

Van Gogh's Favourites I

Hubert Herkomer and the School of English Social Realism

“There is something virile in it - something rugged - which attracts me strongly (...) In all these fellows I see an energy, a determination and a free, healthy, cheerful spirit that animate me. And in their work there is something lofty and dignified - even when they draw a dunghill.”

Vincent van Gogh, October 1882 (Letter R 16)

Unlike the already deceased Jean-Francois Millet, Van Gogh's second great artistic model, Hubert Herkomer, belonged to his own generation. Herkomer's career offered a concrete projection screen for the late entrant who was eager to learn. Only three years his senior, Herkomer, at the time during which Van Gogh just decided to start a career as an artist, had already undergone a remarkable development, from a London-based illustrated journal draughtsman to an internationally successful star painter. Until his early death in 1890, Van Gogh followed the success story of his model with great interest. He envied the social acceptance Herkomer had gained and even thought of visiting him in England to seek his patronage on his quest for a position as a social reportage draughtsman.

In a biographical note that the gifted self-impersonator had launched in an issue of “The Graphic” from 10/26/1876, he gave an account of the difficult times he had experienced as the child of emigrants in Victorian England, where, after a failed new beginning in America in the mid-1850s, his family, who originally came from Waal near Landsberg, Germany, wound up. In Herkomer's account of the poverty and the initial underestimation of his artistic abilities, Van Gogh could very well see his own difficulties reflected. In a letter to his brother Theo dealing with his reading of Herkomer's biography, Van Gogh stated: “The biography also tells that he is not a man who works easily; on the contrary, ever since the beginning he has had to struggle with a kind of awkwardness, and no picture is finished without severe mental effort. I can hardly understand why, even now, many call him rough. I can hardly think of any work more profoundly sensitive than his.”

That this Hubert Herkomer, with whose arduous artistic activities Van Gogh could identify, and the person who had made a fortune with a highly virtuoso and assembly-line-like production of portraits of prominent members of the British Empire, were one and the same person is hard to comprehend. It is even more difficult to grasp the fact that Herkomer, this prince of painting knighted by Queen Victoria after succeeding John Ruskin's Slade professorship at Oxford University, was also the initiator of the first automobile rally in Germany, the building-owner of two neo-Gothic estates – one in England and one in his Bavarian homeland – as well as an actor, hypnotizer, mesmeric healer, inventor of printing techniques, operator of his own art school and of his own theatre, which for the most part staged his own musical theatre plays, as well as of his own film production firm that became famous for their innovative lighting technique. Herkomer is indeed one of the most enigmatic phenomena of fin de siècle art.

In order to grasp the range of this multi-personal existence at least to a certain degree, one would have to bring to mind a number of in part extremely contrary artistic positions of the 19th and early 20th century – above all, Richard Wagner, whose paradigm of the Gesamtkunstwerk was a driving force of Herkomer's varied ambitions. One would equally have to cite the addiction to representation and the staging of ambitions of persons such as Karl von Piloty or Hans Makart, the occult universalism and lucid inventiveness of August Strindberg, the rustic naturalism of Wilhelm Leibl, the pseudo-doyen-like gesture of Franz Lenbach, the realism of Menzel and Liebermann, and not least the Futurist's obsession with speed and technology.

