art

41 Stories from the

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worlds

Suffering and triumph

Crucifix from Nettlingen
Lower Saxony
Around 1120 (?)
Hardwood
Height of cross: 280 cm,
Figure: 192 × 150 cm

Christianity was slow to allow three-dimensional sculptures inside churches. For a long time it has been feared that such sculptures would rekindle the idolatry of the antique world and encourage the cult worship of a physical image rather than the belief in the symbol it stood for. Nevertheless, from the turn of the 10th century on, during the time of the Ottonian dynasty, large and extremely powerful sculptures became increasingly common. In churches, sculptures of Christ on the cross and the enthroned Madonna became important features that played a significant role in prayer.

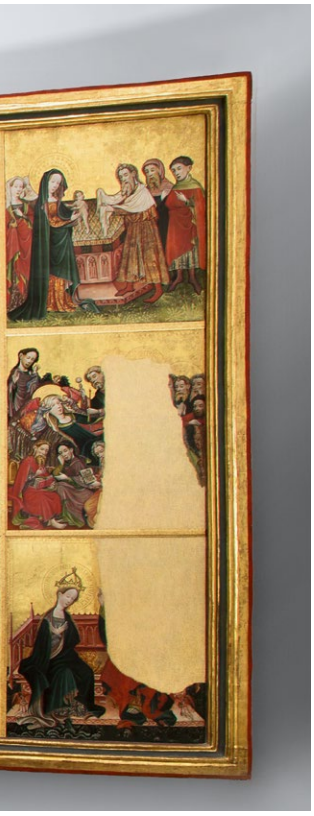
In the case of the large-scale crucifixes of the Romanesque period, the visualisation of both the Son of God triumphing over death and his human suffering plays a key role. The Nettlingen crucifix, which has lost virtually all its original colouring, shows the dead Christ with his head slumped to the side and his eyes closed. His muscular arms (which were renewed in the 13th century) are being pulled down by the weight of his body and his torso has sagged to the side: the reality of his broken body is vividly portrayed and yet subtly exalted. The crucifix comes from the former archdeaconate church St Marys in Nettlingen and was probably made around 1120 in Hildesheim, a leading centre of art at the time.

Crowned soul

The Death of the Virgin from Wennigsen Convent
Lower Saxony
Around 1300/1310
Oak
114 × 139.5 cm

Very few panel paintings from the early 14th century have survived to the present day. The altarpiece from the former Augustinian convent in Wennigsen is an exception, and of fundamental significance for the early history of German panel painting.
The apostles have come from all corners of the earth to gather at Mary's bedside. At the centre of the painting appears the blessing Christ, who has descended from heaven to take Mary's soul. He is depicted with a blue mandorla and surrounded by a golden aureole, holding Mary's soul in his arms – the crown on the little figure's head alludes to her future role as the Queen of Heaven. The artist behind the Wennigsen painting of the Virgin's death was guided by older Byzantine versions of the subject, from which he probably also adopted the figure of the bishop pictured at Christ's right, giving the last rites and holding an aspersorium. It is a stroke of luck that the original frame has survived as well. In the middle ages, elaborate frames often added important aspects to the actual image and were an integral part of the picture. In this case, the frame is decorated with a series of medallions of saints and prophets, while the border of stars points to the miraculous nature of the event.


frater



Brothers in spirit

Franciscan altarpiece from Göttingen
Lower Saxony
1424
Oak and spruce
305 × 787 cm (open)

On the main panel of the altarpiece from the Franciscan Church in Göttingen, we see two miniature Franciscan friars in the middle of the crowd at the foot of the cross. Luthelmus, the Guardian of the Franciscan monastery, is addressing the crucified Jesus with the words "Oh hope and salvation for those who believe in thee." His companion, Heinrich von Duderstadt, continues the invocation with the words on his scroll: "Have mercy on those of us who live here." The two men had evidently been of such great service in the making of the altar that they were permitted to immortalise themselves on it. And while their likenesses are certainly modest in scale, they occupy a central position in the picture.

The Franciscans – or "Barfüßer", as the friars of the order founded by Saint Francis of Assisi are called in German – devoted themselves to the ideal of poverty and were not permitted to own any personal possessions. However, their exemplary asceticism led to them receiving ample donations from the nobility and the increasingly important middle classes. The Göttingen altarpiece provides evidence of that, too: the inner pair of wings folds shut to reveal a row of apostles. In their books, you can read the Apostles' Creed that is spoken during mass and recited as a prayer to strengthen the faith of the dying. A coat of arms is assigned to each of the apostles at the lower edge of the picture. On the very left, at the feet of Saint Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, the Duke of Braunschweig-Lüneburg is given the place of honour, followed by other members of the nobility.

The patrons and "content directors" of medieval artworks often remain anonymous, but in the case of the Göttingen retable their identity is unusually obvious; they are thus expressing their desire for intercession and presenting themselves as a strong, politically potent community following the example of the 12 apostles. And by the way, Brother Luthelmus is mentioned a second time: when closed, the individual panels are separated by an inscription that reveals the work was put up on 24th May 1424, during his term as guardian.

Treasure chest or illustrated bible?

The Golden Panel of St Michaelis Church in Lüneburg
Lower Saxony
Around 1425
Oak
Individual wings: 231 × 184 cm

One of the Landesmuseum's most precious objects is a major work of early 15th century art: the Golden Altar from the Benedictine monastery church of St Michael in Lüneburg. The Landesmuseum in Hanover holds the wings of the once double-shuttered altarpiece. The outer sides depict monumental individual scenes of the crucifixion of Christ and the raising of the Brazen Serpent, which in this context can be interpreted as foretelling the death of Jesus on the cross. When the wings were opened out, they unfolded a sequence of images depicting scenes from the lives of Jesus and his mother Mary, painted in radiant colours against a gold background and spread over three registers. This view presented the individual stages in the story of salvation like the pages of an illustrated bible.

The altarpiece was only fully opened on special holy days. Then a collection of precious objects became visible inside the shrine, which was richly decorated with Gothic tracery: a gold-coated relief from the high middle ages, with the church treasure of the venerable Benedictine abbey elaborately arranged around it. At the end of the 16th century, the gilded reliquaries fell victim to a spectacular robbery; the ensemble was later broken up and the centre of the altarpiece disposed of. However, the magnificent wings with their richly gilded sculptures set in elaborate tracery survived. In addition to the Virgin Mary, they also depict the 12 apostles and a selection of saints who were of particular importance to the monastery. The archangel Michael, for instance, the patron saint of St Michael's in Lüneburg, is easily recognisable on the left wing, triumphing over evil in the form of a dragon.

CAVE MISER·NE MEO TE CONFIXVM TELO IN HOC TERRO COLLOCEM FERETRI LECTO: ANNO·1·5·0·7·

Albrecht Dürer
(1471 – 1528)
Death as a Horse Archer
Around 1502
Ink on parchment
38.8 × 31.3 cm

Beware, wretch!

Adjusted to the shape of a trefoil, the composition is clearly recognisable as a design for a pane of glass. A whole series of such stained-glass templates from Albrecht Dürer's Nuremberg studio have survived intact. In this case Death, clad only in rags, is shown riding on an exhausted, emaciated nag that has to drag itself along. The skeletal figure is fixated on its quarry, which will probably be brought down by a fatal arrow any moment now, and if not, there are plenty more arrows ready and waiting in the well-filled quiver. The Latin inscription around the outside gives the grim rider a voice: "Beware, wretch, lest I pierce thee with my arrow and bed you on this hideous litter", he calls to his unlucky prey.

A counterpart to Dürer's finely drawn design in dark ink has been preserved in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg: it shows Nuremberg provost Dr Sixtus Tucher confronting his own grave. So, the words of warning were addressed to him – and he is the one that the rider is aiming his deadly arrow at as he raises his arm.

In an age where plague epidemics were rampant, people wanted to be prepared for death. The Nuremberg provost always had two stained glass pictures based on the drawings in front of him: they decorated the windows of his study, where they never ceased to remind him of the dangers of the plague and his own mortality. Albrecht Dürer's magnificent stained-glass design is just one of countless drawings and prints in care of the Kupferstichkabinett in the Landesmuseum Hanover.

