

Louis Friedrich Sachse and the making of Berlin as a capital of art

Review of:

Der Pionier. Wie Louis Sachse in Berlin den Kunstmarkt erfand. Anna Ahrens. Cologne/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2017, 780 pp., 288 b. & w. illus., € 100.00 pbk, ISBN 978-3-412-50594-3

Anne Nike van Dam

The nineteenth century in Germany was a key era for the development of the modern infrastructure for the study of art and its history. Museums were built, magazines were published, art historical chairs were founded and art became available to an ever-bigger part of society. Thanks to new developments the reproduction of images became easier, more accurate and more accessible, making them available for a wider public. Yet, despite the dynamics of the era and the increased scholarship of the last decades on the nineteenth century, there is still much that is not known. This holds true especially if one ventures beyond the focus on academic art history.¹ One important blind spot, author Anna Ahrens tells us, is the art market. This is where Louis Friedrich Sachse comes in: entrepreneur, patron of the arts, salon holder, art dealer and many things beside.

An entrepreneur rather than a scholar, Louis Sachse was at the forefront of the development of the Berlin art market, constantly pushing the boundaries of the art scene. His broad interests led him from lithography to daguerreotype and photography, from collecting drawings and watercolours to starting his own salon for contemporary art. It is therefore safe to say that Sachse was a dynamic character, and one that fully warrants the scholarly attention that he receives in *Der Pionier*. The book offers a multifaceted study of the early international artistic networks in Berlin and Paris, as seen through the eyes of what could be called one of its main protagonists. Ahrens draws together the many lines that connected Sachse with so many individuals and institutions in the Prussian and Parisian art world. Through this tracing of interconnections, *Der Pionier* offers valuable insights in the connection between artistic reproductions, contemporary art, and the development of the art scene in general as well as complex Berlin society in the nineteenth century. Based on a great number of letters, the author presents Sachse initially as an eager young

¹ A fair few authors and collections have contributed new insights into the history of art history in the nineteenth century. Yet most of these have focused on academic art history with only sparing attention for the non-academic development of the study of art. Among these were notably: Horst Bredekamp, Adam Labuda (eds). *In der Mitte Berlins. 200 Jahre Kunstgeschichte an der Humboldt-Universität*. Berlin: Mann Verlag, 2010. Regine Prange, *Die Geburt der Kunstgeschichte. Philosophische Ästhetik und empirische Wissenschaft*. Cologne: Deubner Verlag, 2004. Hubert Locher, *Kunstgeschichte als historische Theorie der Kunst 1750-1950*. More attention for the non-academic surroundings is found in: Petra Wilhelmy-Dollinger. *Die Berliner Salons, Mit historisch-literarischen Spaziergängen*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000. Peter Gerlach (Eds). *Vom realen Nutzen idealer Bilder*. Aachen, 1994

man, bright and hard working, who would later develop a strong sense for business. Yet despite his changing interest, over time he never wavered from his everlasting and commendable goal: to help Berlin establish itself as an art capital in Europe. Aside from telling the story of behind this dream, the many letters by Sachse to his business partners, his family, friends and various institutions convey an arresting image of the times, giving an extraordinary impression of the early nineteenth century *zeitgeist* as seen through the eyes of a man with great ambitions.

A look at the existing literature shows that *Der Pionier* is indeed a welcome addition to the literature on the arts during the nineteenth century in Berlin. As remarked upon in the introduction by Bernhard Maaz and Ahrens herself, Sachse's history and the surroundings of the early nineteenth century art market have largely remained unexplored. The majority of the existing works focus on the second rather than the first half of the nineteenth century and even the relatively similar studies are often older and focus on a different geographical area.² Publications on Sachse's history are especially rare. One of the few lengthier pieces that takes this remarkable character as its focus, is the essay by Annette Schlagenhauff 'Die Kunst zu Handeln: Louis Friedrich Sachse. Lithograph, Kunstförderer und Kunsthändler in Berlin'. It will come as no surprise that it is a key source for Anna Ahrens.³ As the publication of Ahrens' dissertation, *Der Pionier* is closely connected to other works by the author and is an important publication for her position as an expert on the Prussian art market. Previous publications focused strongly on the formation of this art market in the first half of the nineteenth century. Together with *Der Pionier*, they are a testament to Ahrens' great store of knowledge about this market and its international affiliations.

