

Introduction

This exhibition brings together masterpieces of French paintings from the 17th and 18th centuries held in German museum collections. It presents famous paintings by Georges de La Tour, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Nicolas Poussin, Claude Lorrain and Antoine Watteau next to less well-known works by artists such as Francisque Millet, Gaspard Dughet, Jean-François de Troy, Laurent de La Hyre, Anne Vallayer-Coster and many more whose names may not be familiar to us today, but whose work is nonetheless of exceptional quality. Presenting key works of all genres – history, genre, landscape, portrait, still life as well as oil sketches – the exhibition traces the development of French painting in the 17th and 18th centuries, examining at the same time the vagaries of fashion and taste in Germany that are reflected in the acquisitions of French art by the leading German collectors of the time.

The Collectors

By the second half of the 17th century, under Louis XIV, France had attained a position of political and cultural pre-eminence that was the envy of Europe. German princes looked to France as the arbiter of elegance and progress. They appointed French court painters, bought French art for their collections and commissioned French artists when refurbishing their residences.

The Dresden court under August II, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland (1670–1733), and his successor, King August III (1696–1763), was most profoundly affected by France. Maximilian II Emmanuel, Elector of Bavaria (1662–1726), also looked to Paris, not least because of his close family ties with the French court. In Schwerin, Christian Ludwig, Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (1683–1756), assembled an important collection of paintings by Jean-Baptiste Oudry. Karoline Luise, Margravine of Baden (1723–1783), arguably the most famous female patron of the arts and a lady of unusual intelligence and education, put together an exquisite collection of French paintings in Karlsruhe. Similarly, the Dukes of Zweibrücken, the Electors of Palatine and the Dukes of Brunswick-Lüneburg sought to emulate France. One of the leading 18th century art collectors, King Frederick II of Prussia (1712–1786), was and the first in Germany to assemble an outstanding group of works by Antoine Watteau and his followers.

In the 19th century, French painting ceased to play a prominent role in German collections. It was not until around 1900 that interest in the art of Germany's western neighbour revived, and not until after the end of the Second World War that important acquisitions were made by German museums, among them the museums of Bremen, Hamburg, Brunswick, Karlsruhe, Berlin and Munich. These collections are worthy successors to their 18th century aristocratic forebears.

Painters from the Lorraine

When we look at French 17th and 18th century painting today, we usually focus on Paris and Rome. At the time, however, cities such as Toulouse, Rouen, Troyes, Aix-en-Provence and particularly Nancy enjoyed a period of extraordinary cultural and artistic flowering that has all but fallen into oblivion in the wake of the French Revolution. The paintings shown here are by artists from the Lorraine who were active in their native land as well as in Italy. Stylistically and iconographically diverse, these works testify to the richness and diversity of artistic production in the French provinces where artists were exposed to a wide range of influences.

Of particular note here is Georges de La Tour, whose poetic, Caravaggio-inspired candlelight scenes and daylight paintings are characterised by the use of dramatic chiaroscuro and a psychologically charged atmosphere. The famously reclusive artist was one of the great simplifiers of the subject, treating domestic scenes in much the same way as biblical representations from the Old and New Testament.

The French Followers of Caravaggio

Rome continued to be at the forefront of painting in Europe even after the deaths of Annibale Carracci (d. 1609) and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (d. 1610). Numerous artists who had arrived in Rome during Caravaggio's lifetime or shortly after his death followed his lead in their choice of subject matter and painting method. They formed a broad international fellowship that carried Caravaggio's influence well beyond the confines of Italy. The brutal, often provocative realism of Caravaggio's work, the artist's determination to present life as he saw it rather than imitate the great masters of the Renaissance, and his resolve to show man in all his dignity exerted an irresistible fascination on an entire generation of artists, among them Simon Vouet, Valentin de Boulogne, Nicolas Régnier and Nicolas Tournier. Not one of the French artists living in Rome at the time escaped Caravaggio's powerful influence. The risk of being sidetracked was relatively small; nature seen with a fresh eye yielded a wealth of subjects and pictorial inspiration. What united these artists was their choice of subjects, which they approached with the same realism that they brought to genre painting, their compositional formula that placed groups of figures against a dark background, and their use of dramatic lighting and heightened chiaroscuro.

