





THE GARDEN IN WANNSEE LOOKING NORTHEAST 1917

MAX LIEBERMANN

oil on canvas	Provenance
1917	Paul Cassirer, Berlin
73.5 x 92 cm	(acc. to cat.rais. possibly Franz Oppenheim, Berlin)
28 7/8 x 36 1/4 in.	Franz Resch, Gauting/Munich
signed and dated lower right	Galerie Gunzenhauser, Munich
	Private collection, Switzerland (1964)
Eberle 1917/8	Private collection

Exhibited

Palais de Beaulieu, Lausanne 1964. Exposition National Suisse Lausanne,
Chefs d'Oeuvre des Collections Suisses. No. 32 ill. (label)

Literature

Eberle, Matthias. Max Liebermann, Werkverzeichnis der Gemälde und Ölstudien. Vol. II 1900-1935.
Munich 1995. No. 1917/8, p. 933.



THE GARDEN IN WANNSEE LOOKING NORTHEAST 1917

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“A well-painted turnip is as good as a well-painted Madonna.”

Max Liebermann

In 1909, when Max Liebermann purchased a large lakefront property in the Alsen villa colony on Wannsee, where he had a country house – or, as he called it, his villa or mansion¹ – built in the neo-classical style by the architect Paul Baumgarten until 1910, the garden played an important role from the outset of the project. For the design of the garden, Liebermann relied heavily on his friend Alfred Lichtwark, the first director of the Hamburger Kunsthalle and, significantly, a proponent of and writer on a reform movement for modern gardening. The house and garden were used for different purposes for many years after the war, but since 2006 the house has been a museum, and the garden has been largely restored to its original state, so that the artist’s Wannsee residence can now be experienced as it was depicted in his paintings.² On the long property, the villa roughly divides the upper third facing the street from the lower two-thirds facing the lake. In the upper, smaller part, a gardener’s shed was also built, and a vegetable garden was created. On the lake side is a terrace adjoining the villa, followed by a large lawn flanked by hedges and rose gardens, a birch grove, flowerbeds, shrubs, and groups of trees.

Max Liebermann himself had clear ideas about the entire property, as he wrote to his architect: “If I stand here on the shore, I want to be able to see through the house to the part of the garden that lies

behind it. In front of the house, there should be a simple meadow so that I can see the lake unobstructed from the rooms. And to the right and left of the lawn, I want straight paths. That’s the most important thing. Something else. The room located on the axis should be the dining room. So, now you can build.”³

The client’s specifications were all fulfilled, and in 1910 the Liebermann family was able to move into the house on Wannsee. In the following twenty-five years until Liebermann’s death, he created some 200 paintings that predominantly show the garden – not counting the drawings, pastels, and prints. Astonishingly, there are no real views of the house itself: it always appears only as a backdrop, or as a marginal element in the picture. Liebermann only incorporates parts of the architecture of the house and sometimes also the gardener’s shed into his compositions. Even the interior is only rarely shown, and only in the mid-1920s, when the painter used the hall for a family portrait. His studio, which Liebermann had set up on the first floor of the house, only appears in a few pictures from 1932 onward. This is the least surprising aspect, because in his garden on Wannsee Liebermann worked almost exclusively in the open air, at nature’s doorstep: the main subject, which he continually reinterpreted, was almost exclusively the garden.

In his painting of the vegetable garden looking to the northeast, Liebermann shows a partial view from the garden patch in the front of the property

¹ Hansen, Dorothee, in: Max Liebermann: Der deutsche Impressionist, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Bremen, Munich, 1995, p. 208.

² On the restoration of the original garden, cf. Braun, Günter and Waltraud (eds.): Max Liebermanns Garten am Wannsee und seine wechselvolle Geschichte, Berlin, 2008.

³ Jedlicka, Gotthard: Begegnungen mit Künstlern der Gegenwart, Zurich, 1945, p. 29.





Max Liebermann
The Studio in Wannsee
 c. 1932

to the front of the house with the two ionic columns supporting a loggia. Some French windows are visible, with the hallway and the cloakroom behind them on the ground floor. The window visible on the upper floor through the foliage belongs to Liebermann's studio. Once again, the house only plays a role as a theatre wall, as a concluding element in the background. The lead role is played by the color composition of the flowers, shrubs, and trees of the garden. The upper edge of the picture is taken up by the green band of the tall hedge of linden trees. Below it, in front of the house, we see the lawns with the rounded boxwoods, and finally, extending up to the foreground of the picture, on both sides of the garden path that cuts through the picture diagonally, the flowerbeds with their lush yellow, white, and red blooming vegetation. The fact that it is a vegetable garden is only recognizable from the lower right corner of the picture, in which Liebermann apparently depicted a bed of cabbage or lettuce. From the dark green of the leaves and the magnificent blossoming flowers, we can tell that the picture was painted in the summer. Nothing indicates that the painting was created during the penultimate year of the war, and that large parts of the lawns were repurposed as cabbage fields to feed the family. Liebermann also captured

this process in pictures, so that we can follow how the cabbage takes over the garden and is then beaten back by the flowers. Even in the idyll of this Wannsee Arcadia, the difficult circumstances of the times are visible.

But this is not the subject of Liebermann's paintings. This painting is a particularly beautiful example of his depiction of perspective among the large group of Wannsee paintings. His choice of framing is often unusual, and many of his Wannsee paintings show a dynamic view seen from the diagonal. Here Liebermann composes a dominating diagonal through the garden path, which follows the almost gesturally painted flowerbeds and which is bordered by the house wall and especially the row of linden trees. The viewer's position appears slightly elevated, so that the angled view further alters and accentuates the perspective. Moreover, in the swirl of colours of the plants and flowers, which are by no means depicted naturalistically, the immediacy of outdoor painting becomes palpable, through which Liebermann seeks to achieve a distribution of colour and mass that does not primarily aim to capture the momentary visible impression, but the inner essence of this phenomenon of colour, masses, light, and movement.



Max Liebermann's villa (street side) on Wannsee, 2014

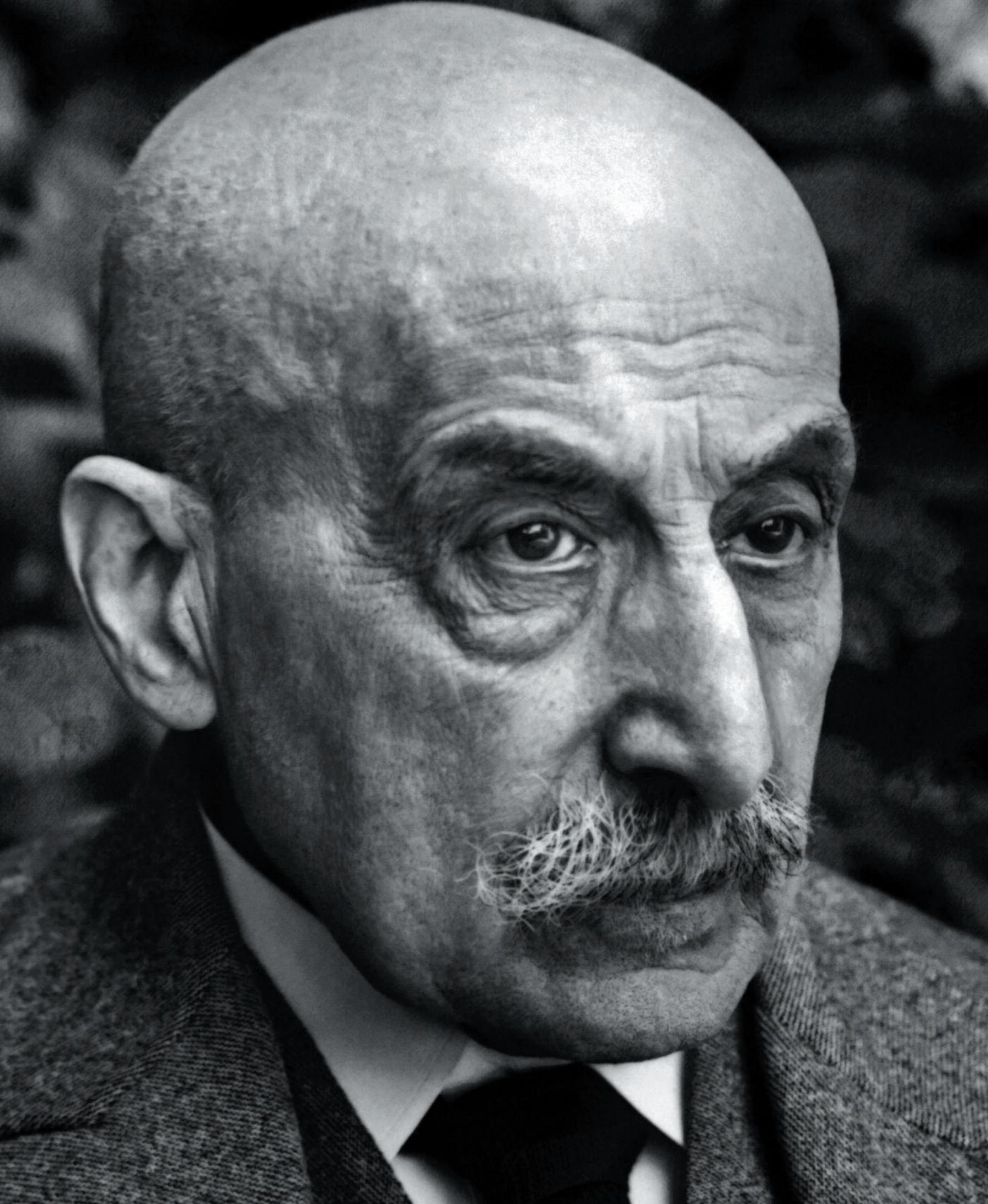
Liebermann is thus part of the tradition of French Impressionists, but clearly sets himself apart from them through his different approach to painting – and in particular through his artistic aims. This French style of outdoor painting is certainly close to his own, and the subjects and formal aspects are analogous to Monet's pictures from his garden in Giverny and especially the famous water lilies; after all, Monet also created a visible autonomy of color through abstraction (and practically at the same time as Liebermann's garden pictures). However, despite these artistic similarities, Liebermann's understanding of the essence of painting is different. In this context, it is telling that Liebermann acquired Claude Monet's 1874 painting *Manet Painting in Monet's Garden in Argenteuil* in 1904 and later hung it in his Wannsee villa. After all, Manet's famous *Bunch of Asparagus* is figuratively nothing more than the well-painted turnip that Liebermann mentioned. For Liebermann, the "well-painted" is a synthesis of the technical and artisanal capturing of the phenomenon of nature and its depiction formed by the artist's mental penetration. Liebermann calls this fundamental artistic process "imagination": "For all art is based on nature, and everything that endures in it is nature. Not just the nature surrounding the artist, but above all his own nature. How he, the artist, looks at the

