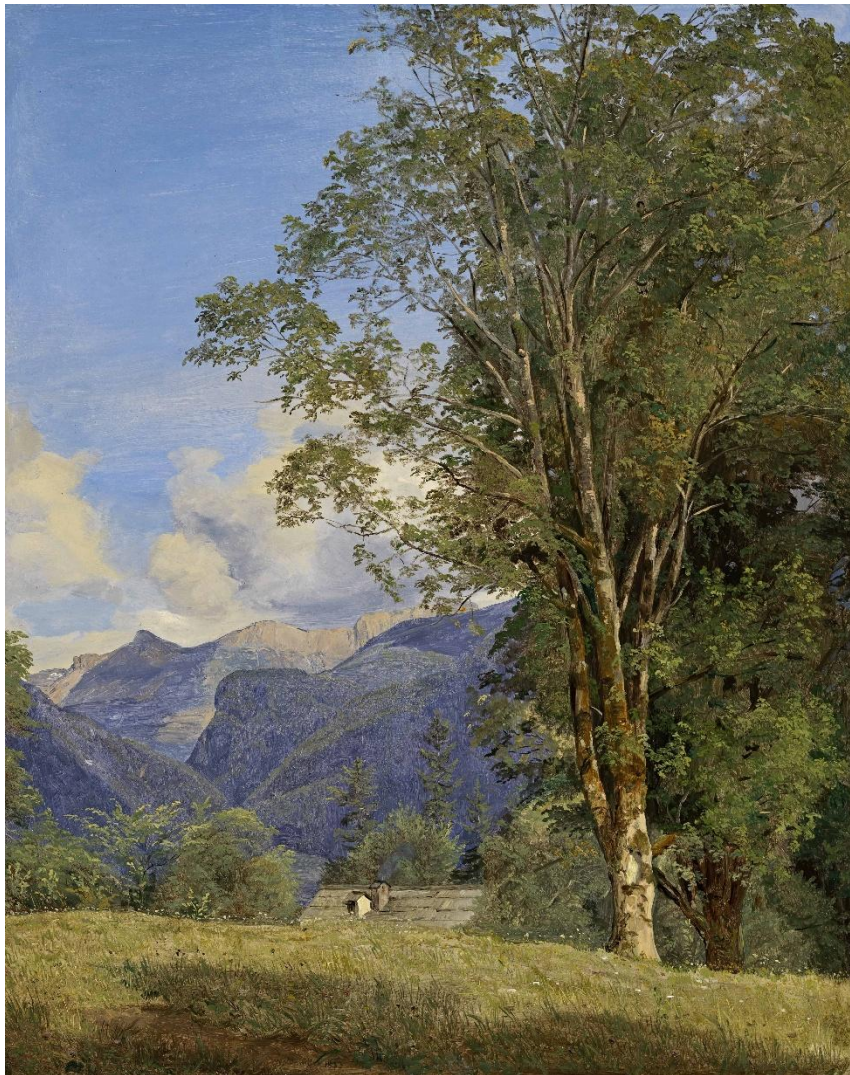


FERDINAND GEORG WALDMÜLLER

True to Nature

Lower Belvedere
27 February to 14 June 2026



Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, *Scene from the Ahorn Village with the Loser and Sandling Mountains*, 1833
Kunst Museum Winterthur, Oskar Reinhart Foundation, purchased 1932, photo: SIK-ISEA, Zurich, Philipp Hitz

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Landscape painting flourished across Europe during the nineteenth century. Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1793–1865) was part of this development, capturing people's yearning for the natural world in his intimate portraits of trees, sweeping landscapes from the Vienna Woods, and influential views of the Salzkammergut. The show also features trailblazing works by contemporaries, such as John Constable and Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, inspiring us to explore Waldmüller's realistic images of the natural world against the backdrop of wider European artistic developments.

General Director Stella Rollig: *Is it even possible to find new aspects to spotlight in Waldmüller's work? It is indeed! Waldmüller's popularity and the Belvedere's extensive holdings of his paintings make him one of the key artists in the museum's collection. By juxtaposing his landscapes with works by other European artists, this exhibition promises fresh perspectives—even for enthusiasts and experts.*

In the first half of the nineteenth century, progressive artists across Europe issued a clarion call for art to be true to nature. At the same time, they increasingly concentrated on their native landscapes. Accompanying this was a more general trend of people wanting to spend more time in the natural world, to learn about it, and to bring nature into their homes in the form of pictures. Political upheavals, social change, and advancing industrialization were the forces behind this cultural shift in the nineteenth century.

Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller, a major Austrian painter from the Biedermeier period, made it his goal to paint "the nature that surrounds us, our time, our customs." His true-to-life portraits, genre scenes, and landscapes polarized opinion. Waldmüller was—and still is—best known for his realistic portraits and scenes from everyday life. Real, observed landscapes only appear as backgrounds early on in his career. This changed in the 1830s, and Waldmüller began placing the natural world at the forefront of his work, producing numerous views with striking naturalism. From that point onward, landscape assumed a decisive role in his art—an interest that remained with him until the end of his life.

Waldmüller was one of the few artists of his time to be equally successful in portraiture, genre painting, and landscape. His naturalistic landscapes—appearing both as backgrounds and as independent images—reflect a broader interest in the natural world in Europe. By placing Waldmüller's landscapes in the context of works by his European contemporaries, new perspectives on his oeuvre unfold, positioning it as a distinctive example of naturalism in Europe, said curator Arnika Groenewald-Schmidt.

Although rooted in a shared ideology, distinct strands of naturalism emerged in different countries, and these were partly interconnected and partly parallel developments. Significant variations in style and approaches to representing the natural world reflect differing methods of training, cultural backgrounds, and topographies. The exhibition offers the chance to explore Waldmüller's engagement with landscape in his views from the Prater in Vienna and the Vienna Woods, the region around Salzburg, and from Italy. Meanwhile, works by European greats, such as John Constable, Johann Christian Dahl, and Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, place Waldmüller in the context of his time.

In summer 2026 the National Gallery will present the first ever UK exhibition of paintings by Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller. *Waldmüller: Landscapes* (2 July – 20 September 2026), additionally the first devoted solely to his work as a landscape painter, is a collaboration between the National Gallery and the Belvedere, which is lending most of the works on display.

EXHIBITION TEXTS

Gnarled trees in the Vienna Prater, the snowcapped Dachstein mountain, a sun-drenched path near Mödling: Real, observed landscapes play a central role in the work of Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller. For this major Austrian painter from the Biedermeier period, landscape was not only a backdrop for portraits and scenes from everyday life but also a subject in its own right. He always sought to depict his motifs with maximum truth to nature—an approach that polarized opinion.

"Truth to nature" was a goal of progressive artists throughout Europe in the first half of the 19th century. Rather than composing idealized landscapes emulating classical models, they were interested in depicting what they saw. Exploring their own surroundings was of key importance. Ongoing industrialization prompted a yearning for a return to simplicity. Coupled with the growing popularity of Alpine tourism, authentic views from the natural world were a welcome addition to the homes of wealthy city-dwellers.

But what image of nature does Waldmüller present, and how do his paintings convey the idea of people's altered relationship with their environment? This exhibition explores Waldmüller's engagement with landscape in the Vienna Woods, the Prater, the Salzkammergut, and in Italy. It also features works by fellow artists such as John Constable, Johan Christian Dahl, and Théodore Rousseau, inspiring us to see Waldmüller in the context of his time.

Nature Takes Center Stage

In the 19th century, aspiring members of the middle class developed into a new group of art buyers. While the nobility and the Church had commissioned paintings with mythological, religious, and historical themes for centuries, middle-class collectors preferred motifs with relevance to their lives. Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller became a sought-after portrait and genre painter. Whereas many of his colleagues placed their figures in generic landscapes, Waldmüller chose real motifs from the Vienna Woods and the Salzkammergut as backdrops. From the 1830s onward, he painted many views of the landscapes in these regions, moving toward a Naturalistic style of landscape painting. He exhibited eight small-format pictures of the countryside near Ischl and the Vienna Prater at the academy exhibition in 1832.

Tradition and Innovation

Landscape painting first flourished in the Netherlands in the 17th century. Artists such as Jacob van Ruisdael painted scenes from their surroundings, liberating nature from its function as a background and making landscape a theme in its own right. In the 19th century, these compositions were a source of inspiration for pioneers of a realistic depiction of nature, including John Constable in England, the Barbizon School in France, and Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller. Deliberately spurning idealized academic compositions, they showed authentic views of their environment. Waldmüller's pictures of forests and monumental trees in the Vienna Prater from the 1830s onward are typical of this transition, as the individual trees were transformed from an object of study to the subject of the painting.

Identification with the Landscape

Following the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19th century, a new patriotic awareness emerged in Europe as people identified more strongly with their own homelands. Characteristic views of real landscapes were popular. After Salzburg was incorporated into the Habsburg monarchy in 1816, the Alpine landscape became the face of the empire. Starting in the 1820s, this region developed into a popular vacation destination for the wealthy classes. The depictions of nature in the background of Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller's portraits therefore not only represented desirable locations but were also symbols of social status and identification with the region. While the nobility had previously tended to pose in front of their own estates, the aspiring middle class chose idyllic mountain landscapes as the backgrounds to their portraits as a way of emphasizing their social status.

Art and Tourism

From the late 1820s, the beauty of the mountains and the brine baths in Ischl increasingly drew wealthy Viennese society to the Salzburg region in summer. These affluent vacationers were followed by artists to meet the great demand for paintings with an identifiable landscape. The works not only brought familiar natural surroundings to Biedermeier urban homes but also signaled the social

status of their occupants. The views of the Dachstein, Lake Hallstatt, and the Gastein waterfall soon became popular and still influence how we imagine these regions today. But Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller also painted pictures of more intimate and less spectacular places, an expression of the yearning of city dwellers for "unspoiled" nature.

Southern Light

After a decade of intensive engagement with Alpine motifs, Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller sought fresh inspiration in Italy. In 1841 he traveled to Lake Garda and Venice, and from 1844 he spent fall in Sicily for three years in succession. Here he discovered painting in direct sunlight, which was to exert a lasting influence on his work. For centuries, the picturesque natural surroundings and distinctive light had attracted artists from the north to Italy. They completed numerous studies and sketches, which were later used as source material for idealized views or fantasy landscapes. As elsewhere, Waldmüller's main focus in the South was precise observation of the motifs and, more especially, the depiction of light and shadow.

Light Painting and Genre

Inspired by his experiences in Italy, in the last two decades of his life Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller turned his attention to light, people, and nature in the Vienna Woods. He painted numerous everyday rural scenes straddling the real and the ideal. While artists throughout Europe were tending toward atmospheric depictions and looser brushwork, Waldmüller remained faithful to a lucid style with a focus on details. Art critics compared his work negatively with the new medium of photography. His choice of colors, frequently described as "garish," also met with incomprehension. The contemporary Pre-Raphaelites in Britain favored bright colors and rich detail as well. Like Waldmüller, they not only made studies of nature but also worked directly on their paintings outdoors.

BIOGRAPHY FERDINAND GEORG WALDMÜLLER

1793

Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller is born on January 15 in Vienna.

1807

Begins his studies at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts.

1811–17

Lives and works in Pressburg/Bratislava, then as a decorative painter in Agram/Zagreb, where he meets the singer Katharina Weidner, whom he marries in 1814. The couple has three children. They also live in Brünn/Brno, Prague, and from 1817 in Vienna.

1822

Divorces Katharina Weidner, with final separation in 1833.

1825 and 1826

Takes study trips to northern Italy and Venice, then visits Dresden to copy Old Masters.

1829

Appointed curator of the painting collection of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna.

1830

Travels to Paris; paints first Prater landscapes; spends first of regular summer vacations in the Salzkammergut.

1835

Appointed ordinary member of the academy council.

1836–38

Gives private lessons at the academy, which is later forbidden. His advocacy of the study of nature attracts many students but also meets resistance from colleagues. He is nevertheless one of the most respected artists in Vienna.

1841

Travels to Lake Garda and Venice.

1844–46

Travels to Sicily three years in a row.

1846

Publishes his ideas for reforming art education under the title *Das Bedürfniß eines zweckmäßigeren Unterrichts in der Malerei und plastischen Kunst* (The Need for More Suitable Instruction in Painting and Sculpture).

1851

Marries Anna Bayer.

1855

Successfully participates in the World's Fair in Paris.

1856

Travels to London and sells thirty-four paintings there.

1857

His pamphlet *Andeutungen zur Belebung der vaterländischen bildenden Kunst* (Suggestions for the Revival of the Fine Arts of the Fatherland) leads to his suspension from the academy on a half-pension. The full pension entitlement is not granted until 1864.

1861

Successfully participates in the art exhibition in Cologne.

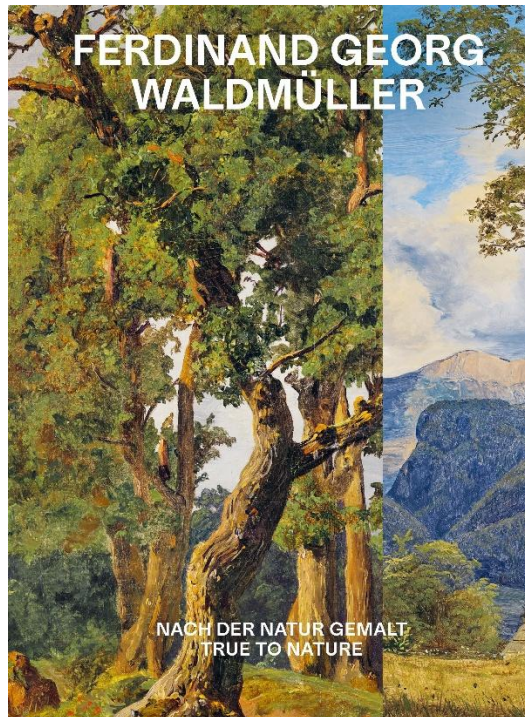
1862

Participates in the International Exhibition in London.

1865

Waldmüller dies on August 23 in Hinterbrühl near Vienna at the age of seventy-two.

CATALOGUE



Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller. True to Nature

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FERDINAND GEORG WALDMÜLLER

AT THE BELVEDERE

Total number in the Belvedere collection

80 works (including 13 on permanent loan)

On display in the permanent exhibition *Picture This! The Belvedere Collection from Cranach to Lassnig* in the Upper Belvedere, as of February 26, 2026

Exhausted Strength, The Neighbors, On Corpus Christi Morning

First purchase for the collection

The Monastery Soup, 1858 (purchased in 1858, exhibited at the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna)

Most recent additions to the collection

The Last Rites, 1846 (bequest from a private collection, 2023)

Ruins of the Temple of Juno Lacinia near Agrigento, 1846 (permanent loan, 2023)

Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller-Archive

Following the death of Bruno Grimschitz, the former director of the Belvedere (previously the Österreichische Galerie), art historian Rupert Feuchtmüller took over his research into the work of Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller and continued it. In 1996 Feuchtmüller published the results of his findings in a monograph on the artist that also included a comprehensive catalogue raisonné. Since 1997, the Belvedere Archive has maintained and updated the Waldmüller Archive, access to which is via the work numbers in Feuchtmüller's catalogue of works.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Exhibition	Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller. True to Nature
Curator Assistant Curator	Arnika Groenewald-Schmidt Kati Renner
Exhibition Design	Juliette Israël
Graphic Design for the Exhibition	grafisches Büro, Vienna
Exhibition Production	Kristina Bosak, Stephan Pumberger
Conservation	Stefanie Jahn, Elias Campidell, Stefanie Hasenauer, János Korényi, Reka Kralik, Franziska Marinovic, Matthias Müller, Barbara Steiner
Duration	27 February to 14 June 2026
Location	Lower Belvedere, Rennweg 6, 1030 Vienna
Opening Hours	Monday to Sunday, 10 am to 6 pm
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For more information on the exhibition and high-resolution press photos please visit www.belvedere.at/en/press