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Es War Einmal in Amerika: 300 Jahre US-Amerikanische Kunst/ Once Upon a Time in America: Three Centuries of US-American Art

Curated by: Barbara Schaefer and Anita Hachmann

Exhibition schedule: Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne, Germany, November 23, 2018–March 24, 2019

Exhibition catalogue: (in German): Barbara Schaefer and Anita Hachmann, eds., *Es War Einmal in Amerika: 300 Jahre US- Amerikanische Kunst*, exh. cat. Cologne: Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, in association with Weinand Verlag, 2018. 576 pp.; 500 color illus.; 41 b/w illus. Hardcover €49.80 (\$55.00) (ISBN: 9783868324877)

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In the preface found in the German catalogue for the exhibition *Once Upon a Time in America: Three Centuries of US-American Art*, Marcus Dekiert, director of the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud in Cologne, Germany, writes:

When we in Europe think of American art, our minds probably turn immediately to the modern art of the post-war period, to the 1950s and 60s. These works quickly aroused enthusiastic attention in Europe, and large numbers of them have found their way into museum collections. However, little is known on this side of the Atlantic about the centuries of art produced in the United States *before* 1945, and about the path—or rather the paths—taken by American art history since the colonial period.¹

Dekiert's statement is strikingly true, for in most German museums few, if any, examples of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American painting and sculpture can be found. In contrast, there are excellent collections of post-1945 American art in German museums, and this period is most often represented in traveling temporary exhibitions from the United States, such as *James Rosenquist: Painting as Immersion* (2017) at the Museum Ludwig and *Nancy Spero* (2019) at the Museum Folkwang in Essen. In Cologne, the Museum Ludwig houses a particularly strong collection of post-1945 American art and a healthy temporary exhibition roster of modern American art; upcoming in November 2019 is a survey of American artist Wade Guyton.

Rarely have exhibitions focused on pre-1945 American art been made available to a German audience at a German museum. Some thirty years ago, in 1988 in Berlin, *Bilder aus der Neuen Welt: Amerikanische Malerei des 18. Und 19 Jahrhunderts* (*Pictures from the New World: American Painters from the 18th and 19th centuries*), focused on American art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with loans from American museums. While this exhibition prompted debate and a symposium that resulted in an edited volume of important scholarship on how American art is perceived outside of the United States, exhibitions with a historical emphasis have been rare since then.² Almost twenty years after the Berlin exhibition, between 2007 and 2009, under the leadership of then-director Ortrud Westheider and in collaboration with curators at American museums, the Bucerius Kunst Forum in Hamburg organized a series of three exhibitions that examined specific themes in pre-1950 American art.³ Yet, to my knowledge, large-scale museum exhibitions offering broad surveys of historical American art have not been on view in Germany.

Which is why the 2018–19 exhibition *Once Upon a Time in America: Three Centuries of US-American Art*, organized at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud by co-curators Barbara Schaefer and Anita Hachmann, was an important and much-needed contribution to the understanding of historical American art in Germany. It presented a broad survey of American art to an audience that otherwise might have had little exposure to it, while exploring smaller subthemes throughout the galleries. The curators assembled a vast number of loans of important American paintings and sculpture made between 1650 and 1950—the majority of which would be well known to any first-year undergraduate studying American art at an American university, but relatively unknown to a German audience. Arranged chronologically, the loans of some 134 objects came from a diverse range of museum collections across the United States. As Dekiert further explains in the catalogue preface, “For the first time in Germany, it is now possible to get to know 300 years of American art in all its facets, and in the process to stand face-to-face with some of the iconic works of American art history.”⁴



Fig. 1. View of Gallery 8 of *Es War Einmal in Amerika: 300 Jahre US-Amerikanische Kunst / Once Upon a Time in America: Three Centuries of US-American Art*, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne, Germany. Copyright: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln

The exhibition was spread over nine galleries and began with a room of portraits and history paintings from the colonial period, with examples from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, including John Smibert, *The Continnence of Scipio* (1719/22; Bowdoin College Museum of Art), Robert Feke, *Reverend Thomas Hiscox* (1745; Redwood Library Athenaeum) and Benjamin West, *Dr. Samuel Boude* (1755/56; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC). In the design of the galleries, the curators and exhibition team specifically sought to engage their German audience by linking largely unknown historical American art in this first gallery to the more familiar work of the American artist Edward Hopper, shown in a later gallery. Hopper, enormously popular in Germany, has been the subject of several recent exhibitions in German museums. Creatively, an entrance opposite the first gallery was left open—but closed off to foot traffic with a velvet rope—exposing a later gallery within the exhibition devoted to American modernism. Here, viewed through the opening, the audience was confronted with a temporary wall that contained three paintings that would have struck an immediate and familiar chord with a German audience: Hopper’s *Girl at a Sewing Machine*, *Hodgkin’s House*, and *The City* (fig. 1).



Figs. 2, 3. *Es War Einmal in Amerika: 300 Jahre US-Amerikanische Kunst / Once Upon a Time in America: Three Centuries of US-American Art*, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne, Germany. Left: View of Gallery 2. Right: View of Gallery 7. Copyright: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln, rba_d051350_05. Copyright: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln

Proceeding chronologically, the second room of the exhibition focused on the period between the Revolution and the early Republic and was aptly titled “Icons of a New Nation.” It included the monumental John Trumbull painting *The Declaration of Independence* (1832; Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art, Hartford); John Vanderlyn’s *Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos* (1809-14; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts); and John Singleton Copley’s *Watson and the Shark* (1782; Detroit Institute of Arts) (fig. 2). Further galleries focused on “The Wild West,” which included George Caleb Bingham, *The Wood Boat* (1850; Saint Louis Art Museum) and Frances Flora Bond Palmer’s lithograph *The New Eden*, with landscapes by Asher Durand and the German-born Albert Bierstadt; “The Gilded Age,” including paintings by Cecilia Beaux, William Merritt Chase, Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, and Henry Ossawa Tanner; and “The Ashcan School,” with George Bellows, Robert Henri, and John Sloan (fig. 3). The exhibition ended with examples of Abstract Expressionism.

The curators took great care in organizing this survey exhibition, enlisting the assistance of outside scholars of American art to act as advisors. As noted in the exhibition catalogue,

these included Margaret C. Conrads of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art; Professor David Peter Corbett of the Centre for American Art at the Courtauld Institute, University of London; and two scholars from Germany Professors Ursula Frohne and Winfried Fluck. The museum also sought to incorporate aspects of Native American art and Indigenous perspectives, and to do this properly they consulted with Tahnee M. Ahtone, curator of Ethnology and Textiles at the Oklahoma History Center. They thereby created a more relevant and inclusive exhibition. This could be felt strongly in the galleries where Native American objects, such as an Iroquois Wampum Belt, were displayed alongside paintings. Throughout the exhibition, all wall and text panels were in German and English.

An American viewer might have felt that the objects chosen were too conservative or that the survey aspect of the exhibition lacked depth. Indeed, if the targeted audience was primarily American, this may have been true, but because the exhibition was conceived of and intended only to be on view at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, it is important to recognize for whom the curators designed the exhibition: first, Germans in the Cologne/Düsseldorf region; second, Germans outside of that region; and last, European visitors. The purpose of the exhibition was to introduce American art to a German and European audience, and in this the exhibition did an important and much-needed service in promoting American art outside of the United States. I can personally speak to having witnessed enthusiasm for the lent objects by students in the general survey course on American art I taught as a visiting lecturer last year in the American Studies department at the Johannes Gutenberg Universität in Mainz. My undergraduate and graduate students had never taken a course in American art, and I saw the awe firsthand that they had in seeing rare works of American art on display in this exhibition; I was further encouraged by their response papers about our visit to the show. The Wallraf-Richartz Museum understood this need to reach out to a diverse German audience and organized specific educational programming to bring in children and students, which also included a museum study day for university students. It should be noted that American art, particularly American art before 1945, is little taught in German universities, in either art history departments or American studies departments. The exhibition and educational programming was an important opportunity to introduce American art not just to a general audience, but in relation to parallel art history and American studies courses taught at the university level in Germany.

The exhibition will have long-lasting influence in Germany, as it was accompanied by a luxuriously illustrated catalogue, with five hundred color images spread over 576 pages. In total, well over fifty scholars contributed to the catalogue; this number is higher when one considers the contributions by the curators and advisors, who also provided catalogue entries and essays. There are thirty essays within the catalogue, largely by noted American and German historians of American art, including American scholars Linda S. Ferber, Margaretta M. Lovell, and David Lubin, and German scholars Bettina Baumgärtel and Susanne Scharf. That the catalogue is impressive is an understatement. Besides the incredible number of color images and essays, each object from the exhibition is provided with two pages: a full-page color image and a short explanatory text. One would expect to pay a high price for such a catalogue, but it is remarkably affordable, under €50 (\$55). The only potential limitation is that the catalogue was printed in German and was not translated. As so many of the contributors are native English speakers and provided their essays and entries in English, this seems like a missed opportunity to also have a catalogue in English. The curators did produce a much smaller, slimmed-down catalogue in English

that provides color illustrations of some of the exhibited objects and republishes information from the main wall panels in each gallery, although none of the essays from the German exhibition catalogue were translated for it.

According to the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, more than ninety thousand visitors saw the exhibition over the four months it was on view. Curator Barbara Schaefer confirmed that this was far above visitor numbers for recent exhibitions held at the museum and makes it one of the most successful shows ever held at the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum. This information alone should be a loud siren call to curators at both German and American museums. The potential for collaboration on future temporary exhibitions of American art is strong. There has been for some time, and continues to be, an interest in Germany for American art and culture from before 1945, and American scholars and curators should continue to look for opportunities to promote American art outside of the United States. Moreover, such an interest in Germany for American art before 1945 may allow German museums to think critically about gaps within their own collections.

Notes

¹ Barbara Schaefer and Anita Hachmann, eds., *Es War Einmal in Amerika: 300 Jahre US-Amerikanische Kunst*, exh. cat. (Cologne: Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in association with Weinand Verlag, 2018), 11.

² Thomas W. Gaehtgens and Heinz Ickstadt, eds., *American Icons: Transatlantic Perspectives on Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century American Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Center Publications, 1992).

³ Ortrud Westheider, "A 'Small Sensation' in Hamburg," *American Art* 22, no. 3 (2008): 16–19.

⁴ Schaefer and Hachmann, *Es War Einmal in Amerika*, 11.