



PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST:  
FRIEDRICH WILHELM KUHNERT

# ARTIST, NATURALIST – AND HUNTER

“ONLY AN ARTIST DEDICATED TO HIS WORK, WHO EXPOSES HIMSELF TO THE DANGERS OF THE WILDERNESS, WHO HAS THE KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNIQUE, IS CAPABLE OF PORTRAYING WILD CREATURES.”

– Fritz Meyer-Schoenbrunn, *Introduction to Kuhnert's Meine Tiere*.

TEXT: BROOKE CHILVERS LUBIN  
IMAGES: RUSSELL FINK GALLERY,  
ROLF D. BALDUS

Europe's first plein-air artist to travel to Africa to portray its wildlife, landscapes and indigenous people, Friedrich Wilhelm Kuhnert, was born on September 28, 1865 in Oppeln, Oberschlesien. Although his family recognized his prodigious talent already at age three, from drawings on a kitchen tablecloth, his civil-servant father's finances obliged him, at age fourteen, to apprentice in the Dutch tool-machining factory, Dessauer Maschinenfabrik, in Cottbus in Brandenburg, over 300 kilometers away.

Nevertheless, on his own he studied Old Masters, like Holbein, using his pastor as a model for his profile portraits, and painted Dutch-inspired seascapes and farm animals. At seventeen, his uncle arranged for his move to Berlin, which would become his permanent home, to live with his cousin Klara Roppertz and her husband. After supporting himself for two years as a portrait artist and calligrapher of elaborate calling cards, the completely self-taught nineteen-year-old applied to Berlin's Royal Academy of Art, the Königliche Akademische Hochschule für bildende Künste.

The classically structured four-year Studium included drawing with pencil, charcoal and chalk; human anatomy and proportion, working from both plaster casts and

live models; and perspective and shading. Already by 1827, the Academy had acknowledged the importance of applying traditional disciplines in portraying animals, and thus contributed to the 19th century fashion for landscapes with sheep, cows and horses. As a result, Kuhnert studied landscape painting under Ferdinand Bellermann (1814–1899), a plein-air enthusiast who had spent four years in Venezuela depicting its rainforests in exuberantly exotic, but scientifically accurate landscapes. He also studied under Paul Meyerheim (1842–1915), who'd done credible works of circus and zoo lions, and who taught about the connection of skeleton and musculature to movement, expression, and the sheen of fur.

As part of his education, in addition to domestic animals, young Kuhnert painted hares, roe deer and red stag from the fields and forests from Dresden and Karlsruhe, and visited zoos as far away as Düsseldorf. Prof. Dr. H. L. Heck, Director of the Zoological Gardens of Berlin, describes the artist standing in front of cages with sketchbook in hand, filling it with studies, especially of lion.

Kuhnert could quickly internalize a scene and rapidly recreate it in two dimensions. Later, he'd complete a ten-foot-long canvas in four days. He reputedly never used an eraser on a single drawing, or made a correction to

In March 1891, Wilhelm Kuhnert, the 27-year-old Berlin artist set off to Germany's East African colony for his first eighteen-month safari.



**Top:** Following in the footsteps of his mentor, Paul Meyerheim, Kuhnert visited zoological parks from Berlin to Düsseldorf to study wild animals. *Resting Tiger* courtesy of Russell Fink Gallery.

**Right:** Although Kuhnert preferred grey skies, in Africa he often painted blue ones to offset his powerful subject's striking contrasting colors. *Cape Buffalo* courtesy of Russell Fink Gallery.

any of his 138 drypoint etching plates (usually published in editions of 60 or 100), all of which have been lost or destroyed since the last was pulled in 1925.

Success came early, and by age twenty he could already afford his first of many Berlin ateliers – Kurfürstenstrasse 98 near the zoo, 41 Luitpold Street, and finally Siegmundshof – and follow his itch for adventure, traveling to Sächsische Schweiz, Sweden and Lithuania.

But the air was thick with talk of Africa when Chancellor Otto von Bismarck formalized Germany's position in the "Scramble for Africa" at his 1884/85 Berlin West Africa Conference, where he announced the granting of an imperial charter to the Gesellschaft für deutsche Kolonisation or Society for German Colonization to establish a protectorate in East Africa, covering German trade interests as the

Deutsch-Ostafrikanische Gesellschaft, or German East Africa Company. Tribal uprisings soon led the company to sell out its holding to the German government in 1891. German East Africa (G.E.A.), lying between Great Britain's Kenya colony and Portugal's Mozambique, and encompassing yesterday's Tanganyika and today's Rwanda and Burundi, would last to the end of World War I.

