

SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT

THIS EXHIBITION AT THE SCHIRN EXPLORES FOR THE FIRST TIME THE GERMAN ENTHUSIASM FOR THE WILD WEST BY FOCUSING ON THE FINE ARTS

I LIKE AMERICA **Fictions of the Wild West** **28 September 2006 – 7 January 2007**

Press preview: Wednesday, 27 September 2006, 11.00 a.m.

Beginning around 1825, a wave of enthusiasm for the American Wild West arose in German-speaking Europe. Set into motion primarily by the translation of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Leatherstocking Tales* it was further encouraged by both the performances of "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" in Germany and Austria and, of course, Karl May's books. The exhibition explores for the first time how the German fascination with the Wild West manifested itself in the visual arts there between 1825 and 1950. It also questions the degree to which these representations were informed by icons of American visual culture. "I Like America" will present more than 150 paintings, films, drawings, engravings, and documentary material, including works by American and German artists such as George Catlin, Karl Bodmer, Alfred Bierstadt, George Grosz, August Macke, Emil Nolde, and Carl Wimar in fathoming the vagaries of the fictitious American West.

The exhibition is sponsored by the Bank of America, N. A. and Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw LLP. Additional support comes from American Airlines and the United States Embassy.

Max Hollein, director of the Schirn: "A complex, many-faceted exhibition on America as a projection screen for German American longings and patterns of reception, 'I Like America' not only comprises numerous paintings, drawings, and films but also documentary material conveying an idea of various presentations and works with which leading American and German artists and commercially oriented entrepreneurs mediated an image of the Wild West to a broad-based public in the 19th and 20th centuries."

Dr. Pamela Kort, curator of the exhibition: Neither the American nor the German attitudes toward the Wild West had much connection to reality. They provide, however, an index of the way that society at large in both countries reacted to manufactured images of cowboys and Indians harnessed to very different ideologies. Although the subject has long interested scholars, *I Like America: Fictions of the Wild West* is the first exhibition to explore Germany's persistent enthusiasm for the Wild West and its relationship to American art and politics between 1825 and 1974.

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The title “I Like America” references the enthusiasm for the American Wild West in German-speaking Europe that emerged in the early nineteenth century. It was then that increasing numbers of Germans, hopeful that there they might establish settlements in the untouched countryside, began to emigrate to the United States between 1830 and 1840, more than 150,000 Germans immigrated to the United States; In 1848, the number grew to more than 100,000 in this year alone. Eager for information, many potential German-speaking emigrants read the first of James Fenimore Cooper’s “Leatherstocking Tales” novel, *The Pioneers* (1823), which had been translated in 1826. As the century marched on, numerous illustrated weekly newspapers, such as *Die Gartenlaube*, the *Illustrierte Zeitung* published in Leipzig, and *Das Pfennig-Magazin*, also helped to satisfy the growing thirst for images and travel narratives. The representations of the Wild West that these magazines contained were just as multifaceted as the reports themselves. Together, they presented a most lively picture of a land characterized by beauty, adventure, isolation, and bounty.

A readiness to embrace the Indian as a kind of blood-brother remains unique to Germany. In America, however, by 1850, the “Red Man” had come to connote a dangerous savage, who frontiersmen, soldiers, and cowboys sought to bring under control. The opening of the West from the 1830s to the 1850s also enabled explorers and artists such as the George Catlin to travel the frontier between “civilization” and “wilderness” and document the life and rituals of the Indians, who were regarded as destined to extinction as though “by a law of their nature”. Inspired by Alexander von Humboldt’s evocation of the bond between natural science and artistic feeling, German expeditioners Prince Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied and Herzog Paul Wilhelm von Württemberg invited artists Karl Bodmer, a native Swiss, and the German Balduin Möllhausen to join them on their journeys into the American West.

Indians also traveled to Germany. Amongst the earliest and certainly the most celebrated of these was George Copway, an Ojibwa by the name of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bow. In 1850 he came to Frankfurt, having been invited to represent the Christian Indians of America in at the third World Peace Congress there. The liberal-revolutionary attitude characteristic of German *Vormärz* politics with its attendant zeal for democratic America caused Copway – the only Indian to attend this dignified gathering – to become its sensation. The result was not only widespread coverage in numerous periodicals but also Emanuel Leutze’s painting of his portrait. Not surprisingly, Leutze chose to call this image *Der letzte Mohikaner*. A celebrated German-born American painter active in Düsseldorf between 1845 and 1858, Leutze was joined there by other younger German-born American painters, Carl Wimar and Alfred Bierstadt amongst them. Painting mainly Indians and a few pioneers, Wimar became known as the Düsseldorf’s “Indian Painter”. The popular reception of the young artists’ work in Germany evidences the veracity of the phenomenon of “German Indian enthusiasm,” which he mined for all it was worth.

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After the Civil War, Americans increasingly obtained their images of the West from the illustrated accounts of the “Indian Wars,” as well as from celebratory literature. George A. Custer, Geronimo, Sitting Bull, and especially Buffalo Bill were fit into templates established decades earlier, now marshaled to support the pursuit of solving the “Indian problem.” Masquerading as authentic representations of the American West, Buffalo Bill’s shows were dominated by well-behaved cowboys rounding up ‘wild’ Indians and lassoing dangerous animals. Not long thereafter, Theodore Roosevelt and Frederic Remington firmly roped these exciting circus images to a functional mythology that could be applied when it came to facing new challenges in Spanish America. Roosevelt’s immensely successful books, *Ranch Life and Hunting Trail* (1888; with illustrations by Remington) and *The Winning of the West* (1889–1896), coupled with his growing status as a war hero, helped land him in the White House in 1901 and keep him there until 1909.