Nicolas Poussin

Born in Les Andelys in Normandy in 1594 and trained in Rouen and Paris, Poussin moved to Rome in 1624. Except for two years as court painter to Louis XIII in 1640–1642, he spent his entire career in the Eternal City. He died in Rome in 1655, famous and celebrated as the supreme 'peintre-philosophe'.

Poussin's œuvre testifies to the artist's great erudition and to his extensive knowledge of the literary and pictorial heritage of antiquity and the Renaissance. His tightly structured, lucid style was in line with France's new rational philosophy that found its most eloquent proponent in René Descartes. Poussin's personal philosophy informed all aspects of his art, from the intensely humane depiction of mythological and biblical subjects that focus on moral problems to the rigorous clarity of his pictorial composition and the poetic intensity of his colours. In order to convey the conceptual content of his history paintings Poussin developed a classicist pictorial language that was based on classical sculpture, Raphael and a few of the outstanding painters of his time, particularly Domenichino. His visual exegesis of subjects from Ovid and Tasso led Poussin to develop a 'lyrical' style that lent stature to landscape painting and that made him, along with Claude Lorrain, the most important proponent of what came to be known as 'heroic' or 'ideal' landscape painting.

Claude Lorrain and 17th Century Landscape Painting

Born in 1604/05 in Chamagne in the Lorraine, Claude Gellée, better known as Claude Lorrain, trained in Rome where, except for one short interruption, he remained until his death in 1682. In the late 1630s, he abandoned the ever popular picturesque genre pictures and

pastoral scenes in favour of ideal landscapes populated with biblical and mythological figures. His paintings convey a sense of limitless space, but it was Lorrain's masterful handling of atmospheric golden sunlight and his ability to suggest the transcendental immensity of light and space that made him famous throughout Europe.

The genre of the 'ideal landscape' created by Poussin and Lorrain exerted considerable influence on landscape painting well into the 19th century. The artists were not so much interested in reproducing a specific, concrete aspect of nature as in the idea of creating a timeless composition of exemplary beauty, that would embrace man as an organic part of nature. The high esteem in which Lorrain and Poussin are held to this day has occasionally overshadowed the achievement of other French landscape painters. Some of them, for example Champaigne, looked to Flemish masters for inspiration, while others, like Dughet, were influenced by Italian art.

17th Century Mythological, History and Religious Painting

In the 17th century, referred to in France as the 'Grand Siècle', the country rose to become the greatest power in Europe. Under the reigns of Louis XIII (r. 1610–1643) and his successor Louis XIV (r. 1643–1715), art and architecture enjoyed an unprecedented flowering, which was further promoted by the foundation of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture in 1648. Italian and Flemish ideas met in the French capital, which by 1630 had begun to develop into a truly metropolitan city that attracted artists from far and wide. Apart from Poussin and Lorrain it was particularly Simon Vouet, who had returned to France in 1627, whose elegance, restraint and light palette inspired the younger generation of artists such as Le Sueur, Poërsen and Dufresnoy.

The multifaceted diversity of different artistic positions of the time is also evident in religious art and history painting. It is represented here by restrained, quietly poetic scenes from the life of Christ and the Virgin, and narrative paintings of subjects taken from Roman history whose classicism was to reverberate well into the 19th century.

17th Century Genre Painting, Battle Pictures and Still Lifes

Dutch and Flemish painters in Rome popularised a type of modest genre painting that depicted mundane street scenes or peasant subjects. These paintings, known as bambocciate, were named after Il Bamboccio, the Italian nickname given to Pieter van Laer, who was the first of the Netherlandish artists to achieve popularity in this genre. Painted predominantly for domestic decoration, these small scale paintings captured the everyday life of the common people and enjoyed considerable popularity in France as well.

Painters of battle scenes turned to the Bamboccianti (the painters of bambocciate) as a source of inspiration to revitalise a genre that was finding a ready market in war-torn Europe. The heroic distance with which Renaissance artists had approached the events on the battlefield – often presented in the form of a topographic panorama – made way for a more direct and naturalistic representation of the action that granted the beholder an inside view of the thick of the fray.

