

A Survey of Anton von Werner's

Proclamation of the German Empire Paintings

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Anton von Werner (1843-1915), created four images of the proclamation of the German Empire, which took place on January 18, 1871, in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles. Von Werner had been summoned to Versailles by the Grand Duke of Baden. He was present and made sketches at the event, and was subsequently commissioned by various members of the court to create various images over time. He appears to have changed the focus of the composition and other details to correspond with the donors' purposes for each version. The four versions are:

- 1) The Palace Version (1877), commissioned by the Grand Duke of Baden and other German Princes for Kaiser Wilhelm I's 80th birthday. It was hung in Berlin's City Palace but was destroyed in WWII. It is preserved only as a black-and-white photograph.¹
- 2) The Woodcut Version (1880), is identified as a woodcut after a drawing by von Werner and a print is listed as in the Berlin collection at the Archiv für Kunst und Geschichte.²
- 3) The Zeughaus Version (1882), commissioned by William I for the Hall of Fame of the Prussian Army housed in Berlin's Zeughaus. The painting was apparently lost at the end of WWII.³
- 4) The Friedrichsruh Version (1885), commissioned by the Prussian royal family for Bismarck's 70th birthday. This painting is extant at Bismarck's former estate in Friedrichsruh.⁴

Anton von Werner was born in Frankfurt an der Oder in 1843 and apprenticed to a housepainter.⁵ He won a fellowship to the Academic Institute of Fine Arts in Berlin, and later studied with painter Adolph Schroeder (his future father-in-law) in Karlsruhe. While in Karlsruhe he formed a friendship with poet and novelist Joseph Viktor Scheffel, becoming

¹ "Anton von Werner, The Proclamation of the German Empire (January 18, 1871) – Palace Version (1877)." German History in Documents and Images. Accessed 10/28/2018. http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1401

² "Anton von Werner, The Proclamation of the German Empire (January 18, 1871) – Woodcut Version (1880)." German History in Documents and Images. Accessed 10/28/2018. http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1402

³ "Proclamation of the German Empire (paintings)." Wikipedia. Accessed 10/28/2018. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proclamation_of_the_German_Empire_\(paintings\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proclamation_of_the_German_Empire_(paintings))

⁴ "Anton von Werner, The Proclamation of the German Empire (January 18, 1871) – Friedrichsruh Version (1885)." German History in Documents and Images. Accessed 10/28/2018. http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1403

⁵ Biographical information in this paragraph: Peter Paret, *Art as History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 165-166.

illustrator for some of Scheffel's works. He came to know the Grand Duke and Duchess of Baden through Scheffel, and through them became known to Crown Prince Frederick and joined his entourage. His art was appointed director of the Royal Academic Institute for the Fine Arts in Berlin in 1875. He was described by Beth Irwin Lewis in *Art for All?* as “communicat[ing] a contemporary and triumphant image of the new nation to its inhabitants, an image that was rational, easily understandable, historicist, ... an image of imperial power conveyed with thoroughly liberal bourgeois values.”⁶

The differences in the four images of the Proclamation are interesting, as is the way in which they were interpreted over time. The first (1877) image was very large, and the viewpoint was from above head level at the left-rear corner of the room. The principal participants are shown at a distance on the left, and hundreds of figures are included, 148 of which are portraits. Paret quotes Werner as writing: “I had to describe truthfully something I myself had experienced – or to fantasize, which would have been easier but was out of place in a work of historical documentation.”⁷ In this image he portrays Bismark in the blue uniform he actually wore on the day. This version also very intricately portrays the Hall of Mirrors and includes the cartouche of the ceiling painting of “The Passage of the Rhine in the presence of the enemies,” by Le Brun. Le Brun's painting (1686) is an allegorical depiction of Louis XIV's 1672 crossing of the Rhine during the Dutch War.⁸

The woodcut version (1882) is from a viewpoint directly in front of the dais, and only shows the main participants, along with a very enthusiastic flanking group of officers. Bismarck now appears dressed in white.

