

Margarethe Geibel

The Goethe House Series



Plate 13, *Treppenhaus II* (Staircase II), 1909

This exhibition celebrates the recent acquisition of a portfolio of twenty-four color woodblock prints by Weimar-born German artist Margarethe Geibel (1876–1955). The series reveals Geibel’s inventive adaptation of Japanese printmaking techniques popular in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. It also provides a figurative walk through a cultural treasure—the house and collections of renowned German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), who, like Geibel, called Weimar home.

Geibel accomplished the first eighteen prints in the series between 1908 and 1911, and the remaining six in 1916 and 1917, during the First World War. Her multiple returns to certain rooms over the cycle reveal a changing relationship with the house, as well as a shift in her color sensibility and graphic technique from bright colors and bold contrasts to more muted tones and textural carving of the woodblocks.

As the concept of a German nation state developed over the course of the nineteenth century, Goethe’s worldview and writings gave voice to a collective German cultural and linguistic identity as well as an emphasis on education. Thus, for those like Margarethe Geibel, born into the young German nation, Goethe’s house stood not only as a locus of culture and beauty but as a symbol of what it meant to be German. These innovative prints present both Geibel’s vision of its interiors—and her reflection on them—as spaces of memory and meaning.

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Margarethe Geibel (1876–1955)

Margarethe Geibel was born in Weimar, Germany. She initially trained with her father, the landscape painter Casimir Geibel, who however had no intention of launching his daughter's career. When Casimir died in 1896, Margarethe—as a woman, excluded from public art academies—pursued private training. She studied with artists who imparted lessons in design, perspective, interiors, and printmaking techniques. In 1902, following an additional two years at a private art school in Stuttgart, she returned to Weimar, where she taught herself the color woodcut printmaking process that she would use throughout her career.



In 1908, Geibel began her Goethe House series, fully completing it in 1917. Geibel followed this cycle through the 1920s with several more woodcut series celebrating Weimar's architecture, parks, and cultural sites as well as other German monuments and scenic towns encountered during her travels.

Although Geibel exhibited regularly to critical acclaim, and her work was collected by museums in Germany and elsewhere, she was never able to fully earn a living based on her art. When she was in her seventies, her younger brother, who had helped to support her financially for many years, passed away. As the physical demands of woodblock carving became too great, she took up drawing and watercolor again, until her passing in 1955.

Above: Otto Hoffmann, *Portrait of Margarethe Geibel* (ca. 1900), Deutsche Fotothek

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832)



Goethe is regarded as Germany's greatest literary figure, born in Frankfurt-am-Main and educated there and at the University of Leipzig. Goethe was already an acclaimed writer by the age of twenty-five, when his 1774 novel *Sorrows of Young Werther*, a heartbreaking tale of unrequited love, caused a sensation. In 1775, Goethe moved east to Weimar, the city he would call home for the rest of his life. There, initially under the patronage of Princess Anna Amalia of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, Goethe became a key figure in the movement known as Sturm und Drang (roughly translatable as "Storm and Stress"), a literary style noted for its heightened emotionalism and energetic action.

In 1786, Goethe embarked on a two-year journey to Italy, where an encounter with ancient Greek and Roman art profoundly influenced his worldview, writing, and collecting. Goethe also studied philosophy and natural science, and would eventually publish works on botany and color theory.

In 1794, Goethe began a lifelong friendship with playwright and poet Friedrich Schiller. They developed a literary movement that came to be known as Weimar Classicism, which blended the emotion of German Romantic literature with the harmony and restraint of Greek and Roman classicism and the rational thought of the European Enlightenment. This movement helped to chart a way forward for German literature and philosophy.

Above: Joseph Karl Stieler, *Portrait of Goethe* (1828), Neue Pinakothek, Munich



In 1782, Goethe moved into a grand house on the Frauenplan in the heart of Weimar, which became a meeting place for his official duties as councillor to the Duke of Saxe-Weimar and a crossroads for intellectual, artistic, and musical figures. Each room, carefully designed by Goethe with walls colored according to his taste, housed his growing collection of art, classical sculpture, plaster casts, and natural specimens. Goethe lived in the house until his death in 1832; in 1885, Goethe's grandson opened it as a museum.

