Lovis Corinth, “The Paintings from the Brandenburg March and the Founding of the Berlin Secession” (1903)

Abstract

The painter Lovis Corinth (1858–1925) recounts the founding of the Berlin Secession, which saw progressive artists come together to counteract the stifling influence of academic art and the official support it received from the government. In this review of Walter Leistikow’s (1865–1908) work, Corinth examines the role of nature. Whereas academic artists took historical events as their primary subject, the artists of the Berlin Secession sought an unmediated view of nature, unencumbered by tradition.

Source

We have seen that in his decorative representations, Leistikow was inspired primarily by Nordic subject matter. In the Brandenburg March, to a certain extent, he again made contact with the real ground underneath his feet, and thus after some time he returned to the naturalistic conception of nature. Suddenly his eyes opened to the austere beauty of the forests and lakes in the Brandenburg borderland. No other artist was better able to capture the melancholic charm residing in these pine forests, the jagged silhouettes of their dark crowns, projected against the moving clouds and mirrored, at the same time, by black ponds at ground level. Leistikow has become the interpreter of this somber natural beauty for the whole world. He is by no means the first to discover these motifs, but his paintings, above those of all others, are the first to have commanded both artist and layman to stand back in wonder. He has been called the painter of the Brandenburg March.

In the last exhibition of the “XI” group—this group of eleven painters, who had withdrawn from the Association of Berlin Artists in 1892, lasted until 1897—Leistikow had shown two such paintings, which resulted in his first unqualified artistic success. […] From his decorative period he continued to use broad surface effects, but in these works he was also able to cultivate the tonal values that depend on air and light. In this individualistic approach he is quite distinct from the French Impressionists with their tingling, mosaic-like, interlinking surface effects. For the major exhibition of the Berlin Artists’ Association held in 1898 at the Lehrter Bahnhof [Lehrter Train Station] he again produced an expansive work in this same individualistic style: black pine trees with a path running along the edge of the water, clouds tinged red from the evening light drifting overhead. He had great hopes for this painting and—it was rejected. This disappointment provided the impetus for founding the Secession. The magnificent painting by Leistikow was purchased right away by the Junker Richard Israel, who donated it to the National Gallery, where it remains one of the pearls of the collection. Many years later this work was the subject of a negative critique by the Kaiser. It happened that, on account of the National Gallery’s acquisition of French Impressionist paintings, the director of the gallery, Hugo von Tschudi, had incurred the great indignation of the Kaiser. Tschudi thought he might be able to rehabilitate himself somewhat in the eyes of the Kaiser by leading him in front of this generally very accessible painting by Leistikow. But just the opposite occurred: His Majesty instructed him acrimoniously that this painting held not even a trace of true nature: “He knows the Grunewald forest and furthermore He is a hunter.” Much earlier, however, when the painting was first rejected, Leistikow recognized clearly that he would never win any advantage or success by showing his work in the exhibitions at the Lehrter Bahnhof. For this reason, he employed all of the means at his disposal to persuade not just the eleven artists of the “XI” group, but a larger group of young artists to break away from the prominent Association of Berlin Artists and form their own association with its own annual exhibition. The most progressive artists of Berlin followed this call and in 1898 the Berlin Secession was founded. Professor Max Lieberman, the man best suited to the

office, was elected president.

It is Leistikow's undisputed accomplishment to have set the founding process in motion, but he deserves even more recognition for the clever manner in which he has assured that the Berlin Secession continues to thrive, since, with the exception of the Munich Secession, all similar undertakings in Germany's major cities have been short-lived.

In 1899, the Secession hosted its first exhibition in its own space at the Theater of the West on Kantstraße. The funny little building, which elicited an amused smile from all passers-by, was renovated with considerable effort, which lasted right up to the minute before the opening. The walls were in fact still so wet that the paintings—to protect them from damage—had to be taken down each evening and hung again in the morning. There was of course a great deal of work involved, and some mistakes were made, but these were far outweighed by the pure joy this new undertaking engendered. The initiators were now the masters of their own fate within their own four walls, and could now practice what they had preached beforehand. Leibl and Böcklin were exhibited and celebrated as the greatest contemporary German artists with their most impressive creations; they were also among the very first honorary members. Likewise, Thoma and Uhde began to show their works immediately; only Menzel remained aloof and forbade in the sharpest tones the inclusion of any of his works in a Secession exhibition. Only now with the advent of the Secession did Max Liebermann genuinely come into his own and gain full recognition, after participating three years earlier in a group exhibition at the Lehrter Train Station and winning, like Leibl, the grand prize, and at the same time having the rank of professor and membership in the Berlin Academy conferred upon him.

Leistikow and the Secession director, the young art dealer Paul Cassirer, went even further. They exposed the Berlin public to the partly frowned-upon, partly unknown foreign artists: Manet and Monet, the already famous Parisians; the formerly unknown Cézanne, who, still alive, had just been unearthed and given the greatest recognition in Paris; and Gauguin, in whom the predecessor of the previously disputed Norwegian Munch was recognized; and finally a Dutchman, from whom no one had ever heard anything, not even a last dying word: van Gogh. Even Cassirer knew nothing of him; Leistikow had seen works of his in Copenhagen and had sensed a strong affinity with his own work. – As strange and impossible as this first sounded to me, after a prolonged viewing of both artists' work, I had to admit that he was not mistaken. At first, van Gogh's paintings caused such a commotion throughout Berlin that everywhere one encountered only ironic laughter and the shrugging of shoulders. But each year, the Secession exhibited new works by this Dutchman, again and again, and today a "van Gogh" is considered among the best and most expensive works in any collection, while during the painter's lifetime one could have had his finest works for a song. It was not just these foreigners, however, who received recognition in the Secession exhibitions, but also several German artists who had until then been misunderstood: Max Slevogt, Breyer, Baluschek, Brandenburg; I myself have the Secession to thank for the fact that my own works became well known and valued. But the effects of the founding of this institution by Leistikow were even more far reaching: the city of Berlin turned more and more into a city of art. This energizing struggle opened the eyes of the city's residents to the fine arts in a new way: they took sides for and against the Secession, and even the Lehrter Bahnhof (until then a venue for old, tried-and-true "products") awoke from its lethargy and had to defend itself willy-nilly against this dangerous competition. Like the Secession, it began to allow talented newcomers to gain recognition and also had to make room in its exhibition halls for avant-garde movements from abroad.

Source: Lovis Corinth, *Das Leben Walter Leistikows. Ein Stück Berliner Kulturgeschichte*. Berlin, 1910, pp. 51–56; reprinted in Jürgen Schutte and Peter Sprengel, *Die Berliner Moderne 1885–1914*. Stuttgart, 1987, pp. 553–59.

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Recommended Citation: Lovis Corinth, “The Paintings from the Brandenburg March and the Founding of the Berlin Secession” (1903), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/wilhelmine-germany-and-the-first-world-war-1890-1918/ghdi:document-722> [September 26, 2025].