The Graphic

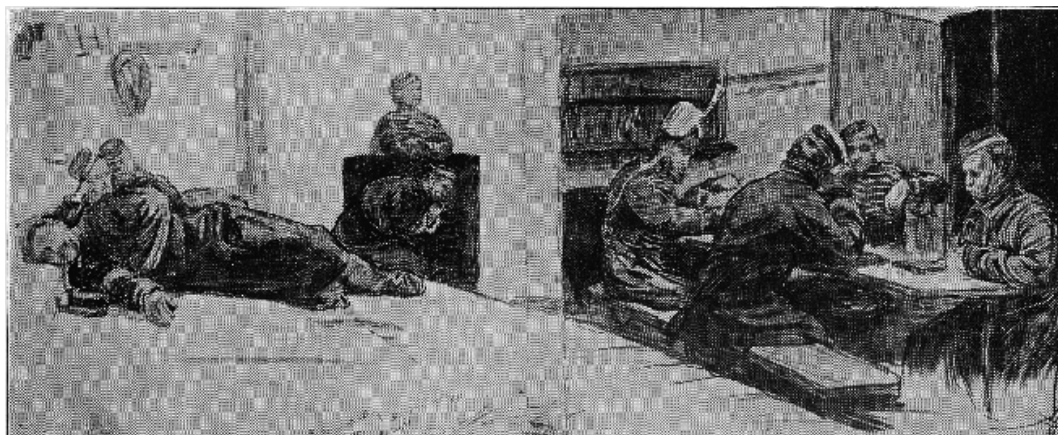
The starting point of all these diverging activities can be seen in his time as a reportage draughtsman with the illustrated journal "The Graphic". This is not only where he developed his creed of effective publicity as a top artistic priority and became familiar with the competing juxtapositions of state-of-the-art technological and classical manual recording techniques, but was also confronted with an all but boundless range of topics for his artistic work, going far beyond the repertory offered by classical academic training. In an obituary notice for the publisher of "The Graphic", William Luson Thomas, he credited him for opening "its pages to every phase of the story of our life; he led the rising artist into drawing subjects that might never have otherwise arrested his attention." In the necrology published in the "Times" in 1900, he even went as far as attributing to the publisher a substantial influence on the development of Victorian painting. "It is not too much to say that there was a visible change in the selection of subjects by painters in England after the advent of The Graphic."

Among the group of young artists that Luson Thomas had won over as employees for "The Graphic", Herkomer was the youngest. As had been the case with his friends Luke Fildes and George Pinwell, he had already delivered illustrations and cartoons to other periodicals, yet the social realistic orientation



J.B. Wirgman, Some „Graphic“-Artists, 1882
(unten links H. Herkomer)

of the new illustrated journal posed a very special challenge for all artistic employees. The wood engraving, “Homeless and Hungry”, for which Luke Fildes in the first issue of “The Graphic” had drawn the model and which in its dramatic, artistic depiction of social misery in the city was a novelty in English publicized illustrations, was programmatic for the working method of this first generation of “Graphic” artists, who in 1872 were subsumed by critics under the term “School of Social Realism”. They included, in addition to the already mentioned Herkomer and Luke Fildes, Frank Holl, William Small, Charles Green, and Robert W. Macbeth. In their illustrated reports, they predominantly visited deprived areas in the metropolis of London. The drawings made on location in poor houses, homes for the blind, prisons, and on the streets of London are of a strange nature, characterized by a pointedly sketchy and straightforward style. So as to counteract the falsification of their work through xylographic transfers, they followed their artistic model, Adolph Menzel, methodically as well, by transferring the drawings to the relief plates themselves.



H. Herkomer, A Guard-Room at Aldershot, 1870



H. Herkomer, Low Lodging House St. Giles's, The Graphic, 1872

The social realist wave of the 1860s and 70s in England would not have been conceivable without the literary model of Charles Dickens, who like Emile Zola had begun his career as a reporter. Past research has almost entirely neglected the influence of French draughtsmen, who at a very early stage – in the late 1840s – had already discovered, in London, the metropolis of the industrial revolution, the wide social gap as an attractive topic of social reportage. The

Pre-Raphaelites ranked as another artistic model, who in 1848 – parallel to the Europe-wide movements of political reform – fought against late-baroque and classicist academicism with their demand for the authenticity of emotion and realistic depiction. It is little known that the Pre-Raphaelite movement, despite all emphasis on inwardness, on its fringes was also a social-reformist movement.



William Small, Sunday Afternoon in St. Giles's, The Graphic, 1871



Frederick Walker, *The Wayfarers*, 1866

Frederick Walker

The most important link between the big-city reportages of the “Graphic” artists and the Pre-Raphaelite movement was established by the works of the prematurely deceased Frederick Walker. He was regarded as the member of a small group of English artists, the so-called “Idyllists”, who sought to combine Pre-Raphaelite inwardness with the pre-Impressionist notion of nature along the lines of the school of Barbizon. In the mid-1860s, Walker suddenly became famous on account of two paintings, “Wayfarers” and “The Vagrants”, which he presented at the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy. What they introduced into the pastoral world of Victorian painting was a hitherto unknown moment of social harshness, resignation and hopelessness.