Only four years after the formation of Germany's African colony, and five years after the murder of Charles "Chinese" Gordon in Khartoum by Mahdi forces, in March 1891 Kuhnert, then twenty-seven, set off on his first eighteen-month African safari, funded by his earnings from illustrating a dictionary of animals published by Hans Meyer, the first European to climb Mount Kilimanjaro.

Starting out from the port of Tanga on the Indian Ocean near the Kenya border



on this first of four safaris, Kuhnert walked inland, without reliable maps, in the footsteps of Arab slavers through Masailand to the foothills of Kilimanjaro. His twenty-five porters carried his tents and camp furniture, rifles, staples, exchange goods, and his easels, pigments and canvases.

Kuhnert was his own professional hunter. In his diaries, he complains of having to exchange his brushes for his hunting guns, to fill the ever-rumbling bellies of up to sixty easily disgruntled men. He recounts his stalks for elephant, lion and buffalo, shooting distances, and locations of recovered bullets with the passion of a big-game hunter, like when his blunderbuss killed a large crocodile that was gnawing on the carcass of a hippo he'd killed the previous day.

Kuhnert described and measured his subjects from horn tip to tail hairs with

the curiosity of a 19th-century naturalist scientist, but perceived their natural environment with the vision of a landscape artist. He chronicled African skies and weather, which he expressed in the bright, tropical luminescence – so different from Berlin studio light – of his paintings. Although he preferred grey skies, he painted blue ones to offset his giraffes' and zebras' striking markings, or the exploding fields of lavender flowers of the Masai steppe in bloom.

He records accidents, illnesses, loads lost in rivers, and both the kindness and truculence of the natives. Overwhelmed by the verdancy of the savanna during East Africa's two rainy seasons, he swears off abusing the greens of his daringly vivid palette. He describes the shapes of umbrella acacias and shimmering yellow fever trees, and the misery of painting amid clouds of annoying

insects, and how the dry season heat caused the colors of his palette to mix together, its swirling winds carrying sand and dust into his eyes and onto his canvases. Yet he loved living as free as his subjects, whose body language and physiognomy he noted were not the same as caged zoo animals.

In 1893, Kuhnert displayed his big, dramatic African scenes at the Berlin Art Exhibition and won its Medal of Honor. Despite his wanderlust, he married the eighteen-year-old Emilie Caroline Wilhelmine Otilie Alwine Herdieckerhoff, and fathered a single daughter, also named Emilie.

In June 1905, he started his second safari with thirty-four porters, two guides, two "boys", one cook, and two "bibis" (ladies), this time starting off farther south, from Dar es Salaam. "He walked westwards, painting and hunting crocodiles, hippos and reedbuck,



WILHELM KUHNERT AND THE IMAGE OF AFRICA

# PAINTER AND COLONIAL EXPLORER

THE KING OF THE ANIMALS | EXHIBITION AT THE SCHIRN ART CENTER, FRANKFURT, GERMANY | OCTOBER 25, 2018 – JANUARY 27, 2019

TEXT: ROLF D. BALDUS

The painter Wilhelm Kuhnert (1865-1926) was one of the most extraordinary artists in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. Unlike his teachers and contemporaries, he did not content himself with painting animals that lived in zoos. Kuhnert was the first open-air painter to undertake the exertions of a journey to the German colonies in East Africa, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, to study its flora and fauna. He was not only an artist, but he went on expeditions as a researcher as well.

In the autumn of 2018, the Schirn Art Center in Frankfurt, Germany, will pay tribute in a comprehensive retrospective to this extraordinary artist, who became known as the greatest African painter of his time, and the illustrator of Brehms *Life of Animals*. Kuhnert became the leading interpreter of his time of tropical wildlife, and had a lasting influence on the image that people had of Africa. At the time, the image of the continent was colored by political-expansionist goals, as well as by escapist yearnings for a life of freedom outside the bourgeois morality. Thus, his work cannot only be understood as a mirror of the history of art and science, but also of colonial history. The exhibition organizers have recognized this in their promotion of the event.

Although his art is known to many people today, and his paintings achieve prices at auctions that hardly any academically trained painter of this era achieves, Wilhelm Kuhnert is almost completely forgotten in the realm of museum representation. This is primarily due to his realistic painting style, which was committed to academicism and which,

after 1945, met with rejection due to the triumphant advance of abstraction. However, for some years now it has been precisely this style of painting that has received attention in art-historical research.