Meanwhile, the first edition of Karl May’s “Winnetou” trilogy appeared in 1893 – books that were soon to make him the most widely read German author ever. More than 50 million volumes of May’s books had been sold by 1950. The readers of his novels found that they satisfied a wide range of needs from identification and self-affirmation through escapist tendencies extending to attitudes which criticized the evils of society and extolled the romance of nature. May’s literary achievements had plenty of well-known admirers, including Ernst Bloch, Hermann Hesse, and Peter Handke – as well as Adolf Hitler, who saw in May’s novels the stuff of Aryan heroes. May found inspiration for his tales in the “ethnographic social novels” by Balduin Möllhausen – also known as “The German Cooper” (*Der Halbindianer*, 1861; *Die Mandanenweise*, 1865), and in George Catlin’s and Karl Bodmer’s illustrations. While Buffalo Bill was glamorizing the cowboy for countless thousands, Carl Hagenbeck, a former animal trader, began to exhibit Indians throughout Germany exploiting both their exotic and scientific appeal. His most successful “Völkerschau” was a presentation of Sioux Indians in 1910. That summer more than a million spectators came to his zoo in Hamburg-Stellingen to see them. In 1903, film producers in America began to explore the entertainment potential of Westerns, soon exporting them to Germany. Amongst the most popular of these were more than 350 films made between 1907 and 1914 by the Californian film company Essanay, featuring the cowboy Broncho Billy. In 1909, Chicago’s Selig Polyscope Company discovered Tom Mix, who soon too began a very popular cowboy star.

Inspired by their viewing of these films and their reading of Cooper and May, beginning in 1911 August Macke and later Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Rudolf Schlichter, produced paintings that evince their continued nostalgic identification with Indians and cowboy desperados and their ways of life.

Following the end of World War I, Western films once again came into vogue in Germany. Short on product and confronted with a growing demand for this genre, such “Sauerkraut” film rarities as *Bull Arizona*, *der Wüstenadler*, produced in Heidelberg and starring German actors, appeared

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on the market for the first time. In the midst of the war, German artists like Otto Dix became increasingly interested in the autonomous world of the unbeatable cowboy. For Otto Dix and Rudolf Schlichter the Wild West offered a form of escapist perspective, enabling them to temporarily sidestep the actual carnage in contemporary Germany. Dominated by barroom brawls, Indian massacres, bandit cowboys, and rapacious gold diggers, their paintings bespeak an identification with a world known only to them through novels and movies. They mark the beginning of the end of the German love affair with the Indian alone.

The exhibition will conclude by leaping twenty four years forward and presenting a 40-minute film documentation of Beuys's first public action in the States, *I like America and America likes Me*, which took place in René Block's gallery in New York in 1974. The ironic title and Beuys' decision to conduct a kind of dialogue in a screened off area with a coyote – an animal held sacred by the Indian – indicates his concern with addressing fictions of the Wild West that continue to play themselves out in Germany and America today.

CATALOG: "I Like America – Fictions of the Wild West." Ed. by Pamela Kort and Max Hollein. With an introduction by Max Hollein and texts by Eric Ames, Eugen Blume, Peter Bolz, Pamela Kort, Karl Markus Kreis, Barbara McCloskey, H. Glenn Penny. German and English editions; each ca. 400 pages, 380 illustrations, Prestel Verlag, Munich, Berlin, London, New York, ISBN 978-3-7913-6095-9/3-7913-6095-7 (English), ISBN 978-3-7913-6094-2/3-7913-6094-9 (German), 29,80 € each

VENUE: SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, D-60311 Frankfurt.

EXHIBITION DATES: 28 September 2006 – 7 January 2007. **OPENING HOURS:** Tue, Fri – Sun 10 am – 7 pm, Wed and Thurs 10 am – 10 pm. **INFORMATION:** www.schirn.de, e-mail: welcome@schirn.de, phone: (+49-69) 29 98 82-0, fax: (+49-69) 29 98 82-240. **ADMISSION:** 7 €, reduced 5 €; family ticket 15 €; combined ticket with "Nothing" 11 €, reduced 8 €; with "Picasso and the Theater" 12 €, reduced 9 €. **CURATOR:** Dr. Pamela Kort. **PROJECT MANAGEMENT:** Katharina Dohm. **EXHIBITION ARCHITECTURE:** Kühn Malvezzi, Berlin. **MEDIA PARTNERS:** Frankfurter Rundschau, hr2-kultur, CineStar Metropolis, Kastner & Partners, Frankfurt am Main, pearls. Gesellschaft für Acoustic Identity mbH.

PRESS OFFICE: Dorothea Apovnik (head), Simone Krämer.
SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, D-60311 Frankfurt,
phone: (+49-69) 29 98 82-178, fax: (+49-69) 29 98 82-240,
e-mail: presse@schirn.de, www.schirn.de (texts and images for
download under PRESS).