L. Sachse et. co

As *Der Pionier* is over 500 pages long, the reading is made more practical by the fact that it is divided into four themed parts. Ahrens uses the introduction, titled 'Eine Preussische Parade', to elucidate some of her extensive sources as well as introducing the necessary background of Sachse's life. Little seems to be known about Louis Friedrich Sachse's early life. Born in 1798 to a wigmaker and his wife,

² Especially the development of academic art history has seen an increase in publications in the work of Locher, Prange, etc. The art market is a different story. Here the early 19th century does still offer vast expanses of unexplored territory. Some publications that have a similar orientation but show the more dominant perspectives, are: Stephen Bann. *Parallel lines. Printmakers, painters and photographers in Nineteenth Century France*. New Haven, 2001, Karen Beall. 'The Interdependence of Printer and Printmaker in Early 19th Century Lithography'. *Art Journal*. Vol. 39, no. 3 (1980): 195-201, Thomas Gaethens, 'Zur Rezeption der französischen Moderne in Deutschland von 1870 bis 1945', in: Andreas Holleczek und Andrea Meyer (eds), *Französische Kunst – Deutsche Perspektiven. Quellen und Kommentare zur Kunstkritik*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004, Beth Irwin Lewis, *Art for All: The Collision of Modern Art in Late Nineteenth-Century Germany*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

³ Schlagenhauff, Annette. 'Die Kunst zu Handeln: Louis Friedrich Sachse. Lithograph, Kunstförderer und Kunsthändler in Berlin'. *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*. Vol. 42 (2000): 259-294

documentation of his life only starts in earnest around 1819. Working as a secretary for Wilhelm von Humboldt, eminent linguist, philosopher and government functionary, Sachse started writing diligently to his family and his fiancée. These are the letters that make it possible to start telling Sachse's story. Unfortunately Sachse's early success as Humboldt's *Privatsekretär* came to an abrupt end when Sachse was arrested in 1822 for being a member of a forbidden student society. He was sentenced to six years in prison and even though he was released early, pursuing an academic or governmental career was now out of the question. Forced to reconsider his future, Sachse developed the idea to devote himself to the arts and to found a state-of-the-art lithography institute in Berlin.

To bring the latest developments in lithography technology to the Prussian capital, Sachse first needed to learn everything he could about it. His education in all matters lithography, like many things Sachse would undertake throughout his life, was thorough. After studying at the Königlich Lithographischen Institut in Berlin in 1825, Sachse moved to Paris to continue his studies. Working at the lithography institute of Knecht, Senefelder et Cie, Sachse gained an increasing number of responsibilities and skills and built a close friendship with Joseph Knecht. After his highly successful time in Paris, Sachse moved to München for a final period of training with Alois Senefelder. In 1828, after several years of preparation, Sachse's dream became a reality as he finally opened his own Institute for Lithography in Berlin.

Within a year of opening, Sachse's institute was a success. It offered different genres of lithography, which Ahrens discusses based on the classifications that Sachse used himself: portraits, landscapes, genre pieces, hunting pieces and diverse objects. Portraits were a key part of Sachse's business and the list of people who featured in the lithographs produced by the institute seem endless. Featuring important politicians and government officials, members of high society, men of the clergy, medical doctors, poets, actors, musicians and scholars, the description of these lithographs give a fair idea of the social groups for whom this was possible. The demonstration of Sachse's wide customer base and the fact that he knew many of them shows the connections that Sachse had throughout the Prussian society. Detailed anecdotes add insights into the day-to-day business of Sachse, including the instance of the misspelling Arthur Schopenhauer's name on a lithography produced at the institute.⁴ The institute also produced lithographs of architecture and landscapes, which inevitably tied into the newly emerging ideas about the creation of national identity and the relationship of culture with the natural surroundings.

