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Kunst fürs Volk: Genre Painting as Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century Germany

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Abstract
Kunst fürs Volk repositions genre painting in nineteenth-century Germany as a form of mass culture, rather than high art, to achieve new insight into the form and function of a rather tired pictorial format. Genre paintings were as commonplace at galleries and large-scale art exhibitions as they were in commercial art, and they were used to illustrate all manner of objects and ephemera. The reiteration of forms within genre paintings had become, in a sense, a ‘massification’ of artistic technique and expression, just as the images and figurative elements themselves were repeated endlessly within different media formats. To the extent that the pictorial elements were ‘devalued’ by virtue of their mediocrity and popular usage, as well as their repetitiveness, the context in which they were situated took on increased significance; the interplay between the object and its context, audience, and reception is the subject of my analysis.

Keywords: Genre Painting; Visual Culture; National Identity; Arbeiterkultur; Bildung; Volkstracht; Heimatkunst; Realism in Art; Social Democratic Party (SPD); Friedrich von Schiller

Genre painting was hugely popular across all social strata in Germany from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, but by the 1890s, art critics had repositioned it as an artifact of nostalgia in the worst sense of the term. Virtually ignored by present-day art historians, its neglect can be partially attributed to contemporaneous critics and editors of luxury art journals such as Julius Meier-Graefe, who foregrounded the national reception of French art in his eagerness to establish a German modernist canon.¹ Even the middle-brow satirical magazine Simplicissimus showcased work by avant-gardists rather than the juste milieu. In its parodies, it favoured the contemporary art worlds of the Jugendstil, the Academy, and the Secessionist movements.² Just as iconic representations like Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa have been entirely leech of their original impact and significance, in late nineteenth-

²See, for example, Bruno Paul’s parody of the Jugendstil entitled Der München Jugend-Brunnen (The Munich Fountain of Youth) in Simplicissimus 2/9 (1897/1898), p. 77.
century Germany, genre paintings and their associated motifs were commodified within countless mass cultural formats. Indeed, art critics of the time called it ‘Kunst fürs Volk’, or ‘art for the people’, due to its ubiquity.  

Even as it came to epitomize the most banal aspects of middle-class culture, genre painting was whole-heartedly embraced by representatives of the German labour movement. The production, distribution, consumption, and celebration of genre painting within socialist and workers’ circles would seem at odds with a radical political agenda. However, its inclusion within leftist publications also indicates that its significance at the time differed from its present-day reception.

This paper offers a new perspective on the too-familiar tropes and techniques of German genre painting. As clichéd as the phrase ‘popularity breeds contempt’, genre paintings were just as overlooked by forward-thinking critics of their day as they are by today’s art historians. Their lack of formal innovation, original content, and, in some instances, clear authorship, renders them a particularly tedious subject for analysis. Rather than hold them to the same standard, or situate them within the same context, as a Manet or a Degas, I have repositioned them as a form of mass culture. Viewed as artefacts of the everyday, the repetitiveness and predictability of their bucolic, pastoral vistas and quaint peasant communities provide an intriguing glimpse into the socio-political operations of aesthetic discourse in late-nineteenth-century Germany.

Instead of reiterating critical judgments categorizing genre paintings as ‘bad art’, in this article, I will illustrate how this typology participates in a wider discussion about taste and its socio-cultural significance across class contexts. I will argue that genre painting was a central and key component of mass culture rather than a rather marginal artifact of collective sentimentality. Finally, I will consider genre painting’s relevance for developing conceptions of communal identity within different social spheres.

**Was Genre Painting Middle Class Art?**

Genre painting has had a long and venerable history in Northern Europe, from Breughel and Vermeer’s masterpieces produced for seventeenth-century Dutch aristocracy and merchant classes to mid-eighteenth-century academic painting. In his *Encyclopaedia* (1757), Diderot defined ‘grand genre’ as history painting, while the ‘petit genres’ included paintings of the

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everyday, landscapes, and still life. This latter category was shortened to ‘genre’ painting, and, at a later date, Diderot narrowed it to ‘la peinture morale’ (1767).  

In Germany, the Biedermeier artist Franz Kugler established academic expectations for genre paintings. In 1842, he wrote that they should be modest depictions of ordinary life composed with a harmonious balance of form, colour, and light. Contemporary art historians characterise genre paintings as ‘representations of scenes of everyday human life’, and from a perspective coloured by Marxist cultural critique, they also have characterised genre painting as particularly ‘bourgeois’, in the sense that these works reflected middle-class interests and cultural priorities. In this section, I will show that while genre painting was, indeed, one facet of bourgeois visual culture, it did, in fact, speak to and for a broader constituency.

Following the Romantic glorification of the vernacular culture of the Volk, the Biedermeier period (1815-1848) saw genre painting’s popularisation. Two major historical events granting the middle and lower classes greater socio-political prerogative bracketed the Biedermeier: the first was the ousting of Napoleon’s armies from the Holy Roman Empire of the German Reich during the Prussian Wars of Liberation and the second was the March Revolution in Germany. Through both of these events, ordinary people hoped to claim greater socio-political empowerment within a continually evolving society. As Jennifer Jenkins has explained in her study of Hamburg: ‘...eighteenth-century citizenship was not uniform, coherent, democratic, or applied in any general way, neither in Hamburg, nor in the rest of German-speaking Europe.’ Historians tend to agree that the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars set up a conflicted precedent and difficult conditions for the conceptualisation and realisation of a unified German democracy. Similarly, the March Revolution has been considered a failure, particularly for the working classes, which were marginalized in its aftermath by a Faustian bargain forged between the monarchy, aristocracy and the socially aspirant bourgeoisie.

