



Old Man with an Umbrella (n.d.). Oil on canvas, 34x26in. This genre portrait, possibly done when Carl von Marr was an art student in Munich, recalls the work of the Munich realist Wilhelm Leibl. Photo courtesy of West Bend Gallery of Fine Arts, West Bend, Wisconsin.

CARL VON MARK: POETIC REALIST

Carl von Marr (1858-1936) was an American-born artist who settled in Munich and became the director of the Munich Academy. His name was originally Carl Marr, the aristocratic *von* being added after his election to the nobility in 1909. In his early work Marr strove to emulate the dramatic historical painting of the academic tradition in which he was trained, but he soon began to turn toward the genre realism of such Munich painters as Wilhelm Leibl. In the end, Marr became a master in the portrayal of warmly intimate domestic scenes. While his success as an academic painter was initially based on the recognition accorded his early historical canvasses, it is the thesis of the present article that Marr's real achievement is best exemplified by the poetic realism of his later works.¹

Marr was the oldest of the four children of John Marr, a German-born engraver who had settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1855. Marr was educated in Milwaukee at the German-English Academy, a liberal private school. His artistic talent was soon noticed, and from the age of nine he received private instruction from Henry Vianden, a German immigrant artist who was a pioneer art teacher in Wisconsin.

As the result of a childhood illness, Marr suffered from impaired hearing throughout his life. His deafness caused difficulties in school, where he was a shy, insecure boy. He left school at the age of fifteen and became an apprentice in his father's engraving business. In the meantime, Vianden sent some of Marr's sketches to the Weimar Art School, where they were favorably received. It was then that Marr's father resolved to send his talented son to Germany for study.

In 1875 Marr went to Weimar. He was only seventeen and because of his youth and inexperience was required to take private lessons before being regularly admitted to the Weimar Art School. His tutor during this period was Karl Gehrts, a young artist who was only five years older than Marr himself. In due course Marr was accepted by the art school and placed in the class of Ferdinand Schauss, where he followed the usual first-year program of drawing from plaster casts. The following year Marr went on to Berlin, enrolling in the Berlin Academy as a student of the genre and portrait

painter Karl Gussow. Marr also received instruction in Berlin from Anton Alexander von Werner, a popular painter of historical canvasses. In 1877 Marr went on to the Munich Academy where his first teacher was Otto Seitz, an artist known for his genre portraits and drawings. From the Seitz class Marr graduated to the composition class taught by Gabriel Max, a painter of portraits and figure studies who was also an illustrator. The faculty at the Munich Academy was favorably impressed with Marr's work and in 1874 he was awarded a silver medal, the first of many such awards he was to receive in the course of a brilliant career as an academically sound artist.

Marr returned to Milwaukee in 1880 and soon opened a studio there. His presence in the city was warmly acknowledged by the local press, but though his work was viewed with interest and respect by the local public, they did not buy. By early 1882 Marr gave up trying to make a living in Milwaukee. He exhibited his work in Detroit at the end of January and then went on to Boston and New York, where he found temporary work as an illustrator. Later that year he returned to Munich, which he now made his permanent home.

In Munich Marr briefly continued his studies at the academy, this time under Wilhelm Lindenschmidt, a painter of genre and historical subjects who was also known for his landscapes in the Barbizon manner. Marr soon opened his own studio, however, where he provided instruction to classes of women, who at that time were not yet admitted to the academy for study. He also soon received a teaching post at the academy.

Marr made frequent trips back to Milwaukee to visit his relatives there and often stayed for the summer. When he returned for the summer of 1887 members of the local German-American community held a banquet in his honor at Schlitz Park with more than a hundred guests in attendance. The press in Milwaukee regarded him with reverence and his visits to the city were always an occasion for press coverage. While in Milwaukee he often painted at the studio of Francesco Spicuzza, working mostly on portraits of relatives and prominent local citizens.