Walker’s unpredictable temper and his early death in 1875, both surrounded by legends, contributed quite a bit to the fact that his name was soon covered by the patina of the young artist whose genius reached an early climax. Walker’s melancholy *mises en scène* had a huge influence on the first-generation “Graphic” artists. Among Van Gogh’s favourites were late works of Walker such as “The Old Gate” (1872) and “The Harbour of Refuge” (1873), which appeared as double-page reproduction engravings in “The Graphic”; in his view, they ranked as pictures that should form the foundation of any collection. What convinced both Van Gogh and Hubert Herkomer of Walker’s pictorial solutions was the strong Pre-Raphaelite suggestive power engendered by the combination of a solemn, almost classic assemblage of figures, a wildly romantic notion of landscape, and the prosaic nature of the subject itself. In 1893, Herko-

mer, in an eulogy dedicated to his model stated: “In Frederick Walker we have the creator of the English Renaissance, for it was he who saw the possibility of combining the grace of the antique with the realism of our everyday life in England. His navvies are Greek gods, and yet not a bit less true to nature.” During the course of a lecture tour in North America in 1882, Herkomer even positioned Walker’s painting as true “poetic naturalism” against the despised and misunderstood new schools of French painting.



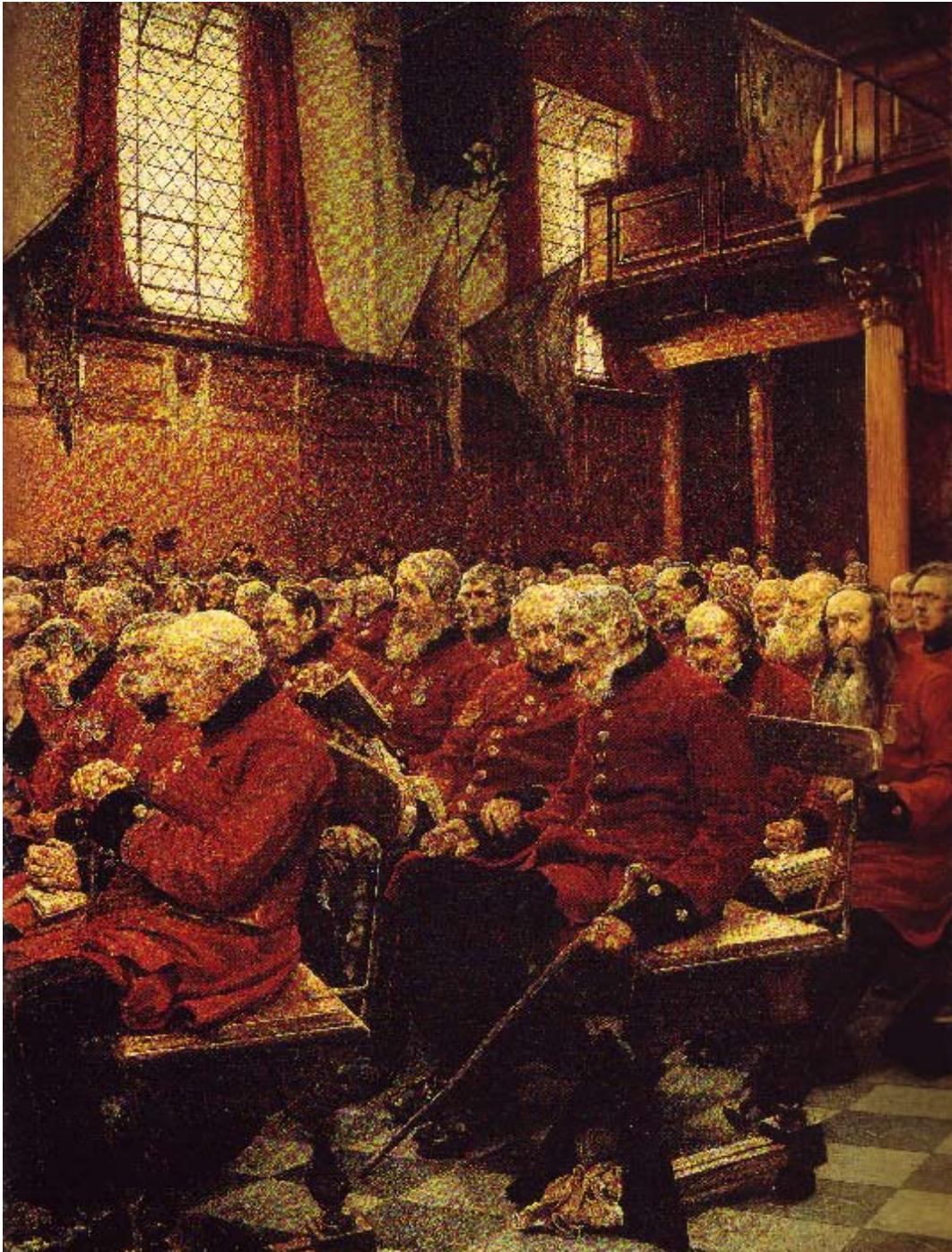
Frederick Walker, *The Old Gate*, *The Graphic* 1876

