

# Hans Rosenhagen, “National Art in Berlin” (1897)

## Abstract

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The academicism of Prussian court painter Anton von Werner (1843–1915) eschewed all modern currents in art. Both Wilhelm II and Werner rejected Social Realism, with its focus on downtrodden subjects, and Impressionism, whose stylistic innovations dissolved traditional academic painting techniques into a flurry of individual brushstrokes. By the turn of the century, however, art sanctioned by Berlin’s officialdom – which often meant Wilhelm himself – was being met with increasing derision and disregard. Here, critic Hans Rosenhagen takes aim at the academic establishment and its reluctance to embrace new forms of art, as evidenced by an exhibition organized by Werner in 1897.

## Source

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For quite some time Mr. von Werner has been considered the prototype of the artist whose level of self-confidence stands directly opposed to the value of his accomplishments, and who, for this reason, may seem somewhat ridiculous, and even more ridiculous the more he puts on airs. Such artists are to be found everywhere, and in general they add to the amusement of their colleagues without otherwise causing any harm. Mr. von Werner, however, does not belong to these harmless aspirants, because his position and situation give him and his actions a certain cover. To those who are more distant from his circles and have the justified expectation that the director of an academy should himself be an outstanding artist and an authority in matters of art, Mr. von Werner maintains his reputation of competence in all cases, even in those where he makes mistakes, and for this reason he is a great danger to the artistic life of Berlin. As long as Mr. Werner – who hates modern art like Lucifer hates the divinity that also encompasses him – was only boring his own students with his confused views about modern art, it was not necessary to take him seriously. His students themselves already took revenge on him in part by producing art that was even sorrier than his, and also by migrating out of opposition into the camp of the modern art proponents and becoming so extravagant in their external appearances that they seduced the remaining new generation of students at the academy into all sorts of artistic mischief. The fact that his own tirades against modern art drove young artists towards this art never occurred to Mr. von Werner. But now he is experiencing the need to reach a larger audience and to acquaint the whole beloved public with his views, to sow the seeds of violent opposition to modern art in the hearts of the most clueless observers. And it is indeed now time to subject his motives, his mistaken ideas, and his modes of combat to closer scrutiny – not to strengthen in him his illusions about his own importance, but rather to prove how thoughtlessly he approaches his audience and how clumsy the arguments are with which he attempts to influence their opinions. [...]

Mr. von Werner cultivates the custom of ending the academic year, which closes with an awards ceremony for the most talented students, with a lecture. For several years now he has allowed himself the pleasure on this occasion of railing against modern art and warning the students to stay away from it. These speeches have often provided the press with an excuse to make fun of him, but never before was the turf as fertile as the speech he gave this past July and then published in the *Vossischen Zeitung*, for the enlightenment of the “widest possible audience.” Judging from his own paintings, one could already see that the director of the academy understood little about modern art, but now he himself had proven unambiguously that, in fact, he knows absolutely nothing about it. In his speech he takes pains to make the case that not a single area of modern painting has produced anything that would compare favorably with the classic works of earlier great artists. To mention just a few of the names, he completely passes over the existence of Lenbach and Whistler; in the realm of landscape painting he seems never to have

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heard of Böcklin, Dill, or Schönleber, and in the area of animal depictions he makes no mention of Baisch or Zügel. Regarding the significance of Impressionism, as Manet, Degas, and Monet have shaped it, he has no idea. In the domain of genre painting, to use the common expression, Liebermann has escaped him entirely; and instead of mentioning Uhde as a distinguished representative of modern painters of religious subjects, he can only name two wholly inferior artists in this field. And this gentleman, who, for the most part, obviously closes his eyes when he visits an exhibition of modern art, stands at the head of an institute upon whose competence and effectiveness developing young artists must depend. Werner's listing of famous portrait painters is genuinely entertaining. Along side Rembrandt we find Bonnat, next to Holbein there is Anton Graff, next to Reynolds stands Gustav Richter. And his speech becomes quite hilarious when he grows agitated about a scholar of art history who maintains that Manet discovered *plein air* painting when he once painted Mrs. de Nittis in the garden. The great Werner himself made this discovery before Manet. And then we hear the absurd assertion that the new direction in art has become prominent only through agitation, advertising and sensational promotion. There is no point in listing the absurdities in this speech, one after another. The lecture presupposes – and again herein lies the boundless arrogance of Mr. von Werner – in the students of the academy a level of ignorance which, in a city like Berlin, where they need only open their eyes, must seem quite preposterous. But if it was rather imprudent of Mr. von Werner to expose his self-serving lecture in all its vulnerabilities to the pressure of criticism, then his publication, likewise in the *Vossischen Zeitung*, of a statement of gratitude for the many words of praise he received for the speech must be seen as his crowning achievement. With it he has again demonstrated that to glorify the name of Werner, all means, including even the coarsest, are welcome.

Since we know that Mr. von Werner belongs to those artists who advise the Kaiser in artistic affairs, we can hardly be surprised that someone representing so much artistic insignificance has dared to maneuver himself into the vicinity of the Kaiser, while not a single artist among those who are actually giving form to contemporary art is to be found in courtly spheres. Mr. von Werner himself has the greatest interest in encouraging the court to view “national art” and “patriotic art” as one and the same, and since his painting is more effort than art, he is naturally also concerned that, at court, effort be valued more than art. And just as the director of the academy takes pains to insure that his students adopt the worst possible opinions about modern art, so too will he seek to have this art discredited at court, to be viewed as “repulsive,” as so much “worthless trash.” And it is precisely for this reason that it is necessary to point out Mr. von Werner's crude ignorance of modern art, and to clearly identify the character traits of the Kaiser's most prominent advisor in artistic matters. Concerning the triviality of his own art, no other artist has ever provided a more classic demonstration than when he himself says: “For historical inaccuracy I have no understanding and no justification. Perhaps this results from the artist's ceaseless study of nature, which has in fact become second nature to me and will not allow me to paint nine heads where according to nature only eight are possible.” Mr. von Werner does not understand why he is not considered to be a great artist. His most ardent opponent could give no better reason than he does himself with these vain words.

Source: Hans Rosenhagen, “Die nationale Kunst in Berlin”, in *Die Zukunft* 20 (1897), pp. 428–34; reprinted in Jürgen Schütte and Peter Sprengel, *Die Berliner Moderne 1885–1914*. Stuttgart, 1987, pp. 546–50.

Translation: Richard Pettit

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