



THE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT PRESENTS THE FIRST MAJOR RETROSPECTIVE  
ON THE LIFE AND WORKS OF THE PAINTER WILHELM KUHNERT

## KING OF THE ANIMALS WILHELM KUHNERT AND THE IMAGE OF AFRICA

OCTOBER 25, 2018–JANUARY 27, 2019

Wilhelm Kuhnert (1865–1926) shaped the concept of Africa in Europe and in the United States more than any other painter of his time. In the late 19th and early 20th century, he was one of the first European artists to set out on a number of journeys to the former colony of German East Africa, which at that time was still largely unexplored. The drawings and oil sketches of the flora and fauna in the region that he made during these trips served as references for monumental paintings that he later produced in his studio in Berlin. Kuhnert exhibited his works internationally with great success, consequently becoming the leading interpreter of African wildlife. From October 25, 2018 to January 27, 2019, the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt is presenting the first major retrospective on the life and work of the artist with some 120 works. Besides studies and paintings from European and American museums, private collections, and Kuhnert's estate, the exhibition unites a large number of the artist's printed and commercial graphic works and publications.

The presentation sheds light on Kuhnert's oeuvre, not only against the background of the history of art and natural science but also that of German colonial history. Kuhnert was an animal and landscape painter who had trained at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin. He developed an early interest in African wild animals, whose appearance and behavior he had previously only been able to study up close at the Berlin Zoo. Zoological gardens began originating in the mid-19th century. They reflected increased knowledge and scientific progress, a curiosity about the world, and the imperialist aspirations of the bourgeois era. At the same time, the market for animal paintings and sculptures was expanding in the late 19th century with the young, ambitious generation of artists entering this field of activity. In addition to formalist aspects and the appeal of the new, however, these artworks also matched the spirit of the times: pictures of lions, tigers, and elephants in particular were seen as symbols of strength, dominance, and superiority and conveyed the spirit of a society that was aiming for its power-political "place in the sun." The notion of animals became a lenticular image of human beings: on the one hand, animals were models for the natural—and hence the divine, social, and political—order; and on the other they represented the ideal of unconscious, unfettered freedom, the very opposite of bourgeois existence. African wild animals provided an unrestricted space of association for German Nature Romanticism and exoticism.

Wilhelm Kuhnert's oeuvre heralds aspects of the modern age: painting en plein air, the experimental pencil drawing, exoticism, the determination to explore distant lands, and travel as a means of expanding one's perspective and experience, often linked with escapism and a critical attitude toward civilization. In his painting Kuhnert pursued an almost scientific approach and recorded the characteristics of the animals as accurately as possible. Although he was neither a biologist nor a zoologist, his detailed artistic and written studies point to an interest in African wildlife that went well beyond purely painterly issues. His animal pictures were disseminated in zoological books such as *Brehms Tierleben* (Brehm's Life of the Animals) and in publications by the director of the Frankfurt Zoo, Wilhelm Haacke, as well as in the form of classroom wall charts. They were even reproduced on the wrappers of Stollwerck chocolate. Although Wilhelm Kuhnert remains one of the most widely collected artists to this day, his oeuvre is still virtually unknown to the public at large.

The exhibition *King of the Animals. Wilhelm Kuhnert and the Image of Africa* is supported by the Gemeinnütziger Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain.

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"Wilhelm Kuhnert is one of the outstanding painters and illustrators of his time. His pictures are not only a mirror and a medium of art and natural history, but also of colonial history. Hence the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt's decision to dedicate the very first retrospective to Wilhelm Kuhnert is not in spite of but in fact because of those "big blank spots" that he sought out in faraway countries—and which continue to exist in our collective memory. The story we aim to tell will teach us a great deal about the mechanisms of art and society, politics and science, about remembering and forgetting—and at the same time about ourselves," comments Dr. Philipp Demandt, Director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt and curator of the exhibition.

Dr. Ilka Voermann, curator of the exhibition, explains: "In restricting himself in his paintings to the world of animals and plants, Kuhnert does not represent Africa as a cultural space but as a natural setting that appears to have no history of its own and is therefore open to interpretations and desires. Kuhnert's works are not mere illustrations of African nature; rather, he appropriates the natural environment and fills it with Western ideas and values. This colonial aesthetic and representational structure is palpable in numerous media to this day. From animal reportages, feature films, movie posters, and book covers to advertising for tourism, an image of Africa is used that is limited to the natural world and wildlife and emphasizes the supposed primitiveness and naturalness of the continent. Kuhnert helped to shape this artificial concept of 'Africa' on many levels and in different media."