Above: Photo courtesy Andrzej Otrębski

Geibel's Artistic Approach

“The seemingly very dryly applied colors combine to form bright harmonies, and it is particularly noteworthy that she has broken free from Japan and is following her own path.”

—Hans Singer, *Die Moderne Graphik*, 1914

Although color printmaking had been practiced in Europe for centuries, color woodcuts underwent a revival with the advent of Japanese *mokuhanga* prints in Europe and the United States, printed from carved woodblocks using water-based inks. After the 1854 Treaty of Kanagawa opened Japan to global trade, Japanese prints became widely available. Their colors and composition worked an important and complex transformation on fashion, handicraft, architecture, and art.

Margarethe Geibel's brilliantly colored prints show a debt to the *mokuhanga* tradition. They are achieved by carving and inking multiple woodblocks which are then printed onto a single sheet in succession to create the completed image. The sheet to be printed is carefully positioned or “registered” onto each inked block in turn, so the lines of the composition do not stray or blur. Some blocks supply colors as required by the composition; some overlap to form further colors or visual patterns. The main block, known as the “key block” and usually printed last, carries the outlines of the drawing and the rectangular border. Geibel printed and assembled the portfolio exhibited here, including in some instances prints from individual blocks to show her process. She even cut the original mats herself, which here are replaced by modern archival mats of the same dimensions and color.

The series also attests to Geibel's changing artistic vision over the nine-year span of its completion. For example, after completing the first fifteen images, in 1911 Geibel's work reveals a shift in which the hatched strokes of the key block become more rhythmic and insistent. In the words of scholar Angela Mainz, “the black contour now becomes the decisive design element.” Geibel's construction of space, and her sensitivity to the play of light on

floors and staircases, show an amazing deftness of conception. Her careful inking of the blocks, often with a brush, and her choice of papers, whose textures are sometimes visible, contribute to the total effect.

As beautifully as her series records the Goethe House, however, Geibel seems to have envisioned her artistic encounter with this cultural monument as more than just a series of mementoes for Goethe enthusiasts. The order of the series does not re-create a sequential tour of the house; for example, Geibel inserts a view of the house's main staircase between her views of Goethe's study and his adjacent bedroom. In addition, Geibel treats more than just glamorous spaces where Goethe received guests and displayed his collections, or the "famous" rooms where Goethe worked and slept. She was also curious about the less-seen and connective spaces, such as the attic guest quarters where Goethe's son later lived (**plates 2 and 15**), and the unusual spiral staircase Goethe had installed to reach them (**plate 7**). Her prints do not merely capture the room in question, but often offer a tantalizing, mysterious glimpse of the next.

Similarly, Geibel seems to have been intrigued by the prospect of capturing Goethe's renowned art collection, which she surely admired—not only his group of plaster casts after Greek and Roman sculpture (unusually large for a private collection), but also his many paintings, drawings, and prints. Her ability to record recognizable versions of these works on a small scale, within the limitations of the color woodcut medium, is nothing less than astonishing.

Geibel's series not only preserves a palpable sense of the house's interiors but was also instrumental in preserving the house itself. When the Goethe House was seriously damaged by Allied bombing during World War II, the restorations were significantly aided by reference to Geibel's prints.

The Goethe House Series

Margarethe Geibel (German, 1876–1955)

Color woodcuts on Japanese paper

Acquired through the Nancy Horton Bartels, Class of 1948, Endowment



Plate 1

Blick ins Urbinozimmer

(View of the Urbino Room), 1908

2024.012 a

Plate 2

Mansarde I

(Attic I), 1908

2024.012 b



Plate 3

Goethes Arbeitszimmer I

(Goethe's Study I), 1908

2024.012 c



In contrast to the fine furnishings and works of art in the various public rooms of the house, Goethe preferred more humble surroundings in his private rooms. Scholar Angela Meinz notes the detail with which Geibel approaches Goethe's study, the site of so many of his ideas—the desk appearing just as Goethe left it, right down to the wine bottle.



Plate 4
Treppenhaus I
(Staircase I), 1909
 2024.012 d

Geibel's two views of the different levels of the grand staircase (see also **plate 14**), added by Goethe in 1792, show her command of space and color. Six different color blocks were used to make this print, including the black key block which provides the coloring for the sculptures on the landing—actually plaster casts painted to appear like the bronze originals.



Plate 5
Sterbezimmer I–Schlafzimmer Goethes
(Death room I–Goethe's bedroom), 1909
 2024.012 e

Goethe's sleeping quarters, just steps away from his study (see **plate 3**), share a simplicity of decoration and function. So averse was Goethe to frivolous comforts that he only finally purchased the armchair seen here when compelled by ill health a year before his death. Goethe passed away in this modest bed at the age of eighty-two, on March 22, 1832. His last words are reported to have been "More light!"



Plate 6
Junozimmer I
 (Juno Room I), 1909
 2024.012 f



Plate 24
Junozimmer III
 (Juno Room III), 1917
 2024.012 x

The Juno Room was so named for its massive plaster cast after the so-called Juno Ludovisi, Goethe's favorite sculpture (*see page 17*). The largest room in the house, it was used for both official functions and private parties, for which music could be provided by the fortepiano placed there. Goethe chose the blue wall color to emulate ancient Roman wall frescoes he had seen in Pompeii.

Margarethe Geibel artistically revisited the Juno Room twice more—each version a testament to the variability of the artist's vision. Here, her last view of the room (**plate 24**) is shown with the first. The initial version is brighter and more open, and the Juno seems to wear a benevolent expression. In the last plate, the viewer is positioned as if seated at the table, the doorway is obscured by a winged figure of Victory, and the Juno's face appears sterner.



Plate 7
Aufgang zur Mansarde
 (Staircase to the Attic), 1909
 2024.012 g

Plate 8
Silhouettenzimmer
 (Silhouette room), 1909
 2024.012 h





Plate 9

Gelber Saal (Yellow room), 1909

2024.012 i

Gelber Saal (Yellow room), 1909

Color proofs of gray, yellow, blue, brown, and black key block on Japanese paper

2024.012 i-i, i-ii, i-iii, i-iv, i-v

In printing and assembling this portfolio, Margarethe Geibel included individual impressions from all five of the blocks used to make the *Yellow Room*. This breakdown of Geibel's process reveals the preparation and skill required to ensure the components of the finished image line up properly. The chair at left—a key compositional element—is visible in every block but the blue, where its two front legs are intentionally left out against the background. Geibel even took care to include the chair-back's shadow, supplied by in gray block.





Plate 10
Büstenzimmer–auch: Brückenzimmer
 (Bust room–also: bridge room), 1909
 2024.012 j



Büstenzimmer–auch: Brückenzimmer
 (Bust room–also: bridge room), 1909
 Proof of black key block on Japanese paper
 2024.012 j-i

The Bust Room was where Goethe displayed much of his collection of plaster casts after ancient sculpture—this was an unusually large collection for the time, especially for a private home. Because he wished the cast of the so-called *Ilioneus* to be visible from all sides, it was located in the center. Cast after a Roman marble original in Munich, the sculpture presents one of the sons of Niobe from Greek mythology, who were slain by the arrows of Artemis and Apollo. Although the room featured many other casts—including busts on pedestals and reliefs attached to the walls, Geibel has cropped her composition to focus on the twisting figure of the dying youth.

This room is also referred to as the Bridge Room, because the Goethe House actually merges two previous parallel structures. The Bridge Room, added in a 1792 renovation, connects the formal rooms that face the square with Goethe's own private rooms overlooking the garden. A splash of green foliage against yellow visible through the double doors of the adjacent Silhouette Room (see **plate 8**) draw the viewer toward the garden's shade.



