

Artists and Painters in the ‘German House’ at Thebes, 1905–15

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On 24 December 1904, a small group of men and women of different nationalities gathered in a newly built house in Egypt for a very special occasion.

The party had been organised by the founder and builder of the ‘German House’ in Thebes, namely the German archaeologist and architect Ludwig Borchardt, and his wife Mimi. Among the participants of this illustrious event were the British archaeologist and Egyptologist Edward Russell Ayrton, the British Chief-Inspector of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, James Edward Quibell, and his wife Annie, the German Egyptologist Kurt Sethe, the Egyptian agent of the German Consulate General in Luxor, Mohareb Todrous, Ludwig Borchardt’s assistant, Georg Möller, and the German representative of (Thomas) Cook’s Nile Service, Leo Pfahl.

The meeting took place on Christmas Eve to celebrate the inauguration of a rather unique building, which had been constructed, so it seemed, in the middle of nowhere on the edge of the desert in a remote area of southern Upper Egypt and opposite the modern city of Luxor. At the same occasion, a guestbook specifically designed and handmade for the purpose was also presented (Fig. 11.1). Naturally, this building has proven to have an extremely interesting background and prehistory.¹

At the end of the 19th century, Egyptological circles in Germany suggested a permanent presence for German Egyptology in Egypt that did not exist at the time. Of course, there had been the famous expedition to Egypt and Nubia headed by Richard Carl Lepsius in 1842–44, whose publications are still an invaluable source of information and inspiration. But unlike the French Egyptologists who had created and directed the Egyptian Antiquities Organisation since 1859, and unlike the British archaeologists and Egyptologists who conducted vast operations throughout the country, a German presence was almost non-existent at the end of the 19th century.

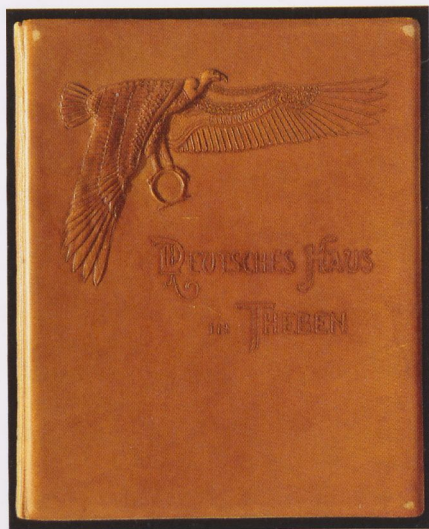


Figure 11.1: The Guestbook of the 'German House' 1904. © German Archaeological Institute, Cairo.

After a year-long debate within the field of German Egyptology – especially within the so-called Berlin School – the imperial government of Germany was finally convinced that a German Egyptological presence in Egypt was necessary. Needless to say, many institutions, authorities and individuals became involved in the process.

On a political level, the two main protagonists were the German Emperor, Wilhelm II, and the Egyptian viceroy, Abbas Helmi II. Besides his undeniable wish to make Germany a colonial power, Wilhelm II also had a keen interest in supporting archaeological investigations, especially in the Near East, where he financially supported several expeditions from his own purse. Abbas Helmi II, on the other hand, seems to have

been a great admirer of Wilhelm II, and was strongly supportive of German archaeological interests in Egypt.

On an Egyptological level, the protagonists were Adolf Erman, the most important German Egyptologist at that time, along with Heinrich Schäfer, the Assistant Director of the Egyptian Museum in Berlin. Ludwig Borchardt, a former student of Erman, was the person who worked on the Egyptian side, having been appointed as a scientific counsellor to the Imperial German Consulate General in Cairo in 1899.

The site for the first permanent presence of German Egyptology was chosen wisely. In the middle of the vast ancient cemeteries of Western Thebes, Borchardt found the ideal spot to build on: an enormous mound of old debris at the very edge of the desert, right in the middle of the Theban Necropolis, just a few paces away from the so-called 'Tombs of the Nobles' and the huge temples of the Pharaohs, and within walking distance of the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens.

Borchardt asked the French-governed Antiquities Organisation for support, but eventually he negotiated the case directly with the Egyptian Government, particularly with the Egyptian Ministry of Finance. In 1904, a contract was signed between the Ministry and the German Government, according to which the building ground in Western Thebes was sold to the German Government for the 'nominal price' of one Egyptian pound. Being educated as architects, Borchardt

and his brother drew up the plans for the building, and in the middle of 1904 construction work was started. By the end of December, the 'German House' was completed, and the inauguration festivities could take place.

