

Susanne Böller

American Students at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts, 1870–1887

Aesthetic Strategies in a Transcultural Context

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English Summary

More than four hundred Americans attended the drawing, painting, and sculpture classes of the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich from the second half of the nineteenth century until World War I, most of them between 1870 and 1887. From the beginning of the 1870s, the Munich Academy was perceived by Americans to be a serious and inexpensive school for a rapidly growing number of art disciples who found inadequate training opportunities in their own country. The Academy's liberal admissions policy for international students – exclusively male, as female students were not admitted until after 1918 – strengthened the reputation of the self-proclaimed “art city of Munich.”

When this generation of artists exhibited their Munich training in the United States from the mid-1870s, opinions were divided; their progress was too great, the execution of the works too “clever.” Art critics gave them the somewhat derisive label “Munich men.” Although only a few became prominent nationally, their achievements spurred a movement that outstripped the modest domestic art scene and took place on a Euro-American stage, primarily in Paris. After their return home, American students of the Munich Academy were active as painters, sculptors, and applied artists. They created exhibition forums and established schools whose students often continued their education in Europe, also in Munich, where new themes and styles were being introduced. These subsequent generations were not then, and are not now, referred to as Munich men; yet their contributions were no less significant to the course of American art.

This book is a collective artistic biography of representative individuals from several generations of the Americans who studied in Munich. It explores their work, and gives shape to their little-known histories. Of the 415 U.S. students whose records are preserved through the Academy's matriculation records, it focuses on the years of highest enrollment, 1870–1887, and on students in the predominantly attended drawing and painting classes. Introductory chapters examine the entire period from 1851–1916 from a dual perspective – that of Munich and the U.S., while the discussion of the classes and the works produced there concentrates on the core period, which included 237 students. Although complete documentation is only available for a third of these individuals, this study greatly augments what American art history knows about the artists called “Munich men.”

The first part of this book provides a chronology of reciprocal media coverage, of Munich as an art center from the U.S. view and the visual arts in the U.S. from the German perspective, and probes the social and/or political functions of art educa-

tion in both contexts. The dynamics of the movement, but also its geographic and sociocultural composition are established, and case studies of the cultural, ethnic, and aesthetic matrix of those places of origin that sent the largest contingents of students delineate the framework for the reception of an American art of Munich provenance. A cross-linking of the matriculation data with key data about artistic careers generates insights into the impact of the Munich experience.

The second part observes the beginners being introduced to academic training. The young Americans who crossed the ocean to study art were eager to acquire academic polish; nevertheless, the components of the initial academic formation – drawing from plaster casts of ancient statues, then from nude and clothed models, and attending lectures on human anatomy – were not equally appealing to all. The curricula and beginners' learning curves become vivid through examples of works and written testimony. Although, unlike in Paris, the focus was on the clothed figure in preparation for historical painting, exemplary representations of the nude, its status in the United States as a collectible and subject of instruction, are also examined.

The third part follows the painting and composition students as increasingly accomplished artists on their way to independence. It examines the different styles, techniques and preferences for Old Masters characterizing each painting classes. While head studies and single-figure representations were the standard in the 1870s, more ambitious, multi-figure genre paintings, necessitated and enabled by an increased awareness of pan-European trends, became common in the 1880s. Exhibition pieces painted by William Merritt Chase, Toby E. Rosenthal and Carl Marr reveal the hard and soft skills to be acquired in Munich. The young artists' choices in content, style and technique are investigated in relation to how the works were received in the United States.