

Wilhelm Trübner's Romantic Ruins

"German-ness" in Crisis

Jacquelyn Delin McDonald

TODAY, THE GERMAN PAINTER Wilhelm Trübner is best known for his works in the collection of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, or for his tongue-in-cheek dog paintings (Figure 1). However, he first gained prominence due to his involvement with the *Leibl-Kreis* (Leibl Circle), a group of young artists in southern Germany, who worked in a realist style under the guidance of the painter Wilhelm Leibl. Leibl had encountered the work of the realist Gustave Courbet at the Munich Glaspalast Exhibition of 1869, and then was introduced to Manet in Paris before returning to Munich. The group embraced realism's matter-of-fact approach, including both its subject matter and its tactile style, as a modern way of painting modern life. It would include, among others, Carl Schuch and Hans Thoma, as well as Trübner. From 1871 to 1873, they worked to produce stoic, everyday scenes of family

members and friends and straightforward studies of interiors, landscapes, as well as depictions of labor. A dark palette, with visible brushwork to signal the artist's hand and presence via the wet-on-wet or *alla prima* technique, was also key to their output. This approach is exemplified by Trübner's *Auf dem Kanapee* (*On the Couch*, Figure 2).

Following the unification of Germany in 1871, the newly formed nation experienced growing political and cultural tensions under Prussian rule. Rapid modernization, the escalating *Kulturkampf* (culture war) between the state and the Catholic Church, and changing artistic priorities, all contributed to a period of uncertainty. After Leibl retired to the countryside, Trübner and other members of the circle experienced what the critic Julius Meier-Graefe later called a "time of aberration." Meier-Graefe's 1915 assessment provides insight into this moment:



Figure 1. Wilhelm Trübner, *Ave, Caesar, morituri te salutant*, 1877. Oil on wood, 45.5 x 37.5 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie / Andres Kilger. Public domain. id.smb.museum/object/966252/



Figure 2. Wilhelm Trübner, *Auf dem Kanapee* (On the couch), 1872. Oil on canvas, 52 x 45 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie / Jörg P. Anders. Public domain. id.smb.museum/object/961696/



Figure 3. Wilhelm Trübner, *Basement window in Heidelberg Castle*, 1871. Oil on canvas, 29.7 x 44.7 cm. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München. Creative Commons. www.lenbachhaus.de

*The later Trübner, who paints the luminous finely-toned landscapes, who has renewed the brilliant technique of his youth, the painter of the splendid pictures of horses and the strong portraits is, as he always was, one of our greatest artists. The days of aberration which find in the history of his copious production correspond to an interregnum in German art as a whole. He himself was in no greater danger than was the whole of our painting in the ten years adrift. But while many another fatally compromised himself, Trübner always gave us sincere documents that testify to his great abilities.*¹

Most interestingly, Meier-Graefe describes the decade of the 1880s as an aberration, or perhaps a straying of sorts away from

modernism, for both Trübner and “German art as a whole.” With respect to Trübner’s paintings of ruins, we can see that his view of the crisis seems to have been expressed as a deep desire to deal with the uncertainties of modernization by romanticizing the past.

For context, it is important that Trübner (1851–1917) was born in Heidelberg, a small town located in what was then the Grand Duchy of Baden. Dominating the town is Heidelberg Castle, a landmark, rich in history, that would remain central to the artist’s personal identity. Since its construction in the 12th century, the castle has witnessed centuries of warfare (and amazingly, been struck by lightning twice). An enduring symbol of local and regional identity to this day, the ruins of the castle formed part of Trübner’s earliest visual memories.

¹ Meier-Gräfe, Julius. *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics*, Vol. II. Trans by Simmonds, Florence and Chrystal, George. Arno Press: New York, 1908, 169.