It was not only Walker’s style that became a model for most of the “Graphic” artists but also his career, which they attempted to imitate, for he, too, had begun as an illustrator and trained wood engraver. In regard to his own painterly attempts, he was very well in a position to think himself into the graphic approach of Walker’s paintings, which in their initial versions were all models in drawings for wood engravings. The same was the case with the painting that made young Herkomer internationally famous overnight. “The Last Muster”, with which he was awarded a medal of honour at the large Parisian painting exhibition of 1878, was based on the wood engraving, “Sunday at the Chelsea Hospital”, which he produced for “The Graphic” in 1871. The picture shows British pensioners indulged in a Sunday Mass; upon first sight, a very quiet and unspectacular picture. Only when taking a closer look does one understand what it is all about: The only person not in line with where all other pensioners are looking

and, instead, facing his neighbour on the pew, is taking this person's pulse. Because his hands have slid down, one can only suspect that the person has just died. In view of the underlying theme of aging and death, Herkomer may be following Walker's footsteps here, yet in regard to the pointedness of the moment of surprise, upon which the attraction of the picture is essentially based – and which in terms of its psychological subtlety is less theatrical than cinematographic – he artistically manoeuvres within 19th-century history painting, albeit in a territory entirely his own.



H. Herkomer, Sunday at Chelsea Hospital, The Graphic, 1871)



H. Herkomer, The Last Muster, 1875

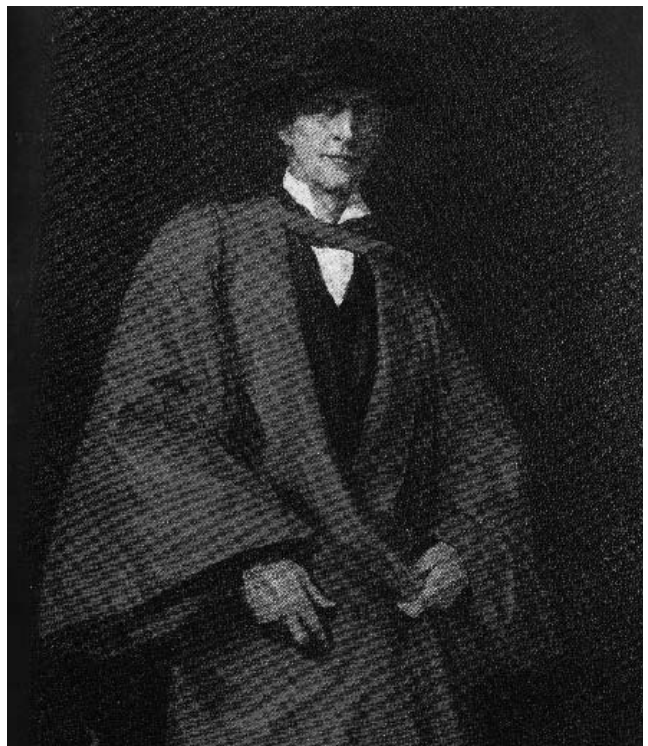
It already becomes clear here what Herkomer's dramaturgical talent consisted in, something which

made the future art entrepreneur turn first to the stage and then to cinema according to his motto that art must essentially have an effect on the public. The painterly composition of the group motif gave him ample opportunity to test himself as a portrait painter. In most of the heads of the community of pensioners, he included portraits of his large circle of family and friends.