Tilman Riemenschneider
(1460–1531)
Female Saint
Around 1510
Limewood
42 × 38 cm

The beautiful saint

For a long time, the Tilmann Riemenschneider masterpiece on show in the Landesmuseum Hanover was not given the attention it deserves. The unknown saint with the splendid headdress is carved from soft limewood, an excellent material for nuanced renderings of texture. And in this case, the different qualities of the various surfaces have been depicted with the utmost skill: the grave and dignified expression on the young woman's face is framed and brought to life by the fabrics of the opulent clothes that form a delicately textured relief around her neckline, as well as by her turban-like headdress, the gently fluttering end of her veil, a pearl-studded clasp and, last but not least, the finely textured waves of her hair.
Today we encounter the contemplative saint in the form of a bust, but she was probably created as a full-length standing figure until an early collector sawed off the lower part of the statue.
Until the 1930s, the unknown saint was considered one of the Würzburg woodcarver's most beautiful creations. But then scholarly interest in the work faded, and only in the last few decades has it been "rediscovered", as it were. Thanks to the generous support of a group of dedicated women from Würzburg and Hanover, it was possible to restore the work in 2003 – a wonderful example of civic engagement that has breathed new life into Riemenschneider's unknown saint.


QVI CERNIS TANTVM NON, VIVA Mr LANTHONIS ORA,.
HOLBINVS RARA DEXTERITATE DEDIT.

Hans Holbein the Younger
(1497/98–1543)
Philipp Melanchthon
Around 1535
Hardwood
Diameter: 9 cm

Miniature reformer

The small circular image works like a box: the top comes off to reveal the portrait of reformer and humanist Philipp Melanchthon painted on the bottom of the lower section. The lid is richly decorated with Renaissance ornaments and bears an erudite inscription that identifies the subject of the painting, addresses the beholder directly and praises the artist who created the work: "You who view the features of Melanchthon almost as if they were alive: Holbein created them with the utmost skill."
The format of cased miniatures like this is clearly reminiscent of antique coin portraits – a tradition that was rediscovered in the Renaissance. They were popular gifts among art connoisseurs and supporters of the Reformation, and Hans Holbein's studio produced a whole series of such likenesses. Sumptuously executed and lovely to hold, they are every bit the equal of portrait medallions from the same period, while the fact that they have been executed as paintings makes them a great deal more realistic. The portrait of Melanchthon, who was a professor of Greek in Wittenberg and a close comrade of Martin Luther, was originally in the possession of the Elector of Hanover and was probably created during Holbein's time in England. Holbein never met the great reformer in person, and based his likeness on portraits by Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach.

The holy penitent

Jacopo Pontormo
(1494–1557)
Saint Jerome Penitent
Around 1528/29
Oil on poplar
105 × 80 cm

In the 19th century, a whole series of significant private collections were brought together in Hanover, including that of August Kestner, a lawyer and ambassador to the Pope in Rome. Jacopo Pontormo's painting "Saint Jerome Penitent" also originates from his estate and is the only painting by this outstanding Florentine Mannerist painter in a German museum.
Pontormo shows the penitent hermit in a radically new interpretation: not as an aged Church Father but with the tensely twisted body of an athletic youth. Full of humility, Jerome has discarded his red cardinal's cloak and hat; kneeling on the ground and bending his upper body, he is doing penance in front of the upright cross that has been inconspicuously placed at the left edge of the painting. He is being watched by a lion which, according to legend, he tamed by removing a thorn from its paw. The powerful portrayal of the athletic body, which takes up almost the entire picture, is an expression of the penitent saint's virtuous fortitude.
Pontormo never finished the painting, and so today it reveals how the artist kept revising and rethinking his subject throughout the painting process. The body of the saint was originally intended to be given additional layers of paint, and Pontormo probably had planned to put the finishing touches to the hastily executed landscape setting in the final step.

Chiselled features

Agnolo Bronzino
(1503–1572)
Portrait of a Young Man
Around 1545
Oil on poplar
59 × 44 cm (oval)

In the 1540s Agnolo Bronzino, a pupil and friend of Jacopo Pontormo, was the most favoured portrait painter at the court of the Medici in Florence. There is a dignified aloofness and cool elegance to his portraits, and the artist's brilliant technique and select use of colour continue to captivate the beholder to this very day.

Due to the oval shape of the painting, the Hanoverian young man here in our exhibition is presented in much the same way as ancient rulers were depicted in the form of sculpted busts. Set against the dark background, his athletic body stands out almost as if it were three-dimensional, and the light that illuminates him from the left shapes certain areas of his skin as if they really were made of marble. Bronzino thus skilfully invites comparison with the related genre of sculpture, while nevertheless leaving us in no doubt that this is a painted picture. But as stern and cool as the painting might appear, there are occasional flashes of great sensuality as well: the glowing pink cloth reveals the immaculately painted body rather than covering it, and the half-concealed nipple gives the picture a decidedly erotic touch.

There is no way of knowing for certain whether the young man in the portrait was an existing person or whether this is an entirely idealised likeness.

Venus entrapped

Bartholomäus Spranger
(1564–1611)
Bacchus and Venus
Oil on canvas
172 × 114 cm
On permanent loan
from the Federal
Republic of Germany

With his left leg forward, the visibly aroused Bacchus presses close to the beautiful Venus. He embraces her, touching her breast, his right hand holding the raised arm of the flawless goddess of love while she gazes at the overflowing wine bowl in her hand as if in a daze. Spranger's sophisticated composition creates a delicate balance: the god of wine is seducing the goddess of love; that – according to the scene's highly condensed message – may be thrilling and beautiful, but it also entails dangers that are visualised in the form of an erudite symbol: a cheetah can be seen on the left, and behind it Cupid, portrayed as a boy, is feeding juicy grapes to an antelope – the beast's favourite prey. The wine will make the timid animal, which symbolises Venus, trusting and inattentive – an easy victim for the cheetah, in itself a common symbol for the god of wine.

In the exclusive princely world of the late 16th century, art was aimed entirely at a circle of connoisseurs and initiates: stories from ancient history and classical mythology, as well as unusual allegorical scenes, were just as much appreciated as subtle wit and overt eroticism. As court painter to the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II, Bartholomäus Spranger held an important office in Prague and served a clientele that delighted in decoding the complex allusions in his pictures.

Son of God or son of Rubens?

Peter Paul Rubens
(1577–1649)
Madonna with Standing Child
Around 1615/20
Oil on oak
63.5 × 47 cm

A stark naked, flaxen-haired boy with rosy cheeks looks out at us from the painting. In the protective presence of his mother, he looks brave but still a little unsteady on his own two feet: there is a touching immediacy about the boy Jesus in Rubens' picture of the Madonna. Perhaps the painter was able to depict this very approachable and human aura so convincingly because he based it on earlier studies of his son Albert and his first wife Isabella Brandt. At the same time, however, the portrayal is full of symbolism and evocative allusions. Rubens draws on the long tradition of half-length Madonnas and seems to have been particularly fond of Titian's works. And just like those older pictures, his painting contains a foreshadowing of Jesus' passion: set against the dark background, the glowing white, intense red and subtly shimmering blue of Mary's robe take on a radiant quality. The figure of the Mother of God is modestly reticent; her dark hair, covered by a black mourning veil, merges with the colour of the gloomy backdrop. As if foretelling what is to come, her head and gaze are downturned in humility, and the touch between mother and child culminates in the exact place where Christ is pierced in the side on the cross. In the Catholic Netherlands, Peter Paul Rubens' paintings of the Madonna sold like hotcakes.

Mesmerising surfaces

Gerrit Dou
(1613–1675)
Portrait of an unknown African
Around 1630/35
Oil on oak
43.4 × 33.9 cm

Gerrit Dou's paintings were admired and enthusiastically collected from early on. A pupil of Rembrandt, he was one of the most successful painters of his day. His diligence was legendary – as were the prices fetched by his internationally sought-after works. One of his biographers reports that a spread-out cloth was always suspended above the easel in Dou's studio in Leiden to prevent grains of dust settling on the smooth, finely painted surface, and another writes that Dou always put his brushes safely away for the same reason. Looking at the painting in Hanover, which shows a young black man in oriental costume glancing over his shoulder, such accounts are not hard to believe: the subject's glowing skin stands out vividly from the dark background, and the light reflections are so meticulously placed that even the smallest disruption on the surface would be intrusive.

As in many of his other paintings, Dou was not so much concerned with creating a portrait of a nameable person as with portraying the typical, striking characteristics of certain figures. In the Netherlands, such studies of heads, or "tronies" as they were known at the time, were extremely popular. Like our painting, they depict men in exotic garb, soldiers in unusual costumes, the wrinkled faces of old people or particularly attractive examples of feminine beauty. It was not unusual for these studies to be reused in larger-scale history paintings.

