

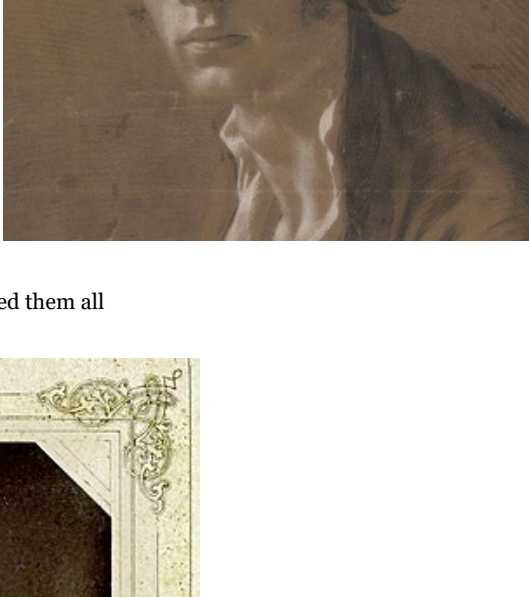
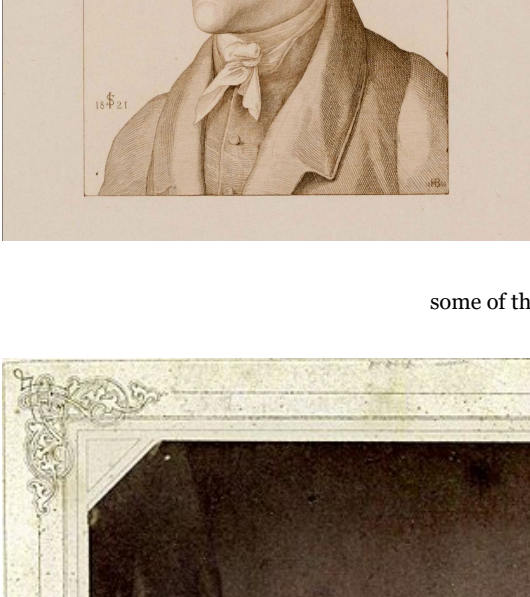
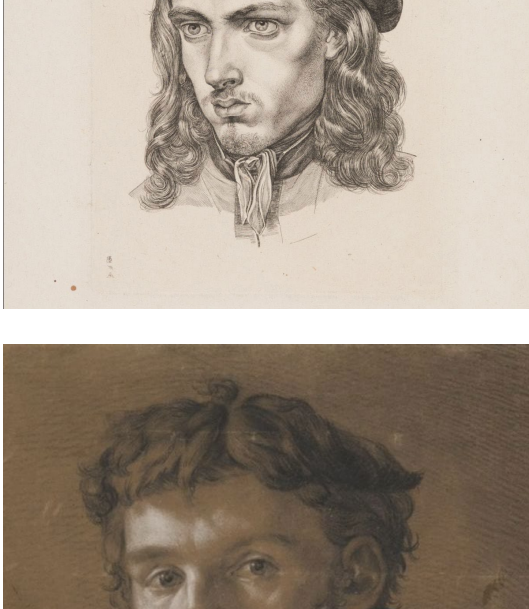
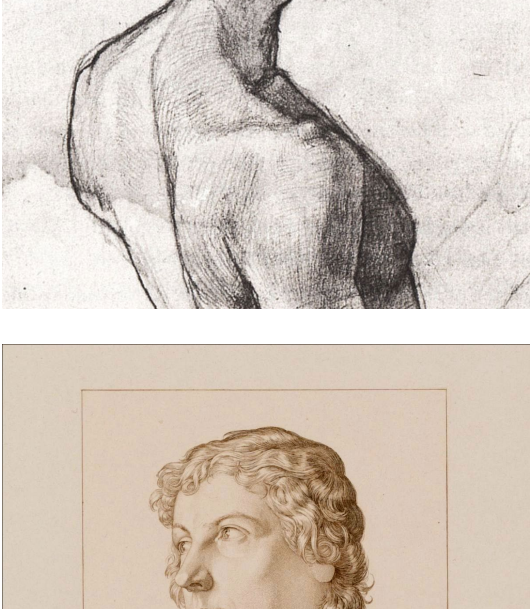
C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

