today without excessive investment; it would endow our art gallery with a unique quality.

These suggestions may suffice to give you an idea of the expansion of the *Kupferstich-Cabinet* in the narrower sense.

An art library will have to be connected to the engravings department. We require a comprehensive reference library in any case, and the public should also be able to access it any time in the reading room. It follows as a matter of course that it will be expanded into a specialist library, just as the reference library of the Industry Museum^[1] has developed beyond its original conception out of necessity. The section on English art would be one of our library's specialties. We have an obligation to gather everything the English have written about their art. We have already made a start. Together with our gallery and the aforementioned collection of English woodcuts and etchings included in the *Kupferstich-Cabinet*, our library will offer materials for the study of English art that are unique in all of Germany. As you will concede, we are not dealing here with a utopian project, but with the objective development of existing possibilities.

Furthermore, the *Kupferstich-Cabinet* will have to incorporate a collection of photographs. Today, they build the basis of any course of study and must support the history of painting just as plaster casts do the history of sculpture. The works of our national masters, the great Italians, the great Dutchmen, must be available in high-quality reproductions, so that visitors have access to the necessary illustrations whenever they use the library. Our photograph collection must also be expanded as a supplement to the English section. Our Kunsthalle must provide access to reproductions of at least all of those English masters whose works we possess in the original. Through such an expansion of the *Kupferstich-Cabinet*, we will bring together materials comprehensive enough to support even exhaustive studies.

Thus, we have gained an overview of the administration's activity with regard to augmenting the collections. We are now left with its third task: utilization.

With respect to facilitating access and the general use of the collections, we will also follow the model of the great museums.

One cannot expect the very busy Hamburg public to visit the *Kupferstich-Cabinet* on a regular basis and to have the folders handed over to them for comfortable study. We must use all the means at our disposal to facilitate access to our treasures.

Therefore, special temporary exhibitions featuring portions of the collection of the *Kupferstich-Cabinet* need to be organized. These would allow us to systematically exhibit our holdings; perhaps one winter the old German copperplate engravers would be featured; at some other point the old Italians; then the seventeenth-century Dutchmen or the eighteenth-century Frenchmen. We also intend to mount exhibitions of our photographs, and to do so according to the same principle—i.e., to show a particular school within its historical context for a set length of time. Introductory notes in various newspapers would have to accompany these events. A separate hall next to the entrance has been set aside for these purposes; this will prevent the reading room from being disturbed by visitors on their way through. Special exhibitions from private collections—one such loan featuring the work of Ludwig Richter has already been promised to us by one gentleman present today—may be added as the opportunity arises.

Our special assignment begins with teaching activity in a narrower sense. Here, we can point to the example of the Industry Museum, which understands and appreciates the importance of its own educational function.

The Kunsthalle, however, incorporates collectibles of a different type and thus demands a unique approach, so we cannot simply copy their model.

Initially, we intend to hold lectures in the museum in front of the objects themselves. Thanks to your dedicated cooperation, we have already been able to start constructing a lecture hall adjacent to the graphic section. It is necessary to have this hall inside our building, since we want to avoid transporting the art objects. Our goal is not to pursue the study of art history and the philosophy of art and aesthetics separately, but to formulate a comprehensive approach to contemplating art. We do not intend to talk about objects, but rather of objects and in front of objects. If, in the process, we rely on the art of the past as well, it will not be to divert attention away for our own contemporary art, but rather to prepare for it. It will be our special task to introduce the English section. We have prepared for this assignment by conducting studies in England, by maintaining continuous contact with the English art scene by visiting the great English exhibitions. We propose to begin introducing audiences to the English section as early as next fall.

In general, we do not wish to present expansive lecture series that would require attendance on certain days throughout the entire winter; rather, we aim to address discrete subjects in various series ranging from 4 to 8 lectures each: e.g., the history of Protestant art; the history of genre painting; Rembrandt; the Dutch portrait; and likewise Italian, Spanish, and French art. Incidentally, as far as Dutch art is concerned, our Old Masters collection provides us with sufficient material.

It is the responsibility of the museum's administrative officers to attempt to draw in talent from the worlds of architecture and scholarship to provide expertise in all those areas from which they are removed. This would safeguard against fragmentation and enhance the overall effect of the institute. It would be very desirable if introductory lectures on the history of architecture were to occur. Here, our photography collection could provide the illustrative material.

Incorporating schools into this entire plan is particularly important to us. Why shouldn't senior

elementary school students or grammar school students in grades four and up^[2] be taken to the Kunsthalle just as they are taken to the Zoological Gardens? The teachers should introduce and thoroughly explain a number of the most magnificent pictures. The students should be guided towards a dedicated contemplation of all the details of the depiction; they should learn the most important pictures and all their details by heart, as they would a poem. It goes without saying that the administration of the Kunsthalle will organize special introductory courses for teachers. I do not have to point out the anticipated results. I would like to underscore one thing, however. In numerous social strata, children are the only route to reaching the parents. Children whose eyes are opened will bring their parents to our museum.