It is remarkable that the group of “Social Realists” included three of the leading portrait artists of Victorian England at the end of the 19th century: Hubert Herkomer, Luke Fildes and Frank Holl. In regard to success and productivity, Herkomer, however, superseded his colleagues by far. Among his wealthy international clients were a martial representative of the British colonial power, Lord Kitchenern, the American financial shark Jay Gould, and the entire board of directors of the German Krupp Corporation. It was a matter of course for someone who was known for not shying away from technical innovations, like his German colleague Lenbach, to fall back on the means of photography. It was also known that Herkomer operated a photo studio and conducted experiments with the medium. All the same, the “discovery” that his portraits were not merely created “after life” was a decisive argument that on the eve of the First World War – in a climate of increasing Germanophobia – contributed to Herkomer’s artistic disqualification. After his death, the hyper-German artists’ colony in the London suburb of Bushey dissolved, and the memory that one of the most spectacular and bizarre media factories of that period had resided there was erased for a long time to come.



H. Herkomer, Lord Kitchener, 1890



H. Herkomer, Self-portrait in Oxford gown, 1907



H. Herkomer, The „Schuhplattl“ Dance, The Graphic, 1873

Yodel culture and new media

Herkomer's media industry was based in a gigantic neo-Gothic estate called "Lululaund", which he had built in 1886 by the American architect Hobson Richardson – financed by the sale of his portrait paintings. Here, as well as in his nearby art school, which opened in 1883, Bavarian evenings and concerts were regularly held. From 1888 on, Herkomer staged his own music theatre pieces, which were celebrated as grand events by the London society, who travelled to Bushey to take in a kind of miniature version of Wagner's Bayreuth. Herkomer had also contributed to a considerable extent – by way of magazine articles and paintings – to the reputation of Bavarian mountain regions, to which he regularly retreated, as international tourist attractions. Not least thanks to his varied activities, native Bavarian customs such as folk dances, zither-playing and yodelling became trendy in the Anglo-Saxon world.



H. Herkomer, A Study in Westminster Union, The Graphic, 1877

The picturesque London suburb was also the scene of numerous pictorial stagings, in which he celebrated simple rural life ("Our Village", 1889) or in which he, continuing to address social realist themes as a portrayer of modern life, took up topics such as unemployment, ("Hard Times", 1885), migration ("The First Born", 1887) and the workers' struggle ("On Strike" 1891).

In these and further key pictures of social rea-

lism such as “Eventide” from 1878 or “Pressing to the West” from 1884, which depict scenes of a poor house in London and a camp for emigrants in New York, he again fell back on compositions or themes stemming from his time at “The Graphic”.

Here, more so than in his first painterly work, Frederick Walter served as a model for the composition of his pictures. However, the calm and gliding perspective preferred by Walker is substantially dynamized by Herkomer by means of abrupt alterations between the figurative foreground and the yawning spatial depth, emphasized by the pointed placement of light. Herkomer’s early impressionistic maelstrom effects of depth on Van Gogh’s spatial vertigo has been pointed out on several occasions.



