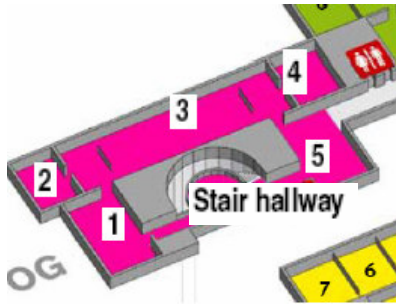


Kunstmuseum Bern

„Damned Guy!“

Karl Stauffer-Bern: Painter, Etcher, Sculptor

August 17 to December 2, 2007



Stair hallway

Karl Stauffer-Bern was born in Trubschachen in Switzerland on September 2, 1857, the eldest of six children. His mother gave him his first drawing lessons which were based mainly on the sketches by Fritz Walthard for an illustrated edition of the works of Jeremias Gotthelf. In the spring of 1866, the boy entered the municipal boys' orphanage in Bern. From there, in 1872, he progressed to the grammar school nearby where Paul Volmar gave drawing lessons. After having to leave the grammar school prematurely, Stauffer entered Volmar's studio. In the summer of 1874 he was sent to Munich as an apprentice to the decorator Wentzel. However, he broke off the apprenticeship in 1875 and worked as a scenery and mural painter to earn money for paints. His *Selbstporträt des Siebzehnjährigen* (cat. 48) was painted during this period. Stauffer's painting is witness to his stupendous technical bravura. It was executed on the spur of the moment without hesitation and probably therefore without preliminary studies. In the spring of 1876, thanks to a stipend from the city of Bern, Stauffer was able to enter the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, which was one of the best art schools in Germany at that time. Alois Erdtelt, fellow student and a friend of Stauffer's, painted his portrait during their time at the academy (cat. 43). He mentioned this in a letter to his parents dated July 28, 1878. Self-confident, Stauffer is captured in the style of portraits by the old masters with his hand raised to the collar of his painter's smock. This portrait appears as a photographic prop in a histrionic stage-setting full of cryptic irony. It shows Stauffer after a night of drinking during which he fell off a chair and injured himself. A grinning Max Klinger stands behind him holding up Erdtelt's portrait of Stauffer (cat. 205).

Room 1

Contrary to his original plans, Stauffer decided not to enter the class of the extremely popular Piloty but chose instead that of Wilhelm von Diez. In contrast to his colleagues, who mainly took the Italians of

the Cinquecento or the French for their models, Diez based his teaching on an earlier period, that of Dürer, Holbein, Rembrandt and Brouwer. Stauffer thus chose the school which favoured the precise observation and reproduction of nature in finely balanced colour over the opulent pathos of historical painting. Diez's studio was a centre for the progressive painters. After Diez fell ill Ludwig Löfftz, one of his former students, not only took over the class but continued with the tradition. Löfftz was an extraordinarily subtle colourist. The German and Dutch schools of the 16th and 17th centuries and these two teachers were to exert a great influence on Stauffer. He had painted a number of copies freely based on old masters that were remarkable due to their striking originality. In his letters he often mentioned copies based on Holbein, Rubens or van Dyck (*Beweinung Christi*, cat. 45). Luise Stauffer-Schärer, his mother, described the attitude of the Bern public to Stauffer's copies thus: "It is only with great difficulty that some copies based on van Dyck and Velazquez from the Munich Pinakothek (...) were permitted to be exhibited in the art museum in Bern." And Stauffer enthused: "There is a portrait by Velazquez that I am going to start copying tomorrow, one of the great masterpieces of portrait painting. I think it portrays a Spanish grandee, at any rate a terribly passionate person, an old grey-head with full lips. (...) Professor Raab would like to get the copy off me, oho!" (compare *Kopie nach Velazquez: Don Juan Mateos*, cat. 46). However, Stauffer followed international art exhibitions in Munich as well as contemporary trends with attention. He regularly contributed to rotating exhibitions in Switzerland. In January of 1880 Stauffer mentioned his decision to devote himself "in the main to portrait painting" and sent works to the exhibitions that were to pave his way in this direction. In this year his stipend was not renewed and the three paintings sent to the rotating exhibition met with rejection, notably the *Porträt eines Mannes mit rötlichem Bart* (cat. 59). The picture does not show someone in a pose, establishing eye contact with the viewer, but a person whom the artist has for a moment detached from the anonymity of the mass. Stauffer's style was criticized as too realistic, and he was unable to take part in the composition class in Munich. In 1880 he accepted the invitation of his friend Hermann Katsch to move into a free studio and lodgings in Berlin. On the journey he carried out some commissions for portraits in Dresden which a customer in Munich had arranged for him (*Bildnis Gräfin Smirnoff*, cat. 56). In Berlin, Stauffer introduced himself to the historical painter and academy director Anton von Werner who took him into his studio and arranged numerous commissions for him. In 1880 Stauffer won the small gold medal at the international art exhibition with his *Porträt des Bildhauers Max Klein* (cat. 60, room 3). The painter shows Klein from the waist up, wearing a black coat and leaning on his hand with his head thrown slightly back in the pose of one of