Unstable sensation

Willem Kalf
(1619–1693)
Still Life
Around 1655
Oil on canvas
66 × 55.6 cm

In the Netherlands of the 17th century, still life – the artistic arrangement of inanimate objects – became a highly prized genre of painting. The precious items and exotic fruits in Willem Kalf's ornate still lifes flatter the wealthy household, and as masterfully painted works of art these paintings are proof of exquisite taste. At the same time, however, their deliberately unstable, only seemingly random composition is a reminder that all things on earth are transient. With consummate skill, Wilhelm Kalf succeeds in balancing all these different aspects in his work. His paintings depict and amplify the qualities of the different materials and are characterised by their distinctive use of light. The pip of a fruit lying casually on the table is just as much an optical sensation as the goblet glittering in the deep darkness of the room, the Persian carpet lying across the smooth marble table top, the pitted texture of the brightly glowing lemon peel or the smooth Chinese porcelain bowl from the time of the Ming dynasty emperor Wanli and the hard reflections it creates.
When Willem Kalf began painting his ornate still lifes in Amsterdam in the 1650s he was living in the house of Johan Le Thor, a prominent merchant and one of the directors of the West India Company. The well-connected Le Thor owned objects like those in Kalf's paintings, and his collection no doubt served Kalf as inspiration.

Abraham Bloemaert
(1564–1651)
Arcadian Scene
1627
Oil on canvas
59.7 × 74.3 cm

Nice hat!

Abraham Bloemaert was fond of giving his Dutch clientele a taste of the sunny world of idealised Mediterranean landscapes. In this case, he combines a landscape composed out of just a few, wonderfully fresh colours with shepherds – a popular subject at the time. The shepherd and shepherdess are sitting on a little knoll near the lower edge of the painting, and we are witness to an amorous advance under the dramatic light of the sun. On closer inspection, however, the two young people's carefree encounter turns out to be decidedly suggestive: lying on the ground, the smirking shepherd is pushing his flute under the skirt of the woman, who is sporting a straw bonnet decorated with flowers. His erotic ambitions are obvious. In the Netherlands of the 17th century, shepherd scenes with erotic undertones were extremely popular and were also a common subject for prints.
Abraham Bloemaert, who ran a successful studio in Utrecht, is considered the founding father of what came to be known as the Utrecht school. The painters of this movement unleashed a veritable storm of enthusiasm for paintings with strong light-dark contrasts in the style of Roman baroque – and not only in the Netherlands. More than 100 painters are said to have started their careers in Bloemaert's studio.

Bathing Gentlemen

Michiel Sweerts
(1624–1664)
Men Bathing in the Evening Light
Around 1655
Oil on canvas
63.7×87 cm

Just before nightfall, some men have gathered to bathe in the river. In the darkness we can recognise occasional swimmers, a figure sitting on the riverbank and two young men joking and wrestling. On the right, we can just about make out a shadowy group of new arrivals. There is little sense of the exuberance normally associated with a bathing scene in the dark, even mysterious picture.

Only the figures in the foreground are depicted in bright light, as if illuminated by floodlights: the three male nudes in classic poses quite literally turn Sweerts' study of antiquity and nude painting into the subject matter of his work.

Sweerts, who had lived in Rome for many years, achieved a unique combination of Dutch genre subjects and the classical imagery of Roman art. His magnificently coloured paintings are evidence of intense reflection on the relationship between nature and antiquity, painting and sculpture. And his biography is just as unconventional as his pictures: on his return from Rome, he initially founded an influential drawing academy in Brussels before setting off on a missionary journey to China as a lay brother. He was dismissed from the missionary society due to unacceptable behaviour and eventually died in Goa on the west coast of India.

A painting with a soundtrack

Jacob Ruisdael
(1628/29–1682)
Hilly Landscape with Waterfall
Around 1670
Oil on canvas
70.7 × 56.4 cm
On loan from the family
of Dr Amir Pakzad

Jacob Ruisdael imagined landscapes in which the beholder sees "water cascading from one rock to the next, until it finally murmurs away", as Arnold Houbraken put it in his 1718 biography of Dutch painters, perfectly capturing the atmospheric waterfall paintings that Ruisdael had caused such a sensation with in Amsterdam. In the middle third of the picture, the river that meanders out of the background and around a cliff forks, plunges down an imposing sheer drop and crashes into a foaming torrent right before our eyes. The stormy sky intensifies the natural spectacle depicted on the canvas, and the superbly composed painting is structured by occasional groups of trees, gnarled stumps with vibrant yellow foliage or uprooted tree trunks floating in the water. The vertical format further underscores the power of the cascading water. By contrast, the figures on the path at the foot of the cliff and on a bridge further in the background look tiny and inconsequential. Ruisdael might have included them in order to visualise humankind's insignificance in the face of nature. At the same time, they draw our gaze into the depths of his elaborately composed imaginary landscape. Jacob Ruisdael, who started working in Amsterdam in 1656, borrowed the waterfall motif from the paintings of Allaert van Everdingen. But whereas the latter drew on sketches of his own trip to Scandinavia for his paintings, it appears that Ruisdael never left the flat expanses of his home country.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GU·TE
PF:

Beer money

4½ "Gute Pfenning", 1691
Electorate of Braunschweig
und Lüneburg, Fürstentum
Wolfenbüttel
Rudolf August and Anton Ulrich,
co-rulers (r.: 1685–1704)
Copper-silver alloy
(billon), 0.905 g
Diameter: 18 mm

The coin is a nice silver colour, despite the fact that it was minted from a relatively low-grade copper-silver alloy with less than 50 % silver content. When it came to producing small-denomination coins, silver had one particular property that was a considerable advantage: in alloys, the "white" metal has such a high tinting strength that the coin looks silver despite its high copper content. The technical term for this alloy is "billon". This trick was actually quite common in the monetary systems of times gone by. But what is remarkable about this particular coin is its denomination, i. e. the face value of four and a half German Pfennig. Nothing like it exists outside Lower Saxony! It is unique in the history of coins and money, only occurs for a few decades and is directly linked with beer consumption during that period.
As long as towns and cities did not have an adequate supply of clean drinking water, beer was an important source of nutrition because, thanks to the brewing process and its alcohol content, the beverage contained hardly any disease-causing germs. It also supplied the working population with much-needed calories for the manual labour that most people earned their living from. In those days, however, beer had a much lower alcohol content than modern-day recipes.
In 1680, a beer tax increase in the Duchy of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel raised the price of a litre of beer from 4 to 4½ Pfennig. This caused problems in everyday life because there were no half-Pfennig coins. And that is how 1½ and 4½ Pfennig "beer coins" came to be minted in the principality of Wolfenbüttel and beyond. However, the coins were not practical for other payments, which is why they ultimately disappeared from purses and coffers 70 years later.


APPARUIT ET FUGAVIT
HOSTES IMPERII.
EXOPTATA VICTORIA GEOR
GII II. MAG: BRITT: REG
CONTRA GALL: 27 IUN
1743 DETTINGÆ
OBTENTA.


INFLUXUS IN LEONEM NUMINIS, PARAT OBITUM LILIIS.
SIEHE ICH WILL VBER
EVCH EINIGES VOLCK
VON FERNE NE BRINGEN EIN
MÆCHTIG VOLCK.
IEREM: C.5.15

Medal commemorating the Battle of Dettingen on 27 June 1743
Electorate of Hanover/Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland
George II (Georg II August; r.: 1727–1760)
Medallist: Christian Schirmer (1679–1751)
Minted in Königsberg (Prussia)
Silver, 58.675 g
Diameter: 56 mm

Can medals lie?

Medals are commemorative items rather than a means of payment: their elaborate reliefs serve as a reminder of notable individuals or of historic and current events. This one shows the Battle of Dettingen (near Aschaffenburg), in which George II of Great Britain and Ireland boldly rode at the head of his troops. The imaginative illustration tells the story of these dramatic events, doesn't it?

At the time, George was the British head of state as well as commander in chief of the army, but he also played a role on the continent as the Elector Georg Augustus of Hanover (or of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, to use his official title). The Electors of Hanover ruled the British Empire in personal union for 123 years, but the electorate and the Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland were constitutionally separate.

At the Battle of Dettingen in 1743 the British, the Hanoverians and their allies defeated the French – a prime example of how the various states of a personal union were intertwined: they naturally belonged together and stuck together, especially when danger was imminent. However, George II did not actually take part in much of the battle: the king had fallen off his horse when it bolted. Even so, Dettingen went down in history as the last battle that a British king personally participated in.