H. Herkomer, Old age, A Study in Westminster Union, The Graphic, 1877



Van Gogh, Nightcafe, 1888



H. Herkomer, Studies for stage lightning (old system)

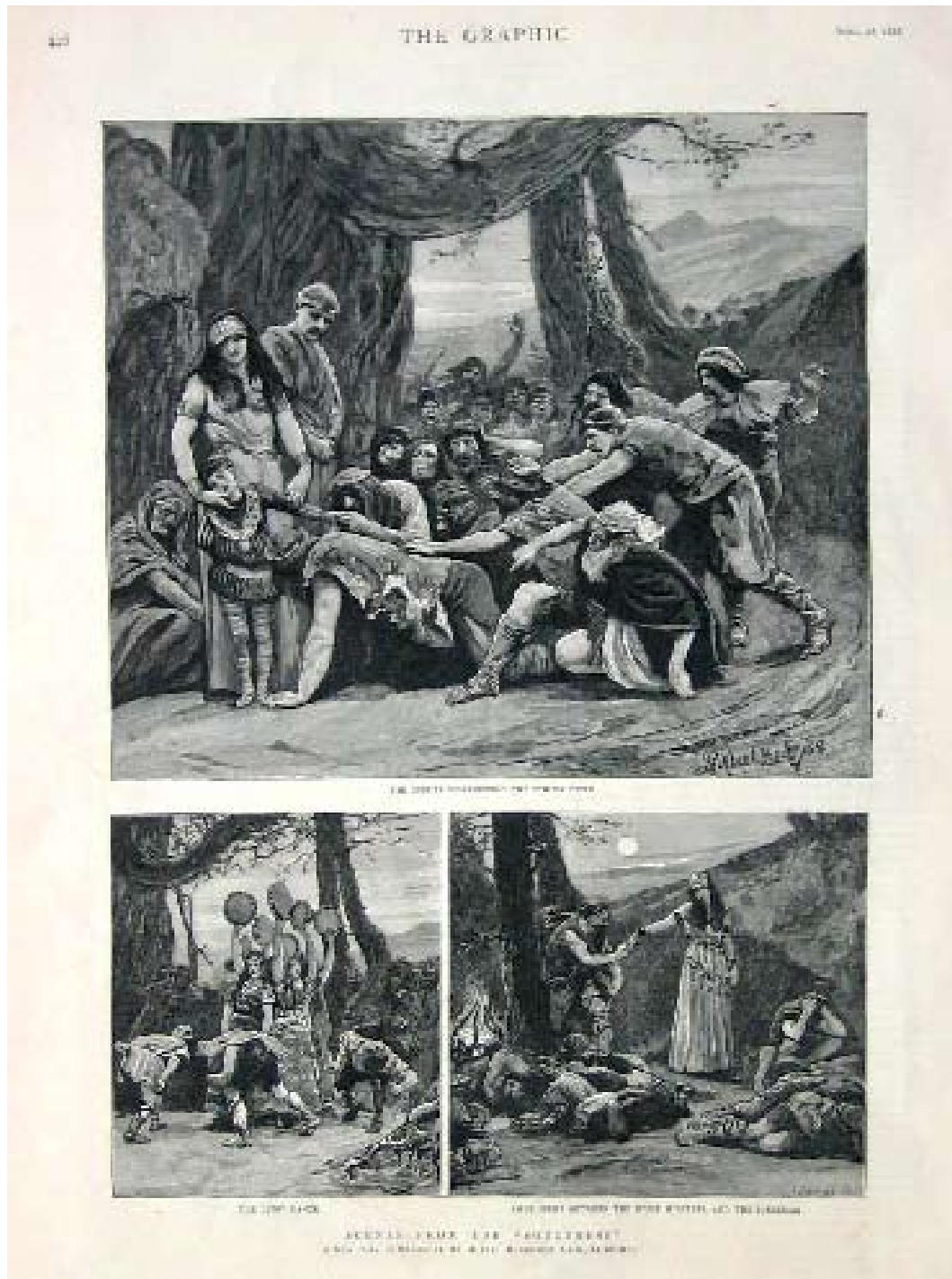


H. Herkomer, Studies for stage lightning (new system)

The extreme conflict between the dynamic belief in progress and deep culture-pessimistic resignation permeating the entire fin de siècle is expressed in the work of Herkomer like in that of no other. Although he vehemently advocated in many of his writings the predominance of tasteful craftsmanship and classical artistic techniques as opposed to the new mediums, his main interest gradually shifted to the perspectives that arose with the most recent technological developments. He was the founder of the first auto rally in Germany, an experimentalist dedicated to printing and enamelling techniques, the proprietor of a photo studio, and from 1912 to his death in 1914 the founder of his own film production firm in Bushey. Always meeting a positive press response, the Herkomer Studios released seven films of various genres, in most of which the producer himself was the principal actor.

From the very start, Herkomer followed the development the new medium with enthusiasm. At the beginning of the 1880s, he invited Eadweard Muybridge as a lecturer to his art school, which – with its libertarian pedagogical principles – was conceived as a counter-model to the classical art academy. Herkomer, as he admitted in a contribution to the “Daily Telegraph” dated 12/21/1912, was immediately enthusiastic about the possibilities of sequential photography, which Muybridge had demonstrated. He was not only one of the few who envisioned the future of film as a mass medium – later to conquer the living rooms as well. In an essay from 1913, he even went as far as proclaiming film to be the art of the future.

What Herkomer's biographical development reveals in a very exemplary manner is something which in terms of the history of media is now becoming increasingly clear, namely, that it was not the retinal or spiritualistically oriented strands of early modernism through which cinematographic thought was prepared, but old historical painting and its young successor, the pictorial art of illustrated journals.