The Kuhnert exhibition at the Schirn Art Center will encompass his entire artistic body of work, which includes not only paintings, etchings, and drawings, but also numerous prints and applied arts, and publications on African wildlife. European and American museums, as well as private collections, and the estate of the artist are supporting the exhibition with loans of his works. Because of this fact, not only will this remarkable artist be comprehensively represented, but also his considerable influence on the German and Anglo-Saxon conceptions of the African continent will be illustrated. The examination of Wilhelm Kuhnert's work also cuts across subject areas that are currently of considerable relevance, not only in terms of art history but also socially, not least about the role of Germany during the colonial period.

## Animals and Hunting

In the Wilhelminian society of the late nineteenth century, that was characterized by strict moral codes and where people increasingly moved away from the animal world due to the increasing industrialization and urbanization in everyday life, African wild animals offered a welcome avenue of escape towards nature romanticism and exoticism. Simultaneously, the lion symbolized strength and energy as the 'king of animals'. The upper bourgeoisie of this era was only too happy to identify with this symbolism.

Kuhnert knew how to use the symbolism of African wildlife, by often staging it, especially his lions, in dramatic, idealized depictions. Nevertheless, he was always committed to realism.

For Kuhnert, his experiences with the wildlife in German East Africa brought with it another component: the hunt. On one hand he was a passionate hunter, and on the other, hunting wild animals helped him to study them more thoroughly. Additionally, he had to provide his porters and camp staff with food. In his own writings he revealed himself as a thoroughly ambitious hunter. He could be enthusiastic about the hunting successes he achieved, but at the same time he was aware of the dangers threatening wildlife, and he repeatedly warned against the consequences of uncontrolled poaching.

Non-hunters then viewed this relationship to hunting and animal welfare with ambivalence, as do non-hunters today. However, it is typical for hunters, who use nature sustainably, to strive for its conservation. The end of the then customary commercial over-exploitation of the seemingly endless game populations in East Africa was initiated and accomplished by hunters. At that time they created the first national parks where hunting wasn't permitted. Kuhnert adhered strictly to the new game protection laws, as he traveled through the first game reserve along the Rufiji River, established by Governor Wissmann in 1896. This reserve, named by the British after the Victorian hunter, author and adventurer Frederick Selous, remains to this day.

For more information: [www.shirn.de](http://www.shirn.de)



crossed the Ruvu and Mgeta Rivers by dugout canoe, explored what is now the Northern Sector of the present-day Selous Game Reserve, marched along the Rufiji, Ruhaha and Ulanga Rivers, and ended up in Mahenge and Iringa,” writes Rolf Baldus in his book, *Wild Heart of Africa – The Selous Game Reserve in Tanzania*. “He came close to falling into crocodile-infested waters, but fortunately quickly managed to rescue a couple of guns, as well as his camera and himself.”

Sometimes the going was terribly tough and tedious through “elephant country, dense bush, high grass, hardly passable, no paths, elephant and hippo trails on which you can break your ankles a hundred times,” wrote Kuhnert in his diary. Sometimes, he marched in scorching heat across the boring burnt bush, other times by moonlight, witnessing the Rufiji in the silver night light. Only when his staff was well fed with impala or other antelope he’d killed, and he’d finished the daily rounds of doctoring them, could he

sit in the shade of a mvule tree and devote himself entirely to his sketching and painting.

Caught up in the Maji Maji Rebellion, the native uprising against colonial tax and labor policies, he was confined for weeks in the primitive garrison post of Mahenge, “defended by only five German soldiers of the Schutztruppe and sixty African askaris, against thousands of African warriors,” adds Baldus. For weeks, some 4,000 natives besieged the area between today’s Ruaha National Park and the Selous Game Reserve.

Despite the fight during which Commander van Hassel was armed with two Maxim machine guns, Kuhnert took advantage of the relatively comfortable conditions to work while being under attack. In January 1906, he was confined again, in Madibira, but used the time to paint its mission churches and portraits of the local people.

After reaching the coast, he travelled from Bagamoyo to Zanzibar, to Tanga to Mombasa, then to India and Ceylon, during

Even on dangerous big game, Kuhnert acted as his own professional hunter, probably carrying a 7.65x53mm Mauser rifle.

which time his wife left him because of his long absences. They divorced in 1909, between his travels to Antwerp, Amsterdam and London.

Six years later, in January 1911, at the suggestion of a Leipzig newspaper, Kuhnert accompanied Friedrich August III, the last





**Left:** Kuhnert's struggle between hunter and artist reminded him that he came to Africa "just to observe as much as possible." Landscapes courtesy of Russell Fink Gallery.

**Top:** Although Kuhnert innovatively set his animal subjects in their proper habitats, his considerations in his compositions were more painterly than scientific.

king of Saxony, on safari in British-Egyptian Sudan, where they visited the battlefields of Omdurman. But the constraints and protocol disturbed him, especially the oversight in Dresden of procuring his hunting license for Sudan.

During his fourth safari, in 1912 in German East Africa, he lingered for weeks in game-rich spots with reliable water. His journals convey his feeling of being torn between hunting and painting: "Although the hunter in me has a difficult time overcoming the desire to shoot, the artist in me is stronger, and I have come just to observe as much as possible." But when a rifle breaks, so does he: "I can't hunt, and thus can't work... I am entirely broken. My entire trip is now, perhaps in question." Luckily, he had other rifles and the broken one could be repaired in Iringa. A compromise is struck with a water-buck: "I shot it in a way to get the most meat, but can also use such a piece for my work, so the two are united." His safari ended in

February 1913 when he broke his left arm. Although this required medical attention, he still managed to visit the Libyan Desert before returning to Berlin at the end of April.

Kuhnert's total original output is estimated at 5,500 works, including 3,500 major paintings, and two books: the richly illustrated *Im Lande meiner Modelle* (1918), based on his last safari and still untranslated until this day, and *Meine Tiere* (1925). He produced a single small bronze sculpture, of a Cape buffalo at rest, casting and numbering three himself, plus three unnumbered copies "that would be difficult to tell from recasts, if there are any," says Russell Fink of Russell Fink Gallery in Lorton, Virginia, who spent extensive time with Kuhnert's grandson Hansjörg Werner and his Kuhnert collection, which also includes his grandfather's personal dinnerware, silver service and hunting rifle.

Kuhnert's field knowledge led to the illustration of major zoological works, including *Brehms Tierleben* (1900), Hahn and





**Top:** Etchings such as *The Voice of Africa* were usually published in editions of 60 or 100. Courtesy of Russell Fink Gallery.

**Left:** Success came quickly to Wilhelm Kuhnert, and he soon established himself in a series of comfortable Berlin ateliers.

**Right:** Kuhnert's non-stop travels led to a divorce from his first wife. But in 1913, he married Gerta von Jankowski, who passed away on his 60th birthday.



Sievers *Afrika* (1901), Haake's *Das Tierleben der Erden* (1901) and Lydekker's *Animal Portraiture* (1912). He also illustrated hunting narratives by science-oriented sportsmen, like Hermann von Wissman, and the memoirs of G.E.A.'s first governor, Count Adolf von Götzen, who bloodily suppressed the colony's 1905 Maji Maji Rebellion, which Kuhnert had accidentally experienced firsthand.

Many of the places he portrayed in works that were signed and dated with the location have hardly changed in the more than one hundred years since. "The Rufiji River flows just as it did on 17th July 1905, when he painted it," writes Baldus. "The descendants of the hippos are still lying in the same spots and the trees do not look much different."

Since landscape and animal painting were taught as separate genres, much has been made of Kuhnert's painting of animals in their habitat. Until then, correctness of an animal's biotope was unimportant, and usually invented in the artist's head. Although Kuhnert's approach was innovative, his considerations were painterly rather than scientific.

For the impressionistic realism of his settings he employed loosely painted grasses, clumps of thornbush, and fallen deadwood as compositional tools, which flattered his untamed subjects' inherent strength and substance more than zealously copied details. To create the tone or mood of the place, he concentrated light and dark areas in different parts of the canvas. Kuhnert often divided the canvas into horizontal bands of fore-, mid- and background, varying their importance to establish both point of view and depth of field. For close-ups, he fills the canvas with his subject framed only by darker boulders, or silhouetted against the sky.

In 1913, Kuhnert married Gerta von Janowski. Although the Great War ended his travels to Africa, it allowed him to paint the last herds of European bison called "wisent" in the Bialowies Forest, the German-occupied game reserve in today's Poland of the former Czar Nicolas II. Just months after his wife passed away on his sixtieth birthday, Kuhnert himself died of pneumonia while on

cure for tuberculosis in Flims, Switzerland in February 1926.

Unfortunately, hundreds of the paintings we know from his eight-by-ten-inch black and white photographs that he catalogued according to country and species, disappeared in the British, American, and Russian bombing of Berlin in World War II. Reichsmarshall Hermann Goering was rumored to own 100, which may have been carted away by the Russians when they sacked his estate, Karinhalle.

Wilhelm "Lion" Kuhnert's lovely grave is in the Südwestkirchhof Standsdorf near Berlin. ■



Brooke Chilvers Lubin is the sporting art columnist for *Gray's Sporting Journal* and a regular contributor to *Hunter's Path*. Brooke is married to PH Rudy Lubin, who operated for more than forty years in the C.A.R., Tanzania and Cameroon.