Considering the period at the beginning of the 20th century, Borchardt's introduction and therefore the first entry in the German House guestbook reads as surprisingly modern. His introduction includes the philosophy of the building, its proposed use as well as ideas about its future inhabitants. The house was not solely conceived as a mere 'excavation house'. Borchardt wanted the house to be a place for scholars with all kinds of interests who needed a comfortable resting place (including a library and facilities for developing photographs) during whatever project the scholars were in Egypt for. Moreover, he extended his hospitality to 'all similarly minded men of other nations'.² And, indeed, the names and dates of those who lived and worked in the house during the first decade after its inauguration demonstrate Borchardt's attitude. The main sources for this early history of the German House and, more specifically, its inhabitants, is the house guestbook, as well as the extensive correspondence of Borchardt kept today in the archives of the German Archaeological Institute Cairo and at the Swiss Institute for Egyptian Building History in Cairo.³

The following list of selected individuals who stayed in the House during the period from 1905 until 1914 illustrates Borchardt's philosophy:

- Édouard Naville and his wife Marguerite stayed in the house several times for a total period of over five months conducting the Egypt Exploration Fund excavations at the Temple of Mentuhotep at Deir el-Bahari, as did Somers Clarke during the last season of the project there.
- Georg Schweinfurth, Uvo Hölscher, and Walter Wreszinski lived in the house for their respective projects in the Theban mountains, in the Temple of Rameses III at Medinet Habu, and in the 'Tombs of the Nobles'.
- Georg Möller conducted the first systematic German excavations in Western Thebes, that is, in an area immediately to the north of the house and in Deir el-Medineh. According to an entry in the guestbook, Möller particularly enjoyed the house's position, working as an archaeologist on the west bank of Thebes.
- Sir Alan Gardiner lived in the house for a month, collating texts for the Berlin Wörterbuch-Project, and
- the British ethnologist C. G. Seligmann stayed in the house for two weeks.

In addition, and most interestingly, Borchardt explicitly included in his introduction artists – 'Künstler' – as future guests. And indeed, until 1914, almost a dozen artists and painters used the house for their work in Luxor and on the

West Bank. While most of these had a German background, one interesting guest was a British citizen, Lancelot Crane. He lived in the house for more than two months, working as an artist for Norman de Garis Davies and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, especially in the fabulous tomb of Menena in Sheikh Abd el-Qurna. Obviously, Lancelot inherited his skills from his father, the famous British artist, illustrator and creator of children's books, Walter Crane.

Among the first artists who stayed at the German House for an extended period of time were the two ladies, Elise Mahler and Maria Ressel.⁴ Elise Mahler was born in what is now the northernmost city of Germany, Flensburg, in 1856; Maria Ressel was born more than 20 years later in Vienna. Mahler was from a well-to-do family and became interested in painting as a teenager. In 1896, she moved to Rothenburg ob der Tauber, a picturesque medieval city in southern Germany, where she gave courses in oil painting and watercolours. It seems that Ressel and Mahler first met in one of Mahler's classes when Ressel was a student. During the next few years, Mahler became Ressel's personal tutor. Over time, the two ladies seem to have developed a very close relationship that lasted until the death of Mahler in 1924. Both of them suffered from bad health for most of their lives, and time and again, one had to take care of the other. Knowing this, it is even more amazing that they decided to endure the stresses and strains of an extended trip to Egypt in 1908. At that time, this endeavour was certainly very ambitious for two European ladies, even though they had booked a complete package with Thomas Cook Travels. The main reason behind the journey, however, was of a more financial nature: both were constantly living above their means and they hoped to produce paintings and watercolours in Egypt that they could sell to wealthy European tourists on site.

For various reasons, this scheme did not work out as the two ladies had hoped. In the early weeks of 1909, they stayed at a boarding house in Egypt's southern border town of Assuan, suffering from various illnesses. At that point, they decided to make contact with the director of the German Archaeological Institute in Cairo, Ludwig Borchardt, asking him for permission to stay for several months at the German House in Luxor.

Borchardt's first reaction was a clear 'No'. He politely, but directly made it clear to the two ladies that the living and working conditions in the German House were not exactly ideal for people with health problems and who were entirely on their own. However, Mahler and Ressel did not give in, and continued trying to convince Borchardt that they were perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. Eventually, Borchardt could not resist any longer and gave his permission. Mahler and Ressel moved in to the house on 1 February 1909 and lived and worked there for almost two months.