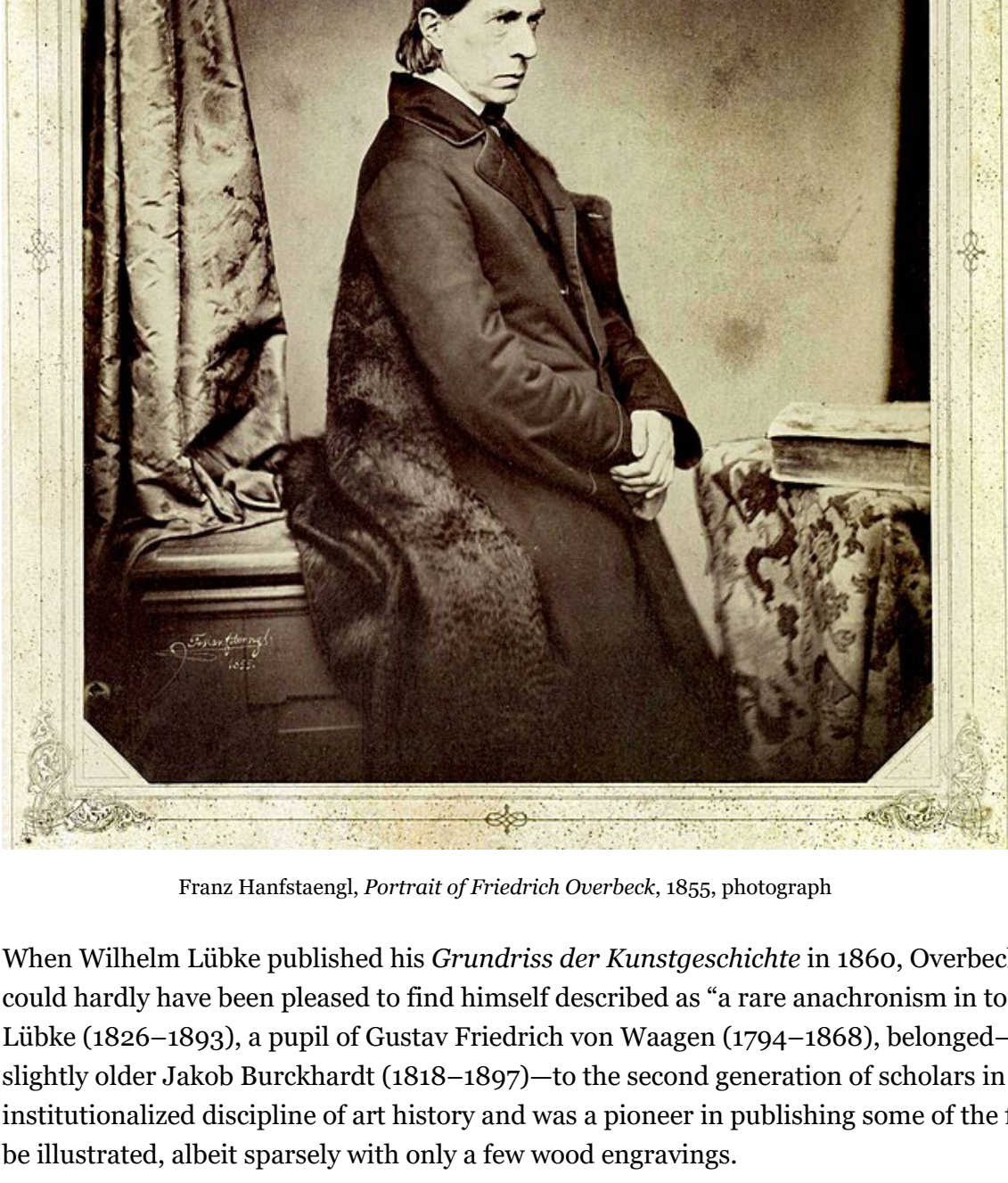
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4 September 2025