This medal was not an official issue and was therefore not directly intended as a political propaganda tool for the court. In the baroque era, medals were extremely popular and there were many medallists who earned a living by making, publishing and distributing them. The medallist who designed this particular specimen no doubt realised that the glorification of a celebrated event would sell better than a king who had fallen off his horse.

Part-time lake in a prime Rome location

Giovanni Paolo Pannini
(1692–1765)
The Piazza Navona in Rome flooded
1756
Oil on canvas
95.5 × 136 cm

From an elevated perspective, Giovanni Paolo Pannini shows us what may well be the most beautiful baroque square in Rome: the Piazza Navona. On the hot weekends of August, the fountain drains were blocked off and the square was deliberately flooded in order to celebrate the "Festa del Lago" – the Festival of the Lake. Anybody who could afford it drove through the cool water in a coach, while the rest of the population watched the social event from the neighbouring palaces and the edges of the square. Pannini, who was much sought-after by his aristocratic clientele for his paintings of baroque festivities, has succeeded in capturing not just the topographical features of the square but the delightful mood of the celebrations as well. Painted with loose brush strokes, the gently rippled surface of the water is structured and animated by the striking shadows of the row of buildings on the left and the reflection of the famous Fountain of the Four Rivers by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Under the clear blue sky, the right-hand side of the square stands out in all its nuances, gleaming in the low evening sun, while the merriness of the festively dressed crowd is palpable even in the shadowy corners at the far end of the square. Pannini often painted events like this several times over and then sold the pictures to different art lovers.

Francesco Guardi
(1712–1793)
Imaginary Landscape with Buildings on the Lagoon
Around 1790
Oil on canvas
59.5 × 72 cm
On loan from the
Fritz Behrens Foundation

Venice's backyard

In this painting, the Venetian painter Francesco Guardi creates a landscape by the sea where a modest settlement can be seen through the ruins. There are people working in the houses, a few smoking chimneys and, here and there, a cloth that has been hung out of a window to dry. Underscored by the size difference between the tiny staffage figures and the huge column on the left, the simplicity of everyday life is juxtaposed with the decaying splendour of antiquity. Perhaps it was this kind of discord that Guardi's Italian contemporaries had in mind when they accused his pictures of lacking dignity. He was more popular among travellers to Italy, which was becoming a fashionable destination at the time – especially for the English. The tourists recognised the picturesque charm of Guardi's paintings: they bought his works as souvenirs of their trip to Venice and appreciated both the atmospheric scenes he painted and his spontaneous, almost sketch-like way of applying paint. His almost impressionistic style clearly sets Guardi apart from his predecessors, as is convincingly demonstrated by his "Imaginary Landscape with Buildings on the Lagoon". The painting – which is in excellent condition – stands out for its shimmering brushstrokes and gleaming yet always slightly muted light; like many of Guardi's other works, it evokes a wistful, romanticised mood. Guardi was the youngest in a line of distinguished Venetian artists and took the capriccio genre – the painting of imaginary landscapes and architecture – to new heights.

The joys of fatherhood

Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Elder
(1722–1789)
The Artist and His Daughters
1774
Oil on canvas
69 × 57 cm
Gifted by Mrs Mercedes Bahlsen, née Tischbein, 1980

During the Enlightenment, the bourgeois family became an important theme in literature and the fine arts. That had an effect on self-portraits, too, and artists took to presenting themselves surrounded by their own family. This painting shows Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Elder, who is also referred to as "the Kassel Tischbein" to distinguish him from other artists from the Tischbein family who shared the same name. He and his two daughters are pictured in his grand house on Boettcherstrasse, in Kassel, in a sitting room that evidently doubled as a study. With one arm resting on the back of a chair, he is standing in front of a picture he just had scetched, holding a maulstick, a palette and some brushes.
Caroline, his eldest, is leafing through a portfolio of drawings, while the youngest daughter has put her needlework down to turn her attention to the family parrot. Surrounded by books, antique sculptures and his own paintings, Tischbein presents his household as educated, industrious and artistically inclined. The artist was a widower; both of his wives died early, but they make an appearance in the picture all the same: portraits of them by his own hand decorate the wall in the shadowy part of the room. Echoing the style of the day, his biographer Engelschall wrote: "Even at his easel, Tischbein savoured the joys of fatherhood."


HISPAN·ET·IND·REX·M·&R·F·VI·
NEW SOUTH WALES
1813


NEW SOUTH WALES
1813


FIFTEEN
PENCE


CAROLUS·IIII·DEI·GRATIA·
SHILLINGS
FIDEI
·1795·

Holes in coins to plug holes in the budget!

Counter-stamped Spanish piece of eight coin (peso, around 1800)
Kingdom of Great Britain,
for New South Wales (Australia)
George III (r.: 1760–1820)

5 shillings 1813
Silver, 21.22 g
Diameter: 39.5–40 mm

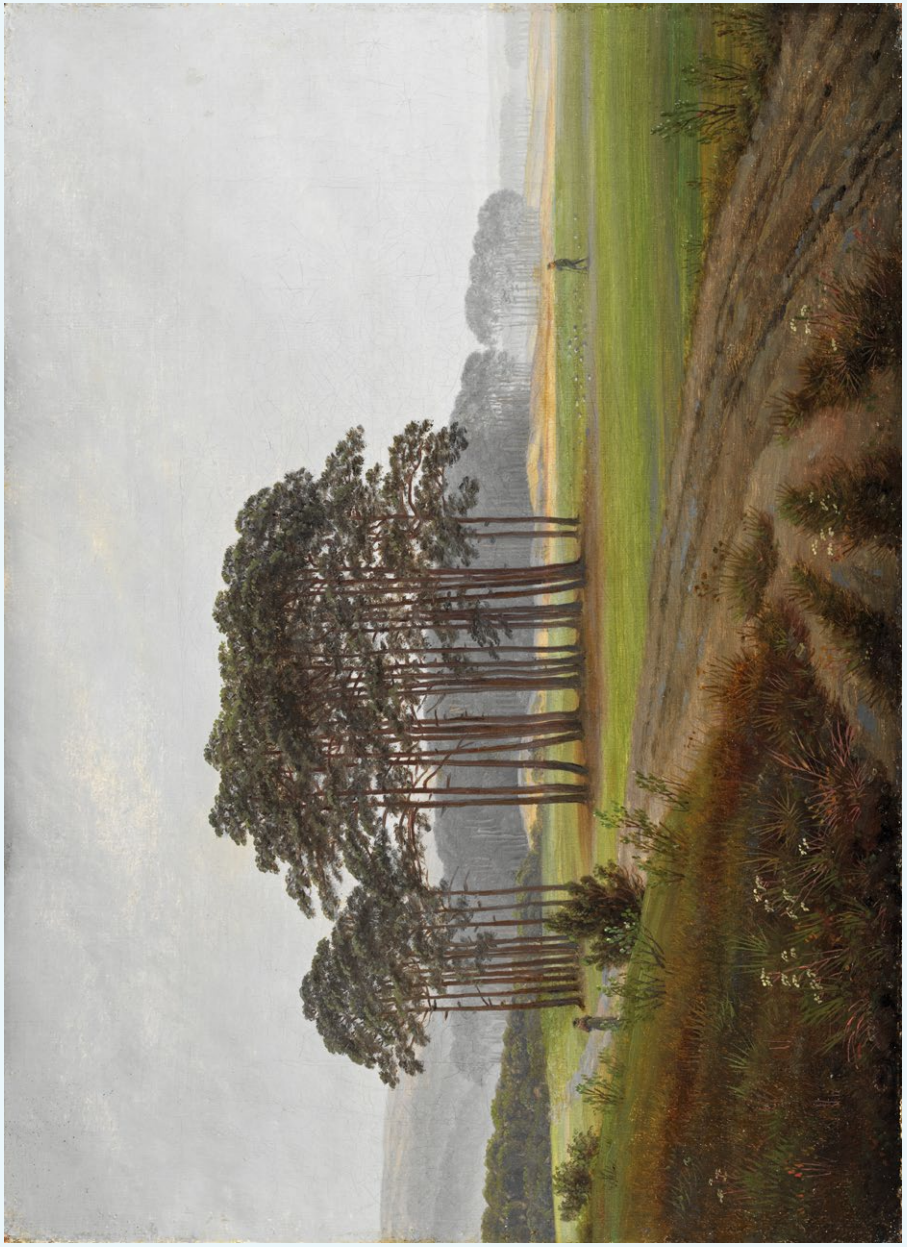
15 pence 1813
Silver, 5.66 g
Diameter: 19 mm