Scenes from the „Sorceress“, The Graphic 1888



Herkomer in „A Highwayman´s Honour“, Bushey 1914

In the MePri – Collections :

Lee MacCormick Edwards, Herkomer. A Victorian Artist, Aldershot, 1999

A.L. Baldry ,Sir Hubert Herkomer. A Study and a Biography, London 1901

Ludwig Pietsch, Herkomer, Bielefeld and Leipzig, 1901

Diverse, Sir Hubert Herkomer. Zum 100.Geburtstag seines Landsberger Mutterturms, Landsberg 1988

Hubert von Herkomer, My school and My Gospel, New York 1908

Stephen Poole, ed., Stand To Your Work. Hubert Herkomer And His Students, Watford, 1983

Michael Pritchard, Sir Hubert von Herkomer and Film-Making in Bushey. 1912 -1914, Bushey 1987

J.G.Marks, Life and Letters of Frederick Walker, London 1896

Clementina Black, Frederick Walker , London 1902

Pamela White Trimpe, George John Pinwell: A Victorian Artist and Illustrator, London 1975

William Luson Thomas, The Making of the Graphic, Universal Review, 1888

Daily Graphic, A Preliminary Number of the New Paper, 1890

Eric de Mare, The Victorian Woodblock Illustrators, London, 1980

Portfolio with individual sheets from The Graphic and Illustrated London News

Works in The Graphic, Harpers Weekly, Every Saturday

Portfolio with etchings

Six drawings

Explanatory notes

¹ Letter 263, February 1883

² “For you the public it was really done”, was one of Herkomer’s mottos – also quoted by Van Gogh – that he used as a caption, as well.

³ The early depictions of urban misery in English periodicals such as the “Illustrated London News”, the “Pictorial Times”, and the “Illustrated Times” had been more of a distanced, objective nature, like the graphic illustrations in the reports of the architect George Godwin, which were published in several issues of the journal “The Builder”. In 1854, they were compiled in a publication titled “A glance at the homes of the thousands”. This report on the catastrophic living conditions of the proletariat in London had a great impact and led to the introduction of a number of humanitarian measures.

⁴ The influence of Menzel’s sketchy illustration style, as had been presented in the woodblock engravings for Franz Kugler’s “Geschichte Friedrichs des Grossen” (1840), on international illustrated journal graphics in the second half of the 19th century cannot be overestimated..

⁵ Van Gogh countered the accusation of his Dutch painter colleagues that the art of the English social realists was too literary by pointing out that an author like Dickens, even in his literary style, was surprisingly sculptural. Letter dated 5/28/1885

⁶ This will be addressed in more detail in a text on Gustave Doré.

⁷ Starting in the 1860s, their great theorist John Ruskin approached Christian socialism. In 1865, Ford Madox Brown completed his much-acclaimed programmatic picture titled “Work”, which for the first time in Victorian art addressed labour in an urban context as a subject.

⁸ Letter R 19

⁹ Lee MacCormick Edwards, Herkomer. A Victorian Artist, Aldershot, 1999, p. 102

¹⁰ as he admits in 1908 in the elaboration of his art educational methods “My school, my Gospel”

¹¹ With this he also followed Luke Fildes, who remixed his wood engraving “Homeless and Hungry”, after all the praise he received for it, in the 1874 oil painting “The Casuals”.

¹² One can find echoes of this fashionable trend in early American country and blues music.

¹³ Herkomer experimented for years with lighting effects on his stage, which he in turn derived from his experiences with painting.

¹⁴ After intensively dealing with the mezzotint technique, he developed his own method, the “Spongotype” or “Herkomer engraving”.

¹⁵ None of Herkomer’s films were preserved. However, a number of stills and scenic sketches do exist.

¹⁶ See: Michael Pritchard, Sir Hubert Herkomer & Film-Making in Bushey, Bushey 1987

¹⁷ With his troupe of actors, who were for the most part students, he staged so-called “Photoplays” that rendered the basic plot of a piece in a series of photos.

¹⁸ “I see the greatest possibility of art in the film (...) I should think the black and white artist never had

such a chance as now, with the cinema by his side.“ Cited in: Michael Pritchard, Sir Hubert Herkomer & Film-Making in Bushey, Bushey 1987

⁹ See : “Die Kinematisierung des Blicks”, Chapter 2, in Stefanie Muhr, Der Effekt des Realen. Die historische Genremalerei des 19. Jahrhunderts, Cologne 2006