Velazquez's rulers. The portrait and the award made him famous overnight, the commissions increased and his prices went up. The free use of colour was a problem for Stauffer of which he was very conscious. The yardstick by which he measured himself was photography; this was to be surpassed by art. Stauffer's standards of achieving the greatest possible exactitude of likeness and of still fulfilling a customer's wishes made things very difficult for him - especially in the case of children's portraits. (*Mädchenporträt*, cat. 65, *Kinderporträt Anton Ebers*, cat. 66, *Brustbild eines Mädchens*, cat. 67, *Knabenporträt, Erich Benjamin*, cat. 68.) He often complained about little exuberant rascals who wouldn't sit still, which is why he used photographs as an aid: "During this time I hope to be able to finish the Girl from Seelig who I am now having photographed as she is such a bad sitter". Stauffer's presence in the right salons and his increasing commissions helped raise his standard of living as well as continually expanding his network of connections in Germany and Switzerland: "On Wednesday I am invited to dine with the Roths to meet the minister Oelbrück and several other diplomats." (cf. *Minister Arnold Roth, schweizerischer Gesandter in Berlin*, cat. 64, Stair Hallway).

Rooms 2 and 4 Graphic works

In 1893, Stauffer attempted to free himself from the fixation on portrait sitters who were cramping his artistic style and taking up his time socially. Peter Halm, a good friend from the time in the Munich academy and an excellent engraver, travelled to Berlin for several weeks. Halm introduced Stauffer to the technique of etching and after Halm's departure, he continued to teach himself. He produced many masterly etchings, particularly self-portraits (*erstes, zweites, drittes, viertes und fünftes Selbstporträt*, cat. 7, cat. 9-12), portraits of the family (*Mutter und Schwester*, cat. 124, *Porträt Luise Stauffer, geb. Schärer*, cat. 125, *Porträt Schwester Sophie*, cat. 126, *Porträt Marie Stauffer*, cat. 127) and of friends (cf. etchings of Peter Halm, Eva Dohm, Ludwig Kühn) and also three nudes (*Stehender weiblicher Akt*, cat. 79, *Liegender weiblicher Akt*, cat. 80, *Männlicher Akt*, cat. 83 and 84). Various state proofs, comparative studies and photographs that Stauffer made himself are proof that etching was a broad experimental field for him. It is particularly in the drawings that we see what drove Stauffer and what he was striving for. In their spontaneous immediacy they give us important insight into his creative process: they were a wide experimental field where he did not have to consider the client, where a free choice of subject was possible, where absolute concentration and focussing on what was important to himself was legitimate. It was only the regular drilling of his eye that led him to the formal penetration of the natural truth of an object: "That's the joke, that one trains one's eye to notice the smallest nicety in nature and to copy it." We can comprehend this strategy of concentration in the striving for the penetration of reality in the drawings and etchings. Stauffer produced strikingly drawn and etched self-portraits (*Studienblatt mit vier Köpfen und Selbstbildnis*, cat. 2, *Weiblicher Akt, Oberkörper liegend mit Selbstporträt*, cat. 3, *Skizzenblatt mit drei Köpfen, Selbstbildnis mit Zwicker*, cat. 4, *Selbstporträt mit Beinskizzen*, cat. 5, *Selbstporträt*, cat. 6, *Selbstporträt*, cat. 8) and female nudes of undisguised intimacy (*Weiblicher Akt, Vollfigur, Rückenlage*, cat. 26, *Weiblicher Akt, Vollfigur, Rückenlage*, cat. 27, *Weibliches Modell, Oberkörper, liegend*, cat. 69, *Schlafende junge Frau von hinten und en face*, cat. 78). In the environs of Munich and Berlin many drawings and watercolours of landscapes were created of great freshness and