The Flagellants (1889). Oil on canvas, 13'10" x 25'8". This large canvas, which depicts a scene from Italian history, took Carl von Marr several years to complete. Although it is his undisputed masterpiece, it is perhaps less in tune with today's taste than the less dramatic scenes which he turned to in his later career. Photo courtesy of West Bend Gallery of Fine Arts, West Bend, Wisconsin.

Marr's training in Munich had inculcated a respect for historical painting, the artists he most admired being Adolph von Menzel (1815-1905) and Ernest Meissonier (1815-1891). During the first years after his return to Munich in 1892 Marr was much absorbed by this kind of painting. His most important work from this period is *The Flagellants* (1889), an immense painting with more than a hundred figures. Based on an incident which occurred in 1348, the subject matter for the painting was drawn from a history of Rome in the Middle Ages by the German historian Ferdinand Gregorovius. Marr made the first sketch for the painting in 1884 and by 1887 had completed the preliminary research, which included two trips to Italy. He painted the picture in his Munich studio during the next two years and won a gold medal when it was exhibited in Munich in 1889. The painting won another gold medal when it was exhibited at the International Exhibition in Berlin the following year. In 1893 Marr attended the Chicago World's Fair as a

delegate of the Society of Munich Artists and exhibited *The Flagellants* at the fair. The painting was subsequently purchased by Louise Schandain, wife of the Milwaukee brewer Emil Schandain, and presented as a gift to the city of Milwaukee. It was at first hung in the Milwaukee Public Library and was later displayed for many years in the Milwaukee Auditorium Building. In 1975 the painting was thoroughly restored and installed in its present location at the West Bend Art Museum in West Bend, Wisconsin.

The Flagellants is the only important work from Marr's historical period which is now in the United States. In 1890 Marr won a Gold Medal at the International Exhibition in Berlin for the painting *Germany in 1806*. The painting, which depicts a scene from the time of the Napoleonic Wars, shows a dimly lit room in which a group of French officers is playing cards while suffering German women and children are seen in the background. *The Children of Bunzlau* (1885), which was awarded a silver

medal by the Munich Academy, is another scene from the period of the Napoleonic Wars. The large painting depicts an incident which happened in 1813. A group of hungry French prisoners were being held captive by Cossack guards who refused to let the women of the town of Bunzlau bring food to the prisoners. When the women then sent their children with baskets of provisions, the Cossack guards allowed the children to pass. The painting was at one time owned by a museum in East Prussia, but its present whereabouts is uncertain.

By the turn of the century public taste for dramatic historical painting was waning, and Marr moved on to other types of expression. Sometimes he produced paintings based on motifs from classical mythology such as *The Hesperides* and *The Fall of Icarus*, but more frequently he turned to biblical subjects. *The Widow's Son* depicts the miracle related in Luke 7:11-16 in which Christ, while visiting the town of Nain, restores to life a widow's only son.

Even before the turn of the century Marr had begun to paint interior scenes of notable warmth and intimacy. Paintings such as *Summer Afternoon* (1892) and *The Red Chair* (c. 1895) bring the same sort of warmth to scenes of domestic life in an exterior setting. *Wind and Waves* (c. 1925) is a late work which appears to reflect the influence of the Swiss neoromantic painter Arnold Böcklin.

Marr occasionally did murals. At Schloss Stein, a castle near Nürnberg, he did a series of murals depicting the *Seven Ages of Man* on the four walls of a banquet hall. He is also reported to have done a ceiling painting at a church in Burgheim, Bavaria, northwest of Munich.

Marr's work contains many portraits, a number of which can be seen at the West Bend Art Museum. These paintings are illuminated by the same poetic vision which is apparent in his domestic scenes. Of particular interest is *Portrait of the Artist's Father* (1891), which shows the engraver John Marr in his shop surrounded by the implements of his trade. The work recalls the type of genre portrait which was a specialty of the Munich artist Wilhelm Leibl.²

Like many artists who reached the peak of their powers at the turn of the century, Marr

found himself cast in the role of a cultural conservative by the generation of modernists which emerged just before World War I. He was even forced to flee from Munich when the city was briefly taken over by left-wing insurgents in 1919. He was confused by German expressionist painting, which he could neither understand nor appreciate.



