

CARL SPITZWEG

(Munich 1808 - Munich 1885)

Der Klausener auf der Höhe (The Monk on High)

signed with monogram (lower left)
oil on canvas
53.3 x 32.3 cm (21 x 12¾ in)

Provenance: Otto Spitzweg Collection;
Swiss Private Collection.

Literature: S. Wichmann, *Carl Spitzweg, Verzeichnis der Werke*, Stuttgart, 2002, no. 1260, illus. 478.

THE COMPOSITION OF CARL SPITZWEG'S *DER Klausener auf der Höhe (The Monk on High)* leads the eye through over-grown plants, where it progresses upwards, lingers on a cat in a bright pool of light, then finally comes to rest on the figure of the monk, who sits with a bottle of wine and glass, smoking and enjoying the golden evening sun. The viewer is drawn into the work, to join the monk in his evening rest, observing his contemplation of hidden view beyond. In similarly composed pictures by Spitzweg, *The Bookworm* (fig. 1) and *Reading the News* (fig. 2), more subjects are observed unaware, deep in their own contemplation.

The style and subject matter of *The Monk on High* indicates that it was created between 1865 and 1870, some time after a highly informative

period on Spitzweg, when the end of the 1840s and the beginning of the next decade brought him new sources of inspiration. From 1844 to 1852 Spitzweg had worked as an illustrator for the new Munich satirical magazine, *Fliegende Blätter*. He was much influenced during these years by the work of French caricaturists such as Honoré Daumier, Gustave Doré and Jean-Jacques Grandville, but his work gained in immediacy through its setting in a realistically rendered German *milieu* recognisable to his public, even though it lacked a socially critical aim or any political dimension. In works such as *The Mineralogist* (c.1854; Wuppertal, von der Heydt-Museum) enraptured by his find, the combination of gentle humour and melancholic resignation secured Spitzweg's appeal to a large market far beyond Munich.



Carl Spitzweg, *The Bookworm*, c.1850, Museum Georg Schäfer (Figure 1)



Carl Spitzweg, *Reading the News*, (1868) Pfalzgalerie, Kaiserslautern (Figure 2)





Moritz von Schwind, *Morgenstunde*, 1858, Schack-Galerie (Figure 3)

However, a shift in his style began from 1847 onwards, when he became friendly with the painter Moritz von Schwind, whose work clearly influenced Spitzweg's painting (fig. 3). The second period of his life was spent in and around Munich. During this time the initial academy hostility to his self-taught art faded, his popularity rose, and his friendship with Eduard Schleich, Christian Morgenstern and Moritz von Schwind deepened. In 1848 Spitzweg made his first visit to the collection of Old Master paintings at the Schloss Weissenstein, Pommersfelden, where he returned to sketch during the next year. In 1849 he went to Prague where he came to know the work of the Czech painters Josef Mánes and Josef Navrátil. In *the Synagogue* (1849; Schweinfurt, Samml). Schäfer records his impressions of the city with an affectionate and sharply observed realism. In 1850 he visited both the Exposition Universelle in Paris and the International Exhibition in London. In Paris he was particularly impressed by the work of the Barbizon school of landscape painters and the oil sketches of Eugène Delacroix. From around 1850 Spitzweg's painting style became increasingly open and relaxed. The character of the individual brushstroke played a more decisive role, and this led Spitzweg to an extremely light application of dots of colour.

Spitzweg shifted his attention away from the comic nature of the protagonists to the mood of the setting, such as the dramatically lit *Girl with a Goat* (1855; Museum Georg Schäfer), shown in figure 6, or a country lane with two lovers (e.g. *Couple in a Wood*, c.1860; Kassel, Neue Gallery), or the erotic *Nymph Bathing*, 1855, Private Collection (fig. 4). Here humour turned into lyrical idyll: Spitzweg evoked a harmonious, fairy-tale world, with the potentially alienating elements of voyeurism, scepticism and resignation subsumed into unquestioning appreciation. In the 1860s Spitzweg began to focus on landscape rather than figures. The atmosphere of *Der Klausner auf der Höhe* (*The Monk on High*)

demonstrates these later interests and influences.

