

KUNKEL FINE ART

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

Gabriel von Max

1840 Prague - 1915 Munich

Born into a family of artists, Gabriel Max trained in his home town of Prague, continuing his training in Vienna. He moved to Munich where he studied at the Academy of Art under Carl Theodor von Piloty from 1863-7. Like his fellow students Hans Makart and Franz Defregger, Max was to emerge as one of the most successful painters of the Wilhelminian period. Piloty and Max shared a taste for dark historical subjects. But where Piloty chose to depict fateful events in the lives of some of Europe's most illustrious figures, his pupil sought out obscure literary themes and striking motifs drawn from religious and mystic tradition.

Max's breakthrough came when his painting *Martyr on the Cross* (The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg), first shown at the Munich Kunstverein, was exhibited at the Paris World's Fair in 1867. The work depicts a youth in classical dress bidding farewell to a young woman martyred for refusing to renounce her Christian belief. The work was widely praised by critics and public alike – not so much for its religious content as for Max's overtly emotional and erotically charged handling of the subject. Other similarly powerful, erotically charged works followed, among them *The Anatomist* (Neue Pinakothek, Munich) executed in 1869, *Faded* (Regionalgalerie, Reichenberg) executed in 1870 and *The Child Murderer* (Kunsthalle, Hamburg), executed in 1877.

In the 1870s, leading researchers into parapsychology such as Carl Du Prel and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing introduced Max to the world of somnambulism, spiritualism and the occult. He participated in séances during which attempts were made to communicate with the dead through a medium. Paintings such as *Geistesgruß* (present whereabouts unknown) were inspired by these experiences. He also developed an interest in visionaries and mystics from the past. Products of this interest are the two paintings *Blessed Anna Katharina Emmerick in Ecstasy* (Neue Pinakothek, Munich) and *The Seeress of Prevorst* (National Gallery, Prague), painted in 1885 and 1892. The perceived ability of mystics to transcend the boundaries between this life and the next provided the perfect inspiration for a pictorial rendering of psychological drama that was to become the hallmark of his oeuvre. Works like these rapidly brought him celebrity status across Europe and in the United States. His mystic,



Gabriel von Max with a young baboon,
1902

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melancholic imagery was widely disseminated thanks to technological change and the emergence of a burgeoning industry in the reproduction of artworks.

Max's anthropological interests are clearly visible in his work. He studied Darwin's theories of evolution and assembled one of the most extensive contemporary collections of ethnographic and anthropological material. He surrounded himself with a family of monkeys, sometimes keeping as many as fourteen in his house at the same time. It was a fascination that developed out of his research into the origins of the human race. The monkeys served him in his scientific studies and as models for his paintings. By bestowing on animals the attributes of human behaviour he held up a mirror to society. The most prominent example in the series is a painting now in the collection of the Neue Pinakothek in Munich titled *Monkeys as Judges of Art* (1889), in which he mocks the judgements of contemporary art critics. In later years his attitude towards his fellow human beings and their lack of respect for creation grew increasingly acerbic. None the less, this did not diminish the popularity of his work. Conversely, the man himself – in his time undoubtedly one of the most eccentric personalities in Munich artistic circles – was publicly eclipsed by his own *oeuvre*.