spontaneity (*Landschaft bei Bukow*, cat. 178, *Landschaft bei Bukow*, cat. 179, *Landschaft bei Potsdam*, cat. 186, *Glinike*, cat. 187). How subtly he was able to express himself in the concentration of form and modelling is shown in the direct virtuosity of his works.

Room 3

Nudes:

In addition to portraiture, Stauffer was intensely occupied with the nude as a topic. It runs like a *leitmotif* in all techniques through all his work, culminating in sculpture. The woman as the sensual seductress, the man as the martyr or Apollonian youth are the protagonists of his nude pictures. Towards the end of his training, at the academy exhibition, Stauffer presented an old man praying and the *sitzenden weiblichen Akt* (cat. 73). The contrast could not be greater: old age and young womanhood, Job and Susanna bathing. He seemed to be satisfied with the female nude: "For some days now I have been finished with my nude (...) you will like it, the effect is plastic and truthful." The insistent and painterly perfection that Stauffer strove for, visible in the vanitas still-life (cat. 53) made him an acclaimed portrait painter in Berlin. In the *Liegenden männlichen Akt* (cat. 51) from 1879, the reference to Christ's Grave by Holbein is obvious. However, here he did not copy the original but by means of an idiosyncratic play of light created a naturalistic image devoid of any sacred content. The physical presence of this body assails the viewer with an inescapable immediacy. From 1883, Stauffer attempted a new artistic approach. Not only in etchings, but also in large uncommissioned painting projects he sought a path to escape from portrait painting and to further develop his art. The unusually large-format *Liegende Frauenakt* (cat. 75), that his girlfriend Wally Münche posed for, was created at the same time as the portrait of Wally wearing a black dress and reading (*Damenbildnis*, cat. 77a). Stauffer wrote to his sister Sophie, "(...) now I'm painting two studies that are promising to be much better; one is of a nude female figure stretched out on an oriental carpet; the other is of a young woman reading, clothed in black and sitting on a red fauteuil. They are not pictures but studies in colour and I'm not sure what is more difficult to paint - the luminous flesh of a beautiful body or the black dress against a dark background." In 1884 he conceived of the plan of painting a large picture without a commission and began studies for the project "Jesus with Simon". The painting never progressed further than some sketches and studies in oil. Three years later Stauffer painted the life-size *Gekreuzigten* (cat. 152) according to his own standards, as he wrote in a letter to Lydia Welti-Escher who was later to become his patroness: "In order to finally show my true colours at this summer exhibition I have started a life-size crucifixion and am painting myself half to death on it. (...) With this work, if it is successful, (...) I hope to make my striving towards learning this craft as thoroughly as possible clear to my colleagues and the public." Even more relentlessly than in *liegenden männlichen Akt*, the sacred content has been expelled from *Gekreuzigten*. Stauffer is not interested in evoking devoutness, he wants to prove that he is a master painter. He takes naturalism to its extremes by rendering the crucifixion recognizable as a staged scene by using a model and thus making that the actual topic. The *Gekreuzigten* received a positive response at the Berlin academy exhibition in 1887.

