

# LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

## KUNST



WILHELM LEIBL

1844 Köln - 1900 Würzburg

*Head of a Girl ('Malresl')*

Oil on panel.

Signed and dated lower right: *W. Leibl 1897*.

27.7 x 24.1 cm

PROVENANCE: Leonhard Tietz (1849-1914) Cologne – Galerie Westenhoff, Lübeck (reproduced on the cover of *Weltkunst*, October 1984) – Private collection, south Germany – Private collection, Switzerland

LITERATURE: Emil Waldmann, *Wilhelm Leibl. Eine Darstellung seiner Kunst. Gesamtverzeichnis seiner Gemälde*, new, extended edn., Berlin 1930, fig. 236, no. 243. – Eberhard Ruhmer, *Der Leibl-Kreis und die reine Malerei*, 1984, p. 403, no. 182, repr.

Leibl's final years saw him abandon the crystalline, enamel-like surfaces of his earlier work to return to a freer style of execution. The space which his figures inhabit began to play a more prominent role. This painting dates from this late period. In 1892, Leibl and Johann Sperl, his friend and colleague, moved from Bad Aibling to the Kolberhof, a house in the remote village of Kutterling at the foot of the Wendelstein. The move was prompted by a desire for rural tranquillity and access to a variety of hunting opportunities. Leibl hired a simple country girl named Therese Haltmeier as his cook and housekeeper. She also sat for him on many occasions, earning herself a nickname which has entered the annals of art history - 'Malresl'.<sup>1</sup>

Leibl made two finished oil portraits of Therese in 1897. One depicts her in a black dress with a white neck scarf seated on a chair (Kunsthalle Bremen) [Fig. 1]. The other depicts her in Bavarian costume with a traditional, tasseled 'Inntaler Hut' (Hamburger Kunsthalle) [Fig. 2]. Therese also posed with Nikolaus Ebersberger (brother of Marie Ebersberger, Leibl's subsequent cook) for the two 'kitchen paintings' of 1898 now in the collection of the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart [Fig. 3] and the Wallraf-Richartz-Museum in Cologne [Fig. 4]. The Cologne portrait can be likened to the present painting in its treatment of light on the girl's features.

Leibl produced a number of studies of Therese at work in the kitchen, one of which is a pencil drawing of 1898 today in the collection of the Staatliche Graphische Sammlung in Munich [Fig. 5]. She would often wear a hat indoors, as the pencil sketch of 1895, now housed in the Kupferstichkabinett of the Kunstmuseum in Basel, shows [Fig. 6]. Eva-Maria Kraft comments on the sketch: *The motif of a woman in a hat working in a kitchen was one of Leibl's preferred subjects. This drawing finds him adopting a new approach to the motif by using vigorous, assertive pencilling and hatching to blend the concrete and the abstract, the spatial and the one-dimensional, darkness and light. The result is a nuanced, highly original drawing of expressive monumentality.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Malresl' is a combination of *Mal[en/-er: to paint/painter]* and 'Resl', an abbreviation for 'Therese' in Bavarian vernacular.

<sup>2</sup> Eva Maria Krafft discussing the drawing *Girl in the Kitchen* in *Zeichnungen deutscher Künstler des 19. Jahrhunderts aus dem Basler Kupferstichkabinett*, exhib. cat., Basel 1982, p. 153, no. 71.

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In this regard the present, nuanced portrayal of a figure in the dim light of an interior invites comparison with the drawings of Therese made between 1895 and 1898. A network of broad brushstrokes activates the painting surface, recalling the pencilled hatching lines of the drawings and combines with the dabbed and thinly worked areas of shadow to create a sense of space around the girl's head. Forms are blurred where they lie in shadow or, like the hat decoration, seem on the point of dissolving. The only forms that have a clearly defined physical presence are those captured by the light – the girl's ear with its small gold earring, her cheek and neck, the frilled edging of her white blouse above the velvety blue-black of her collar. The light brushes her right eye and her nose. Her mouth is partly obscured by shadow. Everything else has a fleeting appearance and for this very reason such aesthetic appeal. The quiet intimacy of this female portrait stems from Leibl's concentration on the essentials.

Eberhard Ruhmer describes Leibl's method as a form of *resolute non finito*, which at first glance could be confused with Lenbach's ingenious semblance of incompleteness. But Leibl's intentions are different. The subtly textured, delicate ash-grey tone of the ground shimmers through, varying in clarity across broad stretches of the picture surface and infusing the entire image with a gentle, rhythmic motion. This fluctuating pattern of surging and rippling densifies and quietens in a soft curve around the girl's head above the centre of the image (...). [Leibl] evokes form with infinite lightness of touch and employs a hint of the palest, coolest and most delicate tones to paraphrase the essence of a being who must have meant a great deal to him, not just as an artistic motif. The decisive signature and dating are confirmation enough that Leibl regarded this immensely delicate, seemingly unfinished likeness as a finished work.<sup>3</sup>

Wilhelm Leibl ranks as one of the great masters of German nineteenth-century painting. In France his work was widely admired by his contemporaries. He was a friend of Courbet and exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1870, winning a gold medal. In Munich he formed the nucleus of a circle of like-minded painters which included Theodor Alt, Rudolf Hirth, Otto Scholderer, Carl Schuch, Johann Sperl, Hans Thoma and Wilhelm Trübner, all of whom were looking to achieve a modern form of pure pictorial expression.

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<sup>3</sup> Ruhmer, op. cit., p. 403

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Fig.1: *Country Girl ('Malresl')*, 1897.  
Oil on panel, 37 x 29 cm.  
Kunsthalle Bremen [inv. 939-1966/21]  
(Waldmann 1930, no. 242)



Fig.2: *Bavarian Girl ('Malresl')*, 1897.  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 cm.  
Hamburger Kunsthalle [inv. 1536]  
(Waldmann 1930, no. 241)



Fig. 3: *In the Kitchen*, 1898.  
Oil on canvas, 71.2 x 60.6 cm.  
Staatsgalerie Stuttgart [inv. 1035]  
(Waldmann 1930, Nr. 247)



Fig. 4: *In the Kitchen at Kutterling*, 1898.  
Oil on canvas, 84 x 64.5 cm.  
Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne [inv. 1165]  
(Waldmann 1930, no. 248)

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Fig. 5: *'Malresl' in the Kitchen*, 1898.  
Pencil, 32 x 22 cm.  
Staatl. Graph. Sammlung, Munich [inv. 1926/271]  
(Waldmann 1942, drawing no. 64)



Fig. 6: *Girl in the Kitchen*, 1895.  
Pencil, with stumping, 41.7 x 33 cm.  
Kunstmuseum Basel, Kupferstichkabinett,  
[inv. 1934.116]  
(not listed by Waldmann [1942])