

COLNAGHI



WILHELM LEIBL
(Cologne 1844-1900 Würzburg)

STUDY OF A SKULL

oil on canvas
34.4 x 31.4 cm

Provenance

Johann Sperl (1840-1914), Munich;
Karl Zitzmann (1871-1956);
His sale, Hugo Helbing, Frankfurt am Main, 16 November 1926, lot 12 [repr. table 5];
With Galerie Heinemann, Munich, with the Gallery's labels on the back, until at least 10 May 1929;
Georg Schäfer (1896-1975) Schweinfurt (with Inventory number 0123 on the back);
Private collection, southern Germany.

Literature

Emil Waldmann, *Wilhelm Leibl. Eine Darstellung seiner Kunst. Gesamtverzeichnis seiner Gemälde, 2.* Berlin, 1930, Cat. no. 81.

Exhibited:

Wilhelm Leibl. Gemälde, Zeichnungen, Radierungen (Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne, and Galerie Matthiesen, Berlin, Cologne-Berlin: 1929), p. 43, Cat. no. 29a.

Vor hundert Jahren: Dänemark und Deutschland 1846-1900. Gegner und Nachbarn. (Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Kunstmuseum Århus, Kunsthalle zu Kiel, Orangerie Schloss Charlottenburg, Berlin, 1981). p. 372, cat. no. 144 D.

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This small picture is one of three studies with skulls that Wilhelm Leibl painted towards the end of his time at the academy – a version dated 1868 can be found in the Karlsruhe Kunsthalle (Fig. 1).

While other artists resorted to more subtle symbols of transience, Leibl, fully committed to realism, simply confronts us with a human skull. The white shroud has been lifted and, sharply illuminated, reveals a gruesomely grinning skull in three-quarter view. The human skull, perhaps an exhibit in an anatomical display collection, rests on a plinth wrapped in black fabric, which gives it back its upright posture in life, as if it were still fused to the torso via the cervical vertebrae. At the same time, this gives the depiction a portrait-like quality, creating the impression of a direct counterpart, which distinguishes this skull from the skulls in seventeenth-century *vanitas* still lifes, which are seen as mere objects or remains.

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Fig, 1. Wilhelm Leibl. *Skull with a Shroud*. Oil on canvas, 1868. Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle.