

UNIVERSITY OF PUGET SOUND

“A CHRONIC TUBERCULOSIS:”  
CARL SPITZWEG AND THE BIEDERMEIER

BENJAMIN BLOCK

ART494

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*Image List*

Fig. 1: Carl Spitzweg, *English Tourists in Campagna (English Tourists Looking at Ruins)*. Oil on paper. 19.7 x 15.7 inches, c. 1845. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

The Biedermeier period, which is formally framed between 1815 and 1848,<sup>1</sup> remains one of the murkiest and least studied periods of European art. Nowhere is this more evident than in the volumes that comprise the contemporary English-language scholarship on the period. Georg Himmelheber, in the exhibition catalogue for *Kunst des Biedermeier*, his 1987 exhibition at the Münchner Stadtmuseum, states that the Biedermeier style was “a new variety of neo-classicism.”<sup>2</sup> William Vaughan, on the other hand, in his work *German Romantic Painting*, inconsistently places Biedermeier painters in a “fluctuating space” between Romanticism and Biedermeier that occasionally includes elements of Realism as well.<sup>3</sup> It is unusual to find such large discrepancies on such a fundamental point for any period in modern art historical scholarship, and the wide range of conclusions that have been drawn about the period and the art produced within indicate a widespread misunderstanding of Biedermeier art by scholars. While there have been recent works that point to a fuller understanding of the Biedermeier period, namely the exhibition catalogue for the 2001 exhibit *Biedermeier: Art and Culture in Central Europe, 1815-1848* and Albert Boime’s *Art in the Age of Civil Struggle*, most broadly aimed survey texts still perpetuate an inaccurate view of the period, and some omit it altogether. It is the goal of this paper to understand how and why such misunderstanding came to be so accepted within the academic world and to begin to shape an inquiry as to how best to approach a renewed study of the subject.

To provide a basis for my inquiry I will focus on the artist Carl Spitzweg (1808-1885) and examine the way that scholars have studied his work. Spitzweg is an apt figure for this

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<sup>1</sup> These dates remain a point of contention amongst scholars. Himmelheber, for instance, places the start of the period at the beginning of the Napoleonic Wars while others place it firmly at 1815 when the Congress of Vienna was concluded. Albert Boime places the beginnings of the period in 1789 at the French Revolution. The period ended, in the social and political sense, in 1848 with the onset of the German Revolution, yet the material produced by Biedermeier artists continued long after 1848.

<sup>2</sup> Georg Himmelheber et al., *Kunst des Biedermeier, 1815-1835. Architektur, Malerei, Plastik, Kunsthandwerk, Musik, Dichtung und Mode* (Munich: Prestel-Verlang, 1987), 20.

<sup>3</sup> Marsha L. Morton, review of *German Romantic Painting*, by William Vaughan, *Art Journal* 42 (1982): 165.

discussion because he was one of the central painters of the Biedermeier era. Moreover, Spitzweg provides a typical case study of the Biedermeier artist and their place in art history. He is an artist whose works are available for viewing in major museums around the world, yet the scholarship that exists on these works is limited and generally unhelpful in understanding their placement within the Biedermeier period and European art more broadly. And so, by studying Spitzweg and the literature that exists about him, it will be possible to formulate an approach that would be applicable to other artists of the period who have been understudied or neglected.

Born in Munich in 1808, Carl Spitzweg was trained formally as a pharmacist from 1825-1828 and became the manager of a pharmacy in the Straubing district of Munich in 1829. He had been an active drawer since the age of 15, but it was not until 1833 when, at the age of 25, he received a large inheritance that enabled him to become financially independent and pursue art full time.<sup>4</sup> Never receiving formal artistic training, Spitzweg nevertheless entered the German art academy in Munich, the Kunstverein, in 1835. He studied there briefly, leaving in 1837 after the wholly negative reception of his painting *Poor Poet*. After this incident, Spitzweg pursued art independently and traveled throughout Europe until 1844 when he was employed by the German non-political satirical newspaper *Fliegende Blätter*.<sup>5</sup>

*Fliegende Blätter* was started in 1844 by the Munich based publishing house Braun & Schneider. In 1855, Ludwig Eichrodt and Adolf Kussmaul began to publish fictional poems in the magazine from the perspective of the “old country schoolmaster Gottlieb Biedermeier,” which ultimately became very popular.<sup>6</sup> Aside their character unwittingly coining the name of the Biedemeier period, Eichrodt and Kussmaul’s lampooning poems displayed little respect for

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<sup>4</sup> Jens Christian Jensen, “Carl Spitzweg,” in *Grove Art Online*, accessed November 13, 2013, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Radim Vondráček, “Biedermeier and its Semantics,” in *Biedermeier: Art and Culture in Central Europe, 1815-1848* (Milan: Skira, 2001), 24.

the prototypical country schoolmaster and, as young liberals, they scorned the acceptance of authority and sense of place that prevailed during the Biedermeier period. As Radim Vondrak points out, many scholars have incorrectly attempted to use the poems of Eichrodt and Kussmaul as evidence for the nature of the Biedermeier period, an attempt flawed inherently by using works of satire as reliable sources of social conditions.<sup>7</sup> Surprising though it may seem, Spitzweg's time spent working for *Fliegende Blätter* is rarely mentioned by scholars and has had little bearing on the prevailing scholarship on his art. Spitzweg's illustrations for a German satirical magazine that continually poked fun at the complacent *petit bourgeois* of German society must certainly be indicative of some element of his character, yet this period of his professional work has been glossed over or ignored altogether. Only Albert Boime has articulated the connection between Spitzweg's time working at *Fliegende Blätter* and the satirical qualities that exist in Spitzweg's works.<sup>8</sup>

Spitzweg's works, as a result of this omission of biographical material, not to mention a lack of structured methodology, have often been viewed superficially. Clouded by both a misunderstanding of the Biedermeier period and a lack of insight into Spitzweg himself, scholars have typically dismissed Spitzweg's works as contentless genre paintings. Gottfried Lindemann states that: "Carl Spitzweg described his world with inimitable charm, not as a critic, or by satirizing it, but as a smiling observer."<sup>9</sup> William Vaughan corroborated this point nine years later when he wrote that "[Spitzweg] seemed incapable of portraying a scene without telling a story," and furthermore, that "there is also a homogeneity about [the characters'] situation that palls after a while."<sup>10</sup> However, these statements only reveal the wide-ranging lack of

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<sup>7</sup> Vondráček, "Biedermeier and its Semantics," 25.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Boime, *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle, 1848-1871* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 499.

<sup>9</sup> Gottfried Lindemann, *History of German Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 159.

<sup>10</sup> William Vaughan, *German Romantic Painting* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1980), 203-204.

understanding of Spitzweg as a figure and the refusal to give anything more than a cursory glance to his paintings. Certainly on the surface they portray humorous scenes that may not have the biting criticism or gritty realism of Spitzweg's contemporaries, such as Honoré Daumier, but they nevertheless present a satirical, occasionally critical, view of Europe during the Biedermeier period and after.

*English Tourists in the Campagna (English Tourists Looking at Ruins)* (Fig. 1) is a clear example of Spitzweg's accuracy in critiquing and poking fun at the European bourgeois. In the painting (19.7 x 15.7 inches) are a group of English tourists and what can be assumed to be an Italian guide who stands holding the coats and jackets of the visitors. He portrays with clarity the central figure, the 'know-it-all' tourist who gestures wildly to the ruins, ostensibly giving a dramatic explanation for their existence, all while glancing back to his two companions as if to ensure that they are paying attention to the tale that he is telling. Thus the figure ignores the value of the ruins in front of him in favor of him honing his skills in dramatic oratory. Meanwhile, the guide leans back yawning, indicating to the viewer that this scene is rather familiar to him. Spitzweg thus offers a critique of both the English and the character of the amateur scholar within a painting that remains lighthearted and apolitical.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, this work was painted when England was rising as both an economic and imperialist force through the strength of industrialization, adding another dimension to Spitzweg's decision to place the British travelers in a foreign land that they seemingly (given the visual evidence) have little respect for, let alone interest in.

This work is also evidence of Spitzweg's internationality and global thought that goes against the prevailing conceptions of Biedermeier as an art style solely concerned with the small

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<sup>11</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art, ed., *German Masters of the Nineteenth Century: Paintings and Drawings from the Federal Republic of Germany* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981), 220.

village full of characters and an emphasis on simply “dwelling,” as Hermann Glaser has characterized it.<sup>12</sup> Spitzweg traveled extensively throughout Europe during his life, spending time in Austria, Switzerland, Dalmatia, and the Adriatic Coast. In 1848 he studied Dutch art at Schloss Weissenstein, Pommersfelden and in 1850-1851 he attended both the International Exhibition in London and the Exposition Universelle in Paris. While in Paris he developed an interest in the work of Eugene Delacroix and the Barbizon school painters. As a result, his paintings began to develop more light and movement in their brushstrokes.<sup>13</sup> This Spitzweg is much different than the one often depicted in scholarship who paints, with charm, the ordinary things around him. The Spitzweg of reality was a conscious, active member of the European artistic community in the nineteenth century. His popularity during his life ensured that his work would have been known, and these biographical insights further develop the notion that Spitzweg’s paintings may have more social commentary within them than many have previously thought.

The current state of scholarship on Spitzweg is simply simply one example of many Biedermeier artists who have been subject to conclusions drawn by scholars that have shown that they have done little contextualized research on the subject. In fact, the first English-language book devoted solely to Spitzweg shows no desire to understand his art in any other context than the purely decorative.<sup>14</sup> This can be attributed to the larger issue of how art historians have studied the Biedermeier period as a whole. As presented at the beginning of this paper, the current state of literature on the Biedermeier period is inconsistent and occasionally of debatable quality. In order to properly assess the present state of affairs within the field and to offer a

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<sup>12</sup> Herman Glaser, ed., *The German Mind of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, (New York: Continuum, 1981), 194-197.

<sup>13</sup> Jens Christian Jensen, “Carl Spitzweg,” in *Grove Art Online*.

<sup>14</sup> Robin Kaplan, review of *Carl Spitzweg*, by Siegfried Wichmann, *Library Journal* 101 (1976): 2474.

means of inquiry that will produce accurate, insightful conclusions it will be first necessary to understand the historiography of the period.

Perhaps the current, largely one-sided debate as to whether or not Biedermeier art is meaningful and valuable to the history of art is not so surprising when the origins of the critiques of Biedermeier art are explored. From the beginning, Biedermeier was an artistic style that looked to the familiar, the sentimental.<sup>15</sup> Radim Vondráček has argued, and I am inclined to agree with him, that this personal and relatable quality of Biedermeier art must be understood to be an essential component of how critics and scholars have studied these artists.<sup>16</sup> Near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, critics began to look back upon Biedermeier artistic production as a sign of the decline of genuine style in Europe. Julius Hirth wrote in 1886 that Biedermeier was a “style of dubious quality, the lack of commitment of which corresponded to the absence of any true art.”<sup>17</sup> Hirth’s disdain abounded, viewing the problem of the Biedermeier as “a chronic tuberculosis of artistic decorum complicated by the atrophying of skill in the decorative arts.”<sup>18</sup> However, appreciators of the Biedermeier did not suffer long, for in 1906 J.A. Lux looked back upon the Biedermeier style favorably, viewing its domestic simplicity and reasonable indulgence as evidence for its attention to life itself.<sup>19</sup> This feeling was reinforced in the aftermath of World War I as growing tensions within Germany and around the world caused resurgence in a sentimental nostalgia that could be found in Biedermeier paintings and furniture.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Vondráček, “Biedermeier and its Semantics,” 24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Julius Hirth, *Das deutsche Zimmer* (Munich and Leipzig, 1886), 46.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> J.A. Lux, “Biedermeier als Erzieher,” *Hohe Warte* 1 (1904-1905): 146.

<sup>20</sup> Vondráček, “Biedermeier and its Semantics,” 29.



It was not until 1923 that Ferdinand Schmidt published the first monograph on the subject of Biedermeier painting.<sup>21</sup> Schmidt was the first to characterize the Biedermeier period as one marked by political suppression that led to an inward-turn by the citizenry, forcing them to abandon their aspirations for liberty in place of tranquility and false autonomy.<sup>22</sup> This oversimplified view has remained for many art historians the primary interpretation of Biedermeier art. While literary historians have long since broken from this view in favor of a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the period, art historians have remained largely neglectful of any advances made in surrounding fields. Wilhelm Dilthey, for example, envisioned Biedermeier as not simply an artistic style in response to political suppression, but as a cultural tide that encompassed not only the arts, but also politics and philosophy.<sup>23</sup> Dilthey argued that this tide was, as summarized by Vondráček, the result of a “series of relationships between the ideals of the bourgeois society of the eighteenth century and the adjustment to the social balance as defined by the State.”<sup>24</sup> Herman Glaser has pointed to the retreat of the citizen into the idyll at the cost of reality as the marker of the Biedermeier period,<sup>25</sup> while Heidi Rosenbaum has seen the period’s concern for family values as evidence for an attempt to preserve social and familial bonds in the face of a changing political and social structure.<sup>26</sup>

As has been shown, while there have been great strides in the past century towards the development of a critical, comprehensive theory of the Biedermeier period, none have yet been undertaken by English-speaking art historians. Accordingly, widespread misunderstanding of the period abounds. Claudia Terenzi states: “Painting can therefore be deemed to represent the least

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Ferdinand Schmidt, *Biedermeier-Malerei* (Munich, 1923), 7-16.

<sup>23</sup> Vondráček, “Biedermeier and its Semantics,” 31.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Glaser, ed., *The German Mind of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, 194-197*.

<sup>26</sup> Vondráček, “Biedermeier and its Semantics,” 31 and Heidi Rosenbaum, *Formen der Familie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982), 251.

significant expression of the Biedermeier style. There were not notable painters and pictures had either a purely decorative function or were intended to illustrate the events of everyday life.”<sup>27</sup>

Such a statement is surprising considering the fact that Spitzweg was both widely acclaimed during his lifetime and, as shown earlier, that his paintings contained some aspect of social and political commentary.<sup>28</sup> Such sweeping generalizations are common in the study of Biedermeier art. For example, Terry Strieter writes that the Biedermeier style was a reflection of the “germination of the economic and social powers of the classes of the center.”<sup>29</sup> However, as Albert Boime has shown, the Napoleonic Wars had destroyed the German economy and that the rise of English industrialization and the influx of cheap, processed goods had undermined local trade.<sup>30</sup>

There are a variety of reasons for the limited and inconsistent scholarship on the art of the Biedermeier period; in this section I seek to understand why this is and what can be done to rectify this situation. As has been shown above, the work that currently exists on the Biedermeier period fluctuates and is greatly limited. From a simple search through the Orbis Cascade Alliance, a 36-library consortium in the Northwestern United States that includes the University of Washington, amongst other libraries, I found that there were approximately 25 book titles devoted solely to Biedermeier art. In comparison, a search for Impressionism yielded some 2,500 titles and another for Rococo showed 672 titles available. This pronounced inequality proves that, at the institutional level of universities and scholars, the Biedermeier period has been marginalized. Many of the most commonly used textbooks in art history courses, including

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<sup>27</sup> Claudia Terenzi, “Biedermeier. A Bourgeois Style in the Restoration Period,” in *Biedermeier: Art and Culture in Central Europe, 1815-1848* (Milan: Skira, 2001), 42.

<sup>28</sup> Jens Christian Jensen, “Carl Spitzweg,” in *Grove Art Online*.

<sup>29</sup> Terry W. Strieter, *Nineteenth-Century European Art: A Topical Dictionary*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1999), 24-25.