It was a Scotsman by the name of Lachlan Macquarie (1762–1824) who created Australia's very first coins: the "holey dollar" and the "dump". Today, they are one of the great rarities in the history of coins and currency. Australia was evolving from a penal colony into a modern state. And that meant it needed money! Macquarie was governor of New South Wales from 1810 until 1821 and, in 1813, solved a difficult problem in an unusual but "typical Scottish" way: because there was an acute shortage of coins in Australia, he had 40,000 older Spanish dollars turned into two coins each by stamping a small disc out of their middle. The coins with a hole in the middle were called "holey dollars". The Spanish pesos were originally worth 5 shillings each, the equivalent of 60 pence, and the new "holey dollars" were given the same nominal value. The punched-out and re-minted discs, on the other hand, were only worth a quarter of that amount, i.e. 15 pence (or 1 shilling and 3 pence). These little coins were known as "dumps". As a result, Macquarie managed to turn one Spanish silver coin into two British coins! At a single blow, he doubled the number of coins in circulation and, by using the "dumps" as a fractional denomination, even increased the money supply by 25 percent. Sometimes, when change was needed, large coins were cut into pieces. That is by no means unusual. Numismatists have a special term for it: "cut money".
And by the way, the colloquial names of the coins are also a play on words: who would not want a "holy" dollar as opposed to a "worthless" dump!
The unique but rather odd shape of the coins prevented Australia's first official currency from spreading elsewhere: although Spanish pesos were internationally sought-after trade coins, nobody outside of Australia wanted pesos with a big hole in the middle!

A day in the countryside

Caspar David Friedrich
(1774–1840)
Cycle of "The Four Times of Day"
Around 1820
Oil on canvas
Morning: 22 × 30.7 cm,
Noon: 21.5 × 30.4 cm,
Afternoon: 22 × 30.7 cm,
Evening: 22 × 31 cm

The Landesmuseum in Hanover is the only place where a complete cycle of the times of day by Caspar David Friedrich has survived. These four paintings are open to all sorts of different interpretations: they can be viewed through the lens of natural philosophy as well as from a religious or even a political point of view.
"Morning" may well be an allegory of active life, because in front of the lifting fog that hovers over the peaceful pond, we see a lone fisherman going about his daily work. "Noon", which depicts a wide track and a shepherd in the meadow, could actually be seen as representing the course of life and our relationship with nature. And there is no reason not to attribute "Afternoon" with the symbolism of mortality, as indicated not so much by the horse and cart in the middle ground as by the juxtaposition of ripening and harvested cornfields in the foreground. Last but not least, the theme of "Evening" would be the "religious take", because at the centre of the picture, in the middle of an open forest, there are two shadowy figures watching the sunset – two men who do not work in the natural landscape, but who are lost in contemplation of both nature and themselves. Friedrich often painted figures seen from behind, and they always allude to the beholder of the artwork because they visualise the act of looking at nature and reflecting on our relationship to it. Whether or not the four paintings show precisely identifiable terrain is less important for their interpretation – although if they do, there is a good chance the locations would be in the Harz, or the Giant Mountains on today's Polish-Czech border. However that may be, there are meticulous underdrawings beneath the paint, based on painstaking artistic autopsies of natural scenes that were sketched outdoors. Friedrich is the leading exponent of German Romanticism and ultimately, in keeping with the spirit of the movement, his view of the landscape and nature is religiously motivated – both in a Christian and a pantheistic sense, inasmuch as it is based on the idea that nature has both a soul and spirit. As a result, the "external" face of nature becomes a mirror and a point of reference for the "inner" world of humans.



Drama and tranquillity

This glimpse of untouched nature records a brief, fleeting moment that could end in an instant if the trees come crashing down or the animals start and run away.
On the left, an escarpment gleams golden yellow in the sunlight. Like a wound, the sandy insides of the earth are exposed, the drama of erosion accentuated by the dazzling spotlight. The trees are dangerously close to the edge of the precipice. They could topple into the ravine at any moment – like the two dead trunks by the watering hole in the foreground. Behind it, a group of red deer has gathered on a lush green meadow to graze peacefully. The animals have raised their heads attentively, evidently in reaction to something that has disturbed the peace and quiet of this natural idyll.
The painting owes it extremely suspenseful impact to its theatrical lighting, to the abrupt change from brightness to darkness, from light to shade. This effect is enhanced by a combination of complementary hues that contains all the primary colours, by the masterful fleetingness and pastosity of the brushwork, and last but not least by the extreme changes in the direction of the lines.
It is this dramatic impact that distinguishes Blechen's landscapes from those of his great idol Caspar David Friedrich. Blechen was also the first German painter who depicted industrial landscapes, too, and thus also the eradication or simply the disruption of untouched nature by human hand.
There is nothing calm about the forest gorge and red deer, and yet a sense of tranquillity dominates all the same – perhaps just for one more brief, final moment, it seems like paradise.

Karl Blechen
(1798–1840)
Forest Gorge with Red Deer
Pre-1828
Oil on canvas
98.7×81 cm
On loan from the Federal Republic of Germany

Shipwreck with chalk cliffs

A storm is raging over the rugged Danish coast; a blanket of dark clouds hangs above the churning sea. The steep, craggy rock faces of gleaming white chalk tower over the beach. The chalk cliffs of Møn are an extremely common motif in Danish art from the first half of the 19th century. Formed around 70 million years ago, the steep coastline in the east of the island rises to a height of up to 128 metres and is constantly threatened by major landslides as a result of erosion.

Sødring's spectacular picture is considered a prime example of the Copenhagen school, which paved the way for realistic plein air painting – the practice of painting out of doors rather than in a studio – and heralded a departure from idealism in terms of both style and content. That also entailed striving for scientific accuracy when painting geological formations and meteorological phenomena.

However, the painting is open to further interpretation as well: on the narrow beach, immediately below the mighty cliffs, we see an assorted group of onlookers watching a stranded ship at the right-hand edge of the picture. The shipwreck caused by natural forces can be interpreted politically, because in 1814 Denmark had lost its status as a great power and was reduced to a small state. From then on, the national identity fed on the idea of "the homeland", and the Danish landscape became a popular subject for paintings. In this interpretation, the rays of sunlight refracted by the cliffs would point to the awakening of a new national pride that popularised the beauties of Denmark's nature.

At a far more general level, the painting also exemplifies a phenomenon that was taking hold throughout Europe at the time: the touristic development of landmarks in combination with the artistic conquest of local landscapes that were considered specific to one's own country.

Frederik Sødring
(1809–1862)
Chalk Cliffs on the Island of Møn
1831
Oil on canvas
100 × 163 cm
Bequest from Margarete Köhne, 2006

New shores

Carl Hasenpflug
(1802–1858)
Walkenried Abbey
1850
Oil on wood
89 × 75 cm

Even an intrepid hiker would have a hard time making their way through the abbey grounds: they would have to negotiate obstacles and avoid the hazards that could be lurking under the thin covering of snow. There is not a soul in sight, just the erect tombstone of a knight whose salvation the abbey's monks once prayed for.

Hasenpflug shows the ruins from close up and gives them a monumental quality. We are looking at the inner side of the west facade over the remains of the side aisle, the gigantic size of which is evoked by the bases of the pillars. Located in the southern Harz, Walkenried is the third-oldest Cistercian abbey in Germany and was completed around 1300. In the 18th century, it served as a quarry for building materials and its survival was severely threatened at the time the painting was made. Hasenpflug was probably aware of that, and his picture can be interpreted as evidence of the Romantics' desire to reconstruct and document the past with scientific accuracy.

But the painting also says something about the artist's spiritual relationship to closeness and distance and to the cycle of decay and renewal. The sacred ensemble becomes the symbol of a lost era; a monument to human achievement is being reclaimed by nature, the rhythm of which determines the measure of human existence, too. Countless shoots are pushing their way through the winter snow, new life is growing in every recess, on every projection and out of every crack in the masonry.

The ruined castle shrouded by mist on a mountaintop in the background is a purely imaginary addition. It indicates the "wandering artist's" longing for faraway places, his sense of departure and urge to discover new places. Hasenpflug's painting visualises a romantic but universal human dilemma, because every time we reach a destination, what was once faraway becomes familiar and curiosity becomes knowledge. The next hike, the next stage in the adventurous journey of life will follow – or to paraphrase Goethe: "A new day beckons to new shores."