Still life painting came into its own comparatively late in France, achieving widespread recognition only in the Twenties and Thirties of the 17th century. In the early years, French still life painters emulated the Netherlandish school with its pronounced literary and emblematic orientation. These early meditative paintings are notable for their compositional austerity and frequent allusions to the five senses or to the transience of human life, as in the

still lifes of the vanitas type. The later, more flamboyant still lifes depicting sumptuous arrangements of fruits and flowers fulfilled primarily decorative functions.

Late 17th and 18th Century History Painting

In 17th and 18th century France, history painting, also known as 'Grand Genre', was seen as the noblest form of art. Bound by a clearly defined canon of approved subjects, history painting typically depicted scenes from the Old and New Testament, mythology and literature, or momentous events from the history of the ancient world of France.

At the end of the 17th century came a new generation of painters to the fore that radically affected not only the choice of subject matter but also the pictorial language of French history painting. Mythological subjects gained in status; the fate of the individual was translated into mythological scenes and thus endowed with universal rather than merely personal significance. The absolutist monarchs sought to lend further legitimacy to their claim to power by identifying with mythological figures and the gods of antiquity – Louis XIV, the Sun King, famously styled himself in the image of the sun god Apollo.

Another aspect of history painting was its rich display of heroic and seductive nudity. Nattier, Vanloo and Natoire showed remarkable skill in posing their goddesses and heroes in ways that combined a natural stance with sensuality, granting the viewer the pleasure of a somewhat risqué vision of the human body. Frivolity and titillation invaded the realm of High Art.

18th Century Oil Sketches

Ever since the invention of oil painting in the 15th century, artists have produced oil sketches, also known as modelli. They are the medium through which artists explore, work through and perfect their ideas for a composition, before painting the final work. One step up from a rough draft and not originally intended for public consumption, oil sketches were painted on paper or card or anything else that came to hand. It was not until the 17th century, when oil sketches began to gain acceptance as works of art in their own right, that artists started to use less ephemeral wood or canvas supports. Oil sketches served multiple purposes: they were used as working models in the studio or to outline a composition to a patron. In the 18th century, many artists instituted the practice of painting oil sketches, or 'ricordi', as an archival record of works that left the studio.

Peter Paul Rubens, the unsurpassed master of the sensuous modello, was instrumental in paving the way for the acceptance of oil sketches as works of art in their own right. Artists and collectors alike prized the spontaneity of the gesture and the virtuosity and freedom of the brushwork. It was this immediacy that attracted painters such as Boucher, Vanloo and particularly Fragonard, who raised the status of the oil sketch to that of a fully-fledged work of art.

17th and 18th Century Portrait Painting

The demand for portraits rose steeply in the second half of the 17th century as not only the court and the aristocracy but also magistrates and members of the wealthy bourgeoisie chose to have their likeness painted. Ranked beneath history painting in the academic hierarchy of genres, portraiture enjoyed great acclaim in the 18th century and many great artists worked as portraitists, among them Rigaud, Largillierre, Boucher, Greuze and Fragonard.

The French tradition distinguishes two basic types of portrait, namely the intimate private portrait and the official society portrait. The private portrait focussed on the essential; it generally shunned elaborately sumptuous clothing or fancy accessories and avoided blatant allusions to the sitter's position in society. On the other hand, the carefully staged society portrait with its immaculately dressed sitters in conspicuously elegant settings projected the status of the sitter's public persona. The genre was epitomised by Largillier and Rigaud whose outstanding portraits set the standard for the next generation of artists. A third form of portrait was the so-called 'figure de fantaisie', practised among others by Grimou and Fragonard. The sitters were often acquaintances of the artist and were shown in fantasy costume, generally known as 'Spanish costume'.

