Anton von Werner, *A Billet outside Paris* (1894)

Abstract

This painting by Anton von Werner (1843–1915) was completed in 1894 and purchased the same year by the National Gallery in Berlin (making it the first Werner acquired by the gallery). The sketch upon which the painting was based, however, had been executed twenty-four years earlier: on October 24, 1870, when the artist accompanied Chief of the Prussian General Staff Helmuth von Moltke (1800–1891) and his entourage in occupied France. The final work shows German troops occupying the Château de Brunoy outside Paris during the Franco-Prussian War. To be sure, Werner documents every detail of the scene and the setting—right down to the inexpertly repaired boot sole at the right. But his principal aim is to emphasize the contrast between the vigorous, ruddy-cheeked troops, with their practical mud-covered footwear, and the sumptuous, effeminate interior they have requisitioned for temporary lodgings. This contrast is conveyed not least by Werner's palette—the soldiers, dressed in blue uniforms with red piping, are rendered in dark primary colors, thereby standing out against an interior awash in pastels and dominated by the warm yellow of gilded surfaces. In this and other pictorial choices, Werner seems to suggest German cultural superiority over the French. For example, the soldiers have not, as in the age-old manner, destroyed the furniture at hand to light a fire and revenge themselves on the enemy; instead, they have taken the time to gather wood on the villa's grounds, seen just outside the window at rear. And while the soldiers look dirty and rumpled, they are not necessarily rough-hewn. In fact, they have enough good German *Bildung*—education and "cultivation"—to play the piano and give voice to song in an impromptu concert. (According to Werner's notes, they were singing Franz Schubert's setting of Heine's poem "Das Meer erglänzte weit hinaus" ["The Sea Shone Resplendent far into the Distance"], which, as he added, was very popular with all the military bands at that time). This history lesson would not have been lost on German viewers of the painting in 1894. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to portray Werner's politics as illiberal or chauvinist. He had no need to make the enemy appear despicable: except for the villa's female concierge and her daughter, who appear to be suffering none of the hardships inflicted upon the Parisian population at the time, the French have simply disappeared from the scene. The mood of good humor is further reinforced by the elaborate clock and vases on the mantle—their very presence suggesting that no looting has been committed by the occupying troops. These choices make the painting even more melodramatic and contrived, undercutting its apparently disinterested virtuosity. What conclusions do we draw from this? On the one hand, the very fact that patriotic painting of this sort had achieved such popularity by the 1890s may indicate that, by the turn-of-the-century, the chauvinism so vehemently criticized by Friedrich Nietzsche after 1871 had evolved into something that was, if not more generous to French victimhood or forgiving of German brutality, then at least more innocuous. Tellingly, when contemporary viewers commented upon Werner's portrayal of soldiers lounging disrespectfully on the furniture of a beautiful French château, they found this aspect amusing, not offensive. On the other hand, such public reaction may reflect the philistine complacency that Nietzsche also identified as characteristic of post-unification German society.

Source

Source: Anton von Werner, *Im Etappenquartier vor Paris* [*A Billet outside Paris*]. Painting, oil on canvas (1894). Original: Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
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