## SUBJECTS AND WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition opens with monumental individual works featuring African animals, such as *Lion on the Ruaha, Tanzania, Africa* (n.d.), *Winding Zebra*, (n.d.), *Cape Buffalo in the Steppe* (n.d.), and *Elephant at a Pond* (1907). Kuhnert made a total of four journeys to Africa, three of them to what was then the colony of German East Africa (today Tanzania, Burundi, Ruanda, and part of Mozambique) in 1891/92, 1905/06 and 1911/12.

Kuhnert was the first plein-air artist in Africa to not only draw and paint the animals there, but also to observe them and their habitats in detail and note their behavior with the aim of integrating the natural surroundings into the picture as an essential part of the animal's existence. The Schirn will be showing a large number of drawings and oil studies as well as rapidly executed sketches. The latter in particular strikingly demonstrate that Kuhnert was able to grasp a situation quickly and portray it with a few pencil strokes. Not only the wildlife but also the landscape, the African steppe, plays an outstanding part in Kuhnert's oeuvre—described and depicted extensively in his journals. Kuhnert also produced studies in which he was less concerned with the accurate portrayal of animals and landscape than with the atmosphere, for example in *Landscape in the Evening Twilight*, (n.d.), to which he added handwritten notes detailing the color. Kuhnert's paintings are reminiscent of Impressionism, for instance with respect to plein-air painting. However, his stylistic debt to Impressionism is limited to a few examples, and especially to his oil sketches. He completed his paintings mostly in his studio in Berlin and remained loyal to the academic painting of Realism. One of the few exceptions is his work *Lioness with Cubs* (n.d.), in which Kuhnert captured the play of light and shade on the foliage and the fur of the animals in roughly executed color fields.

Kuhnert's hunting expeditions provided the basis for his artistic examination of animals. The exhibition therefore studies the aspect of hunting in the artist's creative work, among others with the picture *The Haul (Self-Portrait)* (1915), many drawings made in situ, and historical photographs—including one of his Berlin studio, which was adorned with numerous hunting trophies. Hunting served two main purposes: the provision of food for the expedition team and artistic study. Shooting the animal provided the only way to be able to get close enough to it in order to paint it. Kuhnert's travel journals reveal his overriding admiration for the flora and fauna of Africa, but at the same time his great passion for hunting. It is no coincidence that the artist left behind numerous descriptions—also in writing—of the physique, muscles, and skeleton of certain species. At the same time, Kuhnert lamented uncontrolled and systematic big-game hunting in his

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personal records and in his later publications—satirically depicted in the drawing *Megalomania* (n.d.).

The exhibition at the Schirn classes the artist and his oeuvre within German art and colonial history. Neither the logistics of his expeditions nor the market success of his art would have been possible without colonialism, from which Kuhnert profited and in which he was a protagonist. His relationship to colonialism remained ambivalent, however. During his first expedition in 1891, Kuhnert had allowed himself to be drawn into an armed punitive expedition under the command of the Imperial Commissioner and German colonialist Carl Peters (1856–1918). In 1897, the scandal, which gained notoriety as the “Peters Affair,” was tried by an imperial disciplinary court in Berlin, during the course of which Kuhnert gave evidence against Peters. On his second expedition, Kuhnert became involved in the so-called “Maji Maji Rebellion” (1905–1908) and briefly took part in the fighting near Mahenge. The artist recorded his experiences of war in pencil sketches and a number of oil paintings. The exhibition includes the painting *The Battle of Mahenge* (n.d.) from this time, as well as rare portraits such as *Askari* (1906).

Kuhnert's exhibition activities in Germany were limited largely to the annual Great Berlin Art Exhibition. He was a member of the Society of Berlin Artists and the Association of German Illustrators. He was considerably more active in the area of hunting and colonial exhibitions, in which colonial reality was presented to a wide audience alongside agricultural products, animal trophies, local crafts, and so-called colonial goods such as coffee and chocolate. Kuhnert was often the only or one of the few artists whose works were presented. From 1911 onward, his works were shown regularly in Britain at the Fine Art Society in London. He was also awarded a gold medal in 1904 at the St. Louis World's Fair.

The exhibition illustrates how Kuhnert's oeuvre shaped the general idea of the wildlife and landscape of Africa in the 19th century, to some extent even up to the present day. As a painter he understood and portrayed Africa first and foremost not as a cultural space but as a natural one, inhabited by wild animals rather than by people—a natural world without its own history and is thus open to interpretations and desires. As a result of the wide dissemination of his images through illustrations in natural history books, advertising, printed graphics, and wall charts for schools, this artificial image of Africa found entry into the imagination of bourgeois society.