A larger constellation

Sachse's institute wasn't the first of its kind in Berlin. Aside from the Königliche Lithographische Institut where Sachse studied in 1825, several other companies opened their doors around the same time as L. Sachse et. co was founded at the Jägerstraße number 30. The brothers Gropius, Winckelmann & Sons and a number

⁴ Incidentally, it turns out – this wasn't a mistake made by Sachse.

of other companies opened their doors in the lithography business at the same time. Yet rather than eschewing the competition, Sachse was in amicable contact with many of them, on occasion even collaborating in projects. Art magazines, such as *Museum* and *Deutsches Kunstblatt*, were also part of this early infrastructure of art presentation and discussion, as were the *Kunstvereine* or art societies. Sachse was in contact with virtually all of them, it seems. His connections did not limit themselves to Berlin, either. Since his time spent studying in Paris, Sachse had returned to the city various times, staying in touch with the publishers and artists that he had met there as well as making new connections. Artists were also an essential part of Sachse network. Two well-known artists whom Sachse knew well were Adolph Menzel and Carl Blecher. His close connection with the two artists seems to have been motivated by Sachse's deep-seated wish to promote the arts in Berlin and the artistic *Bildung* of the general audience. This wish took on different forms in different times of his life, but Sachse's patronage of Menzel and Carl Blecher are two concrete examples.

If one thing becomes clear from Ahrens' book, it is that Sachse was never complacent. Keenly aware of the possibilities of this new technology, Sachse aimed to be the first to bring daguerreotypes to Berlin. However, the odds were against him. Sachse ordered the new daguerreotype machine in Paris, to be made to the specification of Louis Daguerre himself. After having paid a hefty sum, Sachse was dismayed to find that his machine was heavily damaged during transport. By the time the machine was finally working, others were either building their own or buying lower quality machines elsewhere. Fortunately for Sachse, the quality of other machines was often mediocre to terrible and the superior quality of much of Sachse's works meant that he did not lose his customers to his competitors. Sachse's unbridled enthusiasm certainly played a large role in this, as he embraced the daguerreotype and the creation of photographs with open arms and was often looking for ways to improve their production.

Contemporary art and *Bildung*

The largest part of Ahrens' book is the fourth and last part: 'Ideal und Aufbruch – Sachse und die zeitgenössische Malerei' and it focuses on Sachse's relationship with the contemporary arts. It seems that Sachse's love for Paris also contributed to his love for contemporary art. The letters that Ahrens quotes in the early chapters demonstrate the fact that Sachse was spellbound by both the city's character and its artists. Already early on, Sachse often took artworks back to Berlin after visiting Paris and in this way built an impressive collection of French contemporary art. This passion for contemporary art appears to have been fuelled at least partially by Sachse's wish to contribute to the *Bildung* of Berlin, facilitating artistic exchange and making different arts available to a larger public. Ultimately, Sachse wanted to contribute to Berlin as a capital of art in Europe.

These aspirations can be linked back to the ideas of Sachse's former employer Wilhelm von Humboldt, famous for his ideas about *Bildung* and education. To contribute to this *Bildung*, Sachse wanted to bring outstanding art that only few would ordinarily see in real life to Berlin. Around 1830, many artworks

were only known as reproductions to the majority of people. Good art to set an example was scarce, Sachse found, and he set out to remedy this. Over the years, Sachse did this in various ways. One way, was by contributing arts to the Academy Exhibition in 1836. After years of working with French publishers, dealers and artists, Sachse was in a position to contribute high quality works to this exhibition and thereby making them available to a larger public. Another way was by opening his own permanent exhibition space in 1853.

