

THE WORLD IN COLORS
SLOVENIAN PAINTING 1848–1918

Lower Belvedere
30 January to 25 May 2025



Ivana Kobilca, *Children in the Grass*, 1892
Private collection © National Gallery of Slovenia, Ljubljana

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The main theme of the exhibition, a joint project with the National Gallery of Slovenia, is a defining characteristic of Slovenian painting around 1900: the intensive engagement with color. Rarely has the study of its decorative effect, symbolism, expressive power, and technical application been at the heart of artistic developments to the same extent as it was in Slovenian painting from this period.

General Director Stella Rollig: The research conducted in preparation for this exhibition produced a wealth of new insights. We now have a much more nuanced picture of the influence of Slovenian artists in Vienna and a better understanding of their connections with their Austrian colleagues and with institutions such as the Belvedere. This also opened new art-historical perspectives on Slovenian painting, highlighting the modernity of the artists featured in the exhibition.

Following Jožef Tominc, the outstanding painter from the pre-1848 period, fascinating personalities such as Jožef Petkovšek and Ivana Kobilca stand out in the second half of the nineteenth century. Around 1900 the group known as the Slovenian Impressionists formed around artists Rihard Jakopič, Ivan Grohar, Matija Jama, and Matej Sternen. Their style influenced Slovenian art until 1918 and beyond.

Barbara Jaki, director and curator of the National Gallery of Slovenia: Vienna played a key role in recognizing the quality and originality of modern Slovenian painting. An exhibition at Vienna's Galerie Miethke (1904) marked a turning point for the generation of artists born in the 1860s who aimed to raise national visibility within a multinational monarchy through modern Slovenian art.

Inspired by French Impressionism, Slovenian Impressionists also sought to capture a fleeting moment in nature. In addition, however, experiments with color, form, and brushwork became increasingly important in their work.

Slovenian painting from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is characterized by a pronounced tendency to design the picture plane as a decorative arrangement of colors. Paintings are often composed solely through a carefully devised combination of a few colors uniformly applied to denote different pictorial elements. This stylistic device was also employed by other artists, but a comparison with paintings in other countries from the same period makes it surprisingly clear that Slovenian painters explored color composition with far greater intensity and consistency than their peers elsewhere, said curator Markus Fellingner.

The show at the Lower Belvedere gives special attention to Slovenian artists' ambivalent relationship to Austria and its capital Vienna. Many of these artists studied or lived for a time in Austria and were caught between conflicting feelings stemming from a sense of latent exclusion while at the same time being dependent on state funding. In this context, many documents from the Belvedere Archive shed a fresh, more nuanced light on the cultural-political ties between Vienna and Ljubljana.

In co-operation with the National Gallery of Slovenia.

EXHIBITION TEXTS

The seven decades between the revolution year of 1848 and the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918 were a time of great change in Slovenian art and culture. The defining characteristic of Slovenian painting during this period was an intensive engagement with color: its decorative effect, symbolism, expressive power, and technical application.

Joining forces with the National Gallery of Slovenia, the Belvedere explores in this exhibition the cultural-political ties between Vienna and Ljubljana in the years around 1900. It was a period when many Slovenian artists studied or lived for a time in Vienna, Graz, or Lower Austria. Exhibitions of international art, networks of colleagues, and friendly ties inspired them as they developed their own independent style of modernism.

One focus of the show is the art of 19th-century Slovenian painters, such as Jožef Tominc, Jožef Petkovšek, and Ivana Kobilca. At the heart of the exhibition is the group of artists in the orbit of Rihard Jakopič, Ivan Grohar, Matija Jama, and Matej Sternen. The style they developed around 1900, known as Slovenian Impressionism, is to this day regarded as the high point of Slovenian painting and captures the world in colors.

