

Anton von Werner, *The Proclamation of the German Empire on January 18, 1871, in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles*, Copperplate Gravure of the “Palace Version” of the Painting (1877)

Abstract

This copperplate gravure by Anton von Werner depicts the same scene shown in an oil painting by the same name, the so-called palace version (1877) of *The Proclamation of the German Empire on January 18, 1871, in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles*. The oil painting hung in Berlin City Palace and was destroyed during the Second World War. The “palace version” of the oil painting was commissioned by the Grand Duke of Baden, along with other German princes, and presented to Kaiser Wilhelm I on March 22, 1877, as a surprise gift for his 80th birthday. The scene was a relatively accurate record of the actual historical event that Werner had been forced to witness, six years earlier, from the back of the hall (note that he inserted himself into the picture at the lower right). Indeed, pictorial accuracy was an obsession for Werner: in preparation for the painting, he executed no fewer than 128 individual portraits, each of which was cataloged so that viewers could identify specific figures within the large crowd of soldiers and dignitaries. In its straightforwardness and lack of drama, the painting accords with Werner’s own memory of the proclamation as a short, dull affair to which he had been summoned on short notice in the dead of winter. Perhaps the smallest glimmer of enthusiasm can be seen in his decision to depict the young officers at the very moment that they raised their helmets to cheer the newly proclaimed emperor. Otherwise, Werner allowed the massed military regiments—seen trooping through the palace’s “Salon de la Paix”—to overshadow the figures of Otto von Bismarck and Helmuth von Moltke (Chief of the Prussian General Staff). It is also noteworthy that, consistent with the moderate liberal inclinations of the Crown Prince and the Grand Duke of Baden, who took the lead in offering Werner this commission, this version balances the “national” and the “liberal” aspects of the event and downplays the ample opportunities afforded by the venue for expressions of German chauvinism (although contemporary viewers surely would have noticed that Louis XIV’s victories are depicted in murals on the ceiling). In this version, Wilhelm appears as *primus inter pares* with the other German princes for the first and last time, and it is clear that Werner took great pains to capture the details of the various military uniforms of Germany’s federal states.

Source



Source: Anton von Werner, *Die Proklamierung des Deutschen Kaiserreiches am 18. Januar 1871 im Spiegelsaal von Versailles* [*The Proclamation of the German Empire on January 18, 1871, in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles*]. Copperplate gravure (1877) of the palace version of the painting. bpk-Bildagentur, image number 30012995. For rights inquiries, please contact Art Resource at requests@artres.com (North America) or bpk-Bildagentur at kontakt@bpk-bildagentur.de (for all other countries).

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