The exhibition space, later renamed Sachse's Internationalem Kunstsalon, reflected Sachse's own ideas about art. Having become more critical of the established Kunstvereine in Prussia and the traditional Academy exhibitions, he considered his space to be an alternative to their exhibitions and as an opposite of the academy exhibitions. Sachse's space featured temporary exhibitions, showing only originals and combining the works of more established artists and younger and more progressive artists and draughtsmen. He did not adhere to a geographical focus: the aim was to present good works of any school, nation or genre. This meant that there were German, French and other international artworks on show, but also different kinds of schools and styles. Sachse would combine Romantic and realistic pieces and show large paintings, drawings and watercolours side by side.

Changing and travelling exhibitions

After opening his salon, Sachse's son Louis Alfred Sachse became more involved with the company. After joining his father on his travels in 1855, the younger Sachse prepared to enter the business, by spending the year in Paris in 1857. Here, he learned about the art scene and art dealership at his father's long time contact and friend Adolphe Goupil. Letters between father and son about artworks, exhibitions, business contacts and transfers, offer the reader a look into the frequent contact between Paris and Berlin, the constant struggle to match artworks with buyers and the extensive network that father and son built and maintained in the two cities.

After several years of hosting his exhibition space, Sachse and his son, also started organizing a travelling exhibition. In 1870, Sachse started a kind of art carousel throughout the Germanophone area, bringing together institutes from all over the territory. Each participating location received a batch of works each month to show. At the end of the month, they would send it to the next space. Communication about the carousel was partially facilitated by Sachse's magazine *Kunst-Correspondenz*, a magazine for the members of his exhibition space that he started producing in 1871. Using *Kunst-Correspondenz* as a medium, the carousel wasn't just used for the exhibiting the artworks, but also facilitated sales. By 1873, 46 locations received their artworks each month. True to Sachse's nature, it was both an economically successful project as well as a philanthropic one, as it brought arts to many areas of the country.

The exhibitions and *Kunst-Correspondenz* were important media for the position of Sachse's firm, which was by now increasingly supervised by the younger Sachse. The success of the various activities meant that a bigger space became increasingly necessary. In 1872 the long awaited larger location was announced near the Royal Theater. Yet this momentous event marked the beginning of the end of

Sachse's emporium. Instead of offering more space for art, the move brought huge financial trouble with it. The new store took longer to build than was anticipated and building materials became more expensive as the building progressed. After trying to gain other sources of income by letting parts of the building, the situation became so serious that Sachse Jr. had to go to the *Kultusministerium* for help. Unfortunately it was not to be. Sachse's company was dissolved, its belongings auctioned off in 1875. Louis Friedrich Sachse withdrew from public life and died on 29th of October 1877. His son rallied and re-established himself as a *Hofkunsthändler* starting a new company: Sachse's Kunst-Auction.

This logical end of the narrative is followed by an epilogue of sorts. Discussing the further development of the contemporary art in Berlin, Ahrens starts with taking a step back and returning to the founding of the Berlin Museum. Wilhelm von Humboldt's role in Sachse's development quite naturally leads to this topic, as Von Humboldt was an important force in the development of the program of the museum. The Berlin Museum was the first of several museums that opened between 1830 and 1870, running in a parallel to Sachse's undertakings. What is especially striking is the fact that Sachse opened his exhibition space in the same year that the Neue Pinakothek opened. When Sachse's exhibition space closed, almost simultaneously, the Nationalgalerie was opened in Berlin. The epilogue offers context for the momentous impact that Sachse's undertakings had on the contemporary art scene, as his business always managed to stay at the avant-garde of the art scene and really contributed to his greatest wish: contributing to establishing Berlin as a capital of art.