Since our population is one that travels regularly, I regard yet another resource that we are developing as very important. I would like to refer to it briefly as the “travel apparatus,” a reference collection of travel materials. The Kunsthalle must be capable of supplying helpful information to anyone wishing to prepare for a journey to Berlin or Dresden or Paris or even just to Lübeck or Lüneburg. At our museum, the prospective traveler must be able to look at photographs of the paintings and—this strikes me as essential—the buildings that he intends to see; moreover, the library of the Kunsthalle must offer the relevant works needed for preparatory study. Instruction in the use of these materials must be offered in systematic lectures, and these should also include critical overviews of the art collections of the various capitals. We would group the relevant material according to the following approximate themes: the museums and buildings of Berlin; Dresden and its collections; the German galleries; the monuments and collections of the Netherlands and Belgium; the collections of Paris; the buildings of Louis XIV; and travel suggestions for England and Italy. This resource would provide an opportunity to steer visitors towards the study of architecture, whose value for artistic education cannot be overestimated.

This, highly esteemed gentlemen, constitutes in brief the plan for the reorganization of the Kunsthalle. We are not envisioning a museum that just stands there and waits, but an institute that actively intervenes in the artistic education of our populace. Moreover, this is not merely a moral and aesthetic question, but an extraordinarily important economic question as well. The future of both our art and our industry depends on whether we know how to educate, here in our own country, discriminating consumers who make considerable and strict demands. Virtually nothing, however, has happened in this area so far.

There is no need for me to tell you specifically that we do not intend to tackle all of this at once. We would not be able to do so even if we already had the necessary staff and funds at our disposal. In any case, years will pass before even the outlines of our program are completed. Yet we deemed it imperative to wait no longer in presenting you with the full extent of our program, although we have only hinted at the major points. The practical implementation of this program will add a number of items to our list and—as we firmly believe—remove only a very few.

Dear gentlemen, we all know that for more than a century, Hamburg’s citizenry has represented the most important element of national culture in the North. Toward the end of the Thirty Years’ War, intellectual life sought refuge behind the bulwarks of Hamburg. As early as the late seventeenth century, this city saw the establishment of the first German opera house; in the eighteenth century, the citizenry of Hamburg—which had been educated to prize the accomplishments of the nation, and in this respect stood ahead of all the princely courts that were biased in favor of French culture—provided the impetus for the renaissance in German literature. To this day, we proudly mention the name of old Brockes.^[3] Part of the glory achieved by Lessing and Klopstock radiates on us as well. Moreover, artistic life was no less vibrant; I would like to remind you that this city was able to conceive and realize a work as magnificent as the Grosse Michaeliskirche (the Great St. Michael’s Church) at a time when the bourgeoisie was stagnating everywhere else.

To be sure, in this century, our politically isolated citizenry, which has been preoccupied with the

struggle for material survival, has not always been able to maintain a consistent level of intensity in its pursuit of ideals. The years of national rebirth, however, have found us prepared, and recent decades have witnessed the most comprehensive efforts to build new foundations for education. You, dear gentlemen, have shown an exemplary willingness to make sacrifices to reform the elementary school system; you have reorganized the older scientific institutes; and you have established others anew. The reorganization of the Kunsthalle is the latest of your endeavors.

May it join the older institutes as a worthy addition! May it contribute within its modest sphere of activity to restoring the artistic education of our population to its previous heights; may the Kunsthalle, through its achievements, continue to merit the goodwill of our patriotic fellow citizens whose voluntary donations have allowed this institute to amass treasures. But, dear gentlemen, for the future development of the Kunsthalle, private help will not suffice. The organism that I have held before your eyes in brief outline cannot come into existence unless you desire it.

NOTES

[1] Museum for Art and Industry [Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe] in Hamburg—trans.

[2] Grammar school ended with eighth grade—trans.

[3] Barthold Hinrich Brockes, poet, born in Hamburg on September 22, 1680, died in Hamburg on January 16, 1747.

Source: Alfred Lichtwark, “Die Aufgaben der Kunsthalle. Antrittsrede, den 9. December 1886,” in Alfred Lichtwark, *Drei Programme*, 2nd edition. Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1902, pp. 13–31. Available online at: https://digitalesammlungen.uni-weimar.de/viewer/image/PPN622982508/1/LOG_0004/.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Alfred Lichtwark, Inaugural Address as Director of Hamburg’s Kunsthalle (December 9, 1886), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1775>> [May 17, 2024].