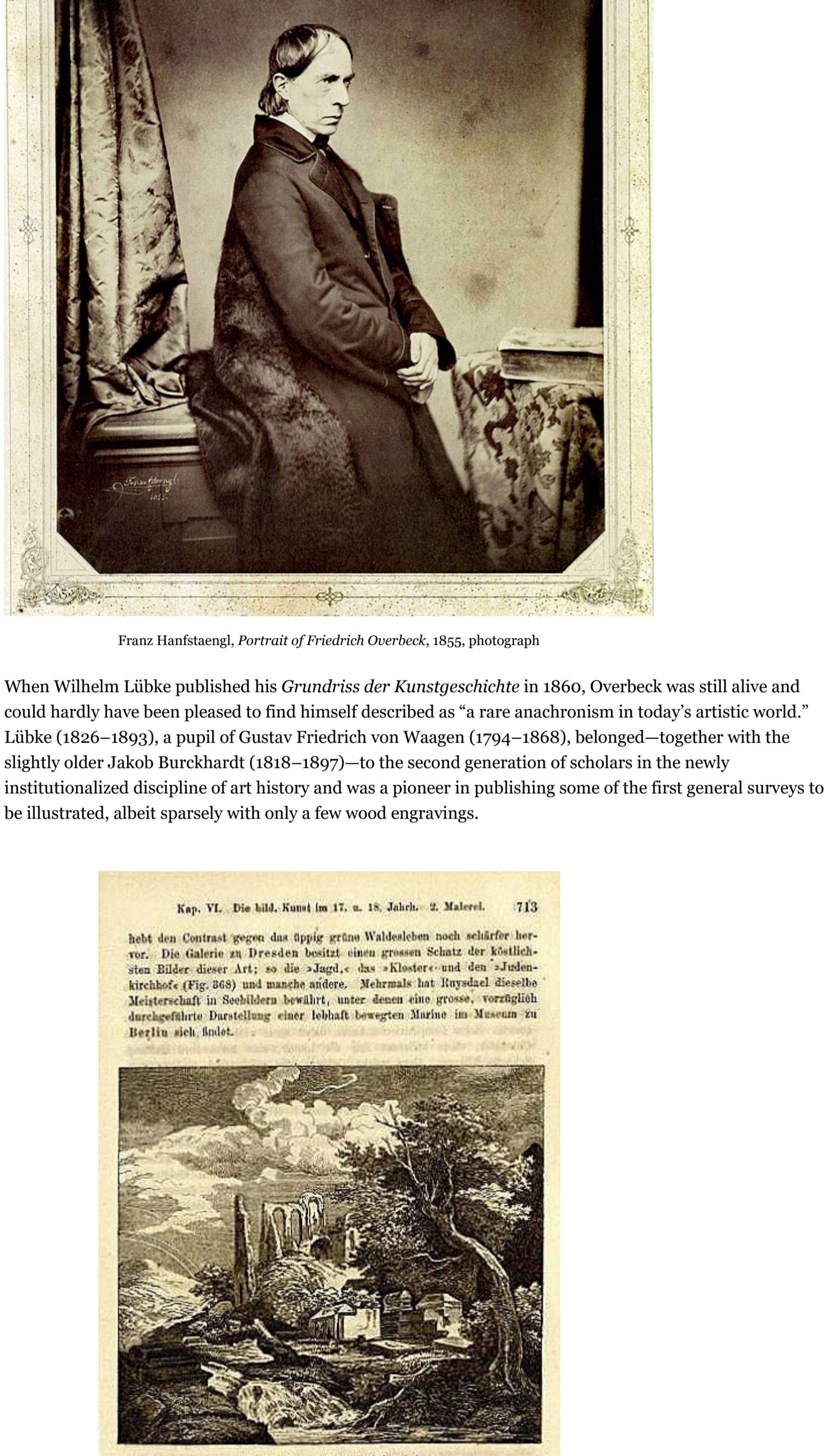


C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

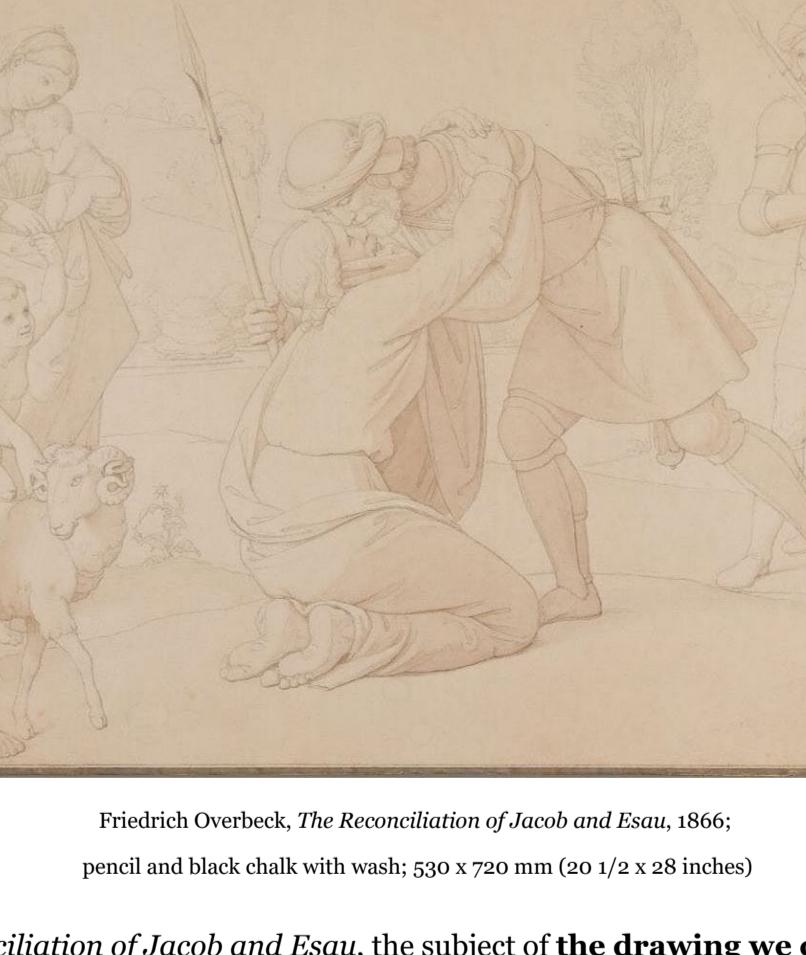
Distraction / Abwechslung
4 September 2025

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.



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

When Wilhelm Lübbe 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.” Lübbe (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.



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

pencil and black chalk with wash; 520 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 *Mittteleuropa*, 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, or life 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).

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 dünt, 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.



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