

Wilhelm Leibl

The Art of Seeing!

31 January – 10 May 2020

Encouraged by Courbet, influenced by Manet, and esteemed by Van Gogh, Wilhelm Leibl (1844–1900) was among the most important representatives of realism in Europe. His work as an artist centered on human beings in their everyday realities. And with his retreat from the city to the rural world, Leibl founded a style of modern figural painting in which the truth of nature took priority over the idyllic and narrative tendencies of traditional genre painting. Wilhelm Leibl's guiding principle was not that his models be beautiful, but that they be "well perceived." Leibl painted primarily portraits and indoor scenes featuring rural figures, with his emphasis consistently on the "how" of painterly execution.

The Cologne native studied in Munich, where he quickly made a name for himself with his talent. And it was while still a student, at Munich's *1st International Exhibition of Fine Arts* in 1869, that the 25-year-old artist achieved his breakthrough. He was discovered there by no less a figure than Gustave Courbet and invited to Paris, where he won his first gold medal at the subsequent year's Salon. In 1873, this passionate painter and hunter withdrew to the country. And from then on, his works would center primarily on the rural populace of Bavaria—which earned him the frequently misunderstood moniker of "peasant painter."

At the Paris World's Fair of 1878, the Second Empire's star critics were miffed at the naturalism of his genre painting *Peasants in Conversation* (referred to by contemporaries as *The Village Politicians*), but this event was nonetheless an unmitigated success for Leibl. His finest works also include portraits of artist-friends, relatives, and personalities from both the landed gentry and the cosmopolitan *Gründerzeit*-era bourgeois circles to whom he was close. Thanks to his regular participation in international exhibitions, Leibl was also viewed as one of the leading European realists in Vienna, Berlin, Hamburg, München, Budapest, Basel, Winterthur, Zurich, New York, and Washington. And even Van Gogh expressed how deeply touched he was by *Three Women in Church*, one of Leibl's masterpieces.

With his rigorous quest for reality, Wilhelm Leibl founded an independent and modern style of figurative painting in which the entirety of natural truth is rendered via the artistic medium. Leibl's work was motivated by his urge to "perceive well"—and thus represent reality in an unembellished manner. And with his artistic stance, in which self-criticism, destruction, and innovation were the driving forces, he has influenced artists all the way into the present.

This exhibition, which includes loan works from Germany, Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, and the USA, was conceived in cooperation with the Kunsthaus Zürich.