Surprisingly little is known of the results of the work completed during their stay at the house. However, some of Mahler's paintings and a number of Ressel's

etchings have recently come to light. Two oil paintings made by Elise Mahler,⁵ for example, are quite impressive for two reasons: first, the format of both paintings is a wide-angle panoramic view of areas on the Luxor West Bank, in the midst of the vast cemeteries of Pharaonic times. The still unexcavated Temple of Rameses III at Medinet Habu is shown in one painting (Fig. 11.2) (the white house situated a little lower and to the left of the temple seems to be Howard Carter's first house on the West Bank). The other offers a most spectacular view of the Theban mountains with their peak in the middle (known in Arabic as 'El-Qurn'), and – on the left and barely visible – the silhouette of the Ptolemaic temple of Deir el-Medineh, also unexcavated (Fig. 11.3). What is noteworthy is the small detail of a caravan of camels a little further down, which certainly depicts a group of tourists, as no local villager would go to the site via this path.



Figure 11.2: 'Theban' by Elise Mahler. From a private collection.

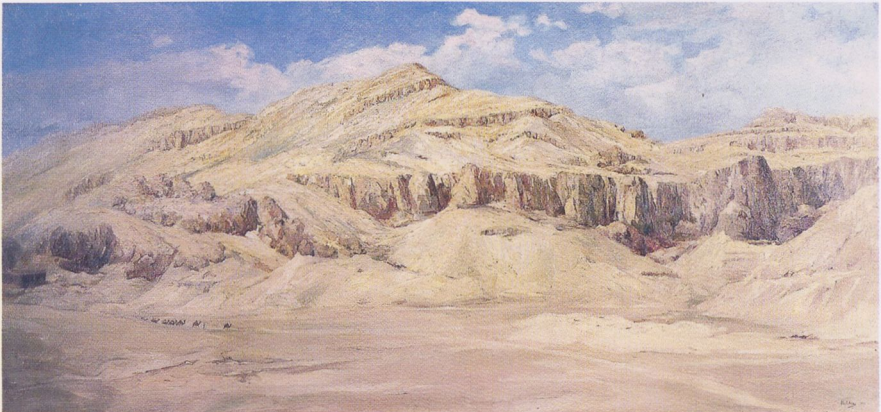


Figure 11.3: 'Tal de Könige' by Elise Mahler. © Museumberg Flensburg.

The second point, which makes the two paintings almost unique, is their perspective, or more precisely, the place where Mahler positioned her easel and canvas to create the paintings. In both cases, it is obvious that the easel was not placed at ground level but on a somewhat elevated surface. If the viewing angle of both paintings is considered, there is only one spot in the whole area where Mahler could have put up her easel, namely on the roof of the German House. The roof provided an ideal view, and not just for artists.

Although a contemporary of Elise Mahler, one artist shows a strikingly different attitude, character and style: Carl Wuttke was born seven years before Elise Mahler, in 1849, and seems to have been quite an extraordinary person. At the age of 25, he travelled on foot from Munich to Rome via the Alps, and spent several years on a trip around the world, including extended visits to Hawaii and Japan as well as India and China. During these travels, Wuttke created a vast number of oil paintings, some of monumental scale, which were later bought by Wilhelm II and put on display in the Emperor's castle in Berlin.⁶ He travelled to Egypt a total of eight times, where he also produced an enormous amount of high quality paintings. Many of his rather mainstream paintings at that time were successfully reproduced as postcards and had an almost worldwide circulation. His work is best illustrated by some of these oil-paintings-turned-postcards, which also mirror an interesting attitude of the artist. One of Wuttke's paintings of the Temple of Luxor is shown in Figure 11.4; and in the background of a portrait of Wuttke by another painter (Fig. 11.5) there is a rendition of Wuttke's own painting of the temple.

Although Wuttke became famous during his lifetime and displayed his paintings at almost every art exhibition in Germany, there is still no *catalogue raisonné* of his work. Quite recently, a number of hitherto unknown Wuttke oil paintings have come to light. Of these, a small pocket-sized painting (Fig. 11.6) is a beautiful view of the river Nile somewhere in Middle or Upper Egypt with the title *On the Nile*.

As far as it is known, Wuttke stayed in the house only once, and for just one week, in February 1909. Among the paintings he created during this time, were two views of the German House and its vicinity. One of these was also reproduced as a postcard and vividly illustrates the impression that the house left on its visitors at that time (Fig. 11.7).

