



German History in Documents and Images

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Max Liebermann, "On the Secession Exhibition" (1907)

Max Liebermann (1847-1935) was one of the founders of the Berlin Secession in 1898. Along with other artists whose work parted with tradition, he organized a series of alternative exhibitions of new art. In the following account, written nine years after the group's founding, he recounts their early success. Although Liebermann was open to diverse styles, he still believed that there were certain aesthetic criteria to which art should adhere. This conceit shows the rise of a new canon of "modern" German art, itself replacing the older criteria of academic painting.

In the press and elsewhere one frequently hears the opinion that the exhibitions of the Secession have outlived themselves: the goals of the organizers have already been achieved and have also been recognized by their opponents as the right ones.

In fact, the great masters of Impressionism, for whose promotion we were once scolded and called unpatriotic, are now regarded as classics, and—even more telling—their works are also presented in academic exhibitions as masterworks.

We are proud to have participated, proportional to our modest means, in realizing the grandest development in modern painting, and we believe, since this part of our task is complete, that we should now limit ourselves to exhibiting almost exclusively German art. We have introduced the Impressionists with their finest works, not to flaunt these treasures, but rather to provide an opportunity for both audience and artist alike to learn from them. The members of the Secession have, however, set themselves a much higher, indeed a much more difficult goal, one that not only has not been achieved, but also one that can never be completely achieved.

We consider art to be not just something that has become, but rather much more something that is becoming and will become: yesterday's revolutionaries are today's classic artists. The task of the Secession is to struggle for the classic artist of the future. The so-called Secessionist element in all of this we gladly leave to our opponents. We recognize the value of a work not so much in its technical perfection—this question actually resolves itself intrinsically with each work of art—but rather in the degree to which the unique individuality of the artist reveals itself in his work. The talent of a painter lies not in the painstaking mimicking of nature, but rather in the strength with which he is able to recreate the impression that nature has called forth in him. It is only the strong artistic personality that can convince us of the authenticity in the representation.

We believe we have done our audiences a great favor in holding firmly to our practice of limiting, as much as possible, the number of works in a given exhibition. Our presentations have thus been spared the greatest danger facing an art exhibition: the tendency, like in a department store, to overhang, to show massive quantities of artworks, thereby transforming the joy of viewing art into a suffering from art.

In striving towards our goals we will, of course, have to forego the general public's applause, since the masses are always drawn to yesterday's sensation. We also know how the hopes of those who invest exhausting pioneering work into a cause are frequently disappointed. But still when we consider all our efforts and the many seeds from the tree of art that we have planted, if just one should bloom then this would be reward enough. The work of the Secession for art and—by the same token—for the artist would not have been in vain.

Source: Max Liebermann, "Zur Sezessions-Ausstellung" ["On the Secession Exhibition"] (1907), in Irmgard Wirth, ed., *Berliner Maler [Berlin Painters]*. Berlin, 1986, p. 173.

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