The cathedral and the girl

Louis Ammy Blanc
(1810–1885)
The Churchgoer
1834
Oil on canvas
112 × 77.7 cm

In view of how often her picture was copied, she must have been a star by today's standards. And her image was not just reproduced in the form of prints: copper and steel engravings and lithographs were made of it as well. It can also be found in the pattern books of tapestry and porcelain makers. And particularly on (collector's) cups!

So, who was this icon of the German Biedermeier era? There is little in her life story to explain her popularity: Gertrud Küntzel, the wife of cavalry captain Eduard Küntzel of the Düsseldorf Hussar Regiment, was the daughter of a Rhineland industrialist. By all accounts it was a happy marriage, but Gertrud died young after the birth of her first child.

Blanc, a pupil of Friedrich Wilhelm von Schadow and an exponent of the Düsseldorf school of painting, created at least three painted versions of this motif himself; the first of them, from which all reproductions are derived, is the picture in the ArtWorlds.

The power of the magnificent composition is undoubtedly enhanced by the fact that the girl is pictured in front of the colossal facade of Cologne Cathedral, which had been left incomplete since the Middle Ages. At the time the painting was made, its completion was being planned – and becoming the symbol of a German unification movement. As a result, there are echoes of both the Romantic fascination with ruins and national glorification in this subject matter. The impact of the perspective is unparalleled: the setting is raised off the ground, we find ourselves several storeys above the street. The upper levels of the cathedral towers underpin the composition and frame the girl; at the same time, her head rises above the architecture as if to complete and crown it.

The lavishness of the expensive traditional costume is every bit as impressive as the fantastic architectural scenery. She is depicted as a churchgoer – full of demureness and humility, even though she is not actually in church. Trusting in authority, god-fearing and blessed with a graceful, impeccable physical appearance, she embodies the Biedermeier ideal of femininity.

A laid-back baron

Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller
(1793–1865)
Portrait of Baron Moser
Around 1833–1835
Oil on cardboard
74 × 58.2 cm
Property of the City of Hanover

The artist presents the largely unknown aristocrat in a highly prestigious setting: even the fact that he is depicted as a full figure is a mark of esteem, further reinforced by the choice of the objects that surround him. His clothing is fashionably elegant, and the top hat befitting his social status is perched on the armrest of the bench in such a way that its exquisite red velvet lining is visible – and adds a splash of vibrant colour to the dark blue tailcoat. Moser is sitting, almost as if enthroned, on an antique-style marble bench in front of his own estate.

At the same time, he has adopted a rather unorthodox and highly informal pose. The baron's legs are slightly crossed, his right hand is lying nonchalantly on his thigh and his left arm is resting casually on the bench. His unbuttoned waistcoat is another indication of the very private relaxation we are witnessing, as is Moser's gentle smile – at the time, it was still rare to emotionalise the subject of a portrait in this way.

The painting also owes part of its appeal to the photorealistic rendering of the skin, especially on the face. There is an extremely sharp and precise quality to the portrait; the plasticity of the figure borders on the extreme and is further reinforced by the fact that the muted colours and absence of contrasts in the background make the distant scenery dull in comparison to the technical brilliance and vibrant colours of the main figure.

Since 1829, Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller had been a professor at the Vienna Academy and was the curator of its collection. Later, his rejection of the academic doctrine of art, and in particular his preference for studying nature as opposed to copying the old masters, often brought him into conflict with his fellow professors, culminating in his premature retirement in 1857.

Today Waldmüller is considered one of Austria's most important Biedermeier painters and his pictures continue to enjoy great popularity.

Venus after the bath

Josef Ernst von Bandel
(1800–1876)
Venus at Her Toilet
1838–1844
Marble
Height: 166 cm
(including base)
Diameter: 63 cm

The life-sized goddess of love is sitting on an ornate three-legged stool with her right leg tucked under; her robes have slipped down around her. A richly ornamented jewellery box stands at the naked figure's feet, overflowing with pearl necklaces and a hair band. Fresh from the bath, the beautiful Venus is braiding and tying her flowing hair and arranging the tresses on her head.

But it is not just the goddess' hairstyle and classic profile that are captivating; the depiction of her entire body is inspired by the art of antiquity. In particular, the artist based his sculpture on the Capitoline Venus, even though the latter's posture is totally different. When Ernst von Bandel was making the initial models for his Venus in 1831/32 and 1834, the famous Roman statue – a copy of the lost Aphrodite of Knidos by Praxiteles – had just gone back on display in the Capitoline Museums in Rome.

Bandel started work on his Venus in Carrara in 1838, during his second trip to Italy. After a long interruption he completed it there between 1843 and 1844, and in 1846 the marble sculpture with its smooth, once highly polished surface went on show at the 14th Hanover Art Exhibition.

During those years, Bandel had started work on his most famous work of all: the Hermanns-denkmal. The monument features a colossal 26-metre-high statue of Arminius, with references in style to antiquity, at least in some minor details. Erected in 1875, it stands in the Teutoburg Forest near Detmold, at what was believed to be the site of the battle of the Teutoburg Forest, witnessing the decisive defeat of the Roman legions at the time. However, it was his statue of Venus at her toilet that Bandel described as his "principal and most magnificent work".

On the Ides of March

Karl Theodor von Piloty
(1824–1886)
The Murder of Caesar
1867 (or 1865)
Oil on canvas
147.5 × 239.5 cm
Property of the City
of Hanover

In 44 BC, the military commander and statesman Gaius Julius Caesar was declared dictator in perpetuity and thus became the sole ruler of Rome. He then began planning wars and conquests that would pave the way for world domination. About 60 men from the nobility and Caesar's personal entourage formed a group in opposition to his regime. On the famous Ides of March (the middle day of the month), the conspirators stabbed Caesar to death. The day before his assassination, Caesar is said to have been warned by a soothsayer: "Cave Idus Martias" – "Beware the Ides of March!" The phrase was popularised by William Shakespeare's play "Julius Caesar", the third act of which also served as the literary source for Piloty's painting. As in the famous drama, Metellus Cimber kneels before Caesar to plead for amnesty for his banished brother.

The ruler's reaction – his rejection – is clear from his recoiling body language, rhetorical gesture and facial expression. The first to react to the refusal is Servilius Casca, who is standing behind Caesar and has already raised his dagger to make the first thrust. Brutus, who is also about to pull his dagger out of his robes, can be seen on the right-hand edge of the picture.

Since 1856, Piloty had been professor of history painting at the Academy of Arts in Munich – the Mecca of German art at the time – and his prowess is evident in the way he stringently develops the painting's composition along an ascending diagonal running from left to right. His technical brilliance is also apparent from his rendering of the lavish stone floor that opens the setting up towards us. The scene is dramatically lit from the right, with the sunlight adding symbolic commentary.

Piloty's picture is a masterpiece of German history painting and has become part of the nation's visual memory.

A veil of light and steam

Claude Monet
(1840–1926)
Exterior of Saint-Lazare Station (Le Signal)
1877
Oil on canvas
65.5 × 82 cm

In early 1877, Monet set up a studio near the Gare Saint-Lazare in Paris and started drawing interior and exterior views of the station. He used these preliminary sketches to create a series of 12 paintings – contrary to the widespread assumption that the impressionists only ever painted spontaneously, in the open air and directly in front of their subject.
In our picture, the painter is viewing the scene from a section of track outside the station. The tracks run diagonally from left to right, leading into the arrivals and departures hall. The steel girders of the Rue de Londres bridge can just be seen on the far left of the picture. The buildings and halls in the background stand in a triangle formed by several streets.
In order to be able to work on the station premises at all, Monet obtained a permit straight from the director of the western line. He only had to pay a few francs to have platforms closed off, trains stopped or engines stoked with extra coal so that they would produce more smoke – because ultimately, the way the light plays with the steam and smoke is the real subject of this painting and not, as in the other pictures of the series, the feats of structural engineering, the "cathedrals of technology". Of all Monet's station pictures, the one in the ArtWorlds exhibits the highest degree of abstraction, the greatest disintegration of material reality. Accordingly, it came in for severe criticism – not least of all because of the banal signal on the vertical central axis which, to make things worse, is also obscured by shadows!
Today Claude Monet is probably the most famous impressionist of all. The word impressionism is derived from his painting "Impression, Sunrise" and was originally meant pejoratively. But the term was soon adopted by those it aimed to rebuke, and they used it consistently to distance themselves from the established art world of the Salon de Paris.