The Friedrichsruh version (1885) is the most reproduced, and was the second most frequently used image in European history textbooks in 2004.⁹ This version returns to a view of the ceremony from the left, facing the wall of mirrors. The Emperor and Princes are shown on the dais to the left, and a group of officers is shown on the right behind Bismarck, who is

⁶ Beth Irwin Lewis, *Art for All?* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 31.

⁷ Anton von Werner, *Erlebnisse und Eindrücke, 1870-1890* (Berlin, 1913) as quoted in Paret, *Art as History*, 173.

⁸ “Versailles la galerie des Glaces.” Accessed 12/11/2018. <http://www.galeriedesglaces-versailles.fr/html/11/collection/c7.html>

⁹ Susanne Popp, (2010). Trans-European convergences in national textbooks for history education? An approach to the comparison of image sources in schoolbooks. *Yesterday and Today*, (5), 127-140.

now the central figure, presumably because this painting was a birthday gift to him. Bismarck is shown in his dress white uniform, and wearing the order Pour le mérite, which he was awarded in 1884, long after the 1871 event depicted here. Paret quotes Werner's memoirs as reporting that when Werner justified changing the color of Bismarck's uniform to William I, the emperor replied: "You are right, he was incorrectly dressed, and it is quite in order for you to have corrected this mistake."¹⁰ Werner also inserted the figure of Prussian War Minister Albrecht von Roon, who had missed the event due to illness. In the 1885 painting Werner portrayed the main participants as the age they were at the time of this painting rather than at the time of the event.

When the first painting was revealed in 1877, it was reported in the press as a technical triumph. The significance of the setting below "The Passage of the Rhine" was not missed, and the crowd of generals was described as "hurrahing and waving their helmets in the air . . . The heaving of the agitated throng is represented with striking effect. We almost fancy we see them moving toward the platform . . ."¹¹ The image preserved in the photograph does not seem so exuberant to the modern eye. Paret records that at the time "some commentators were disappointed by an absence of enthusiasm," to which Werner responded: "'The externals of the event by no means corresponded to its significance'; the ceremony 'proceeded in the most unostentatious manner and with all possible dispatch.'"¹² It is interesting to note that all versions subsequent to the 1877 one firmly emphasize the salute, with swords raised high.

¹⁰ von Werner, *Erlebnisse und Eindrücke*, as quoted in Paret, *Art as History*, 178.

¹¹ A BIG PICTURE. (1877, May 01). Chicago Daily Tribune

¹² von Werner, *Erlebnisse und Eindrücke*, as quoted in Paret, *Art as History*, 176.



Anton von Werner, *The Proclamation of the German Empire (January 18, 1871) – Palace Version (1877)*.



Anton von Werner, *The Proclamation of the German Empire (January 18, 1871)* – Woodcut Version (1880).



Anton von Werner, *The Proclamation of the German Empire (January 18, 1871) – Zeughaus Version (1882)*.



Anton von Werner, *The Proclamation of the German Empire (January 18, 1871)* – Friedrichsruh Version (1885).

A BIG PICTURE.: The Proclamation of the German Empire, at Versailles.
Chicago Daily Tribune (1872-1922); May 1, 1877; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune
 pg. 2

A BIG PICTURE.

The Proclamation of the German Empire, at Versailles.

Correspondence London Times.

The gigantic painting the German sovereigns and Free Towns have presented to the German Emperor on the 80th anniversary of his birthday is a work of the famous Anton von Werner, the Director of the Berlin Academy of Arts, and one of the greatest historical painters of the age. The huge tableau, twenty-seven feet long and fifteen feet high, represents the Proclamation of the German Empire at Versailles on Jan. 18, 1871. The painter, who was present on the occasion, received the order four years ago, and has been ever since industriously at work on it. In this comparatively short period he has produced a work which, for composition, execution, and the immense number of figures it contains, ranks among the best of its kind.

