Avant-Garde: Max Liebermann and Impressionism in Germany
February 28 – June 7, 2026

Max Liebermann blazed the trail for the first artistic avant-garde in Germany. With his early and pioneering connection to France, he initiated a renewal of painting that was to have a lasting impact on German Impressionism. With over 110 works from more than sixty international collections, *Avant-Garde: Max Liebermann and Impressionism in Germany* showcases the development of Impressionism in Germany in its full scope. At the center is Liebermann, who played a decisive role in the internationalization of the German art world as a painter, collector, and president of the Berlin Secession. At the same time, the exhibition also demonstrates how a new generation of artists, inspired by French modernism, further developed motifs such as pulsating cityscapes, images of leisure and nature, child portraits, and theater scenes. Alongside key works by Max Liebermann, Lovis Corinth, Max Slevogt, and Fritz von Uhde, the show rediscovers the work of other important artists such as Philipp Franck, Dora Hitz, Gotthardt Kuehl, Sabine Lepsius, Maria Slavona, and Lesser Ury.

Connections to France

Max Liebermann defied the narrow conceptions of imperial cultural policy and became a role model for many artists in Germany around 1900. As president of the Berlin Secession and the Prussian Academy of Arts, he made a decisive contribution to the internationalization of the art world. He collected examples of French Impressionism early on, works that for him set the standard for contemporary art. He also advised Hugo von Tschudi, then director of the Nationalgalerie in Berlin, on his purchases in Paris.

From the beginning, the orientation to France played a key role in the development of Impressionism in Germany. The French painting that emerged in the 1860s was fascinating for its luminous colors and energetic, sketch-like brushwork. Like Liebermann, many other painters also drew inspiration from the work of their French colleagues and intensively studied modern French art during trips to Paris. In this way, they were exposed to a broad range of new motifs—from sunlit landscapes and atmospheric figural scenes to carefully arranged still lifes.

The first presentation of French Impressionism in Germany took place in 1883 at the gallery of Fritz Gurlitt in Berlin. Sixteen paintings by Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, and Alfred Sisley were displayed, including ten works from the collection of Carl and Felicie Bernstein. Exhibitions in Munich and Weimar followed in the 1890s. Around the turn of the century, the Berlin Secession and the gallery of Paul Cassirer regularly showed works such as Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* or Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*—paintings still considered scandalous in France. In Germany, Impressionism quickly achieved recognition as an avant-garde movement and was viewed as a form of resistance to the nationalistic art policy of the emperor.

While Hugo von Tschudi soon acquired important examples of modern French art for the Nationalgalerie, Liebermann amassed a significant private collection that guests could

admire at his villa in Wannsee. He also cultivated an elaborate garden there from 1909 on, and its brilliant floral splendor became a central motif in his late Impressionist oeuvre—like Claude Monet's garden in Giverny.

Influence and Independence

After 1900, German artists embraced the impulses from France and in so doing developed their own independent pictorial language. They increasingly focused on the social dimension of art, depicting progressive institutions like Dutch orphanages and integrating the newest currents of educational reform, while at the same time emphasizing storytelling and maintaining a narrative element in their work.

In addition to sundrenched landscapes, the Impressionists in Germany also showed the city by night, illuminated by modern electricity. They explored social tensions as well as the anonymity of urban life, conveying an ambivalent view of the metropolis as a place of tension between dynamic culture and emotional strain. Enthusiasm for progress collided with bleak visions of urbanization, prefiguring the Expressionist movement to come.

Around 1900, the formative influence of the theater as an arena for emotional experience also left its mark on German avant-garde painting. Artists explored the pictorial genre of the role portrait and used Impressionist brushwork to imbue their works with a sense of vibrating drama. Such compositions also served as a resonance chamber for contemporary innovations in dramaturgy and modern dance. In addition, painters also depicted biblical stories such as Samson and Delilah as an expression of the battle between the sexes—a theme that gained explosiveness in the wake of the emancipation movement.