Unlike so many of the German Romantics—the artistic “rock stars” of the early nineteenth century—Friedrich Overbeck (1789–1869) lived to the age of 80. Compare this with the life spans of several of his contemporaries: Philipp Otto Runge, born in 1777, died at only 33, succumbing to tuberculosis; Karl Philipp Fohr, born in 1795, drowned—Chris Buckley style—on June 29, 1818 while swimming in the Tiber; Franz Gareis (of whom I could not find a portrait), born in 1775, died of typhus in Rome on May 31, 1803. Another victim of tuberculosis was Franz Horny, born in Weimar in 1798, for whom even the fresh air of the Roman Campagna could not bring a cure; he died in Olevano Romano on June 23, 1824. Johann Christoph Erhard, the least happy of the *tedeschi a Roma*, was not even 27 when he committed suicide there in 1822.

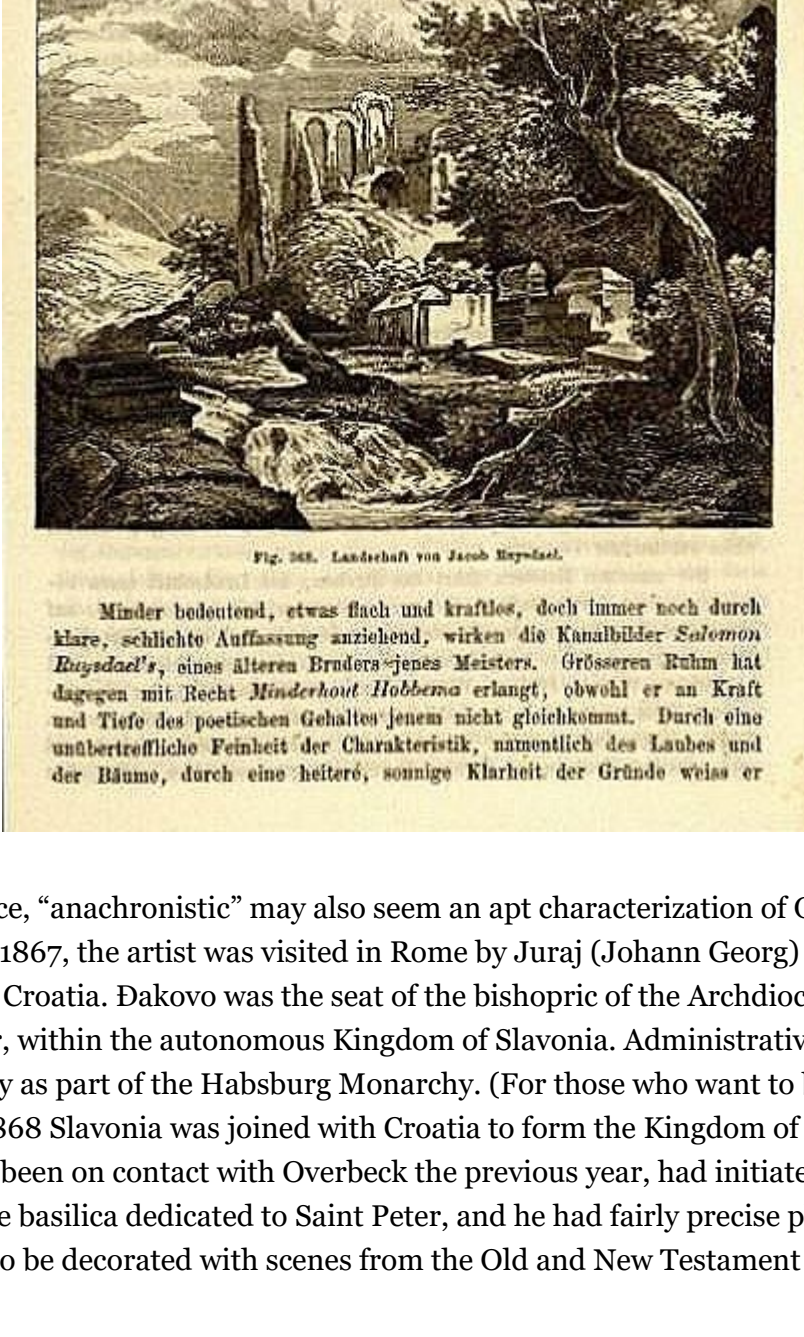


some of the youngsters and the old man who survived them all

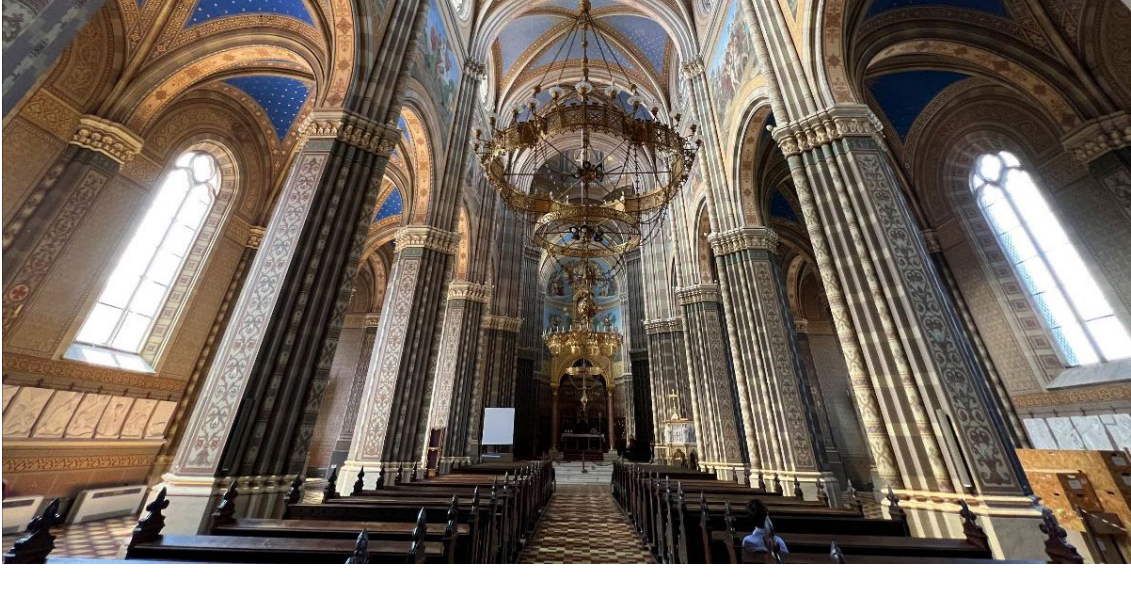


Franz Hanfstäengl, *Portrait of Friedrich Overbeck*, 1855, photograph

When Wilhelm Lübke published his *Grundriss der Kunstgeschichte* in 1860, Overbeck was still alive and could hardly have been pleased to find himself described as “a rare anachronism in today’s artistic world.” Lübke (1826–1893), a pupil of Gustav Friedrich von Waagen (1794–1868), belonged—together with the slightly older Jakob Burckhardt (1818–1897)—to the second generation of scholars in the newly institutionalized discipline of art history and was a pioneer in publishing some of the first general surveys to be illustrated, albeit sparsely with only a few wood engravings.