Spitzweg was an apothecary by profession and it was only by pure chance, while recovering from an illness, that he took up 'dabbling in paint' for therapeutic reasons. The Pinahotek in his native Munich offered Dutch Old Masters, which the young artist loved and often copied. His paintings from early in his career are of comical situations involving human pitfalls, best exemplified by his *The Poor Poet* (fig. 5). In this the eccentric figure of the poor poet personifies the whimsical nature of the Biedermeier era. An opened umbrella is used for protection against the dripping roof, and his verses are burned in the pipe stove to heat his dingy garret. *The Hypochondriac* (1865), similar to *The Poor Poet*, indicates the charmed, if myopic, circles of Spitzweg's environment.

In *The Monk on High* Biedermeier art experiences its petit bourgeois inflection in condensed form. The Congress of Vienna (1814-15) and the industrial revolution had left the German middle class in a state of political acquiescence and ethical stupor. The unrelenting progress of industrialisation caused many to seek refuge in the privacy and nostalgia. Spitzweg's warmly personal style and wistful subjects appealed to their instincts for survival and withdrawal from the less pleasant aspects of daily reality. But Spitzweg's true perception also explores the psychological moment, his gentle humour and sympathy for the peculiarities of his fellow man in his intimate setting, vouch for these values. According to Rudolf Bisanz in 'The Schack Gallery



Carl Spitzweg, *Nymph Bathing*, 1855, Private Collection (Figure 4)

in Munich German Painters, 1850-1880': 'his love for the precious fleeting instant in time and his reverence of the inviolable private space of "little everyman" creates moreover a wholeness and sanctity of existence that only a fool would wish never existed' (*Art Journal*, 1947; vol. 33, no. 3).

The elements described by Bisanz are clearly illustrated in *Monk on High*. Spitzweg's work explored the narrow cobble-stoned streets and back alleys of Munich, and the nearby countryside. One or two figures, usually engaged in some commonplace activity, often just single, eccentric but lovable characters, are intimate in his genres and accompanied by modest anecdotal content. The moods and pictorial unities of his later works, however, depend far less on literary content than they do on purely painterly skills: using glowing, diffused light, and broad luminescent shadows. His technique shows the use of *en plein air* practice; colouristic vividness, and depth of aerial space. It has been suggested by Bisanz that these proficiencies, had he chosen to do so, could easily have enabled Spitzweg to paint in much larger scale. He painted over 1000 paintings, nearly all of them very small in format, often on cigar box tops, which became his legacy. The past fifty years have witnessed further growth in his stunning

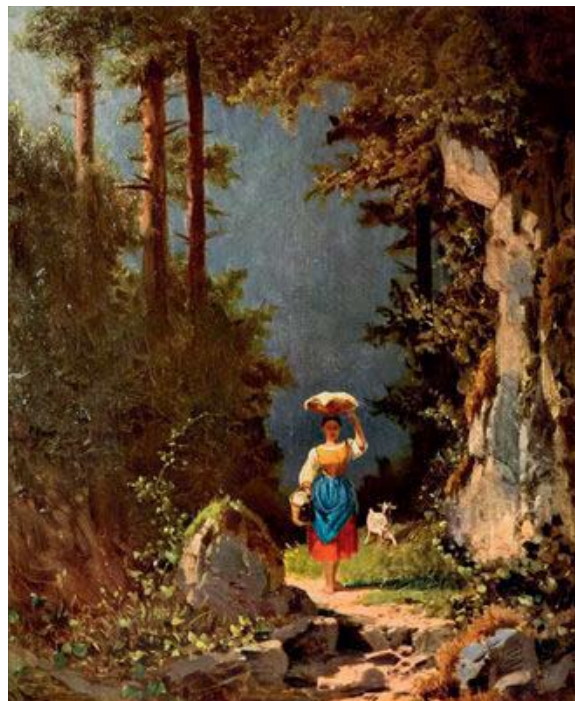


Carl Spitzweg, *Der Klausner auf der Höhe* (*The Monk on High*) (Detail)



Carl Spitzweg, *The Poor Poet*, 1839, Neue Pinakothek, Munich (Figure 5)

popular appeal. Spitzweg received the Bavarian Royal Merit Order of St. Michael in 1865. He was inducted as an honorary member of the Academy of Visual Arts in 1868, though he had never attended an art academy himself, an accolade which is testimony to his high regard and skill as an artist.



Carl Spitzweg, *Girl with a Goat*, c.1861, Museum Georg Schäfer (Figure 6)