

LE CLAIRE KUNST SEIT 1982

MAX LIEBERMANN

1847 - Berlin - 1935

Bauer an der Wiege

Black and white chalk on grey paper; c.1890.

Signed lower left: *M. Liebermann.*

360 x 525 mm.

PROVENANCE: Mr. Artman, Rembrandt Gallery, New York. – Private collection, USA

LITERATURE: Bernhard Echte and Walter Feilchenfeldt (eds.), *Kunstsalon Bruno & Paul Cassirer, Die Ausstellungen 1898 – 1901*, Wädenswil 2011, p.40, repr. p.64, and p.489

EXHIBITIONS: Bruno and Paul Cassirer (Kunstsalon Cassirer), *Cyclus Von Kollektiv-Ausstellungen*, Berlin, 1 Nov.-1 Dec. 1898, no. 35 – *Deutsche Kunst-Ausstellung Dresden 1899*, no. 655, not repr. (exhibition hall 26, *Bauer an der Wiege*, drawing) – *Max Liebermann. Wegbereiter der Moderne*, Hamburg 2011 (ex-catalogue)

This drawing was executed during Max Liebermann's summer visit to Zandvoort in Holland in 1890. Liebermann was greatly affected by the poverty and hardship of the local population – mainly peasants and fishermen. He documented this in a number of drawings and paintings. His depiction of their lives is highly objective and unemotional. There is no hint of an attempt to sentimentalize or prettify, indeed every brush or pencil stroke makes clear his respect and benevolence towards his models and their humble lives.¹ In this regard Liebermann's handling of his subject differs from that of his friend and fellow artist Jozef Israëls who specialized in similar themes – the two made a number of trips to Holland together. However Liebermann saw himself as a neutral observer. The novelty of his art lay not in his choice of motif but in his unsentimental handling of the subject and his liking for specific light conditions.

The rich tonal contrasts of the present drawing and its vibrant use of white heightening are entirely typical of Liebermann's draughtsmanship in the period around 1890. The sheet bears comparison with a drawing titled *Old Man by a Window* [fig. 1] executed on a sheet of grey paper similar in format. In both sheets the arrangement of the two main figures is almost identical. They are seated facing the viewer, their gaze slightly averted, thus avoiding direct visual contact with the viewer. The sitters' heads are placed very close to the upper edge of the sheet while their feet are truncated by the lower edge.

¹ Hans W. Singer, in 1912: *This man was never, not even for a minute, in danger of giving himself over to sentimental effusion. Liebermann painted the poor, but he does not depict them as 'fundamentally better people' as Millet did, nor is he trying to win us over to their joy and suffering as Constantin Meunier did. His goat-girl, his wicker basket carriers, his fisherfolk are simply random objects and he paints them without sentimental connotation, in sober realism. ('Für diesen Typ gibt es nie, auch nur für eine Minute, die Gefahr des Verfallens in sentimentale Schwärmerei. Liebermann hat Armeleut gemalt: aber er stellt sie nicht dar als „im Grunde doch bessere Menschen“, wie es Millet tat, oder sucht uns gar für ihr Freud und Leid zu gewinnen, wie es Constantin Meunier tat. Seine Ziegenhirtin, sein Kiepenträger, sein Fischervolk sind zum rein ziellozen Objekt geworden und er malt sie ohne sentimentale Nebenansichten als nüchterne Realität.')* H. W. Singer (ed.), *Meister der Zeichnung. Zeichnungen von Max Liebermann*, Leipzig 1912, p.16.

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In rapid, fluid strokes Liebermann focusses on the play of light, omitting all unnecessary detail. His use of black chalk is highly versatile, creating vibrant tonal shifts and nuances ranging from the deepest black where the chalk is pressed firmly into the paper to the finest gradations of grey. This creates an impression of spatial depth and suggests the textural qualities of the fabrics and materials. The addition of white heightening adds subtle colouristic effects that are set in contrast to the grey tone of the paper.²

Images of a father and child are rare in Liebermann's oeuvre although the motif of a mother and child is not uncommon in this period. It is not improbable that behind the present, seemingly peaceful scene a drama lies – perhaps a recent death in childbed. The father must now adjust to his new role as guardian of the newborn child. He sits to one side as if with his back to the cradle, in grief and helpless despair as he faces an uncertain future.

This drawing is one of an important group of works on paper from Liebermann's early period. Very few drawings in the group are as highly finished as the present sheet, although each sheet displays the unmistakable quality of spontaneous observation.



Fig. 1: *Old Man by a Window*, black and white chalk on grey paper, 1890. Private collection, Paris

² Karl-Heinz Mehnert, *Hier ist die Zeichnung das gute Gewissen der Malerei*, in *Max Liebermann. Der Realist und die Phantasie*, exhib. cat., Hamburg, Frankfurt/Main and Leipzig, 1997-8, p.51.