Summer Afternoon (1892). Oil on canvas, 52-3/4 x 81-1/2 in.
A poetic realist, Carl von Marr was able to bring matchless skill to the depiction of intimate scenes such as the one shown here.
Photo courtesy of West Bend Gallery of Fine Arts,
West Bend, Wisconsin.

The school of late nineteenth-century poetic realism which Marr's best work exemplifies has long been out of fashion, though there are currently signs of a sympathetic reappraisal. Nonetheless, the technical skill and inherent good taste of his painting distinguish him as an artist who deserves to be taken seriously despite changes in what is deemed fashionable. Despite his inability to come to grips with modernism, his work exhibits growth and evolution, the stiff formalism of his early period giving way to a mature style characterized by warmth and fluidity.

Marr probably began teaching at the Munich Academy during the 1880s, though he was not promoted to professor until 1893. He did not marry until 1916, by which time he was already in his late fifties. His wife, Elsie Fellerer Messerschmidt, was the widow of the Munich artist Pius Ferdinand Messerschmidt, who had been Marr's colleague and close friend. Marr had no children of his own but adopted his wife's two daughters by her previous marriage.



John Marr - Father (1891). Oil on canvas, 50 1/2 x 50 1/2 in. Carl von Marr's skill as a portrait artist is displayed to full effect in this study of the artist's father. John Marr (1831-1921) was a metal engraver and sculptor who is shown here among the tools of his trade. Photo courtesy of West Bend Gallery of Fine Arts, West Bend, Wisconsin.

Although Marr's studio was near the academy in Munich, he lived with his family in a country house at Solln, a village on the outskirts of town which has now become a residential neighborhood within the city. Marr's wife died only three years after they were married.

Marr in his sixties was a fair complexioned man with blue eyes, thinning blond hair, and a pointed beard. He was short, solidly built, and agile. Quiet and dignified in manner, he nonetheless was possessed of a sense of humor which sometimes showed through his sedate manner. Among his students in Munich were the Wisconsin-born artists Alexander Mueller and Adam Emory Albright. Marr remained a professor at the academy until retiring in 1923, after which he had his own private school of painting in Munich for several years. From 1919 to 1923 he was director of the Munich Academy. In addition to the numerous decorations which he received in the course of a distinguished career he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Wisconsin in 1929.

Marr kept up his American citizenship for several years, but lost it after accepting a position as professor at the academy. When he died in 1936 there was a secular service in Munich followed by burial at the village cemetery in Solln, where his wife is also buried. There was a memorial exhibition of his work at the Milwaukee Art Institute in November 1936, which brought together thirty-four of his paintings, all from Milwaukee collections.

— Peter C. Merrill
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Silent Devotion (1896). Oil on canvas, 46x57 in. By the 1890s Carl von Marr had turned away from the historical painting of his early period in favor of intimate domestic scenes such as the one shown here. Photo courtesy of West Bend Gallery of Fine Arts, West Bend, Wisconsin.



Wind and Waves (c. 1925). Oil on canvas, 27x39 in. This painting, from Carl von Marr's late period, reflects the influence of the Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901). Photo courtesy of West Bend Gallery of Fine Arts, West Bend, Wisconsin.

NOTES

¹The list of published sources on Carl von Marr and his work is too extensive to be given here. One recent source which must be mentioned, however, is Thomas Lidtke's color-illustrated book, *Carl von Marr: American-German Painter* (West Bend, Wisconsin: West Bend Gallery of Fine Arts, 1986). For the biographical information on von Marr contained in the present article I have drawn particularly on the many articles about him which appeared during his lifetime in such Milwaukee newspapers as the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. An index of the latter is available at the Milwaukee Public Library.

²Many of the paintings discussed in this article may be found at the West Bend Art Museum in West Bend, Wisconsin, which has the most comprehensive collection of Carl von Marr's works to be found anywhere in the world. I am much indebted to Thomas Lidtke, the executive director of the museum, for providing the illustrations used in this article.

