

KUNKEL FINE ART

Zeichnungen, Gemälde und Skulpturen
des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts

Ernst Moritz Geyger

1861 Rixdorf, Berlin – 1941 Florenz

Ernst Moritz Geyger trained at the Royal Prussian Academy of the Arts in Berlin from 1878 to 1883. Here, his professor, the leading animal painter Paul Meyerheim, took him under his wing. Meyerheim would regularly take his students to the zoological gardens to study the anatomy and behaviour of native and exotic species from life.

In 1886, Geyger was awarded a gold medal for his painting *Viehfütterung* [Feeding Time]. The critics lauded his unconventional handling of the motif and the hyperrealistic painting technique which recalled the work of Dutch seventeenth-century masters – and at the same was considered modern in its approach. Geyger completed his last painting in the space of one day in spring 1887. Titled *Die Weisheit* [Wisdom], the work depicts a near life-sized marabou stork with a halo. It paves the way for his 'grotesqueries' of animals, a theme that had preoccupied him for quite some time. In etchings such as *Kleine Affendisputation* [A Small Disputation among Monkeys] and *Großer Affendisput über die Abstammung der Menschheit* [A Great Dispute among Monkeys over the Origin of the Human Race] he took up the debate on Darwinism, only to reverse it in a satirical vein. A rapprochement with the work of the popular monkey painter, Gabriel von Max, is evident.

Despite his successes as a painter and printmaker, Geyger abandoned both genres and turned instead to sculpture. His first piece was a bronze group representing a hippopotamus attacked by a lion. The group was widely praised for its dramatic power and the virtuosity of its workmanship. Its exquisite chasing was the result of years of hard work. The bronze *Dornauszieher* [Thorn-Puller] saw him return to the theme of the 'animal grotesquerie'. The sculpture makes reference to the antique bronze *Lo Spinario* which depicts a boy pulling a thorn from the sole of his foot. It is now in the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome. In Geyger's version, the boy has been replaced by a pigtailed macaque on a velvet cushion. Geyger's sculptural chef-d'oeuvre was the *Bogenschütze* [Archer], the classical-style figure of a nude archer. Bow spanned, the warrior is shown taking aim at a distant target. This pathos-laden ideal of masculinity captured the spirit of the age. Kaiser Wilhelm II acquired a 5-metre high cast of the figure for the gardens of Sanssouci Palace in 1900. Smaller versions were quickly erected in prominent positions in numerous German cities.

The reason why Geyger's name was forgotten in his lifetime, despite his notable achievements in all sectors of the visual arts, is probably attributable to a scandal which showed him in a somewhat unfavourable light. Max Klinger, at one time a close friend, accused Geyger of embezzling funds that had been made available to him for the purpose of setting up a private academy in Italy. It was to be

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named the 'Deutsche Akademie in Florenz'. In the late 1890s, Geyger and Klinger made their dispute public through the press. A court case involving charges of insult and defamation ran from 1901 to 1903 but proceedings ended in a settlement, although Klinger was widely considered to have emerged the victor. Geyger's reputation was so badly tarnished that he withdrew to Florence, where he had regularly stayed since the late 1880s. In 1905, Klinger, with the support of patrons, founded a study centre for artists on the outskirts of Florence that is still active today – the Villa Romana. Its annual prize, the oldest German art award, is a one-year residence for visual artists.