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WILHELM KUHNERT
1865 - 1926

PORTRAIT OF A MAN FROM EAST AFRICA
Before 1894

Oil on cardboard, signed lower right
60.3 x 44 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of the artist, and by descent; Sold Nagel, Stuttgart, Sammlung Wilhelm Kuhnert, 7 February, 2024, lot 35 (as 'John Walker')

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The interest in depictions of animals, which became the defining theme in his *oeuvre*, was first developed by studying exotic animals in Berlin Zoo. However, he soon developed the desire to observe and paint wild animals in their natural habitat: in 1891, aged just 26, he embarked on his first self-financed expedition to Africa, sponsored by Hans Meyer of the Bibliographic Institute in Leipzig. In total, Kuhnert travelled to Africa three times under his own initiative and at his own expense. He also visited Ceylon in 1906 and, in 1911, accompanied King Friedrich August of Saxony as an advisor on a trip to Egypt and Sudan.

Kuhnert's travels reshaped the Western perception of Africa like no other painter of his time. He was one of the first European artists to explore and document the then largely uncharted territories of German East Africa, including present-day Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and parts of Mozambique. In often challenging conditions, Kuhnert sketched the local flora and fauna, using these drawings as the foundation for his monumental paintings, which he later completed in his Berlin studio and exhibited with great international success.

Kuhnert's work was notable for its almost scientific precision. His wildlife depictions became widely popular through zoological books, magazines, and even advertising. Less well-known, however, are his portraits, which are significantly rarer.

From the outset, Kuhnert's direct, reportage-like style stood in stark contrast to the academic painters of his day, particularly those specialising in Orientalist subjects. He was one of the first to provide Europeans with a naturalistic view of Africa. His versatility as an artist is further demonstrated by the portraits presented here, coming from the estate of the painter's heirs.



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This *Portrait of a Man from East Africa*, likely a local chief painted by Wilhelm Kuhnert during his first trip to Africa, exudes a confident attitude and exceptional dignity. It is a powerful testament to Kuhnert's genuine and unidealised approach to his subjects. Unlike the romanticised and often exoticised portrayals typical of the Orientalist movement, Kuhnert applies the same direct, observational gaze to his human sitters as he does to the natural world.

His sensitive and inquisitive eye captures the authenticity of the individual, free from the conventions or artistic filters that might distance the viewer from the reality of the subject. Unsurprisingly, the boldness of this portrait made it a perfect choice to serve as the cover image for the extensive reportage of Kuhnert's first expedition to Africa, published in 1894:

The two colour prints here reproduced, the head of an "African" after an oil study (the present painting, *nda*) and the "Arab from Cairo" after a watercolour, show how the artist has retained all of the qualities that brought him his first successes as a portrait painter - they both show that intimate understanding and characteristic of individuality that even those who have never seen the model are entitled to, or at least involuntarily cause them to, praise the picture for its striking resemblance.

Eine Künstlerfahrt nach dem Kilima Ndscharo, in 'Velhagen & Klasings Monatshefte', 1894/95, vol. 1., cover picture



Ein Afrikaner. Nach einer Ölskizze von W. Kuhnert.