Commissioned portraits: At the International Art Exhibition in 1881, Stauffer exhibited *Porträt des Bildhauers Max Klein* (cat. 60) in addition to *Buchenwald von Grosshesselohe* (cat. 52, Raum 5) and the “*grauhaarigen Bärenwirt*”. Stauffer’s estimation of Klein, who was an up-and-coming artist in Berlin, was accurate: “*Klein has a very expressive head and is very well-known.*” The portrait earned him the small gold medal (cat. 206, glass cabinet in the Stair Hallway) and made him famous overnight. In the media they praised the unostentatious objectivity in colouring and composition paired with the simultaneous strong expression of the painting. He had hit upon the pragmatic preference of a wealthy society that felt itself most ably represented by Stauffer’s intense naturalism. Those who commissioned Stauffer were almost all representatives of the grand bourgeois society in Berlin, many from Jewish families. In his portraits he attempted to achieve the greatest possible likeness, he worked very hard at this and often with great doggedness. However, Stauffer was not striving for a photographically reflective image, instead he wanted to capture the essence of a personality. Stauffer often wrote in his letters that his ambition, taste, sympathies and antipathies often lent him wings or inhibited him and that the work often became a long and painful process for painter and model alike. Referring to the theatrical poet Adolf L’Arronge he wrote contemptuously: “*He doesn’t want to sit for me and I will have to make photographs of him (...) I don’t think much of him as a poet. He didn’t know Gottfried Keller and Meyer. And still I must paint him, and that well, as he is very well-known in the town.*” (*Porträt des Theaterdichters und Theaterdirektors Adolf L’Arronge*, cat. 63). In *Porträt des Ferdinand Graf Harrach* (cat. 61), Stauffer was complying with the wishes of those he portrayed who desired to have their aristocratic dress and surroundings also portrayed. The detailed precision of the clothing and the ambience compete with the face of the sitter without adding surplus psychological value. On the other hand, he expressed himself with enthusiasm with regard to personalities whose essence and physiognomy stimulated him: “*I will now paint another such a head à la Klein (...), the builder Tietz, a wonderfully fine head to paint. Not beautiful but amazingly interesting. I will paint him for nothing of course*” (*Porträt Baumeister Oskar Tietz*, cat. 62).

Family: For all “private” portraits, particularly for those of members of his family, the unassuming *Selbstbildnis des Siebzehnjährigen* (cat. 48) remained the seminal archetype. Here, programmatically, he restricted himself to the bust format, abjured elaborate clothing and placed the sitter in front of a neutral background. Stauffer worked on his *Porträt der Schwester Sophie* (cat. 123) for over a year. With the classic oval format, he conformed to contemporary portrait photography and placed his sitter without decorative accessories in front of a neutral background. Working without the pressure of a commission, with a model of his own choosing, he could permit himself all the creative license he needed. His sister was not posing for a painter. Rather, he had captured her in a moment of being completely centred-within-herself. Conspicuous are the neutral, light background, the luminosity of the colour and the plastic modelling of the picture. In 1885, the anniversary of their father’s death, in a creative dynamic impulse, he produced three portraits of his mother and sisters, all in mourning: the dignified and grave *Porträt Marie Stauffer* (cat. 121) in the style of Albert Ankers, the unfinished *Porträt der Schwester Sophie in Schwarz* (cat. 122), posthumously cut to an oval shape, as well as the striking *Porträt der Mutter des Künstlers*, Luise Stauffer-Schärer (cat. 120). All were also used as paradigms for engravings.