So far and yet so near

Alfred Sisley
(1839 – 1899)
Welsh Coast
1897
Oil on canvas
53.5 × 64.9 cm

Along with Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley was one of the original impressionists and was involved with the famous exhibitions right from the start. Although it was painted two decades later, Sisley's "Welsh Coast" still embodies his swift technique, rapid brushstrokes and "on the spot" execution – just one of the reasons why the work is considered a masterpiece of French plein air painting.

The painter uses different techniques for applying the paint to create three distinct zones within the picture. The vivid impact of the overgrown slope on the left is achieved by thickly painted bright colours. The intensity of the violet, pink and turquoise hues fades in the shade of the triangular stretch of beach that follows on the right; there is nothing but the silhouettes of two strollers to indicate how far away it really is. Without this hint of three-dimensionality, the composition would seem almost abstract. It is completed by the second triangle: the sea zone, ablaze in the dazzling sunlight. A barely visible horizon divides the lower section of this area into another triangle – the sea – with the rectangle of the sky above it. An almost imperceptible steamship can be made out where the two meet. It is seen from the painter's and the beholder's vantage point at the top of the cliff, establishing a connection between the distance and the foreground.

The picture is part of a series of coast paintings that Sisley completed during a trip to England in 1897. They show various sections of the landscape and feature varying views and subjects. The bold diagonal composition that subdivides the picture into foreground and distance while nevertheless establishing a close link between them points to the powerful and enduring influence of Japanese colour woodcuts.

Auguste Rodin
(1840–1917)
Eve
Around 1881
Bronze
Height: 173 cm,
Base: 49.4 × 58.5 cm
Property of the City
of Hanover

Expulsion from paradise

It is hard to identify the life-sized bronze statue as a historical figure merely by looking at it because the powerful and thickset nude is totally lacking in attributes.
The woman's arms are wrapped around her upper body as if she is trying to protect herself from something. Her left hand is resting behind her right ear on her bowed head, causing her face to sink into the acute angle formed by the crook of her arm. Gripped with emotion, she seems to be trying to hide her face – a metaphor for the shame she feels. Her left palm is turned outwards, in a gesture not just of defence but of not listening. Her right arm is protecting her upper body, especially her breasts.
Whereas her right leg is straight, supporting her weight, the sole of her left foot seems to be lifting off the rocky ground, implying tentative forward movement.
There is no way of knowing the sculpture depicts Eve except for the story of how it came to be made. Rodin had been working on designs for the entrance portal of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris since 1880. Because it depicted scenes from the "Inferno" based on Dante's "Divine Comedy", this work came to be known as "The Gates of Hell". Rodin planned to flank the portal with two life-size bronzes of the first human couple: Adam was to stand to the left of the entrance, Eve to the right. Although he abandoned this design soon afterwards, the sculptures were nevertheless produced. The later reliefs on the wings of the door depict human failings and their punishment by spiritual and physical torment. This is already expressed by the bronze statues: Adam and Eve are the archetypes of private transgressions, responsible for humankind's suffering, but initially for their own. That is why Eve is turning away from the consequences of her sin in despair – to no avail. At the same time, she is trying to protect herself from those same consequences. But the first step has been taken, and the expulsion from paradise has begun.

How over what

With 17 paintings, portraits, townscapes, landscapes and still lifes in its possession, the ArtWorlds owns an unusually comprehensive collection of works by a painter who embarked on his artistic journey in the late Biedermeier period before ultimately arriving at a muted form of impressionism via naturalism and realism. Born in Vienna, Schuch is considered the main exponent of a loose association of artists centred around Wilhelm Leibl. These painters, known as "the Leibl Circle", attached great importance to the alla prima technique, an approach that aims to show that the painting has been "made". Mistakes had to be scratched off down to the canvas and then redone. Corrective superficial overpainting or varnishing was looked down on and considered unartistic. Essentially, it was strived to keep the paints evenly moist and paint wet-on-wet so that the finished picture looked as if it had been made in one go. The image was constructed out of short brushstrokes, each with a separate colour, in an attempt to create the picture entirely out of colour: small flecks were used both to give shape to objects and to indicate spatial dimensions. Accordingly, the objects in Schuch's still lifes are modelled out of areas of colour and not based on a precise preliminary sketch.
These still lifes, including our painting, occupy an important position in the history of art. Most of them were painted between 1882 and 1894, when Schuch was in Paris. During this time, he studied the works of Gustave Courbet and Edouard Manet intensely and became a trail-blazer of the "l'art pour l'art" aesthetic – the aspiration to create art for its own sake, without it serving any other purpose. Just like Paul Cézanne, Schuch spent decades looking not for the "what" in art but for the "how".

Carl (Charles) Schuch
(1846–1903)
Still Life with Apples
Around 1887–1890
Oil on canvas
61.6 × 78.5 cm

Worpswede as a brand

The "Moor Landscape" at the ArtWorlds is the biggest painting that Otto Modersohn ever made. Modersohn was a founding member of the Worpswede artists' colony, which is today considered a prime example of such creative communities.
The painting dates from 1903 – the end of the colony's heyday – and combines virtually all the standard subjects of the "Worpswede brand", depicting them in the rich and heavy tonal palette of black, brown, green, white and blue characteristic of the old masters. Those subjects include the canal through the moor, which combines with the path running along it to open up the landscape and create an extremely naturalistic effect. Moorland cottages, the damp dwellings of the peat cutters, were another popular motif. In this painting, the watercourse and the avenue of birches lead to such a cottage, simultaneously drawing our attention into the distance. Trees – and particularly birches – likewise play an important role in the colony's imagery. The specific but nevertheless often varied subjects also include the "girl by the tree", a component that Modersohn uses on the left bank of the canal: the child is standing all alone at the edge of a cut bank, her dress billowing in the wind. She is gazing longingly but hopelessly across the vast plain that opens up in the far distance to a place where, behind the cottage, the sun is shining.
"For we live under the sign of the plain and the sky," wrote Rainer Maria Rilke in his Worpswede monograph, which was published in the same year that Modersohn's painting was created. However, this enchanting land was a myth created by the artists: it was certainly not the land inhabited by the lost girl, who had no prospects whatsoever in her real, incredibly bleak life. But that did not matter to the artists, because for them the "biblical simplicity" of a lonely child, seemingly rooted in nature, was only meant to convey an abstract, thoughtfully melancholic mood – the same atmosphere communicated by the blue-black depths of the water running through the moor.

Otto Modersohn
(1865 – 1943)
Moor Landscape
1903
Oil on canvas
111 × 215 cm
Property of the
City of Hanover

“That’s my sister!”

Paula Modersohn-Becker
(1876–1907)
Nursing Mother
1903
Oil on canvas
70 × 58.8 cm
Property of the
City of Hanover

Josefine Wellbrock sat for the artist involuntarily. Paula Modersohn-Becker drew her secretly while she was nursing her daughter during a break from cutting peat – at least that is what her brother told the “Hannoversche Presse” newspaper in an article from Saturday, 18 June 1949 entitled “That’s my sister!”

The artist has zoomed in so closely to the half-length figure that her left elbow and unusually cut-off head do not even fit into the picture. The mother’s blank gaze reveals a state of permanent misery and daily exhaustion, and her skin has been weathered by the hard outdoor work. Both mother and child are dressed in poor, shabby clothes. The mother’s hands are “as big as frying pans” and contrast starkly with the rosiness of the baby’s flesh and the whiteness of her own breast. The picture focuses entirely on the two figures; nothing hints at the surrounding circumstances, nothing defines the space they occupy.

Throughout the centuries, mother-and-child portraits have been a popular subject for artists, their style and symbolism influenced by Mary and the baby Jesus. That goes for the artists in Worpswede, too, who often looked to the local inhabitants of the Teufelsmoor region for their subjects. Fritz Mackensen, for instance, who Modersohn-Becker once took drawing lessons from in Worpswede, exalted a nursing peasant as “The Moor Madonna” in a picture entitled “The Infant”.

For Modersohn-Becker, too, this was a subject that she returned to throughout her life. In her diary, she says of a mother-and-child drawing done in 1898: “And the woman gave her life and her youth and her strength to the child in all simplicity, without knowing that she was a heroine.” Her “Nursing Mother” painting from 1903 evokes neither heroic sacrifice nor glorification and promise, just resignation to fate. It is the totally unadorned portrayal of an impoverished life full of deprivation.

Life in an empty space

Vilhelm Hammershøi
(1864–1916)
Interior on Strandgade
1901
Oil on canvas
62.4 × 52.5 cm
Gift from the Sponsors Association of the State Gallery of Lower Saxony

There is a disturbing quality to the interiors that Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi is famous for, and which have led to him being called "the Danish Vermeer". Puristic, stark and dispassionate, they often feature rooms in the house at No. 30 Strandgade where Hammershøi lived with his wife in Copenhagen.

We see a simple parlour furnished and decorated in a late neoclassical, Biedermeier style – and can look out through the window at the facade on the opposite side of the street. It looks surprisingly close and exudes a powerful attraction. A woman dressed in black is looking out at the street from the left-hand window; she seems relaxed, but totally captivated by the outside world.

The picture invites comparison with Caspar David Friedrich's "Woman at the Window", which was created almost 80 years earlier. But in the Romantic painting, Friedrich's wife Caroline is staring out at passing ships and the landscape as if filled with longing. For Hammershøi's wife Ida, the model featured in this and many of his other paintings, there is no such view. Only the longing seems to remain.

Nor are we presented with a snug and cosy home. The colouring of the entire picture is subdued and muted, while the melancholy mood conveyed by the grey hues is enlivened somewhat by the diffuse daylight. That gives rise to shadows – like the cross on the wall above the open piano; others – like those cast by the front table legs – are inexplicable. The bareness of the room is strange, too: without the woman, it would look totally uninhabited. The calculated sense of apprehension is heightened by the absence of a chair in front of the piano, even though there are notes on display. But there would not actually be room for a chair anyway, because its position is occupied by a table covered with a white cloth. In front of the narrow section of wall between the windows, we see a vase on an occasional table. It is empty – just like the two picture frames above it. The windows seem hermetically sealed, the person's body is rigid. Silence reigns.

What a wonderful world

Max Slevogt
(1868–1932)
The Parrot Man
1901
Oil on canvas
81.5 × 65.3 cm
Property of the
City of Hanover

On a wide sandy path flanked by trees we see Burkhardt, a keeper who worked at the Zoological Garden in Frankfurt (Main) around 1900. Appropriately for "the parrot man", he is framed by four birds. A green Amazon parrot is sitting on his crooked lower arm and there is a blue-and-yellow macaw on a swing, accurately depicted with white cheeks and the colourful plumage that gives the species its name. A green-winged macaw is climbing on the keeper's shoulder. It owes its name to the colour of its wing coverts, but the feathers on its body are mainly red and the wings largely blue. Finally, there is a sulphur-crested cockatoo hanging upside down from a second swing, its striking crest flashing bright yellow between the keeper's legs. To begin with, the birds' magnificent colours focus our attention entirely on the dark brown figure of the zookeeper, before the outlines of four strollers draw us into the depths of the painting.

Although the elusiveness of the painting makes it impossible to precisely render the objects' different material qualities, they are nevertheless distinguishable from one another. This is achieved on the one hand by the intensity with which the paint is applied, which is at its strongest in the depiction of the main figure, and on the other by the changing directions of the brushwork. The path, for instance, is depicted relatively evenly, using slightly diagonal strokes of thick paint that correspond to the incidence of light. By contrast, the bushes in the background consist of irregular patches of thinly applied colour, leaving the canvas visible to make it seem as if the light is shining through the twigs.

Slevogt spent several weeks in Frankfurt in 1901, during which his artistic interest was particularly aroused by the animals in the Zoological Garden, which he had visited as a child. He completed numerous watercolours and drawings during this time, as well as 29 oil paintings that include three versions of "The Parrot Man". Slevogt's Frankfurt Zoo pictures are the first of his works to be entirely influenced by the impact of French impressionism.


Familie

A mirror of family life

Lovis Corinth
(1858–1925)
The Artist and His Family
1909
Oil on canvas
175 × 166 cm
Property of the City of Hanover

"Why don't you come into the studio? There's a big mirror in there, let's have a look at it." That is how Lovis Corinth informed his family that he wanted to paint them.
The resulting picture is exactly the same size as the mirror that Corinth used in his Berlin studio apartment in 1909. His daughter Wilhelmine, who was born in June of that year, had been christened there a few weeks before he did the painting. Dressed in her christening robe, she is cradled safely in the lap of her mother Charlotte, who was 22 years younger than her husband. The mother-and-child group seems to be the focal point of the family, and if nothing else is the centre of the group portrait's composition. The couple's son Thomas, who looks older than his four years, is standing on a footstool to the left and serves as a counterpart to his father on the right in terms of both composition and colour.
The painter looks as if he is playing a little joke – perhaps so that the baby will make big eyes at him in the mirror. The son is turning towards his father and seems to be laughing at his antics and face-pulling. There is something almost intimidating about the way Corinth, with his palette and brushes in both hands, is gesticulating wildly above the heads of his wife and daughter. At the very least, it seems reasonable to fear that the oil paints could spill onto their white clothes and make a mess of the lavish neo-baroque hat his wife is bedecked with.
Corinth was known to have a restless nature, which the picture seems to convey, and to be extremely tense before and during a portrait session. The children usually avoided their father's studio and found spending a long time alone with him difficult. And Charlotte, who was her husband's first pupil in drawing and painting and once had intended to become an artist herself, said of the sitting: "Constantly seeing all four of us in the mirror at the same time was very hard work."

Artistic self-analysis

Max Liebermann
(1847 – 1935)
Self-Portrait with Straw Hat
Pre-1915
Black chalk on paper
32.2 × 26 cm
Property of the City of Hanover

Besides an outstanding collection of Max Liebermann's paintings, the ArtWorlds also holds an excellent collection of his graphic art, including the "Self-Portrait with Straw Hat", which depicts the artist with a drawing pad, i. e. at work. Liebermann began filling his first sketchbook in the Berlin studio of his teacher Carl Steffeck from 1866 on – with copies of works by Titian, Ingres and Menzel. But he did not start making himself the subject of his art until very much later, and seems far less euphoric and passionate about it than Lovis Corinth. A comparison of this drawing with the latter's "family portrait" reveals that the two artists had very different characters.

The chalk drawing does not so much as hint at a setting. The only indications that Liebermann is portraying himself as an outdoor artist are the hat and the sunlight from the left. The shapes of his body are clearly defined, and although he has captured the strict outline of a classic three-quarter-length figure with all the skill of an old master, it looks as if it has been sketched with incredible swiftness. With his drawing pad in hand and dressed in informal middle-class attire, the stroller is turning slightly towards the beholder – and thus also towards the mirror that provided him with his model in the studio. Due to the fact that it is a mirror image, Liebermann is holding the chalk in his left hand, although the artist was actually right-handed. The sketchpad in front of his body consists of a large rectangle of blank paper and contrasts with the dark jacket and waistcoat. The artist is looking up from the paper for a second to focus on his subject. The very next moment, he will be sketching. But first, his keenly attentive eyes peer out from beneath the rim of his straw hat, and his raised right eyebrow embodies the concentrated gaze of a meticulously analytical artist.

A straight path to the lake

Max Liebermann
(1847–1935)
The Artist's Garden
1918
Oil on canvas
85.5 × 106 cm
Property of the
City of Hanover

In 1909, Max Liebermann bought a garden property at Lake Wannsee in Berlin – and was proud of the fact that he had earned the money he needed to buy it with art. It was here that the pioneer of German impressionism – already 62 at the time – had his own "little castle" built. Modelled on country houses in Holland and Hamburg, the building had its own studio and served the family as a summer residence from 1910 on.

The picture shows the garden as seen from the lake, which the painter has his back to. Looking from the west, we glimpse Liebermann's house through a little birch grove; we can just about discern the outlines of its yellow facade behind the grid of tree trunks. A dead straight path leads from the house to the beholder. Although it divides the green grounds in two, there are four trees in the middle of it obscuring the view. In the right-hand half of the picture, the composition opens up in the form of a reddish brown zone that was usually a flower bed but was sometimes used as a turnip field during the war.

On the lawn behind it, the – full-time! – gardener is working the soil of the park-like grounds. A splash of yellow signifies her headscarf, a dab of brown her head and a dash of light blue her body, partially immersed in the greenery.

Liebermann designed the estate together with his friend Alfred Lichtwark, the director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle. It was on his advice that the path leading to the water was executed in a straight line. However, Liebermann did not see any reason to cut down the trees to make room for the path. Today the painting is considered a late masterpiece of impressionist garden paintings. And rightly so, even if for no other reason than the rich play of colours and shadows caused by the light filtering through the treetops – and Liebermann's elusive yet masterful depiction of it on the canvas. In the meantime, the picture has even taken on a significant role in preserving German cultural heritage: the painting in Hanover was used to help reconstruct the current design of the property.