<sup>30</sup> Boime, *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle*, 475.

*Janson's History of Art* and *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, do not mention the period at all. Others mention it sparingly. Robert Rosenblum, in *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Art*, writes with a sense of distaste his opinion that the Biedermeier period was simply a watered-down version of Romanticism, stating: "Landscape no less than monarchs and townspeople was subject to this vision of cleanliness, informality, and comfort, and even the Alps, which for earlier painters like Wolf, Turner, and Friedrich had come to evoke Sublimity and overpowering destiny, could be housebroken for middle-class needs."<sup>31</sup> *The Oxford History of Art*, too, glosses over the period, framing it as a smaller, less accessible craft movement that sits in a lower, more provincial position than the Arts and Crafts movement, which began in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>32</sup>

This marginalization is due in large part to a concept I will refer to as the privileging of modernity, a notion engrained within the current scholarship on art history that has resulted in the sidelining of many artistic periods that do not fit into the accepted, linear model of art history. Dawn Ades highlighted this issue in her 1986 chapter of A.L. Rees' book *The New Art History* titled "Reviewing Art History." Though Ades's work is primarily concerned with the treatment of Dada and the Surrealist modes, she makes critical observations about the state of art history that extend far beyond the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She critiques the accepted paradigm that the course of Western art moves inherently towards modernity and towards progression. "The West," she states, "has also tended to believe that... ..it is necessarily in the vanguard of a constant progress ever onward and upward."<sup>33</sup> However, as Ades points out, this is a dangerous stance to take. "The history of art of the last hundred years... ..has been selective and partial, in the interests on the whole of a progressive, developmental model, a linear or 'vertical' line from

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Rosenblum and H.W. Janson, *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Art* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Education, 2005), 176.

<sup>32</sup> "Arts and Crafts Movement," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), accessed March 13, 2014. <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t4/e119>.

<sup>33</sup> Dawn Ades, "Reviewing Art History," in *The New Art History*, ed. A.L. Rees and Frances Borzello (London: Camden Press, 1986): 12.

movement to movement, ‘ism’ to ‘ism,’ in which certain names appear and others do not.”<sup>34</sup> The artists of the Biedermeier period belong to that group of names who do not appear in the history of art. Vondráček, as noted above, has shown that the Biedermeier period tends to look to the familiar. I argue that art historians have confused this looking to the familiar and ever-present as a sign of backwardness. It certainly may seem so at a first glance at the style alone, especially when one compares Biedermeier works to those that have been labeled as ‘Impressionist’ or ‘Realist.’ However, when one truly looks at the content of a work by Spitzweg, such as his *English Tourists in the Campagna*, it is unquestionable that he is both aware of and commenting on the state of the world around him. Perhaps in not so forceful a way as Courbet’s *The Stonebreakers*, but does that mean that the work is less meaningful to the viewer? Does it justify the snide remarks of many art historians over the decades? I do not think so.

There is another factor that has played a part in the exclusion of Biedermeier from many canonical art history texts, and that is Biedermeier’s place within German society in the twentieth century and its supposed connection to the rise of National Socialism. One of the most ardent supporters of this theory is Hermann Glaser, who, in his book *The Cultural Roots of National Socialism*, vilifies the supposed provincialism and romantic sentimentality that has come to be associated with Biedermeier art. “The Biedermeier period,” Glaser states, “was marked by a genuine idealism which, however, in such an idyllic form was ‘uncertain and dangerous.’”<sup>35</sup> However, Glaser’s goal in finding cultural antecedents (the Biedermeier prominently among them) that facilitated the rise of fascism has been largely disproved, as Guy Swanson has observed.<sup>36</sup> Swanson noted that Glaser’s search for these markers on the road to

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Hermann Glaser, *The Cultural Roots of National Socialism*, trans. Ernest A. Menze (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 82.

<sup>36</sup> Guy E. Swanson, review of *The Cultural Roots of National Socialism*, *Comparative Sociology* 8 (1979): 423-424.

