

KUNKEL FINE ART

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

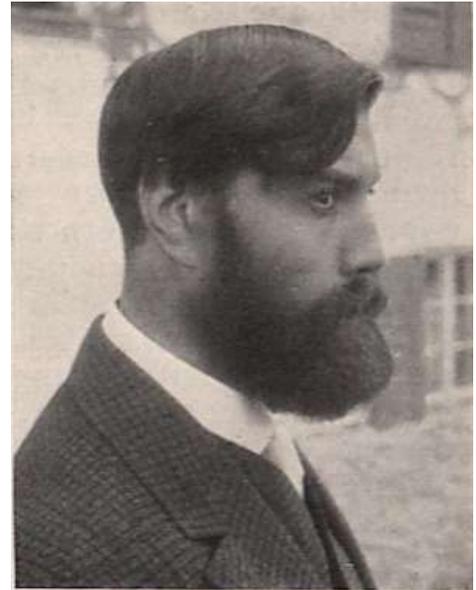
Rudolf Wilke

1873 – Brunswick – 1908

Rudolf Wilke had no easy start to his career as an artist. After completing an apprenticeship as a carpenter in Brunswick he resolved to move to Munich in 1893 to study painting. When his application to the Academy was rejected he enrolled at a private drawing school. Dissatisfied with the teaching there, he moved to Paris, where he took up his studies at the Académie Julian and quickly made contacts with kindred spirits in bohemian circles. However, his stay was soon cut short by a shortage of money which obliged him to return to Munich in 1895.

Wilke's luck changed in 1896 when his entry for an art competition organized by the magazine *Jugend* caught the attention of Georg Hirth, the magazine's publisher. Hirth, a champion of numerous emerging draughtsmen and painters, was quick to recognize Wilke's talents as a caricaturist. He gave him a job on the staff of the magazine and offered to fund a study trip. Wilke's first series, titled *Berliner Momentbilder*, was published in *Jugend* in 1897 and followed by a series titled *Künstlertypen vom Montmartre* in 1898. A year later, Wilke was invited by the publisher Albert Langen to work as a draughtsman for his satirical magazine *Simplicissimus*. Wilke's drawings were widely feted and much admired by his colleagues – all the more profound therefore was the grief and sense of loss when he died of diabetes in 1908 at the age of only thirty-five.

From the start, Wilke's domain was caricature portraiture. His earliest contributions for *Jugend* and *Simplicissimus* depict distinctly narrative scenes with a marked focus on detail. In the course of his career his compositions became clearer and more reduced, with an emphasis on linearity. Increasingly, psychological aspects came to the fore. He would sum up the character of the figure he portrayed quickly and deftly. His medium was pencil, pen and ink, occasionally heightened with white and sometimes using spray technique. The drawings often have a nervous, notational style and seem charged with impulsive graphic energy, products of a rapid creative process. With an anthropologist's eye he would scrutinise subjects drawn from all levels of society – his repertoire included dandies; teachers; doctors; members of student fraternities, the military, the haute bourgeoisie and the



Rudolf Wilke, c.1908

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aristocracy; tramps; beggars; prostitutes; labourers; feminists; petits bourgeois and philistines. But none of his representations were stereotyped and he never robbed his figures of their dignity however exaggerated his depiction of their inner or outer characteristics might be. His rendering of the everyday concerns of the upper classes invariably has a comic touch while his view of the social problems of the lower classes suscitates empathy. Nevertheless, his drawings convey much more than just a portrait of the morals and customs of a bygone era. The momentary situations he depicts and the reaction of the protagonists to them are timelessly human. They help to explain why connoisseurs of caricature describe Wilke as a man of undoubted genius.