world, with his inner and outer senses – this is what I call his imagination – the shaping of his imagination is his art."⁴ Liebermann's concept of imagination is a mental construction that creates and captures artistic experience, a unity of perception, sensation (not same thing), and idea in the moment of painting through perfection of technique.⁵

Seen from this perspective, Liebermann's painting of his kitchen garden in Wannsee looking toward the northeast is not only a beautiful, summery, colourful garden picture full of light and lightness. Above all, it is a brilliant painterly realization of his idea of art.

⁴ Liebermann, Max: *Die Phantasie in der Malerei*, Berlin, 1916, 1922, p. 7f.

⁵ On Liebermann's art-theoretical views, cf. Melcher, Ralph: 'Wissen Sie, ich habe Sie ähnlicher gemalt, als Sie sind.' Max Liebermanns Kunsttheorie zwischen Idealismus und Naturalismus, in: idem (ed.), *Max Liebermann: Zeichnen heißt weglassen: Arbeiten auf Papier*, Ostfildern, 2004, p. 32-35.



MAX LIEBERMANN

1847 – BERLIN – 1935

THE YEAR 1917

The plot of land by the Wannsee, acquired in 1909, with the house built by Liebermann until 1910, and the both lovingly and expertly planted garden, were to develop into an oasis of retreat for Max Liebermann and his family – the outbreak of war in 1914 meant that this happened to an extent far more than had originally been conceived. In 1917, the course of the war had hardly reached Berlin and Liebermann himself. Nevertheless the garden and, most of all, the cabbage fields dug even on the ornamental lawn, were required for self-sufficiency. Besides the garden pictures painted here, Liebermann continued to paint upper class portraits of Wilhelmine society, which was already staring into the abyss – a disconcerting contrast, not only between the reality of the world war and the idyll in the house by the Wannsee, but also between the way Prussian society portrayed itself and its actual situation.

In Liebermann's private life, his granddaughter Marta, born in 1917, enriched the family life and, playing in the garden by the Wannsee, became one of the artist's favourite subjects.

In the same year, Max Liebermann himself celebrated his 70th birthday and the Academy of Arts marked the occasion by organizing his greatest solo exhibition to date, showing almost 200 works. In addition, the Kaiser awarded him the Order of the Red Eagle, an honour for the artist and a mark of esteem that continued after the end of the war. In 1918, the National Gallery established a Liebermann Hall, and in 1920, Max Liebermann was unanimously elected as President of the Prussian Academy of Arts – thus closing the circle for this former leader of the Secession and opponent of this very academy.

Max Liebermann,
1932