Figure 4. Wilhelm Trübner, *View from Heidelberg Castle*, 1873. Oil on canvas, 54 x 44 cm. © Kurpfälzisches Museum Heidelberg, Photo: K. Gattner

Two early paintings, created while the *Leibl-Kreis* was still active, show us Trübner's initial engagement with the site (Figures 3 and 4). Within the first work, *Basement Window in Heidelberg Castle*, Trübner works to show us a realist depiction of a seemingly forgotten window from the castle site. The lowest floor was likely only accessed by those helping with domestic duties in the castle, rather than the kings and elites who resided in the castle's upper-level chambers.

The dark tonality and cropped view associate this work with the realist tendencies shared by Courbet, Manet, and the *Leibl-Kreis*, while the vegetation around the windowpanes shows nature overcoming the structure.

In the *View from the Heidelberg Castle* from 1873, the artist takes a different slant, playing with light and including a human figure in a preserved part of the site. The open windows allow for a view of the village, but the visitor's back obliterates the view of the



Figure 5. Wilhelm Trübner, *Heidelberg, Castle and View of the Plain from the East*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 50.3 x 70.3 cm. © Kurpfälzisches Museum Heidelberg, Photo: K. Gattner

landscape. In this piece, the focus is on the painting itself, with its visible brushwork, and we can begin to see the dark green gestural approach that Trübner will embrace with his later impressionist pieces. In these two interior views, the artist was admiring the unique beauty of each windowed room, and showing an 'everyday' perspective.

In 1878, Trübner worked in the Heidelberg Palace gallery, gaining artistic experience by studying and handling the Old Masters in the collection. His individual ties to the site help to explain the specific views he chose to paint, as well as his growing affinity to the historically layered site. Throughout the late 1870s and 1880s, he would primarily work in Munich, but he also traveled around Europe extensively, to Holland, Spain, Belgium, France and England. However, it seems that by the late 1880s, the artist better identified with his boyhood countryside, rather than Munich, and spent the majority of the year 1889 in

Heidelberg. It was during this time that he produced many studies of the surrounding landscape; particularly of interest is the *View of Heidelberg Palace* from 1889 (Figure 5).

With the *View of Heidelberg Palace*, we see a dramatically different approach toward the subject, compared to his works from 1871 and 1873. The idealized, totalizing view shows a romanticized view of the past, rather than a realist, matter-of-fact look to the present. The artist represents the variation of the landscape through *plein-air* painting techniques, with bold color and the portrayal of light hitting the leaves in the foreground and the Neckar in the distance. Bold and identifiable brush strokes place dabs of colored form on the canvas. Interestingly, the impressionistic execution, despite its quick and decisive *alla prima* technique, allows for a romanticized, idealistic view of the ruins to suggest notions of permanence and timelessness. The artist's choice to depict the



Figure 6. Wilhelm Trübner, *Cäsar am Rubikon* (*Caesar at the Rubicon*), c. 1880. Oil on canvas, 48.5 x 61.0 cm. Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe. Public domain. www.kunsthalle-karlsruhe.de

ruins of Heidelberg from a distance represents a perceived idealized German past, once transcendent, yet now unattainable. The castle and ruins become less a contemporary subject than a symbol of a romanticized German past, suggesting the fragility of personal and national identity of the period.

Trübner's works, especially of the ruins of the Heidelberg castle, hold special significance as a testament to the tragic self-awareness and dramatic experimentation of an artist who perceived a nascent nation in uncertainty and crisis. Later in his life, however, Trübner would primarily work on landscapes. At that point, he embraced an impressionistic approach, with large, mostly dark green canvases of equestrian and outdoor portraits. He would also publish two texts on the theory of art, teaching in Frankfurt and Karlsruhe. Notably, he also became involved in the Berlin Secession and later the Munich Secession, publicly challenging state-sponsored institutions. His affinity for all things "German," however, remained—dogs, history, sausages and romanticizing the past via ruins and the landscape—and is reflected in the title of one of his anecdotal dog portraits, *Caesar at the Rubicon* (Figure 6). It asks a timeless question:

What does one do next in a moment of crisis? Should we stridently move forward, or pause and reflect on the romantic ideas of the past? Trübner's answer, in his engagement with ruins, is that in times of crisis, visions of the past are quite valuable, allowing for moments of contemplation to better understand our personal and cultural identity. ⁴

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