The scene of the painting is the well-known "Galerie des Glaces," in the Chateau at Versailles, a rococo hall, constructed from the designs of Le Bran, and decorated with fresco paintings by the same artist. The spectator looks at the wall opposite the windows—an arched surface, divided by marble pilasters, with the intervening spaces occupied by immense looking-glasses. Trophies of arms, helmets, and escutcheons surmount the mirrors, and, gracefully arranged, connect the capitals of the pilasters with each other. Above this brilliant wall the vaulted ceiling displays a series of fresco paintings, illustrating the victories of the Grand Monarque, who erected the gorgeous pile. The central arch, near which the German Emperor stood at the moment of the Proclamation, is crowned by a fresco, described on the architrave as "Passage du Rhin en presence des ennemis, 1672." Under this cartoon, perpetuating one of the many French raids into disunited Germany, 200 years after its production, the new Emperor celebrated the triumph of his country "en presence des ennemis."

To the left of the spectator, towards the narrow end of the oblong, on a carpeted platform, we see the majestic form of the German Emperor, with the Crown Prince on his right, and the Grand Duke of Baden, the Emperor's son-in-law, on his left. Round them are grouped the German sovereigns and Princes present in the camp. Behind the Emperor, the standards and colors, supported by martial bearers, form a glorious background to the picture; while in front we have a crowd of Generals, the victors in a hard-won campaign, hurrahing and waving their helmets in the air the moment after the reading of the Proclamation. The heaving of the agitated throng is represented with striking effect. We almost fancy we see them moving towards the platform, as the last solemn word of the Proclamation dies away and long-repressed enthusiasm is vented in a thundering cheer. Notwithstanding so many arms are raised, there is no monotony apparent, and the faces stand well out from the canvas, amid the splendid effect of the many-colored uniforms. To give an idea of the magnitude of the performance, no less than 140 portrait figures occupy the space in front and upon the platform. Prince Bismarck, with the pregnant Proclamation in his hand; by his side Gen. Moltke—both looking at the Emperor; Gen. von Blumenthal, the Prussian strategist; Gen. von Stosch, whose feats in provisioning the army are only equaled by the wisdom of his tactical advice; Gen. von Hartmann, the leader of the Bavarian host; Gen. von Fabrice, the Governor of Versailles and Saxon Minister of War; Col. Fabre du Faur, the Wurtemberg leader, and many other well-remembered men of the war, are presented to the beholder in accurate likenesses. Among a variety of artistic merits it is difficult to decide which claims our greatest admiration, the grand and truly picturesque aspect of the whole, or the infinite amount of exact detail, or the life-like and faithful portraiture of the individuals. A. Werner could not but turn out a work of high art, but in a military painting offered to William I., not a button on a shoulder-strap, nor a nail on a flagstaff, nor a tassel on a sword-hilt dare be out of place. The painting is throughout drawn with a firm hand, and is warm and rich in color without disturbing the eye. To the right, in the foreground, the artist has placed himself. Probably, photographs of the remarkable picture will soon be allowed to be taken. The frame, corresponding to the size of the picture, has a magnificent pattern adorned with the coats of arms of the various donors.

Bibliography

PROCLAIMING WILLIAM EMPEROR. (1877, Apr 19). *New York Times* (1857-1922) Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/docview/93608782?accountid=14522>

A BIG PICTURE. (1877, May 01). *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1872-1922) Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/docview/171771832?accountid=14522>

The above two newspaper articles were published shortly after the reveal of the painting, and are quite similar, long descriptions of the painting. They both make note of the significance of the ceremony being held beneath the “Passage of the Rhine in presence of the enemy, 1672” and comment that 200 years later the German triumph was celebrated in the “presence of the enemy.” The Chicago Tribune refers to the Emperor as “majestic” while the New York Times calls him “noble.” The Times identifies the regimental banners on the dais, and notes that the one for the Fusilier Battalion has a “ribbon embroidered by the Crown Princess.” Both note the large size (25’ x 15’) and extreme realism of the painting, and the number of portrait figures (140 or 150.) Both articles also note Werner’s self-portrait in the corner. The Tribune article reports that the frame was ‘adorned with the coats of arms of the various donors.’