18th Century 'Fêtes Galantes' and Genre Painting

When Antoine Watteau came to Paris in the beginning of the 18th century, courtly life with its sophisticated amusements and gallant affairs was enjoying its Golden Age. It was not so much with the eyes of a connoisseur as with those of a dreamer that Watteau captured these festive scenes in his exquisite 'fêtes galantes', a term that was created expressly for his work. Watteau's paintings build on the pastoral tradition and spirit the viewer away into a poetic world of walks in the park and secret rendezvous, a world of comedians and masquerades. Despite many imitators, most famous among them Nicolas Lancret and Jean-Baptiste Pater, the artist had no true successor.

While Watteau's elegantly melancholic pictures may have been hard to classify, French genre painting enjoyed enormous popularity in the 18th century. Genre's thematic and stylistic diversity encompassed not only de Troy's detailed depictions of the amusements of elegant society but also Boucher's pastorals and rural scenes and Chardin's 'little bits of common life'. Boucher's and Vanloo's exotic masquerades coexisted with Greuze's bourgeois dramas. Gérard's small cabinet pictures, which hark back to the Netherlandish genre tradition, and Fragonard's family scenes focus on bourgeois family life.

18th Century Still Lifes

While in the early 17th century still life painters had assembled heavily symbolic objects into austere pronouncements on nature and man, in the late 17th and through the 18th century artists invested the genre with more complexity and sought to raise it from its lowly rank at the bottom of the academic hierarchy to the status of an independent genre in its own right. Eventually, the powerful Académie royale began to admit the leading still life painters into its ranks, among them François Desportes, Oudry, Chardin, Delaporte, Vallayer-Coster and Spaendonck.

The history of French 18th century still life painting is inextricably linked with the name of Jean-Siméon Chardin. Gifted with exceptional compositional skill, the artist gradually moved away from the opulent arrangements of fruit and flowers of his predecessors, without, however, compromising the formal qualities of his art. Chardin's sparse but infinitely concentrated compositions and his exquisite handling of colour and texture endowed the objects with a monumentality that was all his own.

Another master of the French still life is Jean-Baptiste Oudry. His remarkably illusionistic paintings of animals and his hunting pieces are a tour de force of meticulous attention to texture and subtle and sophisticated colour harmonies. Oudry, a fervent advocate of Flemish colouring, devoted a great deal of attention to the question of human perception and the interaction of colours in the creation of perceivable form.

18th Century Landscape Painting

It is often said that true feeling for nature and a rational understanding of nature were first developed in the 18th century. The large-scale return to nature was spurred along by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) who argued that man had become corrupted by society and civilization. Despite the success of Lorrain's and Poussin's heroic ideal landscapes the representation of nature had slowly degenerated to little more than a decorative backdrop in genre or history paintings.

Boucher's idyllically elegant pastorals and bucolic landscapes heralded a shift of emphasis. The artist, who was also active as a designer of stage sets, restored imagination and playfulness to landscape painting. Another important type of landscape painting emerged in the second half of the century: Claude-Joseph Vernet was the most famous and successful landscape and marine painter of his time; in his powerful paintings of seascapes and shipwrecks he captured the raging force of nature and conveyed the terror of the sublime. Hubert Robert, on the other hand, was inspired by the rediscovery of antiquity. Combining unspoilt nature with the depiction of ancient ruins, his paintings speak of the transience of human civilisation and foreshadow Romanticism.

French Painting around 1800

Neoclassicism as practised by Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) and his pupils became the official art of the French Revolution. Embracing a moral and political purpose, Neoclassic history painting extols the noble themes of public virtue and personal sacrifice and fuses them with republican ideas. Subjects were drawn from the events of classical and French history, and the pictorial language was adapted to the heroic and solemn message of the painting. Neoclassicism with its passion for rules and academies soon led to a marked reaction, namely the Romantic movement that revelled in unbridled passion and a love for all things exotic, including the legendary Celtic bard Ossian who inspired a whole generation of artists, among them François Gérard.

Certain types of pre-Revolutionary paintings remained popular well into the early 19th century, among them the charming depictions of bourgeois life by artists such as Marguerite Gérard, Marie-Gabrielle Capet and Louis-Léopold Boilly.

French portraiture around 1800 provides eloquent testimony to the bourgeoisie's new-found status in society. One of the most sought-after portraitists of the time was Jean-Louis Laneuville who had made his name with portraits of fellow artists and delegates of the National Assembly.