Kuhnert frequently cooperated with scientists, who used his illustrations for their publications. For example, the director of the Berlin Zoological Society Ludwig Heck (1860–1951) introduced him to the natural scientist Hans Meyer (1858–1929), a partner in the Bibliographisches Institut in Leipzig and the publisher of *Brehms Tierleben* (Brehm's Life of the Animals). It was probably owing to Meyer's commission for illustrations for the third edition of the book that Kuhnert was able to embark on his first expedition to German East Africa. Selected examples of specialist literature and popular culture will also be on view in the exhibition: in addition to the illustrations in *Brehms Tierleben* (1890–1893), there are also others for *Das Thierleben der Erde* (Animal Life on Earth, 1901)—published by Wilhelm Haacke, the director of the Frankfurt Zoo at that time—and Kuhnert's own publications, including *Im Land meiner Modelle* (In the Land of My Models, 1918) and *Meine Tiere* (My Animals, 1925). In 1900 Kuhnert designed his first series of African wild animals for Stollwerck. His animal pictures were printed in small format on the back of the chocolate wrappers and sold as collectible pictures for children and adults. The Schirn will be showing Kuhnert's designs and the collector's albums *Stollwerck's Tierreich* (Stollwerck's Animal Kingdom, 1903/04) and *Das Tier im Dienste des Menschen* (Animals in the Service of Man, 1910).

One of Kuhnert's major achievements in animal painting is the combination of animal and natural habitat. At the same time, some of his paintings touch on the painterly tradition of anthropomorphic animal pictures, which beginning in the first half of the 19th century had turned animals into mirrors of human emotions and objects of identification for bourgeois society. The final part of the exhibition is therefore dedicated to the “staged” animal and presents, for example, the painting *African Lions* (ca. 1911), which portrays less realistic animal behavior than a bourgeois family idyll, so to speak, which not least ultimately reflects the moral ideas of the period in which it was painted.

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**CATALOG** *King of the Animals. Wilhelm Kuhnert and the Image of Africa*, edited by Philipp Demandt and Ilka Voermann. With a foreword by Philipp Demandt and contributions by Felicitas Becker, Kathleen Chapman, Philipp Demandt, Alexander Gall, Bernhard Gissibl, Miriam Oesterreich, and Ilka Voermann; German and English editions, 264 pages each, 24 x 29 cm (portrait format), 170 illustrations, hardcover, €35.00 (Schirn), €39.90 (trade edition), Hirmer Verlag, ISBN: 978-3-7774-3246-5 (German), , 978-3-7774-3247-2 (English).

**PANEL DISCUSSION** The Schirn will be presenting a panel discussion on October 25, 2018, at 7.00 pm under the title *The Shaping of an Image: How present is Kuhnert's portrayal of Africa today?*. The panel with international experts will discuss the topicality of the image of Africa that Wilhelm Kuhnert helped to create. Participating in the discussion will be historian Felicitas Becker (Ghent University), the curator of the exhibition and director of the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Philipp Demandt, the editor of the magazine *africa positive* Dagmar Mundhenke, the deputy director of the Iwalewahaus in Bayreuth, Nadine Siegert as well as the anthropologist, journalist and film maker Vanessa Wijngaarden (University of Johannesburg). Moderation: Bianca Schwarz (hr2). In German language, at the Schirn Café. Admission with a valid ticket to the exhibition; please register in advance under Tel. +49 69 29 98 82-0 or e-mail [fuehrungen@schirn.de](mailto:fuehrungen@schirn.de).

**AUDIO TOUR** An audio tour to accompany the exhibition is available for €4.00. The commentary, spoken by Axel Milberg, provides basic information about the most important artworks.

**VENUE** SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, 60311 Frankfurt **DURATION** October 25, 2018–January 27, 2019 **INFORMATION** [www.schirn.de](http://www.schirn.de) **E-MAIL** [welcome@schirn.de](mailto:welcome@schirn.de) **TELEPHONE** +49 69 29 98 82 0 **FAX** +49 69 29 98 82 240 **ADMISSION** €9.00, reduced price €7.00 **COMBO TICKET WITH THE WILDERNESS EXHIBITION** €14.00, reduced price €10.00 **ADMISSION FREE** for children under 8 **ADVANCED BOOKING** Tickets are available online at [www.schirn.de/tickets](http://www.schirn.de/tickets) **GUIDED TOURS** Tue 3 pm, Wed 8 pm, Thu 7 pm, Sat 3 pm, Sun 5 pm **BOOK A GUIDED TOUR** Individual or group tours can be booked under Tel. +49 69 29 98 82-0 and e-mail [fuehrungen@schirn.de](mailto:fuehrungen@schirn.de) **CURATORS** Dr. Philipp Demandt and Dr. Ilka Voermann

**THE EXHIBITION IS SUPPORTED BY** Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain

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