Von Werner, Anton. *Erlebnisse und Eindrücke, 1870-1890*, Berlin, 1913.

This book is available at Stanford University Libraries.

Bartmann, Dominik. *Anton von Werner, Zur Kunst und Kunstpolitik im Deutschen Kaiserreich*. Berlin: Deutscher Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft, 1985.

This book is in German. Pages 96-122 are titled “Kaiserproklamation” and include many images of the paintings and sketches, including an image identifying 128 figures in the 1877 painting. All sources cited in this book are German.

Paret, Peter. *Art as History, Episodes in the Culture and Politics of Nineteenth-Century Germany*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988, 165-180.

Paret presents biographical background on Werner, and discusses his career and politics. He also addresses the *Proclamation* paintings both as historical documents and artworks. Of the 1877 Palace version he notes that “the architectural details, shown with tedious precision, do not sufficiently link the cheering Prussians with the apotheosis of Louis XIV above them” (178). This is interesting because newspaper articles at the time clearly made the connection, but perhaps not based solely on the painting itself.

Lewis, Beth Irwin. *Art for All? The Collision of Modern Art and the Public in Late-Nineteenth-Century Germany*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003, 29-31.

Lewis discusses the painting as being intentionally created to “construct an image of the newly united German nation” and states that “reproductions of the painting were widely distributed” (29-30). She also noted that “No viewer could miss the significant perspective: the new nation was a military affair, a masculine affair, and a rational, secular, modern affair” (30).

Popp, Susanne. (2010). Trans-European convergences in national textbooks for history education? An approach to the comparison of image sources in schoolbooks. *Yesterday and Today*, (5), 127-140. Retrieved November 13, 2018, from http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2223-03862010000100012&lng=en&tlng=es

This article reports on a statistical analysis of all current history textbooks across Europe in 2004. It reports that Werner’s *Proclamation* (usually the 1885 version) is the second most frequently used image, after only Delacroix’s “*Liberty Leading the People*.” The article asserts that “What is conducive to its popularity is the fact that in most cases it acts as a symbolic leitmotif that predicts the two world wars in that it associatively projects the ‘aggressive’ German ‘nation building’ as the centre of peacelessness of the European powers.”

“Proclamation of the German Empire, 1871.” Chateau de Versailles. Accessed 11/09/2018. <http://en.chateauversailles.fr/discover/history/key-dates/proclamation-german-empire-1871>.

This is the Palace of Versailles’s website for visitors. This page briefly describes the defeat of the French forces by the Prussians, and the ceremony in the Hall of Mirrors. The description corresponds with the painting. The page notes that ‘six hundred officers and all the German princes were present, except for Louis II’ of Bavaria, who sent his brother in his place. It concludes “The chancellor [Bismarck] had achieved his dream, beneath the paintings by Le Brun extolling the victories of Louis XIV over the Rhine, and had got his revenge for the Battle of Jena in 1806.”

“Anton von Werner, *The Proclamation of the German Empire (January 18, 1871)* – Palace Version (1877).” German History in Documents and Images. Accessed 10/28/2018. http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1401
Brief history and image from Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

“Anton von Werner, *The Proclamation of the German Empire (January 18, 1871)* – Woodcut Version (1880).” German History in Documents and Images. Accessed 10/28/2018.
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Brief history and some images. Image of 1882 painting from http://www.bildindex.de/bilder/zi0290_0020a.jpg. Also mentions an additional painting (1913) done by the 70-year-old Von Werner for a school in Frankfurt (Oder). It too was destroyed in World War II.

“Anton von Werner.” German Wikipedia. Accessed 11/15/2018.

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_von_Werner

There is no German Wikipedia page specifically on the *Proclamation* paintings, but this German page contains a long biography of the artist and some images.

“Anton von Werner.” French Wikipedia. Accessed 11/15/2018.

https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_von_Werner

There is no French Wikipedia page specifically on the *Proclamation* paintings and this French page contains only a very brief “draft” on the artist’s biography.