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5 Ibid., p. 65.  
In secondary literature, art historians have sought to establish a causal relationship between events that transpired on the political stage and the formal characteristics of Biedermeier art and design. Described by Ronald Taylor as indicative of ‘virtuous modesty’ and a middle-class emphasis on ‘things as they are’, he claimed that Biedermeier artists

…looked for a new realism, based on subject matter drawn not from historical memory or from learned allegory, or even from religious parable and vision, but from the experiential world of the moment. Real objects were chosen, realistic and objective in the manner of their treatment.10

As the argument goes, the conventions through which artists mediated ‘reality’ were determined by bourgeois tastes, and were indicative of its socio-cultural values. Indeed, Karl Uhde has argued that the Biedermeier emphasis on the contemporary, rather than the historical, reflected the high sense of self-esteem the middle-classes enjoyed during this period.11

While it is not my specific intention to argue against the notion that nineteenth-century German genre paintings are ‘middle-class’, or ‘middle of the road’, or ‘mediocre’, I would, at the very least, like to acknowledge the historiographical complexity and difficulty of attempting to fix causality between periodization, political events, taste, class, and formal characteristics in art. While it is true that many of these works portray the middle-class milieu, I would argue that no single ‘cause’, such as ‘the rise of the middle-class’ could be identified as the ‘reason’ for genre painting. Indeed, many of the artists who produced these images were not illustrating their own socio-economic spheres. That is to say, the authors and consumers of many German genre paintings hailed from different class, regional, and cultural contexts than those of the subjects depicted in these works, which complicates the notion that German genre painting was realistic on the one hand, and a specifically ‘middle-class art’ on the other.

Furthermore, the understanding that genre painting in Germany ‘happened’ for socio-political reasons presents a number of problems. This first of these is the simple fact that the ‘realistic’ portrayal of the mundane wasn’t solely the preoccupation of Biedermeier painters. Mimetic scenes from everyday life had been produced in Europe for hundreds of years prior to the classification of a period of time as ‘Biedermeier’. For much of the history of Western Art, the middle-classes had not been the primary source of revenue for working fine artists and neither ‘realism’ nor genre painting, for that matter, had been particularly representative of

bourgeois tastes. It just so happens that in mid-nineteenth-century Germany, an increasingly endowed middle-class audience supported genre painting and, furthermore, the bourgeois consumption of genre paintings has influenced its reception as ‘middle-class’ both at the time and at present. Whether this was a matter of taste, availability of typologies, faddishness, institutional patronage, artistic training, the rise of the mass media, the emergence of large-scale public art exhibitions, the internationalization of the art world, all of the above, or any number of other factors, is a subject for debate. I will cover some of this ground in following sections, primarily through an analysis of the discursive role of genre painting within national debates regarding social, political, and visual representation, especially within a developing socialist culture.

**Genre Painting as Heimatkunst**

In this section I will argue that genre paintings represent a shared understanding of community derived from a developing notion of ‘Heimat’ (‘Homeland’), which nuances conventional understandings of class as a divisive social phenomenon. While class did, indeed, play a significant role in informing subject positions and social categories and hierarchies in late nineteenth-century Germany, other aspects of German socio-political culture created linkages between different groups and represented the concept of one people coexisting cooperatively within a single nation-state. Many artefacts of German visual culture show continuing, and differentiating, individual identification with class-, regional-, ethnic-, linguistic-, religious- and gender-specific microcommunities, but others, such as genre painting, which was comparatively wide-spread and readily available within mass culture, reflect popular aspirations towards greater unification.

As Celia Applegate has explained, from the late eighteenth century onward, the bourgeoisie began to discover their ‘Heimat’ through new forms of communication and transportation. This idea of the homeland was not limited to Germany’s political boundaries, but, rather, it connoted the social ideal of rural community projected onto the larger whole. As she described:

> Heimat’s depiction of the small town as a ‘cradle’ of the greater political unity both eased the transition and defined an entirely new, more malleable kind of localness. The idea of Heimat potentially embraced all of Germany, from its individual parts to its newly constituted whole. It offered Germans a way to reconcile a heritage of localized political traditions with the ideal of a single, transcendent nationality.

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Heimat was both the beloved local places and the beloved nation; it was a comfortably flexible and inclusive homeland, embracing all localities alike.\textsuperscript{13}

The concept of ‘Heimat’ or ‘home’ functions in a number of different ways in late-nineteenth-century German genre painting, and it carries several distinct connotations that also tap into a variety of socio-cultural positions—from left liberal to ultra-conservative. Alon Confino has discussed the means by which the middle-classes drew from new forms of entertainment, travel, and leisure to envision a unified Germany as a Heimat. Informed by instances of rural life glimpsed through postcards, train travel, advertisements and other forms of mass media, they began to view their country as an aggregate of regions encompassed within an imagined nation-state community.\textsuperscript{14} For Confino, the Heimat museum reconciled the local with the national, through the representation of variant facets of the whole of German culture. Genre painting similarly accommodated burgeoning interest in the vernacular, and, as the peasantry became increasingly industrialized, it also commemorated increasingly obsolete ways of life.\textsuperscript{15}

