Anton von Werner, *Chief of the Prussian General Staff Helmuth von Moltke in his Office at Versailles* (1870)

Abstract

In October and November 1870, the relatively unknown, 27-year-old painter Anton von Werner (1843–1915) was invited to Versailles to sketch military personnel in the headquarters of the Prussian army and general staff. By that point, the outcome of the Franco-Prussian War had already been effectively decided (at Sedan on September 1–2). As mobile operations slowed down, Versailles became the locus of social and diplomatic as well as military activity. With letters of introduction from the Grand Duke and Duchess of Baden in hand, Werner was welcomed into this setting by officers who believed, rightly, that he might chronicle their role in a great victory. Indeed, Werner effectively captures the palace ambiance in this preliminary version of a painting that was completed by the end of 1870. Here, we see the 70-year-old Chief of the Prussian General Staff Helmuth von Moltke (1800–1891) in his office in the Rue Neuve in Versailles. Moltke's unflappable demeanor and powers of concentration come through as he reads letters and reports taken from the opened envelope on the floor. Werner's determination to portray the details of the room with near-photographic accuracy gives the canvas a busy effect, which arguably detracts from its aesthetic impact. It is plausible that the military leaders, diplomats, and princes who gathered at Versailles in these months felt that painting was the only medium with enough dignity, tradition, and gravitas to record their esteemed place in history. It is ironic, therefore, that they chose to patronize an artist who insisted on including every detail in his canvases, thereby gesturing towards the newer and less revered medium of photography.

Source

Source: Anton von Werner, *Der preußische Generalfeldmarschall Helmuth Graf von Moltke in seinem*

Arbeitszimmer in der Rue Neuve zu Versailles [*Chief of the Prussian General Staff Helmuth von Moltke in his Office on Rue Neuve at Versailles*]. Oil painting, study (1870).
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The final version of the painting, from 1872, is in the Hamburger Kunsthalle under the title *Count Moltke in his Office at Versailles* (November 19, 1870). Availabe online at: https://online-sammlung.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/en/objekt/HK-2186

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