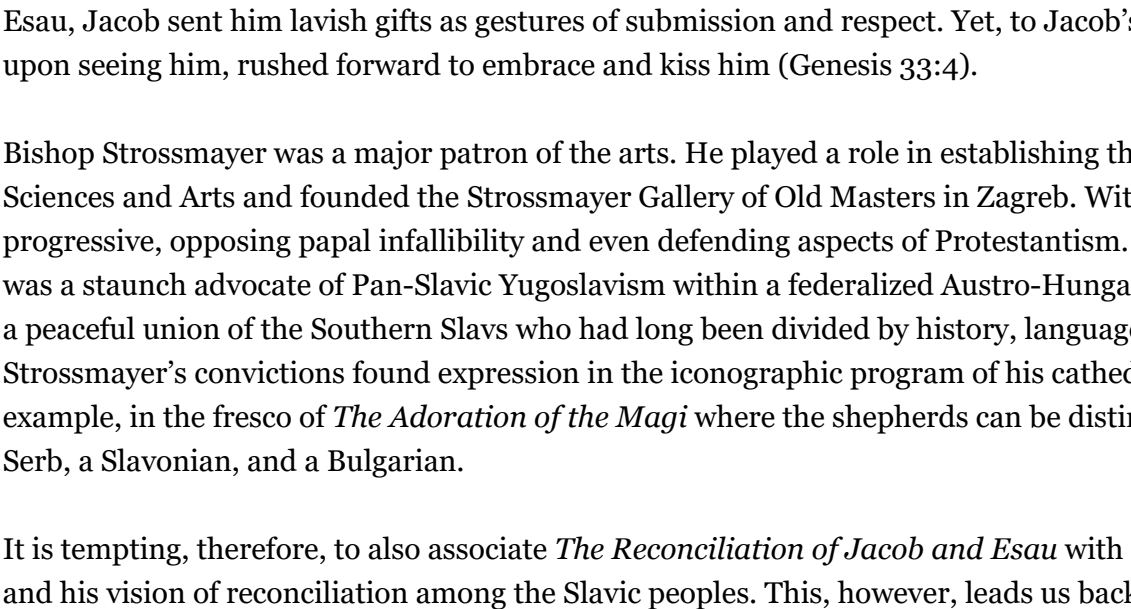
At first glance, “anachronistic” may also seem an apt characterization of Overbeck’s last major work. On February 2, 1867, the artist was visited in Rome by Juraj (Johann Georg) Strossmayer, bishop of Đakovo in what is now Croatia. Đakovo was the seat of the bishopric of the Archdiocese of Đakovo–Osijek, then known as Diakowar, within the autonomous Kingdom of Slavonia. Administratively, Slavonia was tied to both Croatia and Hungary as part of the Habsburg Monarchy. (For those who want to be even more confused by historic details: in 1868 Slavonia was joined with Croatia to form the Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia.) Strossmayer, who had already been in contact with Overbeck the previous year, had initiated the construction of a grand neo-Romanesque basilica dedicated to Saint Peter, and he had fairly precise plans for its interior which he envisioned to be decorated with scenes from the Old and New Testament as well as from the life of Saint Peter.



Overbeck had been one of the founding members of the Brotherhood of St. Luke, a circle of German and Austrian artists in Rome at the beginning of the nineteenth century who opposed the prevailing Neoclassical style. Derided as “Nazarenes” for their religious themes and their penchant for sporting shoulder-length hair—reminiscent of the way Jesus had long been depicted in art—the label ultimately stuck. For Overbeck, Strossmayer’s commission was a late-career fulfillment, allowing him to create the kind of monumental religious art that had largely eluded him and his circle, especially back in the *Heimat*. The Nazarenes only managed to realize two fresco cycles on a large scale, both in Rome and none of them in the church: one in the Casa Bartholdy (which was removed and is now at the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin), the other in the Villa Giustiniani Massimo (which survives in situ). Given his advanced age, Overbeck was asked to supply the designs, while the frescoes themselves would be executed by Alexander Maximilian Seitz (1811–1888) and his son Ludwig (1844–1908). Ultimately, Overbeck completed only thirteen of the life-size cartoons so that the father-and-son team Seitz took over and finished the project.