The Zurich Circle: Stauffer’s *Bildnis Gottfried Keller* (cat. 133) is the synthesis of a sketchily spontaneous painterly approach and photographic accuracy, both of which it surpasses. The head of the poet has been rendered with persuasive precision. The face has an almost frighteningly haptic quality, the bust on the other hand is merely dashed off in broad, virtuoso brushstrokes. Stauffer analyses and gives unmitigated expression to life-weariness and resignation through the collision of naturalistic and sketchily anti-naturalistic imagery. In contrast, the *Bildnis Lydia Welti-Escher* (cat. 135) is painting of the subtle salon type. Stauffer painted the “Princess” of Zurich, the wealthiest Swiss woman of her time, in white on white thereby posing himself a difficult colouristic task that he dubbed “the white problem”. The question of the *toilette* and costume had been discussed exhaustively in letters. Frau Welt wanted to be painted in a red velvet dress complete with train, which Stauffer attempted diplomatically to avert, although a study in the red dress was actually made (*Bildnis Lydia Welti-Escher im roten Kleid*, cat. 134): “*Well, the dress, a main point. (...) I can only offer the suggestion of giving a calm effect. Lace on its own is not effective in a picture, at the most for heightening the shine of the silk or atlas; crushed velvet can also be good, but I think that lace and pearls always have the best effect. With regard to the dressing of the hair, I think leaving the hair loose would be best, with a Belvoirrose.*” In a later letter he broached the subject again “*Red silk velvet or velvet with hat and train – very dashing! (...) If I am preoccupied with white atlas at the moment it is only because I have not yet had the honour of seeing you in a Saskia costume.*” Finally Stauffer was able to win his client over. This was not a portrait in which the subject demonstrated her position and her status in society but rather the very personal protocol of a relationship.

State commission: On September 22, 1886, Stauffer received the state commission to paint the portrait of the writer *Gustav Freytag* for the National Gallery in Berlin (cat. 32, 109, 110). He journeyed to Siebleben where the poet lived and where, during the carrying out of the commission, numerous photographs and etchings were produced. Stauffer’s initial enthusiasm for a rapid execution soon gave way to an arduous struggle for a valid characterization as in addition to the cramped conditions in the workroom, difficulties arose owing to the meagre lighting of late autumn. Stauffer finally put an end to the struggle and began again from the beginning, as Freytag wrote: “*On the last day he took up work again but stopped after a short time. He looked at the picture for a moment, dipped his brush in white paint and suddenly splashed a great, obliterative loop across the whole picture. ‘So’, he said gravely, ‘this is no good, I’ll paint it again.’*”

Sculpture: The numerous sketches for *Adoranten* (cat. 159) illustrate a tentative approach to the correct form and the difficulties that Stauffer mentioned in connection with the new technique. “*Battalion, sculpture is difficult, the damned thing is round, and when you’ve done one side and think ‘aha’, then from the other side it is bound to be ghastly.*” The drawings demonstrate that the attitude of the youth’s arms and hands especially posed an insoluble problem that Stauffer finally put a violent end to by knocking off the arms of the figure above the elbows. Earlier, finely modelled body portraits were significantly different from the charcoal studies for the sculpture projects. What both groups of drawings have in common is the visual appropriation of the model from varying, sometimes only subtly shifted, perspectives which leads to the conclusion of a stereometric procedure. Stauffer felt himself drawn to sculpture and

in 1888 went to Rome to learn the new technique. The Welte-Eschers promised to pay his way, in return, all works produced in Italy were to enter into their possession. Full of enthusiasm for the antique works of art, he began auto-didactically with work on the **Adoranten** (cat. 157-159). Further sculpture projects can only be ascertained from drawings and from correspondence, such as a female figure putting up her hair or a spear thrower. In the autumn of 1889, Stauffer returned to Zurich where, commissioned by his patrons, he began with the redecoration of the villa park. At the instigation of Adolf Hildebrand, Stauffer took part in the competition for the **Bubenbergs-Denkmal** (cat. 160. Stair Hallway). The competition had been announced on July 7, 1890, with a deadline for submission being December 1 of the same year. Stauffer's 55cm high plaster model was one of twenty-one submitted designs, including designs from such renowned sculptors as Rodolfo von Niederhäusern, Alfred Lanz and Richard Kissling. Stauffer died on January 24, 1891. The first prize was won by Max Leu, after the date for submission had been extended in November until August 1, 1891. On May 31, 1958, on the initiative of the Gottfried Keller Foundation, the monument was dedicated in the Schlosspark in Spiez. It was enlarged to the measurements Stauffer had specified and cast in bronze. In a letter to Emmy Vogt-Hildebrand, Adolf Hildebrand's sister, Stauffer had mentioned that it would be made to make the figure 3.50 metres tall and said that 2 metres was the correct height. Zürcher, who had published the family's letters, suggested in 1914 that the model should be enlarged to this size and erected in the main street of Murten. He made no bones of his opinion of the judges' decision on the competition: "Leu's work in Bern, chosen over Stauffer's, is a respectable piece of work, but in contrast to Stauffer's design, disregarded in the competition, it does make quite a showy impression."

