

Max Liebermann, *The Net-Menders* (1887–89)

Abstract

By the late 1880s, Max Liebermann (1847–1935) was accustomed to being attacked by art critics for the social sympathies he had been displaying for years. His first naturalist paintings from the 1870s, though widely exhibited in Hamburg, Berlin, and Paris, had been criticized for portraying depressing and “inconsequential” scenes of everyday life in rural settings. When such criticisms helped lower the price of his works, the sting was all the greater. This painting, for example, was acquired by Alfred Lichtwark for the Hamburg Art Museum for a mere 1,000 marks in 1889—after being shown at a Berlin exhibition of *plein-air* painters in February of that year and at the Paris Universal Exposition that summer. While the men’s close friendship may have eased this exchange, the low price surely disappointed Liebermann nonetheless.

Reminiscent of François Millet’s *The Gleaners* (1857), the painting introduces a windswept landscape in which poor Dutch women mend fishing nets. Their backbreaking work, reflected in the posture and facial expression of the foreground figure, commands Liebermann’s sympathy and respect, especially considering that lower-class women at this time were usually portrayed in melodramatic, humorous, or tragic situations. The force of nature is also evident here. Broad strokes convey the impression of wind and light sweeping down from the billowing clouds and across the entire canvas. Specific details that might distract the eye and reduce the overall impression are consciously avoided, although the faces are far from indistinct. This style was criticized for giving Liebermann’s (and other German Impressionists’) work a sketchy, “unfinished” quality—one that was difficult for traditionalist German burghers to understand or accept. Liebermann, however, was not trying to paint nature itself; rather, as he once put it, he was interested in portraying the ideas and emotions he derived from nature as convincingly as possible.

Source



Source: Max Liebermann, *Die Netzflickerinnen* [*The Net-Menders*]. Painting (1887–89). Original: Hamburger Kunsthalle.
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