Overbeck was a deeply devout man who directed his religiosity in his art toward a spiritual ideal—a lasting truth beyond everyday reality—that he sought to express through the harmonious balance of his compositions. In his later work, this quest manifested itself in an unerring clarity of form that took precedence over spatial depth or traditional modes of representation. Shortly before his death, Overbeck summed this up in an inscription he wrote on one of his palettes that he gifted to his nephew: “The purpose of Christian art is, in my belief, nothing but to win hearts over for truth through the garb of beauty” (*Die Aufgabe der christlichen Kunst ist, wie mich dünkt, keine andere als, der Wahrheit im Gewande der Schönheit Herzen zu gewinnen*—the German art historian Michael Thimann, who was the first to publish our drawing and from whose study on Overbeck I quote this passage, found this idea first formulated in a letter the artist wrote to his painter friend Heinrich Petri in 1863).



Friedrich Overbeck, *The Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau*, 1866;

pencil and black chalk with wash; 530 x 720 mm (20 1/2 x 28 inches)

The Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau, the subject of **the drawing we can offer here**, is not often depicted in art. Having never visited Đakovo and finding little documentation about this project in one of the more remote corners of *Mitteleuropa*, I cannot confirm whether or not this scene was actually included among the biblical cycles adorning the nave of the cathedral. It could well be argued, though, that the theme of reconciliation would have strongly resonated with Overbeck’s patron. After deceiving Esau to gain his birthright and blessing, Jacob fled. On his return, he wrestled through the night with a mysterious stranger—often described as an angel. On the morning after the fight Jacob realized that he had to let God prevail in his life and was hence renamed “Israel” by the stranger, meaning “one who sees God.” Still fearful of meeting Esau, Jacob sent him lavish gifts as gestures of submission and respect. Yet, to Jacob’s astonishment, Esau, upon seeing him, rushed forward to embrace and kiss him (Genesis 33:4).

Bishop Strossmayer was a major patron of the arts. He played a role in establishing the Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts and founded the Strossmayer Gallery of Old Masters in Zagreb. Within the Church, he was a progressive, opposing papal infallibility and even defending aspects of Protestantism. More significantly, he was a staunch advocate of Pan-Slavic Yugoslavism within a federalized Austro-Hungarian Empire, envisioning a peaceful union of the Southern Slavs who had long been divided by history, language, and religion. Strossmayer’s convictions found expression in the iconographic program of his cathedral, as shown, for example, in the fresco of *The Adoration of the Magi* where the shepherds can be distinguished as a Croat, a Serb, a Slavonian, and a Bulgarian.

It is tempting, therefore, to also associate *The Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau* with Strossmayer’s project and his vision of reconciliation among the Slavic peoples. This, however, leads us back to the issue of anachronism. When I first encountered Overbeck’s large cartoons, presented in their neo-Renaissance frames at the St. Annen-Museum in Overbeck’s hometown of Lübeck back in 1994, I pointed out how Strossmayer’s hope had been repeatedly shattered, not least by the then still very recent Yugoslavian War when, among so many other places, Đakovo was heavily damaged. Before that, during World War II, the Independent State of Croatia, a puppet state of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, chose an abandoned flour mill, once used by none other than the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Đakovo–Osijek, to set up a concentration camp to intern Jewish as well as Serbian people. I so wish that now, thirty years on, I could report more uplifting news on the theme of reconciliation. Yet it seems as if the dismantling of civilized societies, even of the one here in the United States, once a beacon of democratic consensus and institutional trust, continues to accelerate more each day.