Much less is known about the life and *oeuvre* of another painter who is worth mentioning. Arthur Schlubeck was born in Stettin in 1878 and died in Berlin in 1945. He travelled to Egypt several times, and stayed in the German House twice, in 1913 and 1914. Although Schlubeck must have produced a considerable amount, little is known of the whereabouts of his paintings and watercolours. In 1906, a gallery in Munich organised an exhibition of Schlubeck's works, which also included drawings and paintings of the aforementioned painters Walter Crane

and Carl Wuttke.⁷ One of Schlubeck's favourite subjects seems to have been portraits of quite a broad spectrum, as illustrated by two examples. The first, which Schlubeck exhibited at one of the Great Berlin Exhibitions of Art, is undated but was certainly created before the First World War because it shows a portrait of the oldest son of the German Emperor Wilhelm II, Crown Prince Wilhelm (Fig. 11.8). The other is the *Picture of an Unknown Lady*, dated to 1919 and published in the Munich-based journal of art and literature *Jugend* that became eponymous of the Art-Nouveau (*Jugendstil*) era (Fig. 11.9).

Another of Schlubeck's favourite subjects, namely figure studies of nude models, seems to have caused considerable irritation – at least in Egypt. Schlubeck wanted to paint nude models on the roof of the German House and requested Borchardt's permission to have female local models working with him in the house. Borchardt vehemently refused, even after an elongated exchange of telegrams and letters in which Schlubeck eloquently described the necessity of his endeavour for the sake of modern art. According to Schlubeck, he even requested and received the support of several European citizens living in the vicinity of the house, among whom were Mr and Mrs Mackay⁸ and an American couple. Borchardt recommended that Schlubeck should make his studies – *Studien* – in the seclusion of the nearby Valley of the Queens.

At the end of his first stay in the house, Schlubeck left an entry in the guestbook in which he thanked Borchardt for his permission to stay there and stated: 'I painted landscape-studies in the mountains and nude-studies of coloured and European models' (entry for 12 May 1913). I do not know of any originals of Schlubeck's nude studies made during his stay at the German House, but he may have used some of them as a basis for later works, for example, for an oil painting made in 1924 which has the title *Sonnenanbeter* (*Sun Worshipers*) and which was recently sold at an auction in Denmark.

There may be another, more political, aspect of Schlubeck's nude studies. During the First World War, in 1915, the German House was destroyed. More than ten years later, Borchardt wrote in an entry of the guestbook that 'the German House was destroyed by the British military authorities' and he continues with a quote from a long-unknown source in English, 'because it was found to be the centre of illicit antiquities trade and otherwise undesirable'.⁹

In Egyptological circles, it was rumoured that Howard Carter was the driving force behind the demolition of the house. Although this rumour was refuted by T. G. H. James (James 1992, 177), the story has made it into modern literature: in her 2001 archaeological novel *Lord of the Silent*, the American novelist Elisabeth Peters quotes Borchardt's entry, more or less accurately, and leaves it to the reader to judge whether or not Carter was involved.¹⁰

Certainly, Howard Carter had nothing personally to do with the destruction of the house. In fact, the demolition was ordered in November 1915 by the British



Figure 11.4: 'Luxor, Temple des Amenophis III' by Carl Wuttke. From a postcard in the author's collection.

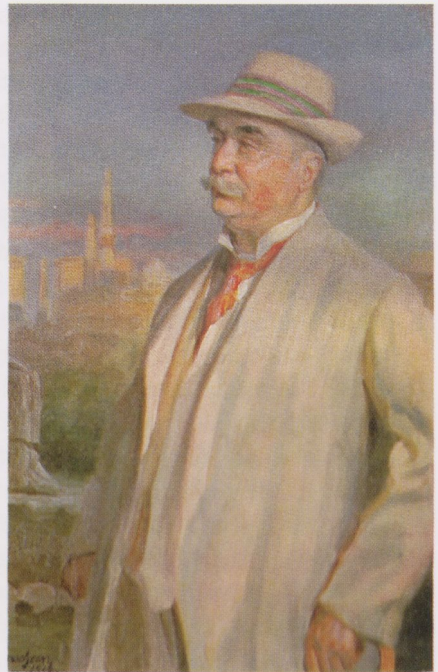


Figure 11.5: 'Bildnis des Kunstmalers C. Wuttke' by Hermann Barrenscheen. From a postcard in the author's collection.



Figure 11.6: 'Am Nile' by Carl Wuttke. From a private collection.



Figure 11.7: 'The German House' in the Desert of Thebes' by Carl Wuttke. From a postcard in the author's collection.

