

The Social Status of Actors, Musicians, and Visual Artists (1890)

Abstract

As the German bourgeoisie acquired greater income and status, members of that class began reappraising the value of culture and the arts. As the following commentary suggests, this process ultimately benefited German artists, who gained greater renown and found a broader and more generous clientele among the middle classes than in aristocratic circles. This commentary makes clear, however, that artists' access to the highest social circles still depended on their gender, their chosen artistic genre, and myriad other social circumstances.

Source

In the course of the century, actors have attained a higher standing than ever before. But not actors as a whole class. Much depends on the theater where the individual works. Here in Berlin, as in Vienna, members of the court theater occupy the highest ranks. Above all, the male actors socialize in solid middle-class society, and it is not rare for them to be quite popular.

[...]

When it comes to the female members of court stages, their status vis-à-vis society varies considerably, depending on the circles in which they conduct their affairs—and I am not using the word in its disreputable sense here. In general, particularly among the more orthodox bourgeois families, there is still mistrust towards female members of playhouses. [...]

Today, the famous virtuoso is virtually the only one to whom all doors are open. His art secures his influence, which even extends to the women of the elegant classes—and in the salon it is the women who determine the status of all those not belonging to the circle of equals by way of birth.

Among visual artists, architects, painters, and sculptors, portrait painters play the foremost role in society, provided that they have the necessary reputation. Some of them have received special honors from the court and have even enjoyed the privilege of invitation to exclusive social events in a smaller circle. That also constitutes a *carte blanche* for entry into elegant society. In this context, the vanity of women is very important. If a painter enjoys the reputation of having a flattering brush, he will be treated with special kindness and spoiled almost as much as a famous violinist or pianist.

Social intercourse between the court and all types of artists is not particularly lively. Representatives of the latter are certainly invited to grand celebrations, but the kind of exchange seen between artists and individuals of the highest standing in Munich during the rule of Maximilian has never developed here in Berlin. Much more active relations to individual painters and sculptors were maintained by the court of the Crown Prince and then Kaiser [Emperor] Friedrich; after all, the now widowed Empress practices this art herself.

Source: Otto von Leixner, *1888 bis 1891. Soziale Briefe aus Berlin. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der sozialdemokratischen Strömungen*. Berlin, 1891, pp. 172–80; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and

Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 344–48.

Translation: Erwin Fink

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