Plate 11
Majolikazimmer
(Majolica room), 1909
 2024.012 k



Plate 12
***Garten (Garden)*, 1909**
 2024.012 l



Plate 13
Treppenhaus II
(Staircase II), 1909
 2024.012 m

Here, at the top of the Grand Staircase, visitors are met with Goethe's treasured plaster cast of the so-called San Ildefonso Group, taken from a Roman marble sculpture of the second century CE. The original sculpture is thought to depict the twins Castor and Pollux from Greek mythology, but Goethe and his fellow scholars were fond of assigning the two youths different classically inspired identities. When Goethe acquired the cast in 1812, he wrote about them simply as "ephebes" or Greek youths in military training. The white plaster of Goethe's copy is painted black, possibly to emulate an eighteenth-century cast-iron copy of the same sculpture Goethe would have seen in Weimar's Red Castle where he attended council meetings.



Plate 14
Junozimmer II
(Juno Room II), 1909
 2024.012 n



Plate 15
Mansarde II
(Attic II), 1909
 2024.012 o



Plate 16
Urbinozimmer-Vorzimmer
(Urbino room-anteroom), 1911
 2024.012 p



Plate 17
Deckenzimmer
(Ceiling Room), 1911
 2024.012 q



Plate 18

Goethehaus von der Gartenseite

(Goethe House from the Garden Side), 1911
2024.012 r

This view of the back of the house is the only view of its exterior in Geibel's series. Its cottagelike appearance is due to the fact that the Goethe House is actually constructed from two parallel houses joined together—the back house facing the garden is shorter and less formal than the front that faces the square.

The carving of the block shows something of the rhythmic hatching that would define the later prints in the series. Here, the carved lines describe abundant vegetation which even seems to grow over the orderly footpath. Although Geibel's work resists categorization, some scholars have seen the influence of Vincent van Gogh, whom Geibel greatly admired.



Plate 19
Gelber Saal II
(Yellow Room II), 1916
 2024.012 s



Plate 20
Arbeitszimmer II
(Study II), 1917
 2024.012 t



Plate 21
Kleines Speisezimmer
(Small Dining Room), 1917
 2024.012 u



Plate 22
Schlafzimmer II–Sterbezimmer II
(Bedroom II–Death Room II), 1917
 2024.012 v



Plate 23
Arbeitszimmer III
(Study III), 1917
 2024.012 w

Juno Ludovisi



Plaster cast,
late 19th century
After the marble original:
1st century CE;
Rome, Museo Nazionale
Romano, Palazzo Altemps
Cornell Cast Collection
258 (Sage no. 204)

Identified in the eighteenth century as depiction of the Greek goddess Hera (Juno in Latin), the sculpture after which this plaster cast was made is nicknamed after Roman cardinal Ludovico Ludovisi, whose collection it entered in 1622. It was much praised by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars who considered it a Greek work of the classical period (fifth–fourth century BCE). For them, it represented ideal femininity, liberty, and dignity in an aesthetic and moral sense.

While in Rome, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe dubbed the Juno his “first love affair,” and kept his own plaster cast of the sculpture. At his departure Goethe left his cast with the painter Angelika Kauffmann. For his Weimar house, he obtained a second cast of the head, which lent its name to Goethe’s blue reception and music room and was admired by many friends and colleagues who in turn sought their own versions of it.

When Cornell acquired this half-size cast of the famous piece, its identification as a Classical representation of the highest goddess was already being questioned. Attributes such as the plait, the diadem, and the woolen ribbon—worn by sacrificial victims and priests alike—mark the head as a work of the early Roman Empire.

—Professor Annetta Alexandridis,
History of Art & Visual Studies

JOHNSON

MUSEUM OF ART

Margarethe Geibel

The Goethe House Series

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IN THE SCHAENEN GALLERY

These gallery texts draw in part on the following publications, whose German titles are translated here:

Goethe's Weimar in Color Woodcuts by Margarethe Geibel, ed. Angelika Mundorff, Stadtmuseum Fürstenfeldbruck, Germany, 1999.

Margarethe Geibel: Color Woodcuts, 1876–Weimar–1955, Joseph Fach Galerie und Kunstantiquariat, Oberursel, Germany, 2021.