New Horizons in Landscape Painting

Until the mid-19th century, Slovenian landscapists were shaped by their training in German-speaking Austria. They found many of their subjects in the imposing mountains and fertile plains around Ljubljana, which artists depicted in a realistic style. The first steps toward a modern interpretation of painting emerged in Pavel Künl's works. This was followed in the late 1860s by Anton Karinger's new analytical treatment of landscape structures, an approach seen later in the work of Austrian artist Anton Romako. Painters Jurij Šubic, Jožef Petkovšek, and Ivana Kobilca all spent periods in France in the 1880s and 1890s. The art world in Paris provided them with abundant inspiration and helped shape subsequent Slovenian painting.

Painting by Design

Inspired by the natural sciences, painters in the 19th century sought to underpin their artistic practice with theory. Accordingly, artists' approach to color was increasingly altered by an exact analysis of interactions between colors and their optical effects. In Slovenia this took on a distinctive character, with artists meticulously designing decorative arrangements of colors on the picture plane. A few main colors are repeated on different objects creating visual connections throughout the image. However, as this device contradicted realistic representation, it is atypical of 19th-century painting.

Comparable approaches did not appear until the modern styles of Neo- and Postimpressionism.

Ivana Kobilca: The Discovery of Light

In an art world dominated by men, Ivana Kobilca was the most successful Slovenian artist around 1900. She had decided to become a painter after visiting the Imperial Picture Gallery at the Belvedere in Vienna as a teenager. As a young woman she studied at Alois Erdtelt's private school in Munich, where she became established as a portraitist. This was followed by extended periods in Vienna, Munich, Paris, and Berlin. Kobilca was well connected in the avant-garde circles of her day and was soon presenting her work at international exhibitions such as the Vienna Künstlerhaus in 1888, the Paris Salon du Champ-de-Mars in 1891, and—as the first Slovenian woman artist—the Venice Biennale in 1897. Kobilca's early works were in a dark palette, reflecting the style of the Munich School, but in the 1890s her approach started to change. The artist discovered open-air painting and the atmosphere created from natural light, which increasingly defined her art.

Real Life

From the mid-19th century, many artists became increasingly interested in depicting "real" life. They no longer composed idealized images of people and landscapes but represented the social realities of the working world. In these images of precarious existences, artists were also capturing their own experiences. Most artists featured in this exhibition enjoyed neither a secure income nor social recognition. Many images reflect fears about the future, alienation and loneliness, hard work and humble pleasures. In addition, throughout Europe at this time, subjects depicting "ordinary people" were also symbols of an awakening sense of national identity.

Anton Ažbe and His Painting School

An entire generation of Slovenian artists was guided by painter Anton Ažbe. After studying at the academies in Vienna and Munich, in 1891 Ferdo Vesel and Rihard Jakopič encouraged him to set up a painting school in Munich. This soon developed into the city's largest and most respected private center of artistic training. Students at Ažbe's school included iconic pioneers of modern art such as painters Wassily Kandinsky and Alexei Jawlensky. It was also where the group of artists in the orbit of Rihard Jakopič, Ivan Grohar, Matija Jama, and Matej Sternen studied. Ažbe incorporated modern analytical approaches to form and color in his teaching. His theory of "color crystallizations"

underpinned a technique of juxtaposing unmixed, pure colors. Ažbe also encouraged his students to paint using a broad brush in a spontaneous, sketchy style.

A New Style Emerges

In 1900 and 1902 the recently founded Slovenian Art Association organized major exhibitions in Ljubljana featuring national artists. Rihard Jakopič and his close colleagues presented their work to a wider public here for the first time. But the response was critical, their modernist paintings described in reviews as crude and "foreign." Undeterred, the artists continued with their work. Their focus was on how to capture a subjective impression using the formal means of painting. Jakopič and Matija Jama painted in the region around Ljubljana. They were often joined by Munich-based Matej Sternen, while Ivan Grohar started painting landscapes in various places in Slovenia. In close dialogue, these four painters developed the style that later came to be known as Slovenian Impressionism. Together with other like-minded artists their common goal was to connect Slovenian painting to international modern art.

Vienna: A Turning Point

In summer 1903 Ivan Grohar moved to Vienna hoping to find opportunities for exhibitions and sales. His plan was successful and in late February 1904 a major show of Slovenian art opened at the gallery of prestigious art dealer Hugo O. Miethke. The exhibition featured works by Grohar; Rihard Jakopič; Ferdo Vesel; Matej Sternen; his future wife, Roza Klein; Matija Jama; his wife, Louise; Peter Žmitek; and sculptor Franc Berneker. They exhibited as a modernist artist group under the name Sava. The show was a great success: rave reviews appeared in the Viennese press, and three works were acquired by the Imperial-Royal Ministry of Culture and Education, some destined for the Modern Gallery at the Belvedere. Vienna-based writer Ivan Cankar even saw it as the birth of a new Slovenian national style.

Slovenian Modernism

Paintings by the Impressionists could first be seen in Munich and Vienna around 1900, where to people's tastes they still seemed radically new. Their revolutionary painting style, capturing fleeting atmospheres of light and air in vibrant colors, made a deep impression on many artists. Important inspiration could be found at the major Impressionism exhibition held by the Vienna Secession in early 1903, which was visited by Slovenian artists Rihard Jakopič, Ferdo Vesel, and probably Ivan Grohar. They were enthralled by the work of French artist Claude Monet and the images by Symbolist painter Giovanni Segantini. Vincent van Gogh was the greatest influence on landscapist

Ivan Grohar. Inspired by these international examples, Slovenian painters went on to develop their own independent modern style.

Color Meets Form

During the late 19th century, a widespread method of teaching art in the schools of the Habsburg Empire involved practicing the observation and drawing of forms, patterns, and figures. The influence of this tuition can be found across the empire, and Slovenian artists were no exception: in addition to their bold colors, their compositions also follow strict formal principles. An essential foundation for the development of "form art" in Central Europe was provided by painter and theorist Adolf Hölzel. In his essay *Über Formen- und Massenverteilung im Bilde* (On the Distribution of Forms and Masses in Pictures), he presented rules about how to balance the arrangement of objects and figures in images. Although there is no record of any contact with the Slovenian Impressionists, they certainly would have known about Hölzel's works and theories.

Artistic Connections

Vienna had already attracted Slovenian artists during the 19th century, when many came to the city to study or seek commissions or sales. But their experiences in the conservative capital of the Habsburg Empire often left them disappointed. It was not until the artistic revival following the foundation of the Secession in 1897 that Vienna emerged as a center of modern art with international appeal—also for Slovenes. Ivan Grohar, Matija Jama, Rihard Jakopič, and Matej Sternen frequently visited exhibitions in Vienna. Their letters discussed colleagues such as Gustav Klimt, Carl Moll, Ernst Stöhr, and Anton Nowak from Maribor. Despite the growing movement seeking national autonomy and the quest for a "national style," developments in Slovenian art remained closely aligned with trends in Austria and other parts of the empire.

Experiments and Series

Inspired by French Impressionism, the aim of the Slovenian Impressionists was also to capture a fleeting moment in nature. In addition, however, experiments with color, form, and brushwork became increasingly important in their work. Their artistic focus shifted from realism to expression. A sequence of works by Rihard Jakopič, for instance, reveals how he had already moved away from a purely Impressionist approach by around 1900. Like Claude Monet in his famous series revisiting the same motif, Jakopič studied different atmospheres and effects of sunlight based on a group of slender trees. Similarly, Ivan Grohar, Matej Sternen, and Roza Klein-Sternen also moved toward more expressive compositions in around 1910.

Networks in Vienna

Slovenian artists in Vienna around 1900 had the backing of a friendly network of colleagues and fellow countrymen already living and working in the city. Architect Maks Fabiani, for example, member of the Ministry of Education Art Commission, advocated purchases by the state and participation of the Sava group in international exhibition projects. His colleague Jože Plečnik, member of the Secession, arranged for the first guest participation in a Secession exhibition in 1905 by Ivan Grohar, Rihard Jakopič, and Matija Jama, who continued to submit works until 1912. Other important supporters included writers such as Josip Stritar, who founded the literary magazine *Zvon* in Vienna. Ivan Cankar, the most important Slovenian writer of his generation, lived in Vienna from 1898 to 1909. He was a close friend of Grohar and other artists, who also served as inspiration for the principal characters in his stories.

Slovenian Art in the Belvedere Collection

Purchases for the state collections, participation in major international exhibitions, and grants were handled from 1910 by the Belvedere management. The extensive correspondence in the museum archive reflects this activity. The Belvedere inventory lists twenty-seven works by Slovenian artists acquired between 1904 and 1914, an indication that the Imperial-Royal Ministry of Culture and Education was aware of the cultural pluralism of the Austrian multiethnic state and actively promoted modern Slovenian art. Most of the paintings were loaned to Slovenian museums and government buildings in Ljubljana and Vienna. After the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy, the new state of Yugoslavia kept the works that were in Slovenia. In 1922 the remaining works were handed to the National Gallery of Slovenia under a sales agreement. Only Ivan Grohar's *Fields of Rafolče* is part of the Belvedere collection to this day.

Progress Toward a National Culture

The people of Slovenia have had political ties with present-day Austria since the early Middle Ages. Their settlements were almost exclusively in the Habsburg crown lands, in duchies and counties with German-speaking rulers. In the 19th century, as in the other crown lands of the monarchy and throughout Europe, an increasing sense of national identity emerged. Fine arts and above all literature played an important role in the search for a collective identity.

August Berthold

Photographer August Berthold was also a member of the inner circle of Slovenian Impressionists. He studied photography from 1902 to 1903 at the Vienna College of Graphic Arts, where he learned gum printing, the preferred technique of prominent Viennese photographers such as Heinrich Kühn, Hugo Henneberg, and Hans Watzek, who exerted a strong influence on his output. From 1904 Berthold worked as an art photographer in Ljubljana and was in close contact with Rihard Jakopič and like-minded artists. He studied their compositions and motifs, and his photographs also influenced them.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL EVENTS

1848–1918

1848

Emperor Ferdinand I abdicates after revolutions in Vienna and the entire empire. Franz Joseph I, the new emperor, establishes a neo-absolutist regime. France Prešeren publishes the poem "Zdravljica" (The Toast) about the March Revolution. The seventh verse is now the Slovenian national anthem.

1849

The kingdom of Illyria, formed in 1816 as a Habsburg crown land with Ljubljana as its capital, is dissolved and divided into the crown lands Carinthia, Carniola, and the Austrian Littoral.

1854

Completion of the Südbahn rail connection between Vienna and Ljubljana.

1858

Construction of the Ringstrasse begins.

1866

Josip Jurčič publishes the first Slovenian novel *Deseti brat* (The Tenth Brother).

1867

Austro-Hungarian Compromise: except for Prekmurje, the Slovenian territories remain in the Austrian half of the empire.

1868

The first Tabor mass gathering is organized, at which members of the national movement demand the equality of the Slovenian language.

1873

World's Fair in Vienna.

1874

First group exhibition of the Impressionists in Paris.

1883

Jurij Šubic is the first Slovenian artist to take part in the exhibition of the Salon des artistes français in Paris.

1888

Opening of Carniola's new Provincial Museum—Rudolfinum in the center of Ljubljana.

1889

Ivana Kobilca is the first Slovenian artist to have a solo exhibition in Ljubljana.

1890

Ljubljana's population exceeds 30,000.

1891

Anton Ažbe opens a private painting school in Munich. Ivana Kobilca participates in the exhibition at the Salon du Champ-de-Mars in Paris and subsequently spends two extended periods in the French capital. Ivan Šubic publishes his essay in Slovenian on

colors and their use in ornaments ("Barve in njih uporaba v ornamentih").

1895

Ljubljana suffers a devastating earthquake at Easter, causing massive destruction. Architect Maks Fabiani, who lived in Vienna, publishes a master plan for the reconstruction of Ljubljana, which will help determine the city's development in subsequent decades.

1897

Founding of the Vienna Secession. Ivana Kobilca and Ferdo Vesel participate in the second Venice Biennale.

1899

Founding of the Slovenian Art Association in Ljubljana.

1900

First Slovenian Art Exhibition in the Mestni dom (Municipal House) in Ljubljana.

1902

Second Slovenian Art Exhibition in the National Hall, now the National Gallery of Slovenia.

1903

Major Impressionist exhibition at the beginning of the year at the Vienna Secession. Monet exhibition in Munich. Opening of the Modern Gallery in the Lower Belvedere.

1904

First exhibition of the newly founded Sava artists' association at Galerie Miethke in Vienna.

1905

August Berthold opens his photo studio in Ljubljana. Rihard Jakopič, Matija Jama, and Ivan Grohar take part in the twenty-third exhibition of the Vienna Secession.

1906

The Sava group has its own room at the Imperial-Royal Austrian Exhibition in London.

1907

Matija Jama moves with his family to Gaaden. He lives until 1914 in various places in Lower Austria. Rihard Jakopič and Matej Sternen found a private art school in Ljubljana.

1909

On June 12 the Jakopič Pavilion in Ljubljana's Tivoli Park opens on the occasion of the third Slovenian Art Exhibition. Matija Jama participates in the thirty-third exhibition of the Secession and the Hagenbund Christmas exhibition.

1911

Jakopič, Grohar, and Jama exhibit works in the Austrian pavilion at the International Art Exhibition in Rome. Ivan Grohar dies in Ljubljana.

1912

Grohar, Jama, and Jakopič contribute eleven paintings to the forty-first exhibition of the Secession.

1914

Start of World War I.

1916

Death of Emperor Franz Joseph I.

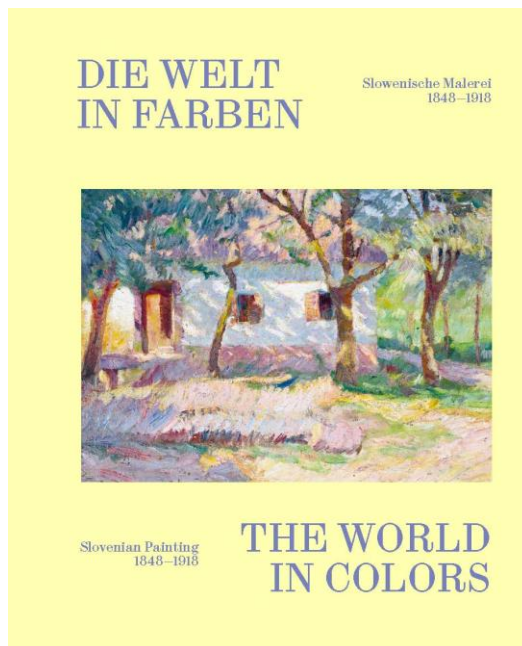
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1918

Deaths of Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Koloman Moser, Otto Wagner, and Ivan Cankar. Defeat of the Austro-Hungarian army in the fall and dissolution of the Habsburg Empire. The south Slavic areas

of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy merge with Serbia and Montenegro before the end of the year to form the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Founding of the National Gallery of Slovenia in Ljubljana.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE



The World in Colors. Slovenian Painting 1848-1918

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Graphic Design: Ivonne Stark

Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther & Franz König

288 pages and about 188 images

Format: 24 × 29,5 cm

OTA-Bind Softcover

Languages: German & English in one volume

ISBN 978-3-7533-0774-9

Price: € 29,80

Publication date: 29.01.2025

Copyediting GER: Katharina Sacken

Copyediting EN: Tas Skorupa

Translations GER-EN: Rebecca Law, Nick Somers

Translations SLO-GER: Marjeta Wakounig

Publication Management: Eva Lahnsteiner

GENERAL INFORMATION

Exhibition	The World in Colors: Slovenian Painting 1848–1918
Curators	Markus Fellingner (Curator Belvedere) and Barbara Jaki (Director of the NGS)
Assistant curators	Michel Mohor (Senior Curator at the NGS) and Miroslav Haľák (Assistant Curator Belvedere)
Duration	30 January to 25 May 2025
Location	Lower Belvedere, Rennweg 6, 1030 Vienna
Opening Hours	Monday to Sunday, 10 am to 6 pm
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