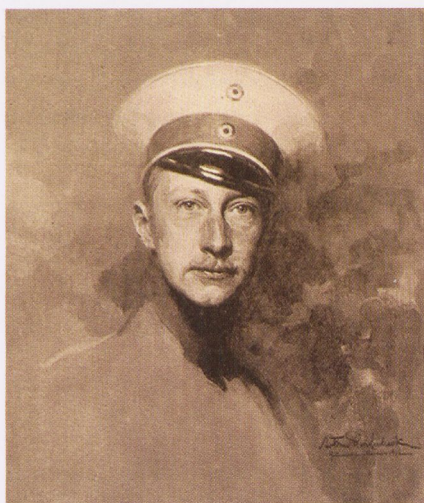


Figure 11.8: Portrait of Crown Prince Wilhelm. From a postcard in the author's collection.

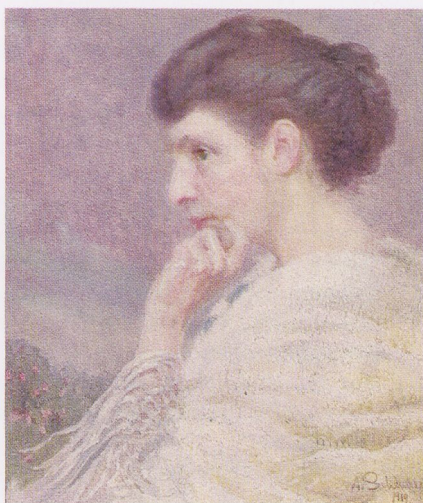


Figure 11.9: 'Damenbildnis' by Arthur Schlubeck. © Daniel Polz, Cairo.

High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Arthur Henry McMahon, and Borchardt's enigmatic entry in the guestbook of the German House is, in fact, a quote from an official message sent by the American diplomatic agency in Cairo to the American Ambassador in Berlin in August 1916:¹¹ 'I have been informed by the Authorities that the house in question was found by them to be the centre of illicit antiquity trade, as well as otherwise undesirable from the point of view

of the British Military Authorities who, therefore, ordered that it should be pulled down in November of last year ...'

It has long been a question of some interest what the expression 'otherwise undesirable' might refer to in this context. Perhaps, one hundred years ago and in a remote area of southern Upper Egypt, artistic endeavours such as nude studies were not as acceptable as the Berlin-based inhabitant of the house, Schlubeck, had believed. And, perhaps, this kind of 'activity' was justly deemed 'undesirable' by both the authorities and the local inhabitants of the villages around the house – activities like this would not have gone unnoticed in those days.

Be that as it may, shortly after Schlubeck had left Egypt, Borchardt rewrote the usage regulations of the German House, stressing its use for scientific work as being its main purpose. After the war, Borchardt re-built the house, and in his guestbook entry on the occasion of its re-inauguration (1 April 1927), artists and painters are no longer mentioned as possible inhabitants. Indeed, during the following decade, only one artist is recorded as having stayed in the house for a period of less than two weeks.

Notes

- 1 Voss, S. (2013) *Die Geschichte der Abteilung Kairo des DAI im Spannungsfeld deutscher politischer Interessen 1881-1929*. Menschen-Kulturen-Traditionen 8,1. Rahden/Westf., Marie Leidorf, pp. 99-108.
- 2 Polz, D. (2007) *Das Deutsche Haus in Theben: 'die Möglichkeit gründlicher Arbeit und frischen Schaffens'*. In G. Dreyer/D. Polz (eds), *Begegnung mit der Vergangenheit. 100 Jahre in Ägypten - Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Kairo 1907-2007*, pp. 25-31. Mainz, Philipp von Zabern, p. 25.
- 3 I owe much of the information provided here to the courtesy of Beatrice and Cornelius von Pilgrim.
- 4 See the biographies of both in: Hümme, J. (2007) *Elise Mahler (1856-1924): Ein Künstlerleben zwischen Flensburg und Rothenburg o. d. Tauber*. Heide, Boyens.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.
- 6 See Wuttke's autobiography, Wuttke, C. (1925) *Reise-Erinnerungen von Studienfahrten rings um die Erde*. München.
- 7 Heinemann, Galerie (1906) *Kollektivausstellungen: Professor Otto Hierl-Deronco, München. Walter Crane, London. Arthur Schlubeck, Berlin*. München, Heinemann, p. 3.
- 8 This would be Ernest J. H. Mackay, at that time working in several of the Theban Tombs, see Bierbrier M. L. (2012) *Who was Who in Egyptology. 4th revised edition*. London, Egypt Exploration Society, p. 348.
- 9 Polz 2007, p. 27.
- 10 Peters, E. (2001) *Lord of the Silent*. New York, HarperCollins, pp. 227-28.
- 11 Voss (2013), p. 176.

Acknowledgement

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