National Socialism largely consist of quotes and fragments of analysis ripped from their social and political context and assembled with no consideration to chronology in order to present a convincing case. Moreover, as Swanson notes, “The joys of domesticity or the wonder of young love are not themes peculiar to German society. Nor, unhappily, are an apolitical outlook, anti-intellectualism, and anti-Semitism.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, scholars such as Wolfgang Becker have begun to reveal the cross-cultural exchange that took place in Europe between Biedermeier artists and those of other schools and styles, thus disproving Glaser’s thesis that the Biedermeier period was symptomatic of a singularly German experience in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. In Becker’s *Paris und die Deutsche Malerei* he traces aspects of Spitzweg’s coloring to Eugène Isabey, the French painter, and points out the similarities of his subject matter with French artists of the time.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, in the preface to *The Cultural Roots of National Socialism*, Glaser perhaps pinpoints the central problem that some scholars still have with the Biedermeier period, stating that: “[The author] still believes in the idyll that was the sentimental *Biedermeier* period,” but he goes on to say that “Today it is impossible to accept any of these values without qualms of conscience.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the memory of World War II and the Biedermeier period’s unfortunate and incorrect association with the rise of Nazism still lingers on in the minds of scholars.

Furthermore, it is unfortunate that Carl Spitzweg was, along with Eduard Grützner, a favorite artist of Adolf Hitler.<sup>40</sup> Hitler, who has been reviled as a tasteless *petit bourgeois* representing the height of an undeveloped artistic preference, has undoubtedly cast his long shadow upon the art of the Biedermeier period. Hitler purchased art with voracity during the 1930’s, cementing his position as tastemaker in Germany and bringing to prominence the work

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Alfred Neumeyer, review of *Paris und die Deutsche, 1750-1850*, *The Art Bulletin* 54 (1972): 364.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>40</sup> Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 181.

of Biedermeier artists, such as Spitzweg, whom he admired.<sup>41</sup> As a result, Hitler's view of Biedermeier art seems to have been absorbed by many contemporary art historians and thoroughly rejected upon principle. Hitler wrote in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the national newspaper of the National Socialists, that:

We need experts who know their craft... .Paintings that pose riddles to the audience do not serve the art, no, they harm it. Here, too, we must again find the common, healthy denominator of the taste of the unsophisticated people.<sup>42</sup>

Here Hitler touts the overt narrative of Biedermeier art as the height of sophistication, while vilifying any art (particularly modern) that engages the viewer. This embrace of the Biedermeier aesthetic and rejection of modern art can unquestionably have influenced the work that art historians took up after World War II and perhaps led to the further acceptance of Biedermeier art as a style that was neither valid nor worthy of study.

Despite the Biedermeier's omission from the art historical cannon, art history is gradually moving towards a more inclusive, 'horizontal,' to use Ades's language, understanding of art and its place within society.<sup>43</sup> The work of scholars such as T.J. Clark and Albert Boime has labored to place European art within its social context so as to better understand its meaning from this point of view. Their work, amongst others, has only just begun to unravel the accepted model of art historical study that, as Ades notes, "tends to work towards a unified view of individuals and movements, and to bestow value on them according to the measure of their unity."<sup>44</sup> Biedermeier, residing outside of that unified view of artistic movements is ripe for reassessment by art historians.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> *Völkischer Beobachter*, July 11, 1938.

<sup>43</sup> This 'horizontal' view of art history is less concerned with the progression of art from style to style, but rather with the wide range of artistic production that can be observed at any given period of time. It is concerned with the myriad social, political, cultural, and economic factors that may have influenced the development, production, and understanding of art. For more on this concept, see Ades, "Reviewing Art History."

<sup>44</sup> Ades, "Reviewing Art History," 18.

Boime has written, to my mind, the most compelling study on Biedermeier art thus far. In his 2007 work *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle*, he devotes an entire chapter to “Biedermeier Culture and the Revolutions of 1848.” Boime is one of the first, building upon Wolfgang Becker’s underrepresented conclusions, to truly frame Spitzweg’s art as perceptive satire that was influenced by Daumier, amongst other contemporary French caricaturists.<sup>45</sup> Fritz Novotny recognized this problem in 1960 in his work *Painting and Sculpture in Europe*, yet his contemporaries never confirmed or continued his stance. Novotny describes Spitzweg as a painter “thwarted” by his own subject matter who was never given fair treatment by scholars.<sup>46</sup> Boime takes up this position and looks to Spitzweg’s painterly style and subject matter (typically consisting of lone eccentrics absorbed in some banal activity) as evidence of his commentary, not as evidence of a dull and repetitive style.<sup>47</sup> In this way Boime reevaluates the accepted interpretations of Spitzweg’s work, focusing on the context in which they were made and Spitzweg’s biography as essential to understanding his art and its purpose.

Moreover, he does justice to art of the period as a whole, bringing forward fresh analysis of Biedermeier group portraits and landscapes, whose theatrical settings and flattened, painterly style evoke set decorations. These narrow spaces evoke the self-consciousness of the Biedermeier artist, whose resulting self-censorship represents the success of the Metternich system of government’s censorship of intellectuals.<sup>48</sup> Although he does not pursue this line of inquiry much further, it would have been an apt moment to take up a comparative study with Franz Grillparzer, the most noted Biedermeier playwright. Furthermore, Boime takes up a defense of the Biedermeier period’s interest in the medieval and the fantastical, which has often

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<sup>45</sup> Boime, *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle*, 185.

<sup>46</sup> Fritz Novotny, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe: 1780-1880* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 227-229.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 499.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 476.

been touted as yet another example of Biedermeier's tasteless, fanciful qualities. "In a larger sense," he states, "the medievalizing and fairy tale images of the peasant constituted a symbolic defense against social change and its accompanying psychological dislocation."<sup>49</sup>

Boime, in *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle*, has taken up the larger issue of reinterpreting Biedermeier art that he was unfortunately only able to begin within his work, given its broad scope of material. However, he has laid the foundation for future scholars to properly research and assess works from the Biedermeier period. His close attention to the economic, social, and geopolitical conditions are crucial for understanding the significance of both Spitzweg's work and the work of all Biedermeier artists. I propose that scholars undertake a process similar to Boime's, but one that takes into account the concerns expressed by Dawn Ades. In studying Biedermeier art, it is important not to place it into a category that works in opposition to artistic styles that were contemporary to it, such as Impressionism and Realism, but rather to explore the work and its place in Europe independent from the channeling of 'isms' that comprises much of art historical scholarship.

Scholars of Biedermeier literature have worked for several decades on what art historians are only beginning to grapple with. Kuna Fracke's 1896 work *Social Forces in German Literature*, Eda Sagarra's 1971 book *Tradition and Revolution: German Literature and Society*, and Virgil Nemoianu's *The Taming of Romanticism: European Literature and the Age of Biedermeier* have all worked hard to understand what particular social and political conditions contributed to the development of Biedermeier and its meaning within those conditions. However, as has been shown, art historians have expressed little interest in overcoming their own lack of comprehension of this critical period in German art.

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<sup>49</sup> Boime, *Art in an Age of Civil Struggle*, 495.



The privileging of modernity has marginalized Biedermeier art, and in doing so has ignored a time that was critical to the development of later artistic styles and to the development of European culture. Extending far beyond Germany, the Biedermeier style was taken up by artists from around Europe. By taking up a renewed interest in this period we can not only gain a better appreciation of the style and its content, but it can also help us to better understand artistic production in response to devastating political events, such as the Napoleonic Wars. The Biedermeier period represents a response to war and suffering far different than Dada, Abstract Expressionism, Goya's prints, or David's paintings, but that does not mean it is any less valid.

*Images*

Fig. 1: Carl Spitzweg, *English Tourists in Campagna (English Tourists Looking at Ruins)*. Oil on paper. 19.7 x 15.7 inches, c. 1845. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.

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