Der Pionier

Der Pionier thus offers a captivating look into the life of Louis Friedrich Sachse and the development of the nineteenth century art market. The scope of the book and the number of interrelations that Anna Ahrens traces are astounding. The fact that the author touches on so many different connected topics makes the book a very valuable resource for anyone interested in the development of the arts in this time. Encompassing the development of new reproduction techniques, the formation of an international network of art dealers and artists and the boom of public infrastructure of art, *Der Pionier* is much more than a monograph. It discusses the urban and social surrounding of Sachse's institute and exhibitions, and demonstrates the complicated international relationships between fledgling nation states that were, not too long ago, at war. As such, *Der Pionier* is almost more a cultural study or a network analysis of the times.

Because of its sheer bulk and the expanse of information, one can easily call *Der Pionier* a behemoth. With 780 pages in total, 500 pages of core text, 1300 footnotes and 288 black and white images, the book is vast. The almost 300 images certainly contribute a necessary but enjoyable visual complement to the text, offering not just illustrations but frequently reinforcing the points that the author makes. Yet no book is perfect and *Der Pionier* is no exception. The points of improvement mostly relate to the accessibility of the book to the reader. Firstly, *Der Pionier* is extremely, almost excessively detailed. This can be considered both as a

vice and a virtue. Parts of the book contain detailed descriptions of travels or give lengthy biographies of people that Sachse had business with. While this offers more specific insights, not all of it seems relevant in the greater narrative of Sachse's life. The unfortunate effect of the inclusion of these details is that it makes it harder for the reader to focus on the actual main narrative of the book. This is further complicated by the fact that the book does not progress strictly chronologically. While the thematic approach of the chapters does offer some guidance, the fact that the timeline throughout the book frequently doubles back on itself makes it hard to keep track where exactly the reader is in time. It also makes it harder to see how Sachse's different exploits actually relate to each other.

Second, the *Der Pionier* would have been even better if the author was more present in her text. Throughout much of the book the tone of the narrative is very descriptive. Even just the relationship between the various topics (lithography, daguerreotypes and contemporary art) in the chapters seems to merit more analysis than the author capitalizes on. For example, the reader is left wondering how exactly Sachse viewed the relationship between his many different exploits in both his institute and his later exhibition. It is only in the last part of the book that Anna Ahrens is more present throughout the text with brief but pointed analyses that add excellent insights into the facts under discussion. One example is her analysis of Sachse's relationship with the idea of *Bildung* as conceived by his former boss Wilhelm von Humboldt. Paragraphs like these emphasize the fact that the *Der Pionier* would have been even better if the author was more present in the text. While the encyclopaedic scope of the book may not have offered much leeway for such consideration, it is a pity, as foregoing some of the more detailed factual descriptions for more in-depth analysis and a slightly stricter focus would have probably made *Der Pionier* a stronger and more accessible publication.

However, as a work that reviews the networks of the art world in the nineteenth century from the point of Louis Friedrich Sachse, and as an encyclopaedia of the personal ties, *Der Pionier* is an absolutely stellar feat. Sachse really does prove more than worthy of the attention lavished on him and Ahrens' has proved she was the right author to do so. What is more, the book offers a lot of questions that future research could pick up on, such as the relationship between the art market and academic art history, a further international analysis of the art market and Berlin's position in it, as well as the position of the brothers Von Humboldt in the Prussian art scene, just to name a few. Its scope and quality therefore make *Der Pionier* both literally and figuratively a vast contribution to the field of nineteenth century art historiography and with its fantastic repository of information, sources and images, it will offer a basis for research for many years to come.

Anne Nike van Dam is a PhD student at Leiden University in the Netherlands. As a scholar of the history of art history, her research is focused on the development of art history as an academic discipline in Germany during the nineteenth century. She is especially interested in the definition of '*wissenschaftlichkeit*' in the early humanities, interdisciplinary histories and intercultural art history.

a.n.van.dam@umail.leidenuniv.nl



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)