Room 5

In 1886, Stauffer was at the height of his painting skill. The portraits of Gottfried Keller and Lydia Welte-Escher brought in further commissions. In 1887, the **Bildnis Bundesrat Emil Welte** (cat. 144 and 145) and that of his wife **Karolina Welte-Gross** (cat. 128) were

produced. Stauffer had no way of knowing that Welte, Lydia Welte-Escher's father-in-law, was later to misuse his powerful position to have Stauffer put in prison in Italy by having false allegations made against him. Stauffer's forceful portrait of the leading politician shows, much more markedly than do the preliminary studies, a decisive, powerful man with arms crossed on his breast keeping the viewer at a respectful distance.

The tall-format **Im Buchenwald von Grosshesselohe** (cat. 52) from 1879 takes an almost singular position among the other works as Stauffer painted very few other landscapes. In spite of its impressive size, the artist spoke of it as a study. The study makes no secret of the fact that Stauffer knew Courbet, Zünd and Daubigny as well as the Ecole de Barbizon. Stauffer followed a recipe. The fact that the picture was an outstanding failure is clearly illustrated by the comparison with Hodler's slightly larger **Waldinneres bei Frontenex** which earned him the first prize in the Calame competition in 1874. Hodler also had recourse to Courbet, but his processing of natural impressions was more direct than Stauffer's. Hodler studied the objects and analyzed the effects of light. Stauffer, on the other hand, painted the landscape as an indoor space and laid the lighter sections in a spatial reversal over the green of the leafy thickets.

Stauffer's good network of connections did not help him after the tragedy in Italy. He had Adolf Hildebrand's sister, Emmy Vogt-Hildebrand, to thank for his last portrait commissions in Switzerland (**Bildnis Frau Dr. Emmy Vogt-Hildebrand**, cat. 129). His commission for the portraits of the married couple Platel also came through her. After he had finished the **Herrenporträt Edmond Jean Platel** (cat. 130) and had just started on that of his wife, Stauffer died. His friend, Julius Luz finally finished the commission.

Brigitta Vogler-Zimmerli, Kuratorin

Accompanying programme (in German)

Public tours: Every Tuesday, 7pm

Introduction for teachers: Tuesday, August 21, 6pm; and Wednesday, August 22, 2pm

Lecture by Prof. Dr. Bernhard von Arx on his book "Karl Stauffer and Lydia Welte-Escher. Chronik eines Skandals"
Tuesday, August 21, August, 8pm

Lust auf Kunst on Saturday afternoon:
Karl Stauffer-Bern und das „janusköpfige Jahrhundert“
Saturday, August 25, 2 to 3.30pm

Lecture by Konrad Tobler: "Karl Stauffer-Bern – zwischen Ferdinand Hodler und Adolf Wölfli"
Tuesday, October 23, 8pm

Staged readings from Herbert Meier's "Stauffer-Bern – Ein Stück". With members of the Schauspielensembles des Stadttheater Bern: In November, dates to be confirmed.

Film in the museum's cinema "Effie Briest" by Rainer Werner Fassbinder
Sunday, September 30, 4pm
Tuesday, October 2, 8pm
Tuesday, October 9, 8pm

Updated information at: www.kunstmuseumbern.ch

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