A New Look at Impressionism in Germany

With over 110 pieces from more than sixty international collections, the Museum Barberini presents one of the largest exhibitions ever devoted to Impressionism in Germany. In addition to canonical works by painters like Max Liebermann, Lovis Corinth, Max Slevogt, and Fritz von Uhde, the show also features lesser-known artists such as Philipp Franck, Friedrich Kallmorgen, Gotthardt Kuehl, Christian Landenberger, Heinrich Eduard Linde-Walther, Franz Skarbina, Lesser Ury, and Max Uth.

Special emphasis is also placed on the long-neglected contribution of women artists to the development of German Impressionism. Even in the conservative German Empire, artists like Charlotte Berend-Corinth, Emilie von Hallavanya, Dora Hitz, Sabine Lepsius, and Maria Slavona were able to assert themselves and create works that now enlarge our understanding of the movement. Another new aspect is the focus on the inspiration German artists garnered in France and the way they applied these influences in their own painting.

The show includes loans from important collections in Germany and abroad such as the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin, the Albertinum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden,

the Folkwang Museum in Essen, the Städel Museum in Frankfurt, the Neue Pinakothek in Munich, the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, and the Belvedere in Vienna. With works by over twenty artists, the exhibition illuminates the broad spectrum of German Impressionism and extends chronologically from the 1880s to the 1930s. It sheds light on the impulses emanating from France and their influence before and after World War I. Technological progress, social modernization, and a new mobility gave rise to unprecedented artistic freedom. With its cityscapes and scenes of leisure and nature, the painting of Impressionism, honed in the open air, exemplifies and reflects this epoch of artistic innovation.

Liebermann's Legacy

The exhibition presents Max Liebermann not only as a major artist, but also as a collector, exhibition-maker, and mentor. As president of the Berlin Secession, he was a courageous voice for internationalism and artistic renewal in the arch-conservative German Empire. In 1889, he received an honorary medal at the Paris world exposition and became a member of the Société des Beaux-Arts; in 1896, he was accepted into the French Legion of Honor.

Liebermann died two years after the Nazi seizure of power, which put an abrupt end to modern painting in Germany. In 1943, his widow Martha Liebermann committed suicide only a few days before her planned deportation to Theresienstadt; their daughter Käthe and granddaughter Maria had fled to the United States in 1938. Liebermann's holdings of French Impressionist art are now dispersed in collections around the world, while his villa in Wannsee is maintained as an important cultural legacy and a political memorial.

The International Impressionism Series at the Museum Barberini

Along with the permanent exhibition of 115 Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works from the Hasso Plattner Collection, the program of the Museum Barberini also showcases international Impressionism. In 2020, the museum presented the exhibition *Impressionism in Russia: Dawn of the Avant-Garde*, followed in 2023 by *Clouds and Light: Impressionism in Holland*.

"To show an exhibition on Impressionism in Germany in this series offers the opportunity to take a fresh look at works from our own art history in an international context. We hope our visitors will experience joy and inspiration from their encounter with the luminous visual worlds of Max Liebermann and his comrades-in-arms—paintings that strikingly demonstrate the painterly skill and emotional power of Impressionism in Germany," says Ortrud Westheider, director of the Museum Barberini and curator of the exhibition.

"After our successful cooperation on *Impressionism in Russia,* we are delighted to realize this project together with the Museum Barberini. The overwhelmingly positive response in Baden-Baden has shown that even today, the subject of Max Liebermann and German Impressionism has lost none of its power and relevance," says Daniel Zamani, artistic director of the Museum Frieder Burda.

The exhibition and accompanying catalogue developed out of a scholarly symposium presented at the Museum Barberini on December 11, 2024. The exhibition was organized in cooperation with the Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, and was on view there from October 3, 2025 to February 8, 2026.

The exhibition stands under the patronage of Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

Other Regional Exhibitions on German Impressionism in 2026

Over the course of the year, German Impressionism will be on view not only at the Museum Barberini in Potsdam, but also at the Berlinische Galerie, the Alte Nationalgalerie, and the Liebermann Villa in Wannsee. The exhibitions will focus on key artistic personalities such as Max Liebermann, Max Slevogt, and Lovis Corinth as well as the networks of collectors, dealers, and critics who encouraged and supported the breakthrough of modern art.