‘Typical’ German home-life was a popular subject of genre paintings, as were communal microcosms: villages, pastoral settings, monasteries, and public houses turn up repeatedly in these works. Oftentimes, these are identified as ‘Bavarian’, ‘Friesian’ or ‘Schwäbisch’, depicting far-flung or isolated localities (fig. 1). They were as familiar to urban audiences through their repetitive pictorial conventionality as they were exotic in their subject matter and geographic remoteness. Some of their titles draw from dialect, as well as place names, to situate these scenes. Additionally, their authors utilized a visual lexicon of decoration and ornament that corresponded to the real and imagined vernacular culture of specific areas. Sutured together, the whole body of genre paintings could be viewed as representative of the German countryside. However, this conceptualisation of Germany excluded the urban middle-classes. Furthermore, despite their mimesis, genre paintings were typologies rather than social-scientific studies of a particular place and time. Priced to suit bourgeois pocketbooks, and produced for the numerous annual paintings exhibitions appearing in cities and towns throughout Germany, they portrayed fantasy rural lifestyles for urbanites.


Karl Rossbacher’s study of the *Heimatkunst* (‘homeland art’) movement in literature showed that after the March Revolution of 1848, the bourgeoisie made efforts to educate itself about anachronistic lifestyles in remote communities with an eye to eventual national unification. A growing concern for the maintenance and conservation of the homeland dovetailed with a developing reverence for the natural environment.\(^{16}\) Rossbacher noted that after 1890, however, *Heimatkunst* became affiliated with radical conservatism, and instead of illustrating a new surge of interest in the countryside, it instead stood for a ‘rigorously’ anti-liberal, petty bourgeois political outlook.\(^{17}\) Rather than address or depict social issues of interest to urban Germans, genre paintings produced by members of the *Heimatkunst* movement visually idealised the ‘healthy’ life of an autochthonous and originary *Volk* in tune with nature.\(^{18}\) Their reactionary rhetoric positioned the metropolis as the opposite of the *Heimat*, and, consequently, authentic German life was conceptualised as rural rather than urban.\(^{19}\) These same sensibilities have informed histories of the influential *Sonderweg* thesis, most notably historian George L. Mosse’s *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (1964).

Taking representations of the *Volkstracht* (folk costume) as my primary example, I will argue that genre paintings contributed to a fictional conception of the *Volk* in its *Heimat*, which helped forge a common national identity. As Antonio Gramsci claimed, national consciousness depended upon the development of a concept of a past ‘which still lives among us’, the production of continuity between history, the present, and the future.\(^{20}\) Genre paintings frequently offered enough incidental detail to identify them as representative of one particular locale or community, and the archaism of folk costuming provided the illusion of ‘history living among us’ by illustrating ostensibly authentic and *Uralt* (age-old) traditions and heritage. Yet at the same time, genre painters drew from a range of stock characters who acted out prescribed roles within a limited number of settings, including monks, farmers, fishermen, hunters, and the like (fig. 2). In both form and content, genre paintings situated small yet significant details within a mirage-like projection that glossed over regional, class, and religious differences through a generalizing and equalizing pictorial rhetoric of

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conventionality. Even as they emphasized the particular through their details and their realistic style, they reflect sameness through the repetition of familiar forms, content, and typologies.

As Martin Blümcke explained, the Napoleonic occupation of Germany freed the peasantry from traditional clothing protocols, and thereafter they were allowed to dress in any way they pleased.21 This is a point of some significance since traditional forms of dress designated not only an individual’s regional or national origins, but also their profession, familial status, and rank.22 By the late nineteenth century, peasants had largely abandoned traditional dress, even as the urban bourgeoisie resuscitated the ‘folk costume’ as a means of expressing national identity. Indeed, the very term Tracht, or Volkstracht, was an invention of middle-class city dwellers, and it was unused by their rural counterparts.23

Ubiquitous within genre paintings, the broad-brimmed hats trimmed with a feather, britches, knee-length wool socks, short jackets, and decorative waistcoats of the Volkstracht were exotic remnants of an increasingly mythologized way of life. For the peasants, the Tracht emphasized one’s position within the local social hierarchy, and marked distinctions between individuals from different locales. Nevertheless, the middle class celebrated the Volkstracht as an indicator of shared cultural heritage via travel brochures, through Vereine (voluntary associations) devoted to costumes and their preservation, and within folk museums.24 When Friedrich Hottenroth published his mammoth documentation of the Volkstracht from Roman times until the founding of the Second Reich, it was met with tremendous approval from critics in publications as diverse as Der Kunstwart, Die Kunst für Alle, Kunstgewerbeblatt, Die Mappe, and Das Atelier.25 Prominent art critic Friedrich Pecht praised it not only for its exhaustive research on the topics, but also for the quality and attractiveness of its illustrations.26

Revisiting styles of clothing obsolete since the seventeenth century, late nineteenth-century genre paintings featuring the Volkstracht did not describe actual peasant dress, but instead

25 Prospects of the Handbuch der deutschen Tracht von Friedrich Hottenroth. Stuttgart: G. Weise Verlag, 1892. This was issued prior to the book’s publication and sold separately for 2 Marks. The book itself cost 100 Marks.
26 Ibid.
catered to its fetishisation. Munich-based Austrian painter Franz von Defregger’s Kraftprobe (fig. 3; Test of Strength, 1898) provides one such example. According to Maria Makela, Defregger was the most accomplished of the many artists who produced ‘lederhosen painting’. She claimed his ‘… cheery, idyllic representations of non-urban life in Bavarian and the Tyrol, which in no way convey the actual existence of the South German and Austrian rural population’ had ‘scores’ of less adept imitators in Munich alone. Defregger’s Kraftprobe depicted a test of strength within a village community, yet he also used the occasion as a means to showcase the Tracht, presenting different variations on men’s costuming.

Even as contemporary artists like Defregger carefully rendered every detail of the Volkstracht, its inclusion within these paintings was entirely anachronistic, despite any presumption that genre paintings depicted everyday life. Even the knee-length woollen socks so frequently connected to the image of German folk costumes were rarely found outside of the museum in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the figure on the foreground to the left of the group wears a Tracht fitting the exact specifications of the Bavarian type Hottenroth described in his compendium: a green-grey ‘Joppe’, or tailless jacket made from thick woollen material with a standing collar, a green vest with gold metal buttons, black lederhosen with white embroidery, white wool socks, brown leather shoes, red neckerchief, and a black hat with green band and feather. However, the red vests with green detailing worn by four other members of the group more closely resemble Tyrolean-style garments. Regardless of the source of the costumes depicted within Defregger’s painting, it is clear that these scenes are works of his imagination rather than illustrations of how rural Germans actually dressed. Like so many paintings of its type, Kraftprobe presents an idealised and fictionalised conceptualisation of rural Germany to an urban viewership.

Genre painting as Bildungs-Exemplar

Again following Biedermeier precedent, genre paintings oftentimes represented an idealised domestic sphere in which family members played out carefully scripted roles, just as images of peasant communities pictorialised standard myths about the Volk in its Heimat. The cult of the nuclear family was a nineteenth-century phenomenon, glorifying a tight-knit closeness
that extended from the home to the surrounding local community. According to historian Jürgen Kocka, a typical middle-class family was a study in patriarchy: ‘Dominated by the husband and father, it was an inner sanctum protected from the world of competition and materialism, from politics and the public, a sphere of privacy…’ Nineteenth-century genre paintings conventionalised newly emergent gender roles, emphasized the value of community, and portrayed the family as an ideal societal microcosm, a model for society at large.

Otto Heichert’s (1868-1946) Pfarr-Idyll (Pastor’s Family Idyll), which had been displayed at the Great Berlin Art Exhibit in 1897, was typical in its depiction of the bourgeoisie enjoying its leisure time. In Heichert’s work, members of an extended family sit together in a garden, each pursuing personal interests. Within the composition, the family group functions as a compact, interrelated unit occupying a clearing in the middle ground. Framed by the wall and steps of their house at the right side, their ‘civilized’ space is encroached upon by burgeoning natural surroundings.

Despite their reliance on technical mimesis and attention to minute detail, paintings like these are more didactic than realistic, following the paradigm of individual and social perfection set forth in discourse surrounding the notion of Bildung. Dorothea von Mücke has defined the term: ‘Derived from the verb bilden (to form, shape, model, constitute, educate, cultivate, civilize, train, organise, establish, construct, find create, to name only a few of the many possible (162) translations), it carries a suffix denoting both a state and a process.’ With respect to Heichert’s work, Bildung is portrayed in numerous ways: through reading, handicraftsmanship, sketching, and engaging in conversation. Indeed, the painting almost functions as a primer on how to be ‘gebildet’, demonstrating ways in which families might incorporate and embody the idea of self-cultivation. Implicit is the notion that the self-improvement of one member of the family benefits all, and from this paradigm emerges the idea that German society as a whole progresses through the establishment and development of ‘gebildete’ families and micro-communities.

The concept of Bildung, which never actually appeared in Friedrich von Schiller’s treatise On the Aesthetic Education of Man (1795), but which has been attributed to this particular text, and also to Goethe’s Bildungsromane, had been defined and refined throughout the

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nineteenth century. Bildung was a key cultural concept, a standard of social behaviour that cut across the classes, and an individual aspiration. In both theory and practice, Bildung reconciled subjectivity with a universal standard, not as a utopian aspiration towards a holistic society but rather as a means to continually strive towards individual, societal and cultural improvement. Schiller thought of culture as a ‘task’, an activity, rather than as a static form of capital that simply could be acquired through status or some other privileged means.

Personal ennoblement, on both a mental and spiritual level, distinguished cultivated individuals from the mob and it also constituted a reaction against aristocratic self-indulgence.33 Writing in disillusioned response to the violent excesses of the French Revolution, Schiller stated: ‘Among the lower and more numerous classes we are confronted with crude, lawless instincts, unleashed with the loosening of the bonds of civil order, and hastening with ungovernable fury to their animal satisfactions,’ and he contrasted these tendencies with those of ‘the cultivated classes’ who ‘offer the even more repugnant spectacle of lethargy, and a depravation of character which offends the more because culture itself is its source.’34 In these passages, Schiller advocated moderate social behaviour and revealed how the value of self-betterment could act as the means through which ordinary German citizens might replace a corrupt aristocracy.35 He theorized that education, particularly aesthetic education, provided the medium through which the individual engaged with the world, refined the potential of the ideal self, and set the conditions for the development of an ideal state.36

Schiller takes the fine arts as his point of departure for discussing the manner in which individuals might interact with the external world, but he later expanded his definition of what might constitute an object of aesthetic contemplation: ‘…form gradually comes upon him from without—in his dwelling, his household goods, and his apparel—so finally it begins to take possession of himself, transforming at first only the outer, but ultimately the inner, man too.’37 The cultivated individual, seeking ever-increasing self-perfection, and as a consequence, societal improvement, is one who has developed the sensibility to surround

itself with beautiful objects that manifest ‘the simple majesty of law’.\(^{38}\) In this sense, taste takes on a moral prerogative. For the purposes of my argument, it is significant to note that Schiller’s understanding of the types of objects that might offer the opportunity for self-betterment were not limited to works of fine art or to elite culture.

More than any other group, the liberal bourgeoisie strove for national unification, an objective that was more or less foisted on citizens hailing from other backgrounds, and it was in its own interest to imagine that members of other classes met its agenda with enthusiasm.\(^{39}\) Historian William Hagen portrayed a contested and conflicted path to nation-statehood, in which the idea of Germany was conceptualised contingently in accordance with socio-political subject positions, both individual and communal:

> Competing German nationalism had arisen, including that of new working-class movements speaking in the name of a revolutionary proletariat that, while international in theory, consistent in practice of nationally demarcated cadres. In some eyes it began to appear that a stable, powerful and successful German nation could only be built by suppressing alternative social and political visions. A contest of rival ‘utopias of modernity’ began that would lead, across World War I’s flaming trenches, to civil and ethnic war to the knife.\(^{40}\)

Genre painting represented the *Volk* as a unified national community, and it was another institution through which the bourgeoisie struggled for hegemony. Indeed, the prettification of rural life—a cipher of its political irrelevance—was one of the ways in which the middle-classes marked the distance between its own empowered, urban milieu, and that of the continually disenfranchised and increasingly marginalized peasantry.\(^{41}\) Viewed within the context of the art market, genre paintings can be characterised as a mass fantasy of the German *Volk* in its natural *Heimat* and as a vehicle for constructing an imagined nation-state identity. The format and content of genre painting was suited to its market niche—artists created intimate paintings of simple family life and neighbourly interaction, and sized them to fit middle-class living spaces.

Of course, none of these idealised, yet ‘realistic’ and ‘typical’ portrayals represented any aspect of working class life, which could be characterised as chaotic, cramped, dirty, public, overworked and licentious. As fig. 4 shows, assembly-line style forms of production extended even into rural communities, despite the fact that, as late as 1907, some 40% of all

\(^{39}\) See, for example, Albert W. Dzur: ‘Nationalism, Liberalism, and Democracy’. In: *Political Research Quarterly* 55:2 (March 2002), p. 192.
\(^{40}\) Hagen, p. 96.
German wage earners still worked as *Lendarbeiter* (in the agricultural sector). During the Wilhelmine period, unstructured families and working women and children were commonalities, regardless of child labour legislation. Despite the verity of its style and the ordinariness of its content, late nineteenth-century German genre painting failed to accurately depict anything resembling ‘the people’s’ real lives, neither that of the city-dwelling bourgeoisie, the proletarianised peasantry, *Landarbeiter*, the urban working classes, nor the increasingly disempowered landed gentry and aristocracy. Now that I’ve briefly outlined some of the ways in which genre painting engaged with turn-of-the-century aesthetic discourse and socio-cultural debates, I will turn to the problem of genre painting within German labour movement publications.

**Genre Painting in Socialist Publications**

Socialism was outlawed as an ‘enemy of the Reich’ shortly after national unification, and from 1878 to 1890, all workers’ associations were subject to police control, even those with little or no obvious political purpose. As Vernon Lidtke explained, ‘[t]o enrol in a club known to have labour movement connections, whether singing society, gymnastic club, or hiking association, was tantamount to taking a political stand because it implied a set of preferences—political, ideological, social—that were unacceptable to most other segments of German society.’ The police searched the houses of individuals and families who actively participated in the labour movement, and advocates of workers’ rights and labour activists were arrested and imprisoned. Socialist leadership operated underground and in exile from abroad, but far from marginalizing the labour movement or demoralizing its representatives, Kaiser Wilhelm’s administration merely gave agitators a common enemy to fight against. The arts were not a priority for SPD leadership during the Party’s outlawed years. As SPD co-founder Wilhelm Liebknecht explained in his 1872 treatise ‘*Wissen ist Macht—Macht Wissen*’ (*Knowledge is Power—Power, Knowledge*), “Die Kunst musst nach Brot gehen”… However, with Otto von Bismarck’s forced retirement and the attendant lapse of anti-socialist legislation in 1890, Party intellectuals came under increased pressure to address

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the means by which the working classes were represented in nationally distributed cultural formats. *Die Neue Zeit*, a journal edited by the influential Karl Kautsky, and which listed a number of Party and intellectual leaders amongst its regular contributors, such as August Bebel, Paul Lafargue, Wilhelm Liebknecht, and Franz Mehring, encapsulated cultural debates within its reportage starting in 1890. Like the *Sozialistische Akademiker*, *Die Neue Zeit* was intended for the SPD’s intellectual elite rather than Party rank and file. Primarily, I will be discussing cultural discourse within the SPD’s mainstream, but I will also refer to one debate concerning the formal attributes and connotations of representation that initially emerged within pages of *Die Neue Zeit*, but which snowballed into a conflict that became large enough to draw in the Party’s general membership.

As would be expected, SPD organs like *Der Wahre Jacob*, the *Illustrierte Neue Welt-Kalender*, and *Die Neue Welt* published politically resonant images, but, more surprisingly, they also contained reproductions of genre paintings and illustrations that mimicked genre painting typologies. Some of these were by well-known international artists, including those who had established their careers much earlier in the century, but others were by contemporary artists predominantly associated with socialist circles. None of these reproductions are particularly noteworthy, and some of them are quite poorly rendered (fig. 5). Their content was remarkably conventional for illustrations appearing in the journals of a growing and influential leftist political movement (figs. 6-7). Hardly any genre paintings depicted the urban working classes, and Germany’s peasants were known for their political conservatism and subordination to the landed aristocracy. Indeed, Friedrich Engels had noted that even though their aristocratic masters repeatedly abused them, peasants were notoriously difficult to organise or agitate. For Engels, the peasants formed the social stratum on which the entire German economy rested, and he characterised them as ‘the exploited bulk of the nation’. Genre paintings celebrated the very conditions under which socio-political power imbalances had thrived for centuries within landed communities (fig. 8), and their visual imagery would seem at odds with the stated aims of a socio-political movement that sought to empower workers.

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Genre Paintings as SPD Art

Illustrated cultural and satirical publications such as the *Süddeutscher Postillon*, *Die Neue Welt*, and *Der Wahre Jacob* were supported with SPD funds and subject to party debate with regard to their content.\(^49\) However, as Volker Berghahn has noted, the SPD did not support the blatant referencing of ideology for fine art.\(^50\) Intellectuals like Franz Mehring, the influential editor of the party’s official organ, *Vorwärts* (Forwards), felt that a return to the Classics was one way to circumvent the production of tendentious works while still supporting art that agreed with Party principles.\(^51\) Along similar lines, Gustav Landauer’s ‘Die Zukunft und die Kunst’ (‘The Future and Art’), appearing in the elite Socialist journal, *Die Neue Zeit*, argued that the path to the future led first through Schiller and Goethe, and that the ‘intelligent worker’ should look to Classical paradigms such as the School of Sophocles, Winckelmann, Goethe’s *Iphigenie*, and Phidias to forge a better future, rather than follow the precedent set by contemporary art movements (fig. 9).\(^52\) *Die Neue Zeit* also published Naturalist author Paul Ernst’s rebuttal, but contemporary art’s supporters were marginalized by a socialist majority that celebrated and invoked German and Western artistic traditions like Classicism, which also were preeminent within the dominant culture (fig. 10).

I intend to argue that genre painting offered another visual arts paradigm to promote affirmative and universal messages aligned with mainstream national culture. The influence of genre painting within the SPD was such that Party intellectuals referenced it while discussing modern art, in itself a rare event. An 1898 article in *Die Neue Welt*, for example, praised the communicative nature of genre painting, claiming that it was paradigmatic for contemporary art.\(^53\)

Appearing in the SPD publication *Illustrierte neue Welt-Kalender, Sommer* (fig. 11; 1891), by Wilhelm Süs (1861-1933), offers a politically radical, working class audience the same themes evident in genre paintings intended for the cultivated middle and upper classes. A bucolic setting provides the context for Süs’ sentimental portrayal of peasant children at play. Workers living off of the land experience a life of comfort, close companionship and ease, presumably in sharp contrast to the urban workforce. *Unser tägliches Brot* (fig. 12; *Our Daily Bread*)...


\(^{50}\) Berghahn (1994), p. 165.

\(^{51}\) Peter von Rüden and Kurt Koszyk (eds.): *Dokumente und Materialien zur Kulturgeschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung, 1848-1918*. Frankfurt am Main: Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1979, p. 31.


\(^{53}\) Anon.: ‘Genremalerei’. In: *Die Neue Welt* 31 (1898), p. 256.
Bread), an original drawing by C. Kolb, also published in the *Illustrierte neue Welt-Kalender*, portrays similar themes, with an emphasis on collaborative manual labour within the process of sowing, harvesting, milling, and baking that provides the daily bread fed to the children in the centre of the composition.

*Sommer* is virtually indistinguishable from any other European genre painting. Nothing in the picture identifies this scene as particularly German, but the *Illustrierte neue Welt-Kalender* also contained representations of the German ‘Volk’ in its ‘Heimat’. Black Forest painter Wilhelm Hasemann’s (1850-1913) *Edler Reiser* published in *Die Neue Welt* in 1898, and the anonymous *Oberbayrischer Gebirgsbauer* (fig. 13; *Upper Bavarian Mountain Peasant, 1894*) appearing in the *Illustrierte neue Welt-Kalender*, demonstrates that the socialist publishers of the journal were just as interested in ‘documentary’-style pictures of ‘authentically’ rural Germans as were their middle-class counterparts. Viewed within a different context, they easily could be slotted into the *Heimatkunst* category.

*Vorwärts* editor Franz Mehring’s distaste for Naturalism contributed to an open dispute within the SPD on a national level, which touched upon style as well as the status of bourgeois intellectuals acting as educators for the working class. The publication of two serialized Naturalist novels in *Die Neue Welt* sparked day-and-a-half long debates at the Gotha Party Congress in 1896 and forced its editor, Edgar Steiger, to defend his decisions before the Party’s membership. Mehring’s main concerns were well known to Engels, who had been an early supporter of Courbet-style realism, and when they emerged at Gotha, they came to inform the formal characteristics and content of cultural production published in mainstream socialist journals intended for the party’s rank-and-file. When comparing the ‘optimism’ of the workers’ movement to the aesthetics of Naturalism, for example, Mehring had observed that avant-garde fine artists and their well-heeled audiences thrived on sensationalist images of the proletariat. He claimed that Naturalism represented the progressive corruption of bourgeois culture rather than the future of the working classes. Furthermore, he felt that Naturalists limited their representations of workers to the *Lumpenproletariat* rather than the healthy, active majority of the working classes. The discussion at Gotha made it clear that SPD journals would not act as the site for artistic experimentation, and that the formal attributes of Naturalism did not supply the image that

the Party wanted to project on behalf of the workers. For SPD intellectuals, the harsh depiction of social ills and inequities did not form the basis of ‘reality’ in art. Rather, their aesthetic preferences were for the articulation of the greatest good. Mehring’s preferences were similar to Karl Marx’s, who had included a discussion of Greek art near the end of his introduction to the *Grundrisse*. For Marx, works of visual art existed in an organic relationship with their specific socio-cultural context, but he also felt that Greek art persisted ‘as the standard and model beyond attainment’.  

| 61 | See, for example, the SPD’s co-founder Wilhelm Liebknecht’s influential polemic ‘Wissen ist Macht—Macht ist Wissen’ (5 February, 1972), in which he wrote ‘*Wissen ist Macht! Bildung macht Frei!*’ (Knowledge is Power! Bildung makes Freedom!). |

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With this statement, he situated the height of cultural production as a moment from the past, never to be surpassed, only emulated. Indeed, the notion of art as imitation was a key aspect of Classicism as well as the Classical revivalism of the Renaissance and late Eighteenth Century. Marx argued that ancient art emerged as a consequence of particular historical conditions, but he also observed that its historical specificity limited neither its appeal to a wide variety of individuals from different eras nor its capacity for interpretation. In short, he appreciated the interplay between its status as an artifact and its capacity to transcend its context to achieve timelessness.

### Genre Painting and *Arbeiterbildung*

During the 1890s, SPD leadership wanted workers to benefit from an assimilation of middle-class culture, only to overthrow, supplant, and surpass it at a later date. Socialist intelligentsia wholeheartedly endorsed several key elements of mainstream culture, including a respect (albeit tinged with scepticism) for the concept of *Bildung*. Classical art and literature, and Weimar-era artistic production, especially the writings of Goethe and Schiller. *Bildung* was a signal characteristic of national culture, and *Arbeiterbildung* programmes for workers organised both ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ guaranteed that ‘the people’ internalized and perpetuated German cultural standards. Transmitting high cultural values to members of the lower classes, *Arbeiterbildung* also ensured that national culture on a
popular scale reflected the highest social aspirations. And yet, even as Arbeiterbildung may have set the stage for the enactment of middle-class ideals, it nonetheless contributed to the self-empowerment of individual workers operating within a representational collectives like professional associations, labour unions, and various leisure-time societies.

Instead of forging a specific artistic style, Party intellectuals like Mehring looked to artistic traditions already in place including genre painting, which maintained a balance between the ideal and mimesis. That is to say, genre painting portrayed an imaginary world in which normative qualities and characteristics are paired with enough detail to maintain the illusion of reality, and evoking the regional traditions and localities from which workers originally hailed. It projected a shared heritage, with other workers as well as the middle-classes, and with the intention of ameliorating deeply felt uprootedness, rather than provoking dissatisfaction with the plight of the proletarianised peasantry.

Carl Pippich’s (1862-1932) painting Schülerrest (Boys After School, 1897; fig. 14), published in Die Neue Welt, provides an opportunity to observe the interplay between the myth and cult of the countryside, workers’ assimilation of middle class social aspirations vis-à-vis education, and the labour movement’s interrogation of the bourgeois ideal of Bildung.

Pippich portrays two peasant boys (Landarbeiter) in the process of becoming ‘cultivated’. Dressed in traditional peasant clothing, they are surrounded by educational aids, including a map of the United States, a poster of exotic animals, and a blackboard. At the same time, they are playfully disrespectful of the authority of the classroom on the one hand and any sense of propriety or social restriction, on the other. The bars on the windows suggest that they are prisoners, while their behaviour indicates their resistance towards authority. Cap on the floor, clog flying through the air, their traditional clothing, like the school itself, ineffectively suppresses their youthful exuberance.

Unlike some images published in Der Wahre Jacob and the Illustrierte Neue Welt-Kalender, which were often accompanied by a rhyme, illustrations in Die Neue Welt generally had little to do with the textual content of the journal. But in this case, Pippich’s depiction of wayward schoolboys corresponded to the theme of a simultaneously published serialized novel by Georg Hermann, entitled Spielkinder (Playing Children). On the one hand, Pippich’s painting portrays the mixed reception bourgeois values received within different regional and other class contexts. Perhaps against their will, the two boys participate in a state-sanctioned educational system, and their very resistance to cultivation signals the scepticism with which members of the working classes engaged with hegemonic culture.
Furthermore, as Anne Higonnet has discussed, childhood had become increasingly idealised from the Enlightenment period onward and new forms of representation were required to substantiate the notion of what she calls the ‘visual invention of childhood innocence’. Portrayals of childhood in SPD illustrated journals drew from art historical and mass cultural precedent to provide their working class audiences with a similarly glorified world of the child. Yet, given the prevalence of child labourers as well as their impoverished quality of life both in the countryside and in the city, these images represent an experience foreign to the SPD’s urban, working class constituency: namely, a childhood conceptualised along bourgeois and upper class lines. However, considering the Party’s emphasis on forward-looking and optimistic cultural production, they also can be viewed as representing hopes for the future acquisition of childhood innocence, as well as educational and attendant economic opportunities, through the greater working class enfranchisement offered by the labour movement.

Conclusion
Through this paper, I have demonstrated how late nineteenth-century German genre paintings represented a commonly held, but contested notion of national identity, articulated through a visual language borrowed from earlier historical periods. They portrayed ordinary Germans as participants within a unified nation-state community through the idealisation of conventional scenes of everyday life and by drawing from a popular lexicon of stock folkloric characters and scenarios alive within a collective cultural memory. Showing ordinary people at home, at school, or working, they emphasized the comforts and pleasures of domesticity and of interconnected families enjoying harmonious relationships. Moreover, as was most important to a proletarian audience, genre paintings portrayed labour not as a burden, but rather as a positive contribution to the betterment of one’s self and one’s society. Through their invocation of Biedermeier sensibilities and of Enlightenment-era paradigms like Bildung and classical revivalism, genre paintings looked back to the era that preceded the failed revolution of 1848, to a time when democratic ideals still held the possibility of full realisation. On the one hand, genre paintings included within SPD publications exemplify the Party’s acquiescence to a bourgeois hegemonic agenda, a moderate approach to social reorganisation that generated its own nemeses in form of early twentieth-century, politically

radical insurrections. But on the other, it can be seen that late-nineteenth-century genre paintings utilised the formal conventions of a period in which the working class sought, through political alliance with the bourgeoisie, to gain equal footing within their society. Genre paintings provided a site for representing enduring aspirations for individual, communal and societal perfectibility based on glorified and mythic elements of a shared German heritage.

The SPD served the proletariat, and the socialist imagination worked to generate and distribute positive representations of the German working classes, no matter how fantastic. To this end, socialist intellectuals, artists, and illustrated journal editors drew from a collective memory of a past that never actually existed for any German, regardless of his or her social standing. Nostalgia for an ideal childhood that no worker had ever experienced, for villages that peasants no longer occupied, and for landscapes that they had little leisure time to enjoy, provided the foundations for a mass projection into a future in which the proletariat would finally achieve all that it had ever lacked. Socialism would not obtain its goals through revolutionary means, but rather through the assimilation of cultural precedents already in place, and through the emulation of the best within German society. Viewed within the socialist context, genre paintings reveal a collective yearning for an ideal future based on an imagined likeness of the past (fig. 15).
Fig. 1: Otto Kirberg, *Frisian Wedding*, 1890-1900.

Fig. 2: Eduard Grützner, *The Beermaster*, 1897. © Franz Hanfstaengl, 1897
Fig. 3: Franz von Defregger, *Test of Strength*, 1898. © Franz Hanfstaengl

Fig. 4: Family of home workers making cartons in Steinach, the Black Forest. Workdays were 15-18 hours long; 6-8 hours on Sundays. Net earnings for a 7 person family, not including children who attended school, was 33 Marks. Copyright: Friedrich Ebert Archiv, Germany.
Fig. 5: Victor Schivert, “Küss’ Weib und Kind,” (n.d.) in Der Neue-Welt-Kalender, 1891.

Fig. 6: H. Kaulbach, ‘Auf und Davon’ (‘Off and Away’), in Die neue Welt.
Fig. 7: Hugo Dehmichen, ‘Andächtige Zuhörer,’ (‘Devoted Audience’) from the Berlin Paintings Exhibition, published in the Die Neue Welt.

Fig. 8: Rata Langa, ‘Eine Junker-Idyll’ (An Aristocrat’s Idyll) in Der Wahre Jacob, 1899.
Fig. 9: Commemoration of Goethe’s 150th birthday from the title page of *Der Wahre Jacob*, 1899.

Fig. 10: Commemoration of Friedrich Engels from *Der Wahre Jacob*, 1895.
Fig. 11: Wilhelm Süs, ‘Sommer’ (‘Summer’), in *Illustrirter neue Welt-Kalender*, 1891.

Fig. 12: C. Kolb, *Unser tägliches Brot (Our Daily Bread)*, in the *Illustrirter neue Welt-Kalender*. 
Fig. 13: Anonymous, *Oberbayrischer Gebirgsbauer (Upper Bavarian Mountain Peasant)*, *Illustrieter neue Welt-Kalender*, 1894.

Fig. 14: Carl Pippich, *Schülerrest (Boys After School)*, in *Die neue Welt*, 1897.
Fig. 15: Oscar Gräf, ‘Ein lukullisches Wahl’ (‘A Delicious Choice’